

## Introduction

By Dr Jeff Howard (Associate Professor of Games and Occulture, Falmouth University)

and Dr Simon Poole (Independent Researcher)

This special issue of *Revenant* is on the theme of “the Occult”: a broad term with many layers and depths, descending etymologically from the Latin word “occultus,” which means “hidden.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the occult as “the realm of the unknown; the supernatural world or its influences, manifestations, etc.; (collectively) magic, alchemy, astrology, and other practical arts of a secret or mysterious nature.” There are multiple shades of connotation to the word “hidden,” including the idea of a restriction of access, of secrets possessed only by a few initiates and guarded through silence. The image of Harpocrates, the Hellenistic god of silence, holding finger to lips in an invocation to hush, suggests this meaning of “occult.” So does the famous fourth power of the Sphinx of Eliphas Lévi: tacere or “to keep silence” (Lévi 1896, p. 30). In this vision of the occult, the secrets of initiation are preserved behind a veil of mystery, which etymologically derives from the Greek word “myein” (to close the lips or eyes).

At the same time, and perhaps more centrally to our special issue, the phrase “the Occult” evokes objects and entities hidden in a different way, i.e. experiences beyond the veil of the mundane world. Much occult practice pertains to techniques and procedures for contacting entities on the other side, existing in alternate worlds or on other planes of existence. As Steve Patterson explains in *Cecil Williamson’s Book of Witchcraft*, the founder of the Boscastle Museum of Magic and Witchcraft understood channeling of forces from the spirit world as central to traditional witchcraft (Patterson 2014, 38). The centrality of contact with invisible entities to runs through multiple currents of magic: the Goetia of the Solomonic grimoires as revived by Jake Stratton-Kent in *The Encyclopaedia Goetica*, the ceremonial magic of the Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Hellenistic magic of the *Papyri Graecae*

*Magicae* (Stratton-Kent 2022; Regardie 2016; Dieter Betz 1992). Moreover, as Bentley Layton explains in *The Gnostic Scriptures*, the concept of gnosis from which the various Gnostic sects derived their name refers to the intuitive inner knowledge (or “acquaintance”) with divinity (Layton 2021, p. xv). “Gnosis” encompasses both meanings of the occult as used in this issue and conjoins them, since the Gnostics earned their name through their belief in the possession of secret knowledge, some of which pertained to the hidden operations of the cosmos in terms of its demonic warders and the passwords needed to evade them. Not content with the Apostle Paul’s dictum that “faith is the evidence of thing unseen,” the Gnostic seeks direct experience of the hidden forces underlying the world. Each of the articles in this special issue, in one way or another, offers hidden knowledge of things unseen.

This occult knowledge runs counter to some dominant forces at work in mainstream culture. Empiricist and materialist forms of science often deny the reality of spiritual forces, even when the quirks of quantum mechanics seem to flirt with what Erik Davis would call “High Weirdness” (Davis 2019). Moreover, poststructuralist thinking, which is the ancestor of much contemporary critical theory, denies that a transcendental signified can ever be accessed beyond the limitless textual veil of arbitrary, culturally constructed signs. Similarly, a growing fundamentalist Christian orthodoxy in the United States fears and persecutes the occult as the root of all evil (while at the same time promulgating its own brand of twisted occult thinking through such movements as QAnon). As *Dark Star Rising: Magic, Power, and Politics in the Age of Trump* suggests, perversions of occult belief and practice ripple through the alt right even while it seeks to stamp them out in others (Lachman, G. 2018).

The occult is thus a form of subcultural or countercultural activity, encompassing in its strange symbols the passwords and initiatory grades of multiple subcultures. The concept of occulture, originating in the work of Genesis P-Orridge and explored by scholars such as Christopher Partridge and Egil Asprem, conjoins the words “occult” and “culture” into one portmanteau suggestive of occultism as part of a larger societal fabric (Asprem, E. 2013). As Stark and Bainbridge explain, “the occult can be

characterized as a true subculture – a distinctive set of cultural elements that flourish as the property of a distinctive social group.” While this definition broadly embraces the notion of occulture generally, it might be more accurate to suggest that multiple occultures exist, or that occulture itself contains multitudes. Partridge concurs with this idea when he argues that “Occulture includes those often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices.” (Partridge, C. 2004, p. 68).

