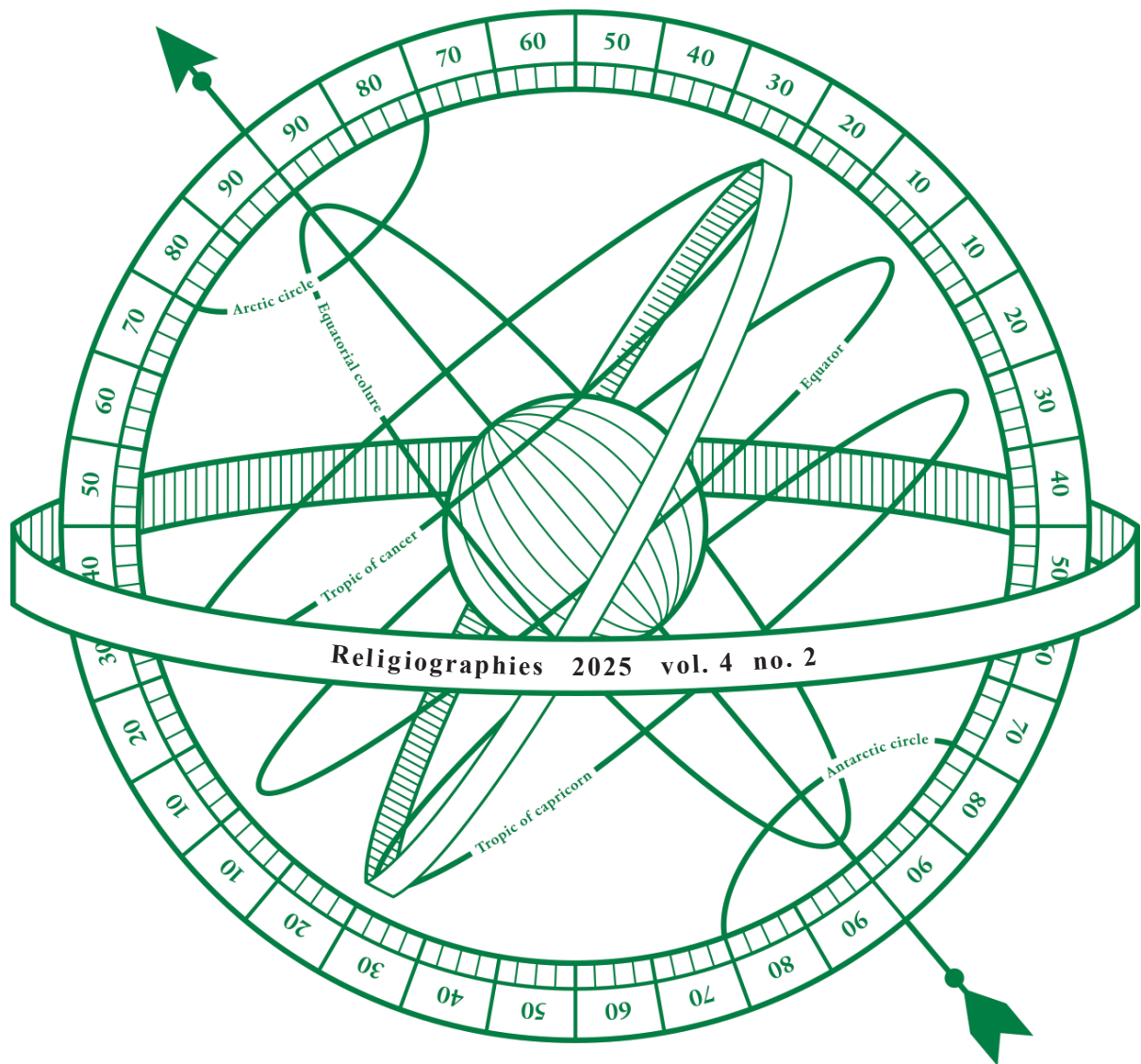


Religiographies



Special Issue
“Occultural Transfers between North and South”
edited by
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Editorial

Understanding Occultural Transfers

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CENTRO STUDI
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The Rise of Occulture

In the last two decades, the term *occulture* has grown in importance when addressing works of art, literature, music, etc., that engage with esoteric and occult themes. Although the genesis of the term can be traced back to the 1970s,¹ occulture rose to a theoretical status with Christopher Partridge's book *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, where he uses it to include "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 that have developed in the last fifty years.²

These practices do not necessarily constitute a coherent religious system with committed adepts. As Partridge continues,

occulture itself is not a worldview, but rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols. Consumers of occulture may be witting or unwitting; they may engage with it at a relatively superficial level or they may have strong religious commitments; they may themselves contribute to the pool of occultural knowledge or they may simply drink from it.³

Put this way, occulture is a flexible and useful methodological tool, especially because it does not draw clear lines between agency and passivity: a piece of occulture can be made on purpose or not, or be made or received by an occultist or not. Partridge mainly focuses on popular culture, which "disseminates and remixes occultural ideas, thereby incubating new spores of occultural thought."⁴ As his main interest lies in the processes of dissemination of occulture and the mutual influence between it and the arts, it is not surprising that he pays most attention to works that have achieved commercial success, such as vampire or fantasy fiction.

However, Partridge's articulation has never explained why occulture as a term should be relegated to popular culture and/or circumscribed to artistic expressions from the last fifty to sixty years. In a 2013 article in *Aries*, Nina Kokkinen challenged this view, redefining occulture as a "tool" to study "how artists categorize certain things (which may include their own art-making as well) as 'sacred,' 'authentic,' 'spiritual' or 'truthful' by means of their works and other practices."⁵ Drawing upon Kocku von Stuckrad's definition of esotericism as a structural/discursive element in social-cultural processes, she re-conceptualizes occulture as

an ever changing discursive field, produced and maintained by (socially-oriented) seekers who are keenly interested in finding or striving towards the higher knowledge/wisdom that would be personally known by them to be *the truth*—the master key for all the questions of life and death. In the midst of this process certain forms of art are often sacralised as "spiritual," "higher" or "absolute" art.⁶

Later research outputs, like Christine Ferguson's and Andrew Rad-

1

Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 124–5.

2

Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 68. Italics original.

3

Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 84–5.

4

Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," 116.

5

Nina Kokkinen, "Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art," *Aries* 13, no. 1 (2013): 22–4.

6

Kokkinen, "Occulture as an Analytical Tool," 31. Italics original.

ford's *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947*, have followed in Kokkinen's footsteps and shown how this category can apply to periods other than the late modernist one, and to other forms of art that the popular ones. The success of the *Occulture Conference* in Berlin and *Trans-States* in Northampton, which have been taking place since 2018 and 2016 respectively, and emic publications such as Carl Abrahamsson's *Occulture: The Unseen Forces That Drive Culture Forward*, have contributed to the further dissemination and re-use of this term.⁷ This special issue of *Religiographies* is indebted to this (oc) cultural humus, while, as will be evident below, it also tries to expand on and correct how these scholars have used the term.

Occulture As Cultural Transfer

The articles in this issue engage with occulture not only as a tool to study the mutual influence between esoteric practices and the production of literature, art, or music, but also as a function of larger cultural transfers between different geographical areas and/or temporal patterns. In 2022, the interest in investigating occulture in a larger context sparked a synergistic exchange between the research network on Esotericism and Aesthetics at the University of Oslo (ESOSTETICS), which I direct, and the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities at the Cini Foundation in Venice. Thanks to a sabbatical sponsored by the University of Oslo and Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and thanks to a generous grant from the UiO:Norden research initiative and the NordForsk/ReNEW (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World) research hub, an international conference took place at the Cini Foundation in November 2023, focusing on *Occultural Transfers Between North and South*. The articles herein were selected from the papers presented at the conference.

The topic of the conference reflected specific trends and met scholarly needs in the domain of Nordic studies, which we tried to approach in parallel with an investigation of aspects of the occultural phenomenon not yet explored. In recent decades, a number of studies on the history of literature, art, and ideas have approached the mutual cultural transfers between Northern and Southern Europe.⁸ In so doing, these studies have also discussed established conceptualizations of “North” and “South” and proposed new ones. This development took place, as sketched out above, in the same period when several research projects in the field of religious studies emphasized how selected works of art and/or literature have negotiated spiritual knowledge and, at the same time, emphasized specific national and/or regional cultural traits from North and South.⁹

What has been much less studied—if at all—is how these two avenues of research intermingle, i.e., how cultural transfers between North and South have contributed to negotiating, exchanging, reworking, and elaborating esoteric knowledge in the production of literature, painting, music, architecture, and the arts at large. Such a lack of comparative knowledge and studies is surprising if one considers the impact of esoteric materials from the global “South” on Northern European culture since at least the end of the nineteenth century. This impact involves, while not being limited to, Sufism, Egyptosophy, and

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Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford, eds., *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Carl Abrahamsson, *Occulture: The Unseen Forces That Drive Culture Forward* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2018).

8

Among many examples, see Elettra Carbone, *Nordic Italies: Representations of Italy in Nordic Literature from the 1830s to the 1910s* (Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2016); Stefan Nygård, *Decentering European Intellectual Space* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Alan Granadino et al., *Rethinking European Social Democracy and Socialism: A History of the Centre-Left in Northern and Southern Europe in the Late 20th Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Peter Stadius, “L’Arcadie moderne: La dimension espagnole du Grand Nord,” in *Le grand tour: Du reste de l’Europe jusqu’à la Laponie et retour*, eds. Maria Lähteenmäki and Joël Ferrand (Helsinki: Fédération des associations franco-finlandaises, 2011), 92–102; Peter Stadius, “Blessed Nordic Modernity: French Images of Welfare Scandinavia in The 1930s,” in *Travels in the North*, eds. Silje Gaupseth et al. (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2014); Peter Stadius, “Happy moderation: Serge de Chessin’s promotion of Sweden in France as a counter image to Bolshevik Russia,” *Nordiques* 41 (2022): 1–14.

9

See for instance Henrik Johnsson, *Det oändliga sammanhanget: August Strindbergs ockulta vetenskap* (Stockholm: Malört, 2015); Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Mauro Ruggiero, *Le muse ermetiche: Esoterismo e occultismo nella letteratura italiana tra fin de siècle e avanguardia* (Sesto San Giovanni: Jouvence, 2019); Sasha Chaitow, *Son of Prometheus: The Life and Work of Joséphin Péladan* (Munich: Theion, 2022).

Freemasonry. Conversely, Nordic alternative spirituality has continuously been a source of inspiration for artistic production in Southern Europe (e.g., with the proliferation of Nordic paganism in musical and/or occultural discourse).

The conference thus aimed to fill this scholarly gap, opening avenues of research and discussing new ways of approaching and conceptualizing occultural phenomena with a North-South perspective as a starting point. For the sake of inclusion, we decided to operate with a relatively broad conception of the terms “North” and “South.” The papers mainly focused on the occultural transfers between Scandinavian and Southern European countries, with examples from Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, as well as incursions in the Near East and the Mediterranean basin. For example, Gísli Magnússon studies the European occultural reception of the literary and philosophical works of the Danish mystic Johannes Anker Larsen, while Tim Rudbøg addresses the occultural negotiation of Italian and British stereotypes in Anna Kingsford’s novella “The Painter of Venice.” Pekka Pitkälä looks at the occultural, “Egyptian” influences on the Finnish artist and writer Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa, and Pehr Englén studies the Danish painter Asger Jorn’s occultural influence on the work of the Situationist International in different European countries. Finally, Matteo Polato investigates the mutual, occultural entanglements between electronic voice phenomena and the sonic arts in Sweden and Italy. The intercultural focus of the articles mirrors occulture’s potential as transfer, which can apply to other geographical areas as well. The heterography at the end of the issue, where Mariano Villalba interviews the Mexican painter Efraín Becerra Castañeda—who blends Mesoamerican and European styles of painting in his search for a spiritual art—may be a good first step in this direction.

Occulture as Theory: A Provocation

While I hope this special issue of *Religiographies* will open new avenues of research on occulture, both at an empirical and methodological level, a theoretical problem remains. During the last decade, while working on different projects related to the relationship between esotericism and the arts, I was repeatedly struck by the lack of a shared theoretical and methodological framework for the interdisciplinary study of literature, art, music, theater, cinema, etc., that engage with esoteric thought. While there are feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, psychoanalytical theories, just to name a few, that have enabled scholars to analyze and study objects across the arts, there is no *occultural theory* to help us study esoteric components and/or implications in the works of esoterically oriented authors and perhaps those with no interest in esotericism. The rest of this editorial will be devoted to this problem, with a special emphasis on the concept of occulture.

As evident in the description above, occulture is first and foremost a *descriptive* and not an *analytical* tool. In other words, it does not offer a method to study and analyze occultural examples. When we know that a piece of art is occultural, what do we do with it? Neither Partridge nor Kokkinen give us any clues. As a partial attempt to address

this problem, Marco Pasi has proposed a four-fold typology of how the relationship of the occult with contemporary art can present itself, summarized as representation, production, initiation, and mediation. In the first instance, occult symbols are reproduced in a work of art. In the second, the artwork becomes an esoteric object on the level of a talisman or magical amulet. If the artwork serves as a point of departure for a spiritual experience, it gains an initiatory function. Finally, a work of art can be the result of a supranatural communication or experience, i.e., it is mediated.¹⁰

Pasi's typology, which was launched in 2010 and developed further in 2015,¹¹ has many merits and has been used by several scholars in the field—but it has an inherent limitation: it is dependent on the intentions of the author and on a *purpose* that the given work is supposed to have. Tessel Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson developed another model in a dialogue with Pasi's. They identify five overall components that interact and can be distinguished within what they call "occult modernism":

1. Processes. Creation, dissemination, and reception of art;
2. Actors. Primarily the artist-creator, but also the audiences, publishers, etc.;
3. The work itself and its genre-specific features;
4. The function of the work, either as intended by the author or experienced by the audiences;
5. Aesthetics, in cases where a specific aesthetic system can be identified.¹²

As shown, this model suffers from a limitation similar to Pasi's; intentionality or at least the explicit "presence" of occult elements in a given piece of art is still the fulcrum of these models. Once more, these are typological, not analytical structures: they describe how a particular kind of art may look, but they do not tell us how to analyze it. In an article from 2022, Christine Ferguson wrote extensively on the dangers of intentionality and of a purely content-driven understanding of an occultural piece of art. Ferguson calls for an acknowledgement of the aesthetic structures and expressive devices of a literary, artistic, and/or musical work, bearing in mind that "surfaces are rarely straightforward" and that "they are never a wholly conclusive guide to literary meaning or reception."¹³

I focus on the problem of intentionality and typology, not because of a post-structuralistic obsession with the death of the author and/or an urge to theorize, but because I am convinced that occulture has a much larger potential in the study of the arts, and perhaps may overcome artistic and genre constraints and establish itself as a kind of "occult theory." I intuited this, perhaps involuntarily, by Pasi again, during his keynote address at the eighth ESSWE International Conference, which focused on "Western Esotericism and Creativity: Art, Performance and Innovation" and was held at University College Cork in 2022. At some point, Pasi pointed out how Piero Manzoni's sculpture *Merde d'artiste* could be considered an alchemical piece of art, because the conventions at the core of the art world turned vile materials, such as excrement, into gold—a kind of artistic *magnum opus*. I am

10

Marco Pasi, "Coming Forth by Night," in *Options with Nostrils*, ed. Alexis Vaillant (Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2010), 107–8. See also Bauduin and Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art*, 14–15.

11

Marco Pasi, "Hilma af Klint, Western Esotericism and the Problem of Modern Artistic Creativity," in *Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, eds. Kurt Almqvist and Louise Belfrage (Stockholm: Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, 2015), 101–16.

12

Bauduin and Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art*, 16–17.

13

Christine Ferguson, "Beyond Belief: Literature, Esotericism Studies, and the Challenges of Biographical Reading in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Land of Mist*," *Aries* 22, no. 2 (2022): 214.

pretty sure that Pasi was joking, not least because Manzoni had no esoteric inclinations (at least that I know of). *Merde d'artiste* would never work in one of the theoretical models I have sketched above. And yet, I would like to take Pasi's intuition seriously and more literally than originally conceived—as a way to discuss a possible occultural theory.

What is theory, or at least, what does it do? This question would need a couple of conferences to be answered properly, but I will try to pinpoint at least one aspect, drawing on a classic text on the matter, Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*. According to Culler, literary theory can briefly be defined as “the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it.”¹⁴ At the risk of oversimplification, I see no a priori obstacle to subtracting “literature” from this quotation and using the same definition for other forms of arts like visual arts, music, film, etc. However, I believe that the emphasis should be placed on the second part of Culler's definition, i.e., that theory is a set of methods to analyze a given work. Borrowing a formulation from Richard Rorty, Culler continues by pointing out how theory “designate[s] works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong.”¹⁵ Here we touch upon a crucial aspect of theory, i.e., its capacity to move across fields and genres, and to question assumptions related to them. Working on this line of thought, Culler concludes that

if theory is defined by its practical effects, as what changes people's view, [it] makes them think differently about their objects of study . . . The main effect of theory is the disputing of common sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience. For example, theory questions: 1. The conception that the meaning of an utterance or text is what the speaker “had in mind,” 2. Or the idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere, 3. Or the notion that reality is what is “present” at a given moment.¹⁶

Isn't this exactly the opposite of a typology and or/descriptive account? The focal point in Culler's quotation is the transmigratory nature of theory, its possibility to transcend disciplinary barriers and trends and establish new knowledge *regardless of the intention of the author and/or the context in which the object of study is produced*. Can occulture thus be seen as rising to this status of occult theory, an analytical tool applicable across the arts? In lieu of a conclusion, I will test this idea with a case study of occultural transfer between Norwegian culture (an area of Norden which is regrettably not represented in this special issue) and the Scottish one.

Henrik Ibsen's Occultural Transfers

In 1908, the Orpheus Lodge of the Theosophical Society in Scotland organized a staging of Henrik Ibsen's 1867 play *Peer Gynt* in Edinburgh. This staging, and the English translation it was based upon, were produced by Isabelle M. Pagan, a theosophist and astrologer who interpreted the play as a drama about reincarnation. The story of the

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Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.

15

Culler, *Literary Theory*, 3.

16

Culler, 4.

compulsive liar Peer, who leaves Norway in a quest to escape from his deeds and, existentially, from the question "who am I?," is turned into an allegory of the soul's journey towards perfection through several reincarnations, which is known as one of the pillars of theosophical thought.¹⁷

In particular, a scene towards the end of the play is interpreted as Peer's physical death, the whole last act of the play taking place in the quarantine period between his past and next incarnation. This interpretation causes problems within a "classical" occultural context, as it raises the question of which insights esoteric readings can integrate in works of art that are not concerned with esoteric doctrines. Based on the present state of research, Ibsen had no interest in esotericism whatsoever, and therefore, from a literal point of view, this interpretation is "wrong"; there is no reason to believe that Ibsen wanted to convey theosophical knowledge—the Theosophical Society was founded eight years after he wrote the play—and there is no later evidence that he had read theosophical literature.

However, if this reading of *Peer Gynt* is literally "wrong," one could then ask if this reading is equally "wrong" on other levels. For instance, the theosophical parlance used by these interpreters resembles that of early psychology and its entanglement with esoteric discourse. To put it another way: when Pagan speaks of Ibsen's "subliminal self," which finds expression in *Peer Gynt*, or of his fiancée Solvejg as an allegory of Peer's "higher self," her argument is not necessarily weaker than that of the psychoanalytical readings that have become part of Ibsen studies in recent decades. And if it is true that Ibsen could not have had knowledge of Theosophy at that point, this is also true for most of the theories (for instance, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism) that are often used to understand his work. Also, if it makes sense to read *Peer Gynt* through Hegel and Kierkegaard—two central philosophers with strong ties to Christian thought that we do not definitively know Ibsen read—this does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to read Ibsen with Theosophy, just because this system of thought has arguably not been part of a shared cultural knowledge in Scandinavia and in the West at large.

This is, I think, a crucial point, because if we lift Theosophy as a system of thought from the field to which it belongs—esotericism—and bring it over to another field—literature/art—we are doing theory. In this sense, theorizing occulture does not mean looking for hidden theosophical elements in *Peer Gynt*, because these elements are not present; it means, rather, using occulture as "a systematic account for analysing literature," as Culler would put it.

The advantages of such an approach are many. In the specific context of *Peer Gynt*, using occulture as literary theory enables us to solve a problem of interpretation that Ibsen scholars have grappled with for over 150 years, i.e., whether Peer's final encounter with the love of his life, Solvejg, represents a form of salvation, be it secular (Peer has finally "found himself" and can start life as a "whole" subject) or religious (Peer has been absolved of his sins). Scholars are mainly divided into two factions, those who say yes and those who say no. No conciliation between these positions has been found. What strikes me about all these readings is that they are built upon a Western, Christian worldview in which such salvation happens once and is valid from

there to eternity. A theosophical interpretation, on the contrary, would disintegrate such oppositions and offer a way out of this impasse.

With that as a starting point, it becomes less important to understand whether the ending is conciliatory or represents Peer's salvation, as Peer has simply concluded one of his incarnations, possibly not one of his most spiritually successful ones, and will be able to do better in the next. In this way, *Peer Gynt* acquires more of a circular than a teleological structure, emphasizing the complexity of human experience, and offers an alternative solution to a scholarly quandary, which seems to be stranded in either a saved/not saved dichotomy or a blunt statement about the fragmentation and aporias of modernity. This is not to conclude that Ibsen wrote a drama on reincarnation, or that he must have known it while writing *Peer Gynt* (although the latter is not impossible). My point is that when occulture is used as an analytical method, and not as a typology or a descriptive umbrella term, it may unveil aspects of a given piece of art that have escaped previous scholarly attention. Raising occulture to the state of theory may turn into an exciting and surprising journey. I hope that this issue of *Religiographies* may be a first step in this direction.

Occultural Literary Transfer in the Danish Mystic Johannes Anker Larsen

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Abstract

This article examines the European reception of the Danish mystic and novelist Johannes Anker Larsen (1874–1957), situating him within the framework of “literary occulture.” It traces how Larsen’s spiritual and aesthetic ideas traveled across cultural and linguistic borders, identifying three main phases in his reception: the early 1920s, marked by the Gyldendal Prize and international translations; the interwar years, when his thought intersected with the Eranos network; and the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when his works re-emerged within New Age and spiritual subcultures. Through readings of Rainer Maria Rilke’s letters, Eranos scholarship, and later subcultural appropriations, the article illuminates the interplay between esotericism, literature, and cultural transfer, and argues that Larsen’s case exemplifies both the marginalization and persistence of spiritual literature in modern European culture.



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In scholarship, Nordic esotericism—with the exception of Swedenborg—has not received much attention. In an article on the “Research on Esotericism in Scandinavia,” Hammer and Bogdan stated: “The situation is reflected in the standard reference work on esotericism, the Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism. Swedenborg is covered in a full-length article. Apart from this, however, esotericism in Scandinavia is barely mentioned.”¹ They attempted to change this situation by editing the first comprehensive volume on Scandinavian esotericism in 2016.² Separate chapters are dedicated to Swedenborgianism and the Danish cosmological thinker Martinus Thomsen (1890–1981). But Johannes Anker Larsen—the other great Danish esotericist and postconfessional mystic of the twentieth century—is nowhere to be found in the volume. In a Danish scholarly context, Knud Wentzel improved the situation significantly. His 2011 monograph on J. Anker Larsen: *Mystiker og digter: Anker Larsens liv og forfatter-skab*³ (*Mystic and Poet: The Life and Works of J. Anker Larsen*) deals very competently with his life, his literary production, and the Danish reception of it, but he only briefly touches on the European reception. In that regard, he is a good example of the tendency among scholars—also within the field of occulture—to operate with a primarily national perspective. The Scandinavian and European reception of Anker Larsen’s works is, however, considerable.⁴ Without a doubt, Anker Larsen had—and has—a much larger European and transatlantic readership than Martinus.

The following investigation pursues three interconnected aims: first, to map the European reception of Anker Larsen; second, to analyze the imagology of the North in the cultural transfer between Scandinavia and Central Europe;⁵ and third, to examine how literary and esoteric discourses merge in this occultural transfer. Structurally, the article describes three phases of the reception of Anker Larsen: (1) an initial phase in the 1920s, when Anker Larsen received international attention due to the prestigious Gyldendal Literary Prize; (2) a middle phase in the interwar and postwar period, when Anker Larsen appears in or around the Eranos esoteric-philosophical network; and (3) a late phase from the 1980s onwards, in which his works are primarily read and circulated in New Age and spiritual subcultures. This tripartite structure allows us to trace both the shifting *occultural position* of Anker Larsen and the gradual transformation of his reception from mainstream (spiritual) literature to a more subcultural or marginal status.

To Anker Larsen, the medium of literature was a means to an end: he used fiction to express spiritual insights. Using the term “occulture” about Anker Larsen’s spiritual books calls for an explanation. As Partridge coined it, occulture encompassed primarily the countercultural movements from the 1960s onwards.⁶ Occulture can be extended seamlessly, however, to art and literature at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The following description of occulture can easily be related to Anker Larsen’s *De Vises Sten* (*The Philosopher’s Stone*): “Occulture is that shadow side of culture fascinated by that which hegemonic religion, culture, and science marginalizes or rejects, but which is, nevertheless, ubiquitous, perennial, and important for the enchantment of the everyday.”⁷ *The Philosopher’s*

1
Olav Hammer and Henrik Bogdan, “Research on Esotericism in Scandinavia,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 20 (2008): 3.

2
Henrik Bogdan and Olav Hammer, eds., *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

3
Knud Wentzel, *Mystiker og digter: Anker Larsens liv og forfatter-skab* (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2011).

4
Academic research on J. Anker Larsen is sparse. In my initial research, I only found two MA theses from 1973 and 1989. In 2008, I was able to reach the author of the newest thesis, Lis Majlund Nielsen, who borrowed me her manuscript. She established contact with her supervisor professor emeritus Knud Wentzel who was willing to show me his finished, but still unpublished, manuscript, the first Danish academic monograph on Anker Larsen, which was published in 2011. Wentzel included a chapter on how Anker Larsen was received by Rilke based on my research. Furthermore, Anker Larsen is mentioned in the article “Scientific Spirit, Spirituality and Spirited Writing: Spiritualism between science, religion and literature” by Christina Barz (*Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 31, no. 1 [2010]). He is also briefly mentioned in Per Faxneld’s article on the Danish dairy salesman and Luciferian freemason Ben Kadosh (or Carl William Hansen) because Anker Larsen depicts Kadosh in his novel *The Philosopher’s Stone*. “‘In Communication with the Powers of Darkness’: Satanism in Turn-of-the-century Denmark, and Its Use as a Legitimizing Device in Present-day Esotericism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57–77.

5
Cf. Astrid Arndt, Andreas Blödorn, David Fraedorff and Annette Weisner, *Imagologie des Nordens* (Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag, 2021).

6
Christopher Partridge, “Occulture and Art: A Response,” *Aries* 13 (2013): 132.

7
Partridge, “Occulture and Art,” 135.

Stone is a novel that deals with a panorama of occultural currents in the 1920s: mysticism (also Catholic), Theosophy, Tantra, Spiritualism, etc. It is, in other words, a kind of meta-occultural novel that critically describes all the erroneous spiritual pathways of contemporary occulture. At the same time, it is a product of occulture itself.

Partridge approaches occulture as a cultural historian and does not go deeply into the literary aspects of it. While his conceptualization of the term “occulture” offers a valuable framework for understanding the cultural diffusion of rejected spiritualities, it tends to emphasize the sociological and historical over the specifically literary. In this regard, recent scholarship has proposed a more fine-grained engagement with the aesthetic and textual dimensions of esotericism. Notably, Christine Ferguson has articulated what has been termed the *literary turn* in the study of Western esotericism, which foregrounds not only how esoteric themes appear in literature, but also how literary form and technique mediate, transform, or even produce esoteric knowledge. In her 2022 article “Beyond Belief: Towards a Literary History of Modern Occulture,” Ferguson argues that scholars should pay greater attention to the literary strategies by which esoteric or spiritual ideas are conveyed—whether didactically, allegorically, symbolically, or through aesthetic indeterminacy. This perspective is particularly relevant for authors such as Anker Larsen, whose writing is situated in the interstice between spiritual instruction and literary expression. The question is not only *what* he communicates, but *how*: to what extent do literary devices—narrative perspective, character construction, metaphor, paradox—mediate the mystical experience and shape its reception? The ambivalent response to *The Philosopher’s Stone*, which will be examined in the section “How Anker Larsen was Received by Rilke: Imagology and Symbolist Occulture,” provides an opportunity to analyze the notion of literarity in relation to emic literary occulture, since Rilke’s critique focuses on literary form and on the tension between spiritual insight and aesthetic execution. When Rilke laments the didactic dimension of the novel, he is implicitly invoking a set of literary standards by which spiritual literature must also be judged. In this sense, his letters offer a proto-theoretical model for evaluating occultural poetics.⁸

Since Johannes Anker Larsen (1874–1957) is fairly unknown today, it seems appropriate to introduce him. Anker Larsen was born on the small Danish island of Langeland south of Funen in 1874. He briefly studied theology, law, and philosophy of religion, but gave up his studies to devote himself to a double career as actor and author. He never succeeded as an actor, but achieved a certain success as a stage director, translator, and comedy writer. Later in his career, he was censored at the Royal Danish Theatre. Spiritually, his life can be divided into two halves: from 1890–1909, he was a member of the Danish Theosophical Society. And here he encountered what he called “the family documents,” i.e., the great mystical writings of human history such as the Tao-Te-King, the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita, Sufi poetry, and the discourses of Jesus, Molinos, Francis de Sales, and other Christian mystics. However, he left the Theosophical Society in 1909. His later criticism of Theosophy was directed at its “intellectualism” (he said he developed a dislike for metaphysics during this time and

The question of occultural aesthetics is not the only parameter. In my research on Rainer Maria Rilke, I have emphasized the importance of understanding the esoteric cultural code as a key to grasping formal aspects of the Austrian poet’s work. Equally central to my project was the task of establishing Rilke’s ideal of a spiritual literature. When Ferguson downplays the narrative that esotericism has been neglected in modernist literary scholarship—while simultaneously citing seminal studies on the subject—she, in my view, underestimates the extent to which mainstream scholarship has tended to exclude esotericism as a serious and influential tradition. This tendency is especially pronounced in German-language criticism, where esotericism continues to be widely marginalized. I have addressed this regrettable state of affairs in relation to the scholarship on Rilke in my monograph: Gisli Magnússon, *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik: Esoterische und okkultistische Modernität bei R. M. Rilke* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009).



J. Anker Larsen, 1923, Historisk Arkiv for Rudersdal Kommune (Historical Archive of Rudersdal Municipality).

got out of the “metaphysical jungle with a practically whole skin”⁹). According to his autobiographic book *With the Door Open* (Danish: *For åben Dør*), he had a profound mystical experience in 1910 in the Geel forest in Holte north of Copenhagen—based on the remembrance of a privileged moment, a nature epiphany, in childhood. Now, the most central thing in his life was the mystical experience, the experience of eternity, as he called it. But his personal experiences of nature mysticism also made him critical of the organized, metaphysical, or intellectualized pursuits of spiritual meaning in general: church, theosophy, spiritualism, occultism, tantra, et cetera.¹⁰

Anker Larsen—like Martinus—was a postconfessional mystic, but unlike Martinus, who preferred to write lengthy esoteric treatises to convey his thoughts, Anker Larsen chose literature as his medium of communication. From 1905–1919, Anker Larsen wrote two novels and four short story collections. They can be perceived as preparation for his *magnum opus*, *The Philosopher’s Stone*, published in 1923. Here, we follow three different spiritual paths exemplified by three characters, Jens Dahl, Christian Barnes, and Holger Enke, and Anker Larsen uses the metaphor of the alchemical stone as a symbol of spiritual meaning, often involving a difficult and even erroneous pursuit.

The novel gave Anker Larsen his breakthrough as a writer in 1923, when he won Gyldendal’s novel prize of DKK 70,000, which at the time was equivalent to more than half a Nobel Prize. Henceforth, Anker Larsen wrote the aforementioned autobiographical account *With the Door Open* in 1926 and six more novels, *Martha og Maria* (*Martha and Mary*, 1925), *Sagnet der vokser ind i himmelen* (*A Stranger in Paradise*, 1928), *Rus* (*Intoxication*, 1931), *King Lear fra Svendborg* (*King Lear from Svendborg*, 1932), *Olsen’s Dårskab* (*Olsen’s Folly*, 1941), and his swan song *Hansen* (1949).

Among the Danish public, Anker Larsen’s popularity as an author who was vigorously debated in the leading newspapers followed primarily in the wake of the prestigious literature prize from Gyldendal. The head of the prize committee was the highly respected Professor in Nordic literature Vilhelm Andersen (other members were author Ludvig Holstein and Gyldendal director Axel Garde). Since Anker Larsen was not an established author at the time, it was hotly debated whether the novel was worthy of the recognition. The reviews ranged from panegyric praise and moderate recognition to resentful put-downs. The consensus seemed to be that it was a significant work of great spiritual worth, but aesthetically not wholly satisfying. Nevertheless, *The Philosopher’s Stone* was assessed positively by literary giants such as literary critics Georg and Edvard Brandes, Professor Oluf Friis, and writer Knut Hamsun.¹¹ He received two chapters in Professor of Philosophy Harald Høffding’s book *Religious Types of Thought* (*Religiøse Tanketyper*, 1927). Vilhelm Grønbech, professor of history of religion, who was an expert on mysticism, wrote the foreword of the Danish edition of *With the Door Open* in 1927. This, without a doubt, contributed to his cultural capital in this period.

The Anker Larsen reception was, however, not confined to Denmark. Primarily due to the Gyldendal prize, his books were translated into numerous languages: German, English, French, Dutch, Swedish, Icelandic, Estonian, Finnish, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Ru-

9

J. Anker Larsen, *With the Door Open: My Experience*, trans. Erwin and Pleasance von Gaisberg (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931), 25.

10

Without using the term “occulture,” Christina Barz comes to a similar conclusion when describing the presentation of spiritualism in *The Philosopher’s Stone* by Anker Larsen and *Madame d’Ora* by Johannes V. Jensen: “Notwithstanding their different treatment of spiritualism’s ideology and practical employment, those two literary samples actually highlight its significance within the cultural discourse at the time of their origin. However obfuscated or even naïve spiritualism, as presented in the two non-fictional texts, may appear—in retrospect it has to be considered as a mental feature to be reckoned with in the early 20th century’s history of ideas, as it intends a symbiosis of two essential opposite tendencies of the time.” Barz, “Scientific Spirit, Spirituality and Spirited Writing,” 153–54.

11

Oskar Weitzmann, “J. Anker Larsen, ein nordischer Mystiker,” *Ostsee-Rundschau und der nordische Aufseher* 11 (1934): 240.

manian, and Russian. As is evident from this list, the Anker Larsen reception is a prime example of occultural transfer, since it encompassed both Nordic, Central European, and Eastern European countries.¹²

How Anker Larsen was Received by Rilke: Imagology and Symbolist Occulture

The imagological aspect of the Anker Larsen reception is most evident in the German-speaking areas.¹³ *The Nordic* was often featured in journals and newspapers. In the *Ostsee-Rundschau*, Anker Larsen was presented as a “Nordic mystic,”¹⁴ and in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, he was called a “Nordic Magus.” Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Nordic literature, theater, and art have enjoyed the reputation of being artistically and politically progressive. Strindberg was performed in Berlin by Max Reinhardt, and Arnold Schönberg used the *Gurre Songs* (*Gurresange*) by Jens Peter Jacobsen for his monumental cantata. The collected works of Henrik Ibsen, Herman Bang, Strindberg, and Jacobsen were published in German, and two of the most important German novels from the beginning of the twentieth century—Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*)—were inspired by Norwegian works: Alexander Kielland’s *Garman and Worse* (*Garman og Worse*) and Sigbjørn Obstfelder’s *A Priest’s Diary* (*En præsts dagbog*).

The German historian and journalist Fritz Endres writes about Anker Larsen in an article on “Nordic Poets.” In his introduction, before turning to the German translation of Anker Larsen’s novel *Rus* (*Intoxication*), he displays the stereotyping tendencies of Nordic imagology:

Nordic poetry has something over contemporary German poetry: it has an oral tradition, at least in the epic area. Their storytellers can narrate; the long winter nights, one would think, have taught them and their listeners the patience that the true storyteller needs. From their youth on they experience the sound of the sea, the roar of the endless forests, the hard, ever-same work of the boatman and the fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer; their cities are neither so big nor so loud that they drown this austere melody with their rattling and screaming. This is why Nordic epic poetry always has a sense of great form, even if it does not always fill that form; always a knowledge of great content, although it only saw the most content-rich experience of our time, the World War, as a spectator.¹⁵

Endres juxtaposes Nordic and German poetry and uses common conceptions of Nordic nature and life style to explain the special oral quality of its literature and “great sense of form.” Despite a criticism of Anker Larsen’s works as being more philosophical than literary, Endres attests in him the ability to mesmerize and educate the reader due to his “genuine [= Nordic] storytelling.”¹⁶

The North-South-juxtaposition is also evident in how Rainer Maria Rilke received Anker Larsen. Rilke’s judgment of the novel has

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There was also a lively Anker Larsen reception in the United States, but I have limited myself primarily to the European perspective in this article.

13

Imagology is a theory on cultural representations and national stereotypes. It was developed in the 1950s, but has gained momentum in recent decades due to the work of Joep Leerssen. Cf. Joep Leerssen, “Imagology: History and method,” in *Imagology The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 17–32.

14

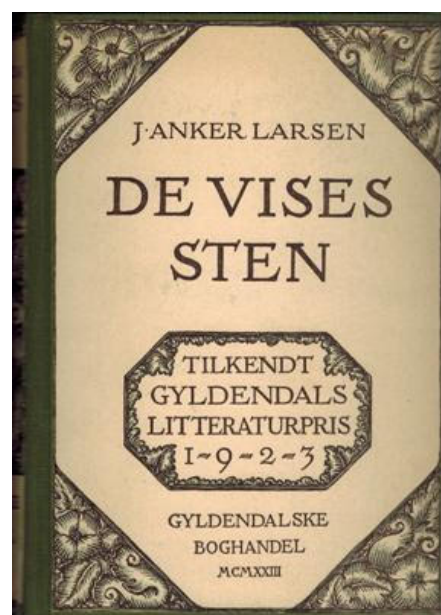
Oskar Weitzmann, “J. Anker Larsen, ein nordischer Mystiker,” *Der nordische Aufseher* 8, II volume of *Ostseerundschau Lübeck* (November 1934): 240.

15

Fritz Endres, “Nordische Dichter,” *Der Kunstwart* 45 (1931): 195.

16

“echten Erzählkunst.” Endres, “Nordische Dichter.”



Cover of the Danish first edition of *De Vises Sten* (*The Philosopher's Stone*), 1923.

great weight, since he was both one of the greatest German-language poets of the twentieth century and shared Anker Larsen's spiritual worldview. Rilke stylized the Scandinavian mentality as being more open to the occult than other European cultures. In his only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), one of the earliest modernist novels in German literature, the main character is a poor Danish aristocrat who arrives in Paris only to discover its shocking modernity. Rilke, however, also describes Malte's childhood memories from the mansion Ulsgaard in the Danish province. The novel mirrors Malte's genuinely modern experience of fragmentation, alienation, and existential anxiety he was confronted with in the disturbing reality of the metropolis of Paris. But this nihilistic modernity seems to coexist peacefully with ghosts and other paranormal phenomena. When Rilke, late in his life, was asked by the scholar Hermann Pongs about the "occult incidents" in *Malte*, he wrote: "The 'occult occurrences' in Malte: in part accurately recounted experiences of childhood in Prague, in part things experienced and heard in Sweden. This is, moreover, one of the reasons why the fictitious figure of M. L. Brigge was made a Dane: because only in the atmosphere of the Scandinavian countries is the ghost ranged among the possible experiences and admitted (which conforms with my own attitude)."¹⁷ This passage shows that Rilke attached special importance to Scandinavia in connection with the occult and paranormal. It is even the reason why Malte Laurids Brigge is a Dane.¹⁸ This stylized, occult image of the "Scandinavian" mentality echoes in Rilke's letters on Anker Larsen's *The Philosopher's Stone*.

In Switzerland, where Rilke had lived since 1919, Anker Larsen was particularly well received; he thus gave a series of lectures in the autumn of 1925. About this time, *The Philosopher's Stone* was given a positive review in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, where the critic Edouard Korrodi called it "masterly" and "easily the strongest *weltanschauung* novel which can be written in our time."¹⁹ Rilke's Swiss benefactor and close friend, Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, whom Rilke called Nike, had discovered Anker Larsen and was deeply touched by *The Philosopher's Stone*, which she sent to Rilke. Rilke then wrote three letters that constitute the different phases in how he received Anker Larsen:

Thank you for the *Philosopher's Stone*: I read the first chapters with interest; isn't it a kind of Bonsels with, in addition, this clarity of the Scandinavian eye, which, like the twilight of their bright summer nights, never dies completely? I do not know if Bonsels would have been capable of the discovery which, certainly, I divine, carries this book and imports above all: (The "Open"). It is a life-changing experience, related to that which came to me then in Duino as the most peculiar consciousness and which I later had printed under the heading "Experience" in one of the (older) *Inselalmanach*. If there are reviews of Anker Larsen's lecture published, please send them to me, if possible, with some brief comments from you. (I wrote to Inga Junghanns immediately!).²⁰

Here Rilke combines the two overarching themes of this article: the cultural transfer between the Nordic occulture and central Europe *and* the

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Rainer Maria Rilke: *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, vol. 2, 1910–1926, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton 1947–48), 357.

18

It is, however, another Dane in the novel who symbolizes the Scandinavian attitude in the most exemplary way, namely Count Brahe. The count's clairvoyance is connoted positively in the novel, which contains five episodes from Denmark, all of which have to do with paranormal phenomena: the Christine episode (and the first Count Brahe episode), the Ingeborg episode, the episode with the ghost hand, the haunted house of the Schulin family, and the second Count Brahe episode. To these five episodes, which all belong to Danish childhood memories, one can additionally add two records which relate to automatic writing: the automatic writing hand and the episode with Goethe and Bettina von Arnim.

19

Edouard Korrodi, "Der Stein der Weisen," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Literarische Beilage (May 10, 1925): 3.

20

Merci du *Stein der Weisen*: j'ai lu avec intérêt les premiers chapitres ; n'est-ce pas une sorte de Bonsels avec, en plus, cette clarté de l'œil scandinave, qui, comme le crépuscule de leurs neiges claires d'été, ne s'éteint jamais complètement? Ja ne sais pas si Bonsel eût été capable de la découverte qui, certainement, je le divine, porte ce livre et y importe avant tout: (Das "Offene"). Es handelt sich hier um eine lebenswandelnde Erfahrung, verwandt jener, die mir damals in Duino zum eigentümlichsten Bewußtsein kam und die ich, später, unter der Überschrift „Erlebnis“ in einem (der älteren) *Inselalmanach* habe abdrucken lassen. Si on publie des compte-rendus sur la conférence d'Anker Larsen, envoyez-les moi, je vous prie, avec, si possible, quelques petits commentaires de votre part. (An Inga Junghanns hab ich sofort geschrieben!). Rainer Marie Rilke to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, October 29, 1925, in *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, vol. 2 [Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1977], 1062. (My translation).



Duino Castle, etching by Adolf Fesca (1821–1872), based on drawing by August Anton Tischbein (1805–1867).

relationship between occultism and artistic creation. The connection with the *Malte* novel is established through the reference to the translator of *Malte* into Danish, Inga Junghanns. Rilke compares Anker Larsen with Waldemar Bonsels, whose works are characterized by nature mysticism.²¹ But according to Rilke, Anker Larsen has “this clarity of the Scandinavian eye, which, like the twilight of their bright summer nights, never dies completely.” The bright summer nights are one of the often used stereotypical tropes about the Nordic countries. But Rilke merges it with an occultural stylization of Scandinavia as a region of clairvoyance (the “clarity of the Scandinavian eye”). In the first of the three letters, Rilke had only read the first chapters and compared Anker Larsen’s account of “the open” in *The Philosopher’s Stone* with his own experience at Duino Castle in 1912, where he—in the text *Erlebnis* (*Experience*)—uses the same term. In both accounts, the “open state” is contrasted with a normal “closed state,” and in both cases, the meditative togetherness with a tree is the gateway to an experience of “the open.” And in both cases, this mode of experience abolishes the distinction between the living and the dead, who can freely partake in each other’s realms. To describe the state, Anker Larsen makes use of paradoxes. In a poem, Rilke—true to his symbolist task of innovating in traditional language—finds a neologism for this open state: *Weltinnenraum* (the inner world space). Anker Larsen describes the state as being synaesthetic, akin to Rilke’s notion of conquering new areas of extrasensory reality through the optimal interplay of the five senses in his experimental essay *Ur-Geräusch* (*Primal Sound*). Furthermore, both Rilke and Anker Larsen assigned great importance to the child’s ability to sense the world, and they both stressed the value of recollecting the “open” sense impressions from childhood. In the *Malte* novel, Rilke speaks of “performing the childhood” [die Kindheit leisten].²² Rilke, in other words, had good reason to draw a parallel between his own conception of “the open” and Anker Larsen’s.

The second letter, which Rilke wrote to his Swiss benefactor a week later, facilitates a discussion of different kinds of occultural literary strategies. In a sense, Rilke—as a proponent of symbolist poetics—challenges the more naïve literary methods of the “spiritual author” Anker Larsen, to whom literature was a means to a spiritual end. By consulting Rilke’s criticism of Anker Larsen’s novel, we can discern the more advanced literary “occultural” techniques of symbolism. Rilke acknowledges the authenticity of Anker Larsen’s mystical experiences, but he finds it regrettable that “such an extraordinary discovery enters the market in such a ‘packaging.’ ” “Packaging” means the way in which Anker Larsen had aesthetically crafted his novel, and according to Rilke he was greater as a mystic than as a writer. Rilke’s first criterion for the successful work of art is its ability to move the reader. If the action seems untrustworthy, if the portraits of the novel’s characters do not convince, the spiritual core of the work also misses its target. Secondly, Rilke criticizes the book’s self-help or didactic tendency, which he calls “helpful” [hülfreich]: “How do the great Danish names grow back to their previously recognized stature through this book. Jacobsen or Bang: it’s just not acceptable, it’s not acceptable to make ‘helpful’ books, the help must not be in the book, at most above the relationship of the reader to the book, in the space

21

Waldemar Bonsels is most famous for the children’s book *The Adventures of Maya the Bee* (*Ge. Die Biene Maja und ihre Abenteuer*, 1912).

22

Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1987), 856.



Rainer Maria Rilke, photograph by M. Schramm, ca. 1900.

between the reader and the book remains (this strange space that has a counterpart in the imaginary image space and in the surrounding space dominated by a sculpture), the misunderstanding of aid becomes transparent as occurrence.”²³

The fact that Anker Larsen connects the spiritual experiences with “goodness” goes against the grain of the modernist Rilke. In his fragmented novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rilke had strived to endow spiritual experiences with the highest degree of authenticity by contrasting them with the greatest possible misery. The definition of the artistic ideal leads to an attempt to describe the essence of the spiritual work of art. The problem with the “helpful book” consists in the fact that the “help” is *in* the book instead of truly challenging the imagination of the ideal reader. Thereby, the work of art is in danger of being reduced to a one-dimensional mouthpiece of a spiritual message.²⁴ Rilke’s rigorous aesthetic criticism, but also the acknowledgement of Anker Larsen’s mysticism, could serve as a model for the analysis of literary esotericism and occulture: How important is the merging of these two discourses? And how does the lack of balance between them influence the reception? This leads us back to Christine Ferguson’s call for a *literary turn*, since it offers a valuable lens through which to read not only authors like Anker Larsen, but also the critical reactions they provoked. Her insistence that scholars pay attention to the *form* through which esoteric ideas are conveyed—whether through narrative experimentation or through symbolic or allegorical veiling—marks a shift from merely identifying spiritual content to evaluating how such content is *aesthetically constructed and negotiated* within literary frameworks. From a Fergusonian perspective, Rilke may be seen as advocating for a *literary occulture* that gives priority to form over message, resonance over clarity, and disturbance over consolation. This discussion is still relevant in the twenty-first century, where emic occultural literature is often frowned upon by the literary establishment. Here, it might be interesting to investigate whether the marginalization of emic occultural literature is due to its presumed lack of aesthetic complexity.²⁵

Anker Larsen and Eranos

Eranos constitutes an interesting perspective on the European Anker Larsen reception. From July 1–3, 1927, Anker Larsen gave a series of lectures at the *School voor Wijsbegeerte* (The School of Philosophy), a philosophical and esoteric study center in Amersfoort in the Netherlands. According to Hans Thomas Hakl—who has written a comprehensive account of the history of Eranos—“an exchange not only of experiences, but also of speakers took place with Eranos.” In this context, Hakl quotes Anker Larsen:

The Danish philosopher of religion, director, and successful author J. Anker Larsen (author of *Der Stein der Weisen*, 1923), who also spoke there, said of the school: “One gains the impression that here one aspires to knowledge and insight in the old classical sense, in which right knowledge and right living were indivisible and mutually dependent.” Hakl adds: “A resonance

23

My translation. “Wie wachsen einem die großen dänischen Namen über diesem Buch wieder zur früherkannten Größe. Jacobsen oder Bang: es geht eben nicht an, es geht nicht an, ‘hülffreiche’ Bücher zu machen, die Hülfe darf nicht *im* Buche sein, höchstens über dem Verhältnis des Lesers zum Buche, darf, im Raume, der zwischen dem Lesen und dem Buche bleibt (diesem merkwürdigen Raum, der ein Gegenstück hat im imaginären Bildraum und in der, von einer Skulptur beherrschten, sie umgebenden Räumlichkeit), das Mißverständnis eines Beistands zum durchsichtigen Ereignis werden.” Letter to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, November 7, 1925. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1977), 1068.

24

The reply letter of Wunderly-Volkart is not available, but from Rilke’s third letter from November 10, 1925 (Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, 2:1072), we can deduce that she was hurt by the way in which Rilke ridiculed *The Philosopher’s Stone*. He assures her that nothing would be further from his mind than to cause her pain; he would have thought she would have laughed at his “excessive temperament,” “which ultimately stemmed from the recognition, emotion, and admiration that connected me most vividly with certain parts of the book. Only because its essence was infinitely clear and important to me could I become so enraged, as it hurt me to see this innermost value not only connected with weaknesses, but actually exploited to their advantage. And it was precisely about the helpfulness and ability to help of the book that we remained of one mind!” (My translation). In his diplomatic reply, Rilke calls his reluctance to believe that “good people should not pour their goodness into art,” and his “highly private reservation”; a concession that, of course, must be taken with a grain of salt. But Rilke also writes that he wished Anker Larsen himself would agree with him, and on this point Anker Larsen did not disappoint him. On several occasions, Anker Larsen states that his central concern is spiritual experiences and their communication, and that he has no particular ambition as a stylist. Cf. interview with Anker Larsen in the Danish newspaper *B.T.*, May 1, 1931.

25

An interesting case is this regard is the Danish author Peter Høeg, known internationally for *Miss Smilla’s Sense of Snow* (*Froken Smillas fornemelse for sne*, 1992). When he published *The Quiet Girl* (*Den stille pige*) in 2006, the response of the literary critics was so hostile that it transcended purely aesthetic criteria. This is a good example of the way in which literary critics misunderstand emic occultural literature because they are not sufficiently informed about the cultural code that forms the foundation of the novel. Literary criticism should analyze emic occultural literature as works in their own right, and not as the result of an erroneous world view. Cf. Gisli Magnússon, “Tabuiseret Spiritualitet?: Esoterisk Tradition Som Nøglen Til Peter Høegs *Den Stille Pige*,” *Passage* (*Århus, Denmark*) 33, no. 3 (2018): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.7146/pas.v33i3.107746>.

with Eranos can clearly be detected here.”²⁶

Hermann Hesse, one of Anker Larsen’s early readers, did not partake in the Eranos meetings, but his ideas about spirituality, Jungian psychology, East-West dialogue, and cultural renewal were in accordance with the founding principles of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn and C. G. Jung.²⁷ Hesse read *The Philosopher’s Stone* when it was published in German in 1925 and described it as the “highest experience and true magic.”²⁸ Hesse’s positive assessment must be seen in light of the very similar spiritual pursuit in novels such as *Demian* and *Siddhartha*, written shortly before Anker Larsen’s novel, in 1919 and 1922 respectively. Just as Anker Larsen outlined the dangers of Faustian spiritual striving in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, Hesse, in *Demian*, writes about the

Buddhists who sought to convert Europe, a disciple of Tolstoy who preached nonresistance to evil, as well as other sects. We in the inner circle listened but accepted none of these teachings as anything but metaphors. We, who bore the mark [the invisible sign of Cain], felt no anxiety about the shape the future was to take. All of these faiths and teachings seemed to us already dead and useless. The only duty and destiny we acknowledged was that each one of us should become so completely himself, so utterly faithful to the active seed which Nature planted within him, that in living out its growth he could be surprised by nothing unknown to come.²⁹

This is very much in accordance with Anker Larsen’s warning against spiritual searching within metaphysical systems, and both seem inclined towards experiential nature mysticism. The nature-river-contemplation that lets Siddhartha find peace in Hesse’s eponymous novel is not so different from Anker Larsen’s nature contemplation in *The Philosopher’s Stone* and *With the Door Open*.

A scholar closely related to Eranos, who refers to Anker Larsen, is Frederic Spiegelberg, who became professor of Indian civilization at Stanford in 1941. Spiegelberg followed the Eranos meetings with interest, and according to Hakl, was an “important as a link between Eranos and the spiritual center of Esalen in California.”³⁰ In his 1948 book *The Religion of No-religion*, Spiegelberg retells the story of an epiphany he had when he was a young theology student. He had just read a poem by Rilke: “All will again be great and Mighty/And no churches which clasp Him tight/As though a fugitive, then wail over Him/As over a captive and wounded deer” from the *Book of Hours*—the young Rilke’s postconfessional poetic and spiritual manifesto.³¹ As he continues,

I see a boy running along the seashore, across meadows and green fields, looking at trees and bushes, enjoying the scent of the flowers and the majesty of thick white noon-day clouds, and stimulated by his own vitality and youth. He has just read for the first time some songs of the mystic poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and the ideas of this visionary fill his heart, growing in his mind like seeds in a fertile soil. His usual, every-day con-

26

Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Christopher McIntosh (London: Routledge, 2014), 137.

27

Hesse’s first wife, Mia Bernoulli, was present at the 1932 and 1935 Eranos meetings. According to Hakl, she even attended the meetings of Fröbe-Kapteyn during the Alice-Bailey phase. Hakl, *Eranos*, 103.

28

Hermann Hesse, “Erinnerung an Lektüre,” *Die Neue Rundschau* 36, no. 2 (1925): 968.

29

Hermann Hesse, *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair’s Youth*, trans. Michael Roloff and Michael Lebeck (New York: MJF Books, 2010), 127.

30

Hakl, *Eranos*, 106.

31

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel 1987), 329. Frederic Spiegelberg already quotes *The Book of Hours* (and Anker Larsen) in the first chapter of *The Religion of No-Religion* (Stanford: James Ladd Delkin, 1953).

sciousness has vanished, and he feels instead something deep, something holy. He calls it his higher Self. And this, his new, better transmuted Ego, feels in the so-called world nothing but holiness.³²

In this altered state, Spiegelberg suddenly reaches a church:

And while thus enjoying this new life and this transformed reality which is nothing other than a mere testimony of God's glory and omnipresence in everything that exists, he suddenly approaches around the corner of the road—a church. And the sight of the church gives him a shock. For what on earth is a church doing in his glorified world?

The young Spiegelberg—inspired by Rilke's anti-clerical poetry—experienced a stark contrast between the epiphany of nature and the dead rocks of the church. This is, indeed, a very Ankerian experience, and in *The Religion of No-religion*, he refers positively to Anker Larsen's description of the open, where

[r]eality in itself becomes doubtful and miraculous—that is, the general background of all those so-called “revelations,” which, moreover, are as different as can be. The Norwegian [Danish] novelist Anker Larsen, describes in his *Philosopher's Stone* how the little boy, sitting lonely in the garden and gazing at an elderberry tree, suddenly becomes aware that the tree “stands open,” and through this event the entire world around him loses density, leaving as it were some holes open which gave him a thoroughfare into an unknown Beyond.³³

This is, of course, the same scene that Rilke compared to his *Experience* of the “open.”

A third reference to the Eranos circle³⁴ involves the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser, whose stage model of human consciousness has been highly influential.³⁵ In *The Ever-Present Origin* (*Ursprung und Gegenwart*, 1949–1953), Gebser mentions Anker Larsen as a representative of the “aperspectival stage”—in the fine company of Friedrich Hölderlin, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Gebser's favorite poet, Rilke. To Gebser, magic and myth “are flourishing with astonishing purity among those poets who have authentically surpassed the mental-rational structure” which results in a “new attitude toward death.”³⁶ According to Gebser, Anker Larsen expresses a similar aperspectival, integral view of death. Gebser quotes the following passage from *With the Door Open*:

Life and death entered being together with me. They are two continuously present sides of this my being in time. Sometimes the one and sometimes the other predominates within me yet they always work together; and with my being in time they both vanish with me. Whoever has experienced the eternal now [the present] does not see a bottomless abyss between “life” and “death.” Here words are again lacking. I can haltingly say: The

32

Frederic Spiegelberg, *The Religion of No-Religion*, (Stanford: James Ladd Delkin, 1953), 18.

33

Spiegelberg, *The Religion of No-Religion*, 2.

34

According to Hakl, “Jean Gebser took part in the sessions between 1942 and 1948 and established fruitful contacts with Jung, Kerényi, and Portmann, although he did not actually give any lectures.” Hakl, *Eranos*, 8.

35

To mention one example of Gebser's influence, the American philosopher Ken Wilber was inspired by Gebser's cultural structures of consciousness: archaic, magic, mythic, and integral. Wilber even calls his philosophy “integral” rather than “holistic.”

36

Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas, (Part Two: Manifestations of the Aperspectival World) (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), 502.

eternal now is Being, and time is existence. Whoever transforms existence into Being has nothing more to do with “life” and “death.”³⁷

Indeed, this passage expresses the same idea of unity of life and death that permeates the aperspectival poet Rilke’s magna opera: *Duino Elegies* (*Duineser Elegien*) (1922) and *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Sonette an Orpheus*) (1922).³⁸ Gebser’s high regard for Anker Larsen as an equal of Rilke and Martin Heidegger is typical of the generally positive assessment of him in the first phase of the reception.

The Anker Larsen Reception during the Late Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

From the 1980s onwards, Anker Larsen’s works have undergone a significant transformation in reception: once the object of interest among leading literary and intellectual figures, his books are now primarily read within spiritual and New Age circles. Thus, Anker Larsen is still available on the shelves of spiritual bookstores in Denmark (5 titles), Germany (9 titles), the Netherlands (4 titles), Czech Republic (6 titles), France (1 title), and the United States (3 titles).³⁹ This shift is not simply a matter of audience, but reflects a broader cultural realignment—one that speaks to the marginalization of spiritual literature within the modern literary system and to the durability of occultural transfer outside the mainstream. This late phase of reception is marked by a double movement: on one hand, Anker Larsen has been gradually erased from the canonical and scholarly memory of twentieth-century literature (the aforementioned monograph by Knud Wentzel being the exception); on the other hand, he is canonized anew within a subcultural field of esoteric seekers, spiritual practitioners, and alternative publishers.

The changing infrastructure of his publication history bears witness to this shift. While *The Philosopher’s Stone* was initially published by leading Danish publisher Gyldendal (1923 and 1955 editions), more recent editions have been issued by *Visdomsbøgerne* (1983, 1986, 2016, and 2021), a small press that positions itself explicitly within a spiritual tradition, printing titles by Meister Eckhart, Patanjali, Aldous Huxley, and other perennialist figures. Similarly, in Germany and the Netherlands, the reprints of Anker Larsen’s works have migrated to boutique spiritual publishers like *Mysterium Magnum* (first Anker Larsen Verlag) and *Stichting Met Open Deur* (named after his autobiographical account *With the Door Open*), often with paratexts and cover designs clearly targeting a New Age readership. Following the new German editions, there were at least ten reviews celebrating the rediscovery of Anker Larsen. Characteristically, these contemporary articles on Anker Larsen did not appear in prestigious literary journals and newspapers like *Zeit*, *Spiegel*, or *Frankfurter Rundschau*, but in German-language New Age and spiritual magazines such as *Pentagramm* (1996), *Pulsar*, *Einblick*, *Golem*, *Strahlen des Lichts*, *Spuren*, *Gralswelt*, *Yoga und ganzheitliche Gesundheit*, and *Advaita-Journal*.⁴⁰ Under the title “A Modern Magician of the Human Soul,” the anonymous *Einblick* reviewer wrote:

37

J. Anker Larsen, *Bei offener Tür* (Leipzig: Grethlein, 1926), 64. Quoted from: Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 502. To Gebser, Anker Larsen is a kindred spirit of Martin Heidegger: “Anker Larsen stresses Being, years before the publication of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.”

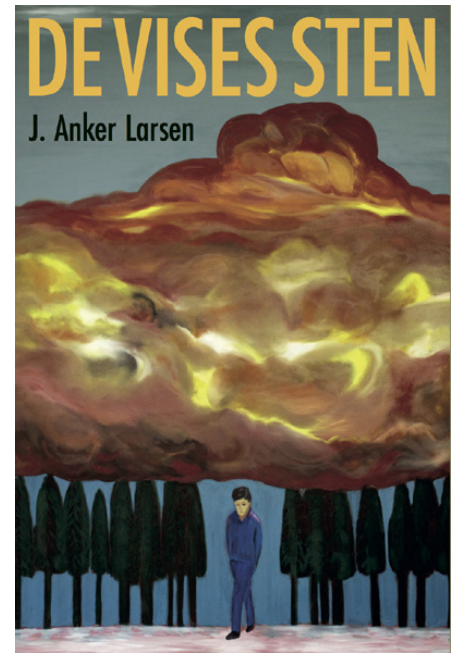


Fig. 5. The cover of *The Vises Sten* by Johannes Anker Larsen. *Visdomsbøgerne* 2016 (4th edition).



Fig. 6. Czech cover of *Philosopher’s Stone: Spolu opustíme den* (Avatar, Prague, 2011).

The rediscovery of the Danish writer Anker Larsen is a sensational discovery for spiritual literature. A man steps out of obscurity into the spotlight of a kind of literature that is now being recognized by more and more people and, quite surprisingly, finds an enormous resonance. Now the readers ask: How could these books be forgotten?⁴¹

The holistic physician Klaus Bielau wrote in the magazine *Pulsar* in a similar vein. He spoke of “the renaissance of the almost forgotten Danish writer and man of the theatre J. Anker Larsen, who was in his time compared with Dante, Dostoyevsky and Tagore.”⁴² The reviews often draw on New Age discourse, giving priority to intuitive knowledge, universal truth, and spiritual authenticity over literary or historical specificity. The logic of occultural re-enchantment at play here aligns well with what Partridge has identified in contemporary occulture: the retreat from institutional religion toward experiential, syncretic, and psychologically interior forms of spirituality.

This surge of interest did not last, but his status as a “spiritual classic” in the German-speaking area was confirmed in an issue of *Magische Blätter* on Art and Spirituality in 2020, reprinting one of Anker Larsen’s lectures from his visit to the *School voor Wijsbegeerte* in 1927—alongside Pëtr D. Ouspensky and Bo Yin Ra.⁴³

The latest Danish book on Anker Larsen (and another rather unknown Danish mystic, Emmanuel Sørensen, who called himself Sunyata) was published in 2023. It was written by Gunhild Lystbæk and bears the title *Evighedsblikket: to glemte danske mystikere (The Gaze of Eternity: Two Forgotten Danish Mystics)*. It is comparable to the contemporary German reception, since it was written by a spiritual insider who wants to share her spiritual discovery of Anker Larsen. And when we look at the contemporary appeal of mindfulness and the popularity of Eckhart Tolle, who writes from a very similar place as Anker Larsen, we may have an explanation of why Anker Larsen continues to be published and rediscovered. In this sense, Anker Larsen’s third-phase reception is emblematic of a broader cultural process: the segregation of esoteric literature into a subcultural niche, even as its ideas continue to circulate widely in popular spirituality. Thus, Anker Larsen’s subcultural survival testifies to the enduring relevance of the occultural themes he explored—nature mysticism, post-confessional mystical experience, the “open state”—albeit reframed through the vocabulary of mindfulness, non-duality, and New Age perennialism. The fact that Anker Larsen is still in print and discussed, albeit outside academic and literary institutions, suggests that the occultural literary transfer he embodies has not ceased but merely changed channels.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, Anker Larsen has generally received a stepmotherly treatment in the esotericism scholarship—and in scholarship in general. The intensity, longevity, and international scope of the Anker Larsen reception make him a particularly interesting phenomenon in the history of literary occulture. By mapping and analyzing the European reception of Anker Larsen, one can discern

38

It is remarkable how often Anker Larsen and Rilke are considered kindred spirits. Gebser comments on an Anker Larsen quotation: “Yet the most valid expression to date of this attitude toward death is offered by Rainer Maria Rilke. His ultimate interpretation is completely mythical-polar, yet it transcends the mythical.” Here, Gebser quotes two famous Rilke-letters: “Death is the inverse, the undescribed side of life: we must attempt to achieve the greatest awareness of our existence which resides in both unlimited regions and nourished by both . . . This true form of life penetrates both regions, the blood of the greatest circulation courses through both: there is neither a here nor a thereafter, but rather the great unity,” and: “Like the moon, life too surely has another side turned away from us; yet is it not its opposite but its complement to perfection, to completeness, to the real, intact, and complete sphere of Being.” Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 502. Cf. Magnússon, *Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik*, 282–98.

39

I used WorldCat (<https://search.worldcat.org/>) and Google Books to find available versions.

40

The spiritual Anker Larsen articles were published in the following journals: “Diener des Lichts,” *Pentagramm* 5 (1996): 35; Klaus Bielau, “Der Stein der Weisen: Zur Renaissance des nahezu vergessenen dänischen Schriftstellers und Theatermannes J. Anker Larsen,” *Pulsar* (June 2003): 22–23; Beate Kruzinski, “Der Stein der Weisen,” *Einblick* 6 (December 2003): 15; Anita Maria Kittler, “Die leichte Unerträglichkeit des Seins oder: Das Eigentliche ist für das Auge unsichtbar; Über den dänischen Schriftsteller Anker Larsen,” *Golem* 4, no. 14 (2003): 20–25; Martin Friesknecht, “Ins Offene: M. F. feiert die Neuentdeckung des dänischen Dichters Johannes Anker Larsen,” *Spuren* 1 (2004): 64–65; Jürgen Edelmayer, ed., *Strahlen des Lichts*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2003): 16; Hella Naura, “Buchbesprechung: ‘Der Stein der Weisen,’ ” *Yoga und ganzheitliche Gesundheit* (September 2003); Werner Huemer, “Der Stein der Weisen. Wieder entdeckt: Johannes Anker Larsen,” *Gralswelt* 30 (2004): 47; Ulrike Porep: “Anker Larsen: Der Stein der Weisen,” *Advaita-Journal* 10 (March 2004): 66–67; *Spirit-Net* (www.spirit-net.de); *BewusstSein* (www.bewusst-sein.net); *Reiki Magazin* (www.reiki-magazin.de).

41

Einblick 6 (December 2003): 15. (My translation).

42

Klaus Bielau, “Der Stein der Weisen,” *Pulsar* (June 2003): 22–23. (My translation).

43

Johannes Anker Larsen, “Vortrag in Amersfoort: I. Kultur und Religion,” *Magische Blätter* 101, no. 7 (Herbst 2020): 55.

three distinct phases: in the first phase, he had a certain cultural capital due to the Gyldendal prize, and this resulted in his being translated and quoted by members of the cultural elite. In this phase, the North-South dichotomy was prominent, especially in Germany. In the second phase, Eranos proved to be a fruitful common denominator. And in the third phase, he is hardly read outside the spiritual milieu (from the 1980s onwards). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the North-South imagology gradually disappeared from the picture. By studying the complex reception history of the Danish mystic and author, we gain insight into the relationship between the cultural establishment and literary occulture. Despite the great affinity with Rilke, whose cultural capital is as prominent within the literary establishment as in spiritual circles, the fate of Anker Larsen was to be compartmentalized primarily with spiritual authors, such as Paolo Coelho, who are not considered “serious” authors by literary critics.⁴⁴ J. Anker Larsen is, however, an essential part of this crossover of discourses. Scholars partaking in the literary turn of esotericism have an important task when considering both the cultural code of esotericism *and* the literary dimension of occultural literature, such as Anker Larsen’s production.

44

Cf. Gísli Magnússon, “Neomystische Naturerfahrung als neuer Sinn: Rainer Maria Rilkes Anker Larsen-Rezeption,” in Karin Wolgast, ed., *Sinnverlust und Sinnfindung am Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 43–59.

North and South in Anna Kingsford's *The Painter of Venice* and Beyond

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Abstract

This article explores the fictional work of Anna B. Kingsford (1846–1888) and especially “The Painter of Venice,” a novella published in her collection *Rosamunda the Princess: An Historical Romance of the Sixth Century, and Other Tales* (1875), which has hardly received any scholarly attention. It shows how her early fiction perpetuated stereotypes about Northern and Southern Europe, reflecting an essentialization of the nationalism of her era, as well as her British background. These stereotypes became transfers of an imagined Southern temperament and served as a basis for what Kingsford felt was lacking in the English temperament. These stereotypes highlighted her positive fascination with Italy, which she depicted as a land of intuition, allegory, beauty, art, and secret knowledge. This portrayal starkly contrasted with her view of Britain, which she saw as lacking these more intuitive and aesthetic qualities. While such idealization was partly a product of the nationalism of her time, it was also a projection of her longing for a more spiritually and artistically fulfilling environment, which she associated with the South. Kingsford used these stereotypes and the setting of her novella as an early foundation for developing themes in her later occult works, which interconnected hermetic themes of allegory, intuition, nature, transformation, and beauty.



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Introduction

Anna B. Kingsford (1846–1888) lived a short, yet remarkable life during the second half of the nineteenth century. Although only limited research exists on her ideas, she is known in the study of esotericism for her contributions to the revival of occultism, hermeticism, and esoteric Christianity during the nineteenth century.¹ She was born in Essex, England, to John Bonus (1794–1865), a wealthy merchant, and his wife, Elizabeth Ann Schröder (1805–1888). According to the biographical sketches written by Edward Maitland (1824–1897), her companion in spiritual and other matters, she started to have illuminations, visions, as well as a strongly developed sense of intuition, which would play a major role during her life.² She also had lucid dreams, and from all of her impressions, she wrote poetry and fiction from an early age. Her work was published and received good reviews.³ Following her convictions, she became a strong anti-vivisectionist and a campaigner for vegetarianism and women’s rights. She was one of very few English women to obtain a degree in medicine, and, at the same time, she managed to graduate without having experimented on any animals. She also wrote on these topics, for example in *Addresses & Essays on Vegetarianism* (a collection of material published in 1913), *The Perfect Way in Diet* (1881), and *Health, Beauty and the Toilet* (1886). From the late 1860s to the early 1870s, prior to becoming a member of The Theosophical Society and meeting Maitland and other occultists, she was engaged in these subjects and, in 1872, she took over a women’s magazine, *The Lady’s Own Paper*, which promoted women’s rights.⁴

Kingsford also had an interest in Buddhism, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism, which led her to the Theosophical Society. From the very outset of her encounter with the Theosophical Society, she became a prominent member, and in 1883 she became the leader of The London Lodge, founded on June 27, 1878, by Charles Carleton Massey (1838–1905) under the name The British Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of Aryavart.⁵

At the lodge, she wrote and gave lectures on what she called “The Perfect Way.” These lectures were published and became part of her significant esoteric work on esoteric Christianity, with titles such as *The Perfect Way* (1882) and *Clothed with the Sun* (1889). Her focus was especially directed towards Hermeticism, esoteric Christianity, and related subjects, which at a certain point led to a clash with the prominent theosophist A. P. Sinnett (1840–1921), whose major focus was on the so-called “Eastern” spiritual tradition, as seen in his popular book *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). Shortly after this publication, Kingsford broke with the Theosophical Society, and in 1884 she founded her own society, The Hermetic Society, which was active until 1887 and was an important precursor to The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, established in 1888.⁶ This made her one of the significant transmitters of Hermeticism in the nineteenth century. For example, she translated *The Virgin of the World of Hermes Mercurius Trismagistus* (1884) from French into English (the *Korē kosmou*: a Hermetic text-Stobaeian excerpt). Furthermore, she was involved in a circle of occult learning that stemmed from Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875). She also corresponded with Baron Nicolas-Joseph Spédalieri (1812–1898), who transmitted Lévi’s esoteric ideas.⁷ In addition, she had connections



Anna Kingsford, 1880s. Source <http://witchnovel-research.wordpress.com/>. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

1

See Alan Pert, *Red Cactus: The Life of Anna Kingsford* (Watsons Bay: Books & Writers, 2007); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 40–50, 55–77, 89–110, 123–43, 158–80; Christine Ferguson, “Anna Kingsford and the Intuitive Science of Occultism,” *Aries* 22, no. 1 (2022): 114–35.

2

Edward Maitland, *Anna Kingsford: Her Life, Letters, Diary and Work* (London: George Redway, 1896), 1:1–3. Maitland also conjectures that Kingsford might be of Italian descent on her father’s side reaching back to the founding of Venice. Pert, *Red Cactus: The Life of Anna Kingsford*, 67–73.

3

Pert, *Red Cactus*, 1–16.

4

Pert, 35–42.

5

Pert, 81–90, 107–25.

6

Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 41, 53, 55–56, 59. Pert, *Red Cactus*, 127–33.

7

Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, 2:178–79.

with Mary Ann Atwood (1817–1910), who, as early as 1850, wrote a significant work on spiritual alchemy, *Hermetic Mystery*. The above shows that Kingsford, later in life, had situated herself at an important crossroad, through which she received knowledge and impressions from various channels, from different parts of Europe, including Éliphas Lévi's occultism, to Hermetic and alchemical studies, not to mention Theosophy.

Her involvement in the social currents of her time, particularly the role of women in society and new views on health and animal welfare, is well worth remembering and exploring in addition to her significant contribution to occultism. In more recent years, research on her activities in the social sphere and her wider influence on her contemporaries and her posterity has begun to grow, but still much needs to be done to get a fuller picture of her significance.⁸ Yet another important dimension of her work, which has been almost entirely neglected, is her literary output. Related to the theme of this special issue, this article primarily aims to open up the study of Kingsford's fiction, exploring themes she later developed in her occult works. In addition, the article addresses the reproduction of stereotypes in "The Painter of Venice" (1