

## RETURN OF THE REJECTED POSTMODERN OCCULTISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Way back in the 1970s, the maverick historian of the occult, James Webb, a pioneer in the field, coined a phrase that summed up for him and his readers the essence of his subject. He called it “rejected knowledge”. What did Webb mean by this? What is this knowledge and why is it rejected?

The knowledge Webb referred to is the body of beliefs, ideas, and practices that has come down to us as the western Hermetic or occult tradition. Exactly what constitutes this tradition may differ depending on your source. Yet there is little disagreement that it includes belief systems such as astrology, which argues that the position of the stars at one’s birth is a determining factor in one’s life; alchemy, which is concerned with the ability to effect transformations in matter – such as turning lead into gold – as well as in oneself; and magic, which can be used to communicate with angels and demons and also exert power over people and things at a distance.

Although the general idea about this tradition – insofar as one has any idea of it at all – is that it is a hodgepodge of superstition, fantasy, and downright nonsense, a closer look tells a different story. If we go by the sensational popular books on the subject, or the astrology columns that litter newspapers, magazines, and the web, then we cannot blame intelligent people for thinking it something best to steer clear of. But if we peer a bit behind the façade of popular misconception – often encouraged by a hyper-rationalist mentality that rejects this tradition *tout court* – a different picture emerges. In fact, the irony here is that the modern sensibility, which defines itself precisely by rejecting this tradition and the way of seeing the world associated with it, is very much rooted in it. The modernity that prides itself on outgrowing what it sees as an adolescent vision of the world is a product of the very thing it claims to have outgrown. If we want to see a kind of Oedipal *agon* here, we would, I think, not be too far off the mark.

### HERMETIC RENAISSANCE

We know that the Renaissance – that burst of creativity that spanned the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and pulled western man out of the muddle of the Middle Ages and established him as the character we know today – came about because of the rediscovery of the work of ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato. But somewhat less well known is the fact – brought to our attention by the work of historians such as the great Frances Yates – that along with Plato and indeed superseding him, there was another source behind this remarkable transformation. This was the rediscovery of a collection of texts, the “Corpus Hermeticum”, which were believed to have been written ages earlier than Plato and which Plato himself – it was thought – looked to for wisdom and inspiration. The

author of these works was believed to be the ancient sage Hermes Trismegistus, “thrice greatest Hermes”, who lived before the Flood and was believed to have taught not only Plato but also Moses and who, among many figures in the church, shared equal billing with Christ for a time.

A story Yates tells give us an idea of just how important these texts, which make up the fount of the Hermetic tradition, and their supposed author were for the individuals who brought about the Renaissance. In 1463, Marsilio Ficino, newly appointed head of the reformed Platonic Academy, was asked by his patron Cosimo De Medici, the great Florentine power broker, to translate some writings of Plato that his book scout had recently acquired. This was courtesy of Constantinople finally falling to the Turks a decade earlier. Cosimo was a great lover of learning and he expressed the desire to read all of Plato before he died. But no sooner did Marsilio begin his task than Cosimo asked him to stop and put Plato on the back burner. Another batch of writings had come into his possession and these, Cosimo declared, took precedent over the father of western philosophy. What were these works that shoved Plato into the back seat? They were the “Corpus Hermeticum”, the very works that every scholar knew Plato himself had looked to for insight and knowledge. These were indeed a find. Marsilio translated them, and their influence informed Renaissance figures such as Michelangelo and Botticelli, and laid the foundation for practically all of the occultism and magic of the following centuries.

Yet, as more than one historian has pointed out, the humanism which grew out of the Renaissance and was informed with the new vision of humanity as a source of knowledge and power in itself and not merely as a race of wretched sinners, dependent on a stern God for its salvation, laid the foundation for the great transformation in western consciousness, the Age of Reason, which followed.

Nevertheless, within a century and a half of Marsilio’s translations, except for a few devoted followers, Hermes Trismegistus and his writings had lost the enormous prestige they had enjoyed until then. I tell the story in my book “The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus” (Edinburgh 2011), but in essence, in 1614, while writing a history of the Catholic Church, the humanist scholar Isaac Causabon quite by accident discovered that the Hermetic texts attributed to Hermes could not have been written in the age in which they were believed to have been written. The Greek used in the texts was a Greek that came after Plato, not before. There was also the inconvenient fact that, although believed to be a student of Hermes, Plato never mentioned him in any of his dialogues. That was odd. Other discoveries raised more suspicions and these eventually led Causabon to the conclusion that the Hermetic texts, far from being written in dim ages past at the dawn of time, were really a product of unknown authors – we have no names for them – who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, in the first centuries after Christ.

If one thing led to the fall from grace of Hermes and his tradition, this was it. From that time on to our own age, the knowledge that could be found in the Hermetic and related traditions was well and truly “rejected”. And it was at this point that the new pursuit of “natural philosophy”, the precursor of science, began to dominate the western mind and to determine what was “real” knowledge and what was not. This new knowledge was based on the idea of *measurement*. It was a knowledge founded on the notion of quantity, on numbers, not in the ancient Pythagorean sense of certain qualities and essences associated with numbers – a view it shares with other mystical teachings such as the Kabbalah – but in the strict sense of precise observation and measurement of matter and the forces that acted upon it. It was solely concerned with the “outside” of things, and denied them any kind of “inside”. That, according to the philosopher René Descartes, one of the founders of the new way of knowing, was only the case with human beings, and even there this “inside” was limited to the tiny island of consciousness that existed within each of our skulls. From this perspective, we can only assume others have a similar “inside”; we can never know for sure, and we should recall that Descartes believed that animals were really little more than what we call robots. Their expressions of pain and suffering were for him nothing of the sort, merely the equivalent of the noises a machine might make if it wasn’t running properly. I should point out that more than one commentator has suggested that if taken seriously, Descartes’ vision approximates the way people suffering from schizophrenia see the world. Thus began what the esoteric philosopher René Guénon called the “reign of quantity”, the rule of which continues today.