The occult can thus be thought of as a family tree with multiple branches or a river with dividing and converging tributaries, just as the articles in this special issue each explore multiple branches of occult thought and practice. At times, these streams converge, sometimes based on media (the music of Ghost or Coven, the ludic adaptations of the occult in videogames or tabletop games) or on theme (the occult science of astrophysics or robotics, the fictional the paranormal, synchronicity-driven documentary *Hellier*). At the same time, each of these articles diverges wildly in terms of specific approach, reflecting the individual talents, personalities, and glorious quirks of our diverse set of authors. In this respect, Howard and Poole operate less as editors and more as DJ’s (spinning the tracks of a wide variety of bands) or mediums (conducting a séance in which a throng of varied spirits are encouraged and allowed to speak). As each of these voices booms, wails, or whispers forth from the beyond, they offer hints of occult techniques and technologies: new means of accessing the beyond. Madara’s article on Robotheosis applies the ancient theurgic practices of Imablichus to the contemporary ritual use of robots, especially in relationship to the necromantic and oracular tool known as the mantic skull. Lindsay Demarchi outlines ways in which astrophysicists might leverage their telescopes and spectrographs poetically and necromantically to detect traces of dead loved ones as a counterforce against grief. Both authors are describing technologies in the broad sense of that word as “techne” and “logos”: the words about a skill, thereby aligning their approaches with Erik Davis’ concept

of technosis (the use of digital technologies to attain mystical insight). Some technologies are techniques of altering consciousness, along the lines of Mircea Eliade's description of shamanic practices as "archaic techniques of ecstasy" (Eliade, M. 2004). Vik Gill's article on occult kink casts BDSM in the light of these ecstatic techniques, hearkening back to the etymology of "ecstasy" in "ex" and "stasis"—the emotions which rip the practitioner out of stasis and transport them into another realm. Gill notes that kink practitioners often describe their activities as ways to access primal energy. These hidden energies are at the heart of the occult and necessary to enable countercultural eruptions of rebellion and resistance. Hence, diverse forms of occult resistance (feminist, queer, neurodiverse, national or anti-national) simmer and burble through multiple articles in the issue, including Rose Johnson's piece on Ghost fanfic and fan culture.

At the crossroads of these diverse countercultural movements is a central idea: the hidden world beyond can empower our operations within this one, fueling change. For this change to matter, the various media and forms of creativity described in this issue must connect with deeply primal human experiences. Malte Wendt and Marie-Luise Meier encapsulate these impulses well in the phrase "mysteries of blood, birth, and appetite." Whether we call these forces spirits, gods, or egregores, these are forces that cannot be inherently tamed, but only summoned and then reckoned with in conversation. Yet, these conversations are crucial at our contemporary moment, which some have described as disenchanted and therefore in need of re-enchantment. Mikael Sebag's essay on the intricately magical tabletop game *invisible Sun* contextualizes this game within a larger cultural project of re-enchantment. Re-enchantment is necessary in cultures affected by the narrative of modernity, which for many theorists implies secularism, scientific materialism, and a vanishing of mystic wonder under the watchful eye of the rationalism that Blake called the "unholy trinity" of Newton, Bacon, and Locke (representing deterministic physics, the scientific method, and empiricist philosophy respectively)

(Blake 1811). Now, more than ever, the world needs the occult. The articles in this special issue help to point the way to hidden knowledge beyond this one.

## Works Cited

- Asprem, E. (2013). *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture*. State University of New York P. New York.
- Bietz, H.D. (1992). *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*. U of Chicago P. Chicago.
- Blake, W. (1811). *Milton*. In *Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman. Anchor Books. New York.
- Davis, Erik. (2019). *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies*. MIT Press. Boston.
- Eliade, M. (2004). *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton UP.
- Lévi, E. (1896). *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*. G. Redway. London.
- Lachman, G. (2018). *Dark Star Rising: Magick and Power in the Age of Trump*. TarcherPerigree. New York.
- Layton, B. (2021). *The Gnostic Scriptures*. Yale UP. New Haven.
- Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "occult (n.), sense 2," December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5249310222>.
- Partridge, C. (2004) *The Re-Enchantment of the West. Alternative Spiritualities, Sacrilization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*. T&T Clark International. London.
- Partridge, C. (2013) *Occulture is Ordinary*. In *Contemporary Esotericism*. Ed. Egil Asprem and Bennet and Kennet Granholm. Routledge: London.
- Patterson, S. (2014) *Cecil Williamson's Book of Witchcraft*. Troy Books. London.
- Regardie, Israel (2016). *The Golden Dawn*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Llewellyn Publications. Woodbury, Minnesota.
- Stark and Bainbridge. "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects." *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 85, No. 6 (May, 1980), pp. 1376-1395. U of Chicago P. Chicago.
- Stratton-Kent, J. (2022). *The True Grimoire: Encyclopaedia Goetica, Volume 1*. Scarlet Imprint. London.