## LOST KNOWLEDGE

According to the new regime, the knowledge attributed to Hermes and his writings was most decidedly not “real”. It could not be quantified; it could not be measured, nor could it be observed in the sense of the empiricism that was on the rise, or demonstrated in the way of the new “experimental” method. It was and remains an *intuitive* knowledge, one concerned with the *inside* of things. In this sense it is closer to art and poetry than it is to science. Space does not allow me to go into detail about this – I do so in my book “Lost Knowledge of the Imagination” (Edinburgh 2017) – but where the new knowledge is concerned with breaking things down into smaller and smaller bits and pieces in order to see “what makes them tick” – and by now this means the world of elementary particles – the Hermetic way of knowing was concerned with the underlying *unity* of things. “The One, the All” was a central Hermetic maxim and much of this tradition was concerned with understanding the *correspondences* among things, which it perceived through analogy, in the sense that “like knows like”.

Yet this poetic, metaphoric way of understanding the relatedness of the world could not compete with the new knowledge, which gained ascendancy through the undoubted success of its practical application, which in many ways presented it as an even more powerful form of magic. It was at this point that the Hermetic tradition and everything

associated with it was unceremoniously thrown into the intellectual rubbish bin. In other words, it was trashed. You cannot get more rejected than that.

But even here irony ruled. Along with René Descartes, whose Hermetic inclinations led him to an – unsuccessful – attempt to join the secret Hermetic society the Rosicrucians, other founders of the modern world, such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, and Isaac Newton, were all devotees of the kind of knowledge that would soon be rejected. Newton's embrace of the lost tradition is perhaps most dramatic. During his lifetime Newton practiced alchemy, about which he wrote more than he did about gravity. And at the time of Newton's "discovery" gravity itself was considered an "occult" power. Occult simply means "unseen" or "occluded", that is, obscured. If so, then gravity *is* an "occult" power, for who has ever seen it? And the notion of some force having an effect on bodies at a distance [the famous "action at a distance"] with no medium conveying it, is – when you think about it – pretty much what we mean when we think of magic. When the magician performs his spell and strikes his enemy down, there is no material medium through which his power travels to its target.

The standard idea of Newton as the first "modern thinker", which dominated accounts of his life and work following his death in 1727, was not challenged until the 1930s, two centuries later, when the economist John Maynard Keynes bought a collection of Newton's papers and discovered the actual extent of his fascination – one could say obsession – with alchemy and Biblical chronology. This led Keynes to call Newton "the last of the magicians" and not "the first of the age of reason". Even so, hardcore devotees of "scientism" – the belief that the criteria of scientific verification can and *must* be applied to *all* aspects of experience, regardless of the consequences – maintain that Newton's interest in the Hermetic arts was merely a sad aberration of an otherwise great mind.

## **GOING UNDERGROUND**

Nevertheless, the Hermetic tradition, however rejected, did not disappear, even with all the calumny raised against it, which was considerable. It merely went underground, and for the past four centuries it has resurfaced many times in different ways and forms. In another book, "The Secret Teachers of the Western World" (New York 2015) I chart its varied reappearances over the past few centuries. One area in which this "rejected knowledge" has generally resurfaced is what we today call "popular culture", which at an earlier time was called "low brow" and even earlier was known as "folk traditions". And as the "high brow" culture was dominated by the new modern view, it makes perfect sense that the "low brow" interest in magic and everything associated with it would seep back into western consciousness via routes generally regarded as unimportant and negligible, much as how the daylight consciousness of modern man is troubled by the imps and demons of the unconscious provided by the nightly psychic rubbish thrown up at him in his dreams.

To chart the “return of the rejected” in the various forms of popular culture that followed would be tedious and take us far beyond the boundaries of this essay. But some examples should suffice. Romanticism, of course, is our prime suspect, but its earlier precursor, the Gothic, expressed this return in forms more crude and ungainly than its more refined descendant. Works like Horace Walpole’s “The Castle of Otranto”, Matthew Lewis’ “The Monk”, Ann Radcliffe’s “The Mysteries of Udolpho”, William Beckford’s “Vathek”, and other Gothic tales were quite literally “nightmares in print”, a character they shared with the unsettling canvases of Henry Fuseli, whose “The Nightmare” is the signature example. These bloodcurdling tales set the stage for the often even more gruesome works of the Grand Guignol of French popular theatre and the Penny Dreadfuls that flooded the British reading public in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

While most of these works were fundamentally concerned with giving their readers sufficient satisfactory shocks, some, like Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein”, had a moral content as well. “Frankenstein”, as we know, is a cautionary tale about the dangers inherent in the new powers made available to humanity through science. Victor Frankenstein plays God and learns that such *hubris* comes at a price. This was the same lesson that a work of greater stature than any I have mentioned also sought to convey to its readers. And while it is considered one of the great works of World Literature, and not an ephemeral product of popular culture, it too drew on the rejected tradition of the dark arts to make its point. I am of course speaking of Goethe’s “Faust”.

Here the author responsible for lighting the Romantic flame that would burn across Europe takes a 16<sup>th</sup> century tale of a dark magician and his comeuppance and turns it into the archetypal warning about the pursuit of knowledge at any cost – the very addiction that even as early as Goethe’s time characterized western man’s obsession. For Goethe, there were limits to the value of knowledge, or rather there were limits to what knowledge was valuable. For him, because we *could* know something did not necessarily mean that we *should* know it, and the voracious appetite for knowledge *in itself*, whatever its consequences, that came to characterize western man, led the Goethean historian Oswald Spengler in “The Decline of the West” to christen our age the “Faustian”. I should perhaps point out that Goethe’s interest in the Hermetic tradition was not solely literary. As a young man he practiced alchemy zealously and he was a member of a Frankfurt Pietist circle that studied the works of the Swiss Renaissance alchemist and healer Paracelsus and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Bohemian theosophist Jacob Boehme. And it was Goethe’s work in science – a radically different science than that of his contemporaries – that led Rudolf Steiner to develop his modern Hermetic school of Anthroposophy.

## **FIN DE SIÈCLE MAGIC**

Romanticism in Germany, England, and France continued this tradition; a mention of Novalis, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Gerard de Nerval is enough to make this clear. The “realism” and “naturalism” that followed as the initial Romantic impulse faded brought

matters down to earth or – more frequently – the gutter, as in the novels of Zola, for example. But towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, proponents of this school, such as the novelist J. K. Huysmans, felt it had reached its limit, and after initiating the *fin de siècle* taste for “decadence” in “À rebours”, Huysmans, too, turned to the occult. His “Là Bas” took Zola’s “naturalist” technique – a kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century “docudrama” approach – and applied it to Satanism and the Black Mass. Soon European capitals like Paris, London, St. Petersburg, and others were playing host to a fully fledged “occult revival”, perhaps the most important inspiration for which was the founding of the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875 by Henry Steel Olcott, William Quan Judge, and – undoubtedly its most remarkable progenitor – the eccentric Russian esoteric teacher and world traveller, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. I tell Blavatsky’s story in my book, “Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern Spirituality” (New York 2012), but here it is enough to say that if it is true, as is often claimed, that all modern Russian literature emerged from Nicolai Gogol’s story “The Overcoat” – itself a tale in the magical, supernatural tradition – it is equally true that practically all modern occultism and esoteric philosophy sprang from HPB’s ample bosom.

Following its revival in the *fin de siècle*, the occult and its fellow travellers went in and out of favour; in “A Dark Muse: A History of the Occult” (New York 2003) I chart how its inspiration can be found in a number of “modern” writers. The “roaring twenties” saw a kind of “golden age” of modern esotericism, with figures like Rudolf Steiner, G. I. Gurdjieff, P. D. Ouspensky, Aleister Crowley, C. G. Jung, and others all operating at the same time. The “dirty thirties”, which saw the rise of fascism, Hitler, and the Stalinist state, were occupied with other concerns and the 1940s gave us World War Two. So it is safe to say, I think, that for most of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the occult remained on the margins of culture. This was true until the 1960s. As I show in “Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties and the Dark Side of the Age of Aquarius” (New York 2001, London 2002), that decade saw a “return of the rejected” on an unprecedented scale.

## **MORNINGS OF THE MAGICIANS**

Several factors made this possible. One was the growth of popular culture itself and the means of its dissemination. To the movies and radio were added television, the long playing record – “LPs” –, and the newly revived superhero comic book, which in the 1940s had magical characters galore, but which by the mid-50s had nearly sunk from view. Another equally important factor was the new audience ready to consume what the new media provided: youth culture. In the 1950s a new demographic was discovered: teenagers. In an affluent age – which the 1960s were, at least in the United States, where I was growing up – young people had “disposable income” and they were ready to dispose of it in the form of records and the accessories that the fashion of the day demanded accompany them. By the mid-60s these were often of an occult character.

This modern occult revival began in 1960 in France with the publication of “The Morning of the Magicians” by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, a right-wing journalist and ex-Resistance physicist respectively. Their grab bag of occult misinformation – which, among other things, initiated the now hugely popular “occult Nazis” genre – was a surprise bestseller, first in France and then in its English translations, and it turned the black and white, Gauloise-clouded Left Bank into a technicoloured landing site for flying saucers. Riddled with mistakes and full of unsupported assertions, but written in a hectic, breathless, and very readable prose – like the modern age itself, these authors were in a hurry – this compendium of “rejected knowledge” sparked a popular interest in the occult that remains to this day.

By the late 60s, the occult and all that accompanied it had received the imprimatur of the most famous people in the world, the Beatles. A look at the cover of their epochal 1967 album “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” is sufficient evidence; it features among the many “people we like” Aleister Crowley, C. G. Jung, and the mescaline and LSD-taking Aldous Huxley (drugs, of course, had a hand in the occult revival; at one point, Timothy Leary, high priest of the 60s ersatz psychedelic “mystery religion”, claimed to have “re-incarnated” Crowley and modelled his career on his) and a clutch of Eastern gurus. The rejected had returned with a vengeance and hit the charts at “number one with a bullet”, going straight to the “Top of the Pops”. Soon enough, the second most famous people in the world, the Rolling Stones, were following suit, with their album “Their Satanic Majesties Request”, released at the end of 1967, hot on the heels of “Sgt. Pepper’s”. Many other bands took the cue, and mysticism, magic, flying saucers, and a plethora of other “rejected” items soon found an enthusiastic new audience. By the end of the decade, the *hippie musical* “Hair” was informing the world that the “age of Aquarius” was upon us, or at least was on its way. According to it, Jupiter would align with Mars, and “peace would guide the planets and love would steer the stars”, a message reaching millions of households via the hit version of the song “Aquarius” by the occultly named group The Fifth Dimension. The Hermetic tradition had become the hippest thing in town, and as I show in “Turn Off Your Mind”, it had permeated film, television, comic books, and even “serious” literature, with novels like John Fowles’ “The Magus” and Jorge Luis Borges’ “magic realism” sharing bestselling shelf space with epic magical fantasies like Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings”.

This dream of a new Aquarian Age soon hit a very unwieldy wall. The first blow came in Los Angeles, in August 1969, with the maniacal slaying of the actress Sharon Tate and her friends, followed by the slaughter of Leno LaBianca and his wife, at the hands of a crew of sadistic flower children led by the love-loving jailbird guru Charles Manson. The next nail in the love generation’s coffin came at the end of that fateful year – which, among other things, saw the opening of the Gap clothing giant, named after the chasm separating the generations – when the “morning of the magicians” turned into the “night of the living dead”, at San Francisco’s Altamont Raceway. Here, at a free concert given by

the Rolling Stones on 6<sup>th</sup> December, not many had sympathy for the devil when it turned out that his minions, the Hell's Angels – a name indicative of the moral ambivalence of the time – murdered one member of the audience and terrorised the rest, while the “world’s greatest rock and roll band” provided the soundtrack. The Stones were by this time deep into Crowley, initiated into his philosophy of “do what thou wilt” through the ministrations of the avant-garde filmmaker and Crowley devotee Kenneth Anger. Perhaps more than anyone else, Anger is responsible for the occult-rock’n’roll-transgressive sex melange that came to characterise the darker side of the counter-culture.

## **ROCCULT N’ ROLL**

At this point, the occult stream in popular culture seemed to split into two currents. One led to the sweetness and light of what was to become the New Age, which has been with us now for some time. The other, a darker, more turbulent tributary, informed the brand of “roccult n’ roll” that characterised what came to be called “heavy metal” and later “goth” or “death rock”. The names of bands like Black Sabbath – taken from a 1963 Mario Bava horror film featuring an aged Boris Karloff – seem evidence enough of this. In my book about Crowley, “Aleister Crowley: Magick, Rock and Roll, and the Wickedest Man in the World” (New York 2014), I chart Crowley’s influence in this genre and in more sophisticated contexts such as that of David Bowie, whose final album “Black Star”, replete with occult innuendoes, was released just days before his death in January 2016. To go over that ground here would be superfluous. So with the reader’s kind permission, let us leap forward a few decades to a period closer to our own.

## **ILLUMINATI, ANYONE?**

The question I put to myself in writing about Crowley was why he maintained a niche in popular culture as a rock and roll icon, when other mystical characters, like Madame Blavatsky and Jung, who had earned high counter-cultural status in the 1960s and early 70s, did not.

In one sense, the answer to this question is obvious. As a friend of Crowley once remarked, he was devoted to “excess in all directions”, which strikes me as a good title for an album. In 1967, the British “underground” newspaper “International Times”, edited by a friend of the Beatles, ran a full page article on Crowley, presenting him as a proto-hippie. This was based on his reputation as an advocate of polymorphous perversity – his penchant for sex anywhere, at anytime, with anyone – and his enormous drug intake, and less so on his status as a master mage. With sex and drugs, all you needed was rock and roll in order to transform Crowley from a 1920s reprobate to a 1960s liberationist. When the 60s “revolution” crashed, the mystics who had found followers among the love children lost their street cred, but Crowley’s darker appetites kept him in good stead with the harder generation that followed. In more recent times, he has found a place among the rap and hip hop crew, who blend his philosophy of *thelema*, or “do what thou wilt” and taste for expensive accoutrements – purchased more times than not with other people’s

money – with their own sense of elite entitlement and flaunting of ostentatious bling.

In an interview about his 2009 video “Run this Town”, the rapper Jay-Z wears a hoody emblazoned with Crowley’s maxim “Do What Thou Wilt”. The video itself is rife with *thelemic*, occult, and other esoteric imagery, mostly of a Masonic, Illuminati variety. (For those who know of the Illuminati only through its recent cyber revival – hundreds of websites claim to speak for it – its actual historical existence ended in 1784, when this short-lived Masonic offshoot was unceremoniously shut down by the Bavarian government.) The singer Rihanna appears in the video holding aloft a burning torch; this is supposed to symbolise her and Jay-Z’s alliance with the arch-rebel, Lucifer, the fallen angel, morning star, and light bearer. The video takes place against a post-apocalyptic landscape, suggestive of Crowley’s coming age of “force and fire”; the old order has fallen and the new one, dominated by the occult elite, is on its way. And it is not only in his videos that Jay-Z celebrates the occult. His lucrative Rocawear clothing line features apparel festooned with Masonic iconography: pentagrams, pyramids, and the All-Seeing Eye, which also makes appearances in his videos. In “On to the Next One” (2010) we find a flash of the goat-headed deity Baphomet, a heathen god supposedly worshipped by the Knights Templar, a “holy warrior” band originating in the Crusades, which have come to be a sort of all-purpose occult fraternity responsible, along with the Illuminati, for any number of nefarious esoteric activities. That among Crowley’s many pseudonyms – he was never the same person twice – we find Baphomet, only helps secure these links.

Gestures like the “devil’s horns”, made by clenching the thumb and middle fingers and extending the fore and little fingers, also turn up regularly in similar videos, with performers like Rihanna and Eminem practically copyrighting it. Other celebs, like the R&B singer Ciara, added their own ingredients to the rap witch’s brew. In her video “Keep On Lookin’” (2013), she wears a jacket emblazoned with “XIV Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn” on the back and boots to match. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn – its name tells of its heritage – was the most famous magical society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, featuring among its members the Nobel Prize winning poet W. B. Yeats and, notoriously, Crowley. It ran aground in 1900 when Crowley’s magical self-aggrandisement led to the irreparability of the fractures that had already appeared in its ranks. Other stars, such as Ke\$ha and Kanye West – the latter purported to be an Illuminist – share in these Hermetic antics.

## **GAGA GNOSTICS**

Another pop star joining the occult ranks, this time through a medley of Gnostic imagery, is Lady Gaga. The Gnostics were an early Christian sect who were later vilified and effectively wiped out by the “official” Petrine church, although many historians suggest that they were true Christians and that the ones that conquered Rome were the real “heretics”. The fundamental Gnostic belief is that we live in a false world, created by an “idiot” demi-urge – identified with the Biblical Jehovah – who was hired by the true God

to do the job but who got carried away and claimed pre-eminence. The Gnostic path is one of rejecting this world and reigniting the spark of the “true” one that lies deep within us, a theme that turned up in many films of the 90s, most famously “The Matrix” (1999), and can be found in several Netflix offerings, such as “Sense8” (2015–2018), “Altered Carbon” (since 2018), and others. One means of doing this is by rejecting the heroes of the Bible and celebrating its villains. So Cain is preferred over Abel.

In “Judas” (2011) Lady Gaga follows this tactic by portraying a Mary Magdalene who throws over Jesus and hooks up with his betrayer, Judas. In the video, Jesus is shown healing the sick and helping the poor, while Judas, the leader of a biker gang, guzzles liquor and paws women, a reference, some suggest, to Crowley’s, a kind of Gnostic, coming age of self-seeking hedonism – which, by some accounts, has already arrived. But what stands out in this video for me here, is that in it Lady Gaga’s eyes are made up to look like the ancient Egyptian “eye of Horus”, the powerful child of Isis and Osiris and the avatar, for Crowley and others, of the coming new age. This is not by chance, as a video by another female singer makes clear.

## **TRASH MYSTICISM**

In her work exploring the world of “trash mysticism” – her name for the form “rejected knowledge” has taken in the world of postmodern pop culture – the artist Karin Ferrari has investigated some curious aspects of contemporary life. Like a social media naturalist, she observes the strange growths and eccentric forms that proliferate in the obscure corners of YouTube and other electronic environments, dank pools of doubtful information which provide internet insomniacs with flickering company on sleepless nights. She covers quite a lot of ground, from the Antarctic to the news media of her homeland, Austria, with much in between. But her field work is not neutral, carried out at a distance, objective and detached. Like many who enter strange lands in order to study their inhabitants, only to succumb to their ways, we can say she has gone native, and the conspiracy theories, paranoid politics, and occult beliefs that she investigates become in her hands the material for digital artworks that not only comment on the neuroses of our time but, frankly, add to them. If the best healers are those who are wounded, we can say that Ferrari’s work shows signs of suffering from the disease of which it purports to be the cure, as was said of the psychoanalysis that emerged from Vienna.

This is not meant as a criticism of her work, as the satirist Karl Kraus’ quip, which I have borrowed above, was when he directed it against his countryman Freud. Much more like Jung, who consciously plunged into a psychosis in order to plumb the depths of the unconscious, Ferrari’s embrace of internet weirdness is both a reflection of the unstable ontology of our post-truth age and a commentary on the cognitive dissonance that has become par for the course in a world of “alternative facts”. That she calls her series of “decoded” videos “The Whole Truth” only adds to the epistemological ambivalence common to our time. But just as Freud informed us that the truth will out in awkward places,

with the repressed – or rejected – popping up in slips of tongue and among many forgotten umbrellas, it may be the case that one way any sort of truth may appear today is in the form of a delusion. Or am I just paranoid?

## **DARK HORSES**

In “Katy Perry’s ‘Dark Horse’ (The Whole Truth)” (2018), Ferrari takes the viewer on a guided tour of the occult, Hermetic iconography that she suggests saturates what may otherwise seem an ostensibly innocuous pop video. Some of the symbols she detects are obscured from the casual view; others are emblazoned in plain sight. To viewers unused to such close reading, Ferrari’s esoteric decoding may seem little more than obsessive nit-picking, the kind of symbol hunting that paranoiacs, determined to find “signs” everywhere, are prone to. For Ferrari, what may strike the rest of us as harmless attention-grabbing eye-candy, which is at the worst annoying, are really potent insignia. They form a secret alphabet speaking of the designs of an elite cabal to establish a hierarchical world state along the lines of the Illuminati, who, by all accounts, are much more popular and powerful now than they ever were in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bavaria. Back then they hailed from Ingolstadt. Nowadays, they come from outer space, the “dog star” Sirius, in fact. How much Perry’s interest in these matters goes beyond the dictates of producing an eye-catching video in a highly competitive market is unknown, at least to me. (If it is anything like the occult interests of some pop stars I’ve known, I suspect it is not that deep, but I could be wrong.) As we have seen, magical imagery and ideas have been at home in the pop world for decades now and have served her predecessors very well, if their sales figures are anything to go by. In the song, Perry asks “So you want to play with magic?” and apparently many do, suggesting, perhaps, their level of seriousness. But how much Ferrari herself believes in what she reveals is also debatable. Interviews she has given are less than clarifying, and her admissions to being a bit “psychic” and to have spent time in a “satanic cult”, suggest her tongue is firmly in her cheek. Yet how firmly, is unclear. But then, in a world in which we are not quite sure what is “real” or “true” anymore, given “post-truth”, “alternative facts”, and all that, this seems to be the point. Like many of the weird YouTube videos in which Ferrari finds inspiration, the viewer is caught and drawn in by the disturbing suggestion of plausibility that is the secret ingredient in any number of conspiracy theories. As the American philosopher and pioneer parapsychologist William James said of the phenomena he examined, there is never enough evidence to convince the outright sceptic, but always enough to keep the true believer hot on the trail. The same can be said for the captivating, if not totally convincing material with which Ferrari works her own magic.

## **IS THAT HORUS BEFORE US?**

To spell out all the signs and symbols Ferrari unearths in “Dark Horse” would require more space than I am allowed, and would also spoil a viewer’s enjoyment in getting them, well, from the horse’s, that is Ferrari’s, mouth herself: the deadpan voice in which she delivers her findings is part of the experience. But a few things can be mentioned.

Perry's video takes place in a fantasy Egyptian tableau in which an eye-catching Eye of Horus appears in numerous forms and settings. (We may recall that Hermes Trismegistus was also known simply as "the Egyptian".) Eyes, sight, vision, and other ocular themes permeate the video, and we recall that "occult" simply means "unseen". Yet, in this occultly informed performance, practically everything is in view of the "All-Seeing Eye", a Masonic emblem of the eye of God that Ferrari reads as a kind of Hermetic panopticon, a surveillance system that observes everything but which is itself out of sight.

In the Great Seal of the United States, the Masonic All-Seeing Eye rests atop a pyramid, its radiant gaze taking in the scene. For Ferrari, this mystical vantage point is a symbol of the pervasive observation surreptitiously enforced by the hierarchical socio-political system with which pop stars like Perry and others are in cahoots. Just as for our ancestors, the gods looked down on mere mortals from the heavens above, so too today's deities are celebrities who not only reside above us but are actual "stars" themselves. This is an echo of the ancient Egyptian belief that, once free of the frail earthly body, the worthy dead – pharaohs and other masters – became immortal heavenly bodies themselves. Aleister Crowley, for whom Horus was an important figure, was always good for a memorable one-liner. In his "Book of the Law", the template for the coming age of "force and fire", he – or his extra-terrestrial communicant Aiwass, whom, Crowley tells us, dictated the "Book of the Law" to him – said that "Every man and every woman is a star." Or can be, in our free-for-all grapple for celebrity.

This is a promise, Ferrari said, made by the powers that be to the rank and file, as encouragement to climb the economic pyramid, or at least to try to, and so maintain the very socio-political order that oppresses them. Fame, glory, power, and wealth await the winners, while, as Crowley said, "The slaves shall serve." The slaves here wear Perry's own Pharaoh brand men's underwear – like Jay-Z she has diversified her portfolio – the suggestion being that while they think they too can be stars, the system that they believe can deliver this promise actually holds them firmly in place.

I might point out that in one scene, Perry, in one of her guises as a "black queen" – there is also a "white" one, symbols of the opposites brought together in magical integration – ingests jewels brought to her by a suitor, actually a member of the "lower order" seeking initiation into the upper ranks. This ostentatious display of consumption (much more than "conspicuous") is an echo – conscious? – of a scene in Kenneth Anger's Crowleyan film "Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome" (1954), in which, during a magical ceremony, the Great Beast gobbles handfuls of precious stones. A missed meme, perhaps?

## PEPE THE FROG

Speaking of memes, magic, politics, and Katy Perry – an unlikely grouping, to be sure – I was reminded while watching Ferrari’s work that Perry has some “real life” association with an internet meme which, according to many accounts, was used magically to help put the first postmodern Reality TV US president, Donald Trump, in office. I am speaking of Pepe the Frog.

Pepe, the creation of cartoonist Matt Furie, started life as an innocuous amphibian slacker, known for urinating in public. He rose to celebrity after pop stars like Nicki Minaj and Katy herself introduced him to a wider audience by appearing in internet posts with him. Unfortunately, he was then appropriated by users of 4Chan, the anonymous internet site used by adolescent Trump fellow travellers to spew their teenage resentment at a world which, in their eyes, had gone way too PC. In the course of doing this, they discovered that in some inexplicable way what they were posting online seemed to be echoed in the “real world”, in the kind of “meaningful coincidence” that Jung called “synchronicity” and which 4Chan users, in a techno upgrade, called “synchromysticism”. I cannot go into detail here – I tell the story in “Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump” (New York 2018) – but, to cut a long story short, if synchronicities occur for Jung when something in the mind is mirrored meaningfully in the outer world, synchromysticism happens when something that was first on the internet – a kind of exteriorised collective imagination – then takes place in the “real world”. For the people on 4Chan, this first happened by chance. Soon, however, they wondered: could we make it happen on purpose?

Enter Pepe. 4Channers began to feature Pepe in posts supporting Trump’s campaign. There was Pepe peeping over the wall Trump promises to build on the US-Mexican border. There was Pepe as one of the “Deplorables”, a posse of Trumpeters so christened by Hillary Clinton and thus given massive media attention. She also tagged Pepe as a symbol of “hate crime” and so ensured his popularity. There was Pepe with Trump and even as Trump as President. As they spread the word the Pepeists began to notice something. 4Chan is anonymous – in fact, the cyber-terrorist group Anonymous got their start there. But each post is given an eight digit number. As Pepe started to flood the net, the people posting him saw that they were getting two, or three, or four numbers in a row – two 2s, three 3s, four 4s etc. They began to bet on what they would get, a dub, trip, or quad. It began to seem that something – or someone – was noticing what they were doing *and responding*.

## HAIL KEK!

There was yet more weirdness. 4Channers were fond of playing the “World of Warcraft” game online. For some strange reason having to do with the Korean language – I said it was weird – whenever they wanted to post “LOL”, it came out “KEK”. This happened so often that they stopped bothering with “LOL” and just wrote “KEK”. Soon after this, a Pe-

peist discovered that there was an ancient Egyptian frog-headed deity named Kek, who was the god of chaos (it is true, there is). As I say in “Dark Star Rising”, if one word characterises Trump’s presidency, “chaos” seems a good candidate. And the kind of magic the Pepeists were trying to work is a branch of what is known as “chaos magick”. “Chaos magick”, a child of 1970s punk London, eschews the traditional magical implements and ceremonies and, like “found art”, uses whatever is at hand. What was at hand for the 4Channers at work were the memes on the net, “meme” being the name the ardent Darwinian Richard Dawkins gave to what he saw as the cultural equivalent of a gene: symbols, images, slogans, basically anything that could be copied and imitated. What meme was most at hand? Pepe. He is a frog and so is an ancient Egyptian god of chaos. And they already knew this god’s name, Kek. And as they performed their magic, using Pepe as an animated talisman – an object charged with the magician’s will and imagination – they noticed that something was happening. Was Kek responding to their posts? Was he encouraging them to post more? Was Trump, an agent of presidential chaos, and also a suspected member of the Illuminati, his avatar?

## **MEME MAGIC**

Such thoughts may have been on Richard Spencer’s mind when, at the annual meeting of the National Policy Institute, a far-right very white organisation, held in Washington, D. C., a few days after Trump’s election, he opened the gathering by declaring that he and his fellows had “dreamed Trump into office”. “Hail Trump! Hail our hero! We made this happen! We made this dream come true! We willed Trump into office!” Spencer, the founder of the Alt-Right, boldly declared this to his comrades, who responded with a volley of Hitler – Or, ahem, Roman – salutes. More than one occult-oriented viewer of this display – shown on news media around the world – twigged that Spencer seemed to be saying that he and his Alt-Right fellows had used “meme magic” to do what any sane individual would have thought unthinkable – that is, make Trump president. And, as it soon came out, Trump himself was a devotee of “positive thinking”, the Christianised version of New Thought popularised by his mentor, the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, at the many sermons Trump sat through at Peale’s Marble Collegiate Church in New York City.

New Thought is an upbeat, prosperity oriented version of the ancient occult belief that “thoughts are things” and that through the mind alone we, or those who practice it, can “create their own reality”. Trump, we know, has been busy doing this for some years now, at the expense of everyone else’s. Because of this, in my book I call him “the singularity”. He seems to be the living nexus of a variety of forces at work in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century – occultism, postmodernism, deconstructionism, Reality TV – through which our ideas about what is real and what is not have been turned upside down.

Ferrari’s work highlights the strange beliefs that proliferate in the dark corners of the internet. But, as we all know, truth, or even post-truth, is stranger than fiction.

## INVASION OF THE IPHONES

The idea that an extra-terrestrial or supernatural agency is behind developments in contemporary culture, including politics, is the theme of another of Ferrari's works which, with all due respect to Katy Perry, I find more disturbing than even her "Dark Horse". In "The iPhone XS: A Techno-Magical Portal" (2018), Ferrari posits that the latest technological developments in the ominously named "smartphones" echo – in a more practical, effective, and ubiquitous way – the ancient magical ambition of making contact with beings from another plane, whether angels or demons. Telecommunications means "communicating from afar" or "at a distance", just as television means the same for sight and telepathy for feeling or, in parapsychology, thought. But the distances involved here are not merely around the planet but include other sectors of reality, and Ferrari goes beyond spelling out the similarities between high-tech and high magic, a mirroring that cultural investigator Erik Davis made unambiguously clear in his classic work "Techgnosis". Thomas Edison, a source of illumination – the light bulb – and so, in a sense, an Illuminati, was also interested in spirit communication and was working on a device to facilitate this when he joined the Theosophical Society in 1878. Since then a variety of technological attempts to cross the barrier into the unseen world have been made, from the Kirlian photography that emerged in Stalin's Russia to the health benefits of Radionics. But Ferrari's twist on this is different, and it is disturbingly reminiscent of the more paranoid episodes of "The X-Files" (since 1993).

For Ferrari, it is not so much that we are trying to communicate with "them", whoever they are. They *are* communicating with us, and have been doing so for some time, and the purpose of their contact is not beneficial, as hopeful sci-fi films such as "The Day the Earth Stood Still" – the 1950s original, not the dreadful remake with Keanu Reeves – and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (1977) suggest. As darker visions seem to perceive, these visitors from another planet, plane or dimension have designs altogether more colonial. They want to establish a firm foothold here on planet Earth and offer those willing to aid them in this ambition high places in the pyramidal, hierarchical socio-political system, the outlines of which Ferrari discerns in the magical pop performances of Perry and other celebrity collaborators. In exchange for their help in giving these disembodied intelligences access to our world, that is a "form" – one of Ferrari's more chilling readings is of the true meaning of "information", whose age ours seems to be – these entities will provide their assistants with power, wealth and prestige, all the benefits that come to the elites who "make it" in this world. If this sounds like a take on the ancient "devil's bargain" or the theme of some of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos stories, I can only remark on the attention that the followers of Kek seem to have received from *something* on the "other side" of the internet.

I will also point out that Madame Blavatsky became Public Enemy #1 with spiritualists because she maintained that the spirits appearing at séances were not those of one's dear departed aunt or of famous people but were simply a kind of astral hobo, the psy-

chic equivalent of street people, eager for any contact with the “real world”, and happy to tell any story or adopt any identity that will help in this. Blavatsky deplored the practice, because the medium – those through whom the spirits communicated – gave up his or her own “self”, their conscious egos, in order to be taken over and used by the visitors from the other side.

According to Ferrari, what happened in the séances of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in dark rooms and around a table, is happening now to millions of people around the planet, through the miracle of the increasingly more intelligent smartphone. Incidentally, the shot of a séance she uses in her decoding comes from Fritz Lang’s 1922 film “Dr. Mabuse The Gambler”. Like the extra-terrestrials who want us to have our entire life on a phone – or, as Steve Jobs said when launching the iPhone, in our pockets – Mabuse wants to control every aspect of the world around him, and if you know the film, he does. In that sense our lives are in his – or his occult counterpart’s – pocket, not our own.

## **A BYTE OF THE APPLE**

As with her take on Katy Perry, how much Ferrari believes in the paranoid scenario she elicits from Apple’s dream machine is unclear, as is to be expected. And again, to detail the wealth of possible clues she discerns – or, to be fair, projects? – would be to go over ground that she has already subjected to a very fine-toothed comb. Nevertheless, I came away from my viewings of this work more than halfway convinced that, as she says in a semi-robotic voice, “The iPhone is not what it seems to be.” If so, then what *is* it? If it is a “technological portal”, as she claims, where does it take us, and who will greet us when we get there? And do we really want to know?

Perhaps not. But some of the elements of this smartest of phones that Ferrari highlights at least suggest some idea of who may be knocking at our cosmic door. Or who may already have a set of keys and may soon get around to changing the locks.

One of the odd things about the iPhone XS is the weird “oil slick” like blob featured on its case. Ferrari points out that this oddly shifting surface – seemingly animate – in many ways resembles the surface of the planet in our solar system closest to the sun, Mercury. The sun, as the source of light for us on planet Earth, is clearly suggestive of the Illuminati, and representations of the All-Seeing Eye show it as radiant, glowing, as the sun is. Mercury makes sense for a telecommunications device, as for the Romans he was the messenger of the gods. But Mercury originally started life as the Greek god Hermes, again a messenger – a delivery company of that name does a swift business these days – but he was also something more. Hermes was a god of magic, and he was also a psychopomp, leading the souls of the dead into the underworld. But even more to the point, it was a blending of Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth – the god’s scribe but also a god of magic – that gave birth in ancient Alexandria to Hermes Trismegistus, founder of the Hermetic tradition, and product of the syncretism characteristic of the

Alexandrian age. So, through an admittedly tenuous linkage, we seem to be back in the world that Katy Perry's "Dark Horse" wants to bring to life, one in which the rejected Hermetic tradition and an extra-terrestrial intelligence have teamed up to establish some kind of technological "fifth column", working to effect an ontological coup against the human race.

Paranoid, you say? Well, yes, perhaps. But when you start to follow Ferrari's clues and the pieces begin to coalesce, the difference between paranoia and revelation, like that between fact and fiction these days, starts to break down, or at least seems less rigid. I see that I have just written "revelation". Is that because I have unconsciously absorbed Ferrari's suggestion that the initial asking price of the first Apple computer, \$666.66, *means* something? This, we know, is the number of the Beast in the Book of Revelations in the Bible. It was also one of several magical nom de guerre adopted by Crowley. (And does the fact that it is also the address of a building on New York's Fifth Avenue, owned by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, add anything to this?) The Antichrist, another important character in Revelations, whose appearance would herald the end of the world, would be presaged, we are told, by a "wonder worker", whose magical powers would astound the people and who would gain worldwide fame and prestige through his many miracles. This, we might say, is precisely the kind of thing that our technology allows us to do today, that "more powerful form of magic" I mention earlier in this essay.

Other Biblical allusions help support this suggestion. Probably the most famous apple before the one that gifted us with the iPhone is the forbidden fruit that ejected our primordial parents out of the Garden of Eden. Eve was seduced into taking a bite (byte?) of this by the wily serpent, a symbol of wisdom in the occult tradition – an important Gnostic trope – but one of evil for Judaism and the Petrine church. According to Ferrari, one bite/byte led to two, and it was by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that the whole binary mode through which we have come to understand reality came into being: good and evil, black and white, night and day, man and woman, and so on, up to our by now indispensable 1 and 0. And while it may be the product of a rival company, why is my Samsung phone named "Galaxy"? And why is its operating system called "Android", a word that originally meant a robot that looked so much like a human being that you could not tell them apart? What, or who, is this operating system operating on? As our phones become increasingly smarter and our lives are more and more downsized so that they can fit inside someone's pocket, are we becoming the robots that are indistinguishable from the genuine article? And if so, how can we tell? More than one sci-fi story or film is based on the premise of androids who don't know they are robots and believe they are human.

Hello? Is anybody there?

## **ALL TOO TRANSHUMAN?**

One of the consequences of the operating systems that, according to Ferrari, are operating on us is the seemingly irrevocable breakdown of the separation between the artificial and the natural, between the world as it is before our Faustian greed for more and more knowledge and the will to apply it get to work on creating its virtual, high-definition simulation and that simulated world itself. “Life imitates art,” Oscar Wilde said long ago, and we seem bent on proving him right. If meme magic is the process by which what is on the internet is echoed in “real life”, will our desire to create ever more “lifelike” simulations of life and its inhabitants – including ourselves – soon dissolve the distinction between the two? Will our lives end up in some technocrat’s pocket, absorbed – as Ferrari suggests – via the “touch screen interphase”, through which the virtual world of information bleeds into and sucks out the real world of space, time, and all that comes with it? Are we approaching the kind of “end of humanity” which postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault dallied with in print but which, according to Ferrari, is being stage-managed and facilitated through the magic of electronic telecommunications? Are we, to give a phrase from Nietzsche a techno upgrade, becoming “transhuman, all too transhuman”, in a way that the coiner of that term, the biologist Julian Huxley, would never have associated with his idea? And is there anything we can do about it, aside from chucking our iPhones out the window and reverting to low tech as we try to eke out a neo-primitive life somewhere off the grid?

Or am I just paranoid? Ask Karin Ferrari. I am sure she will tell you the truth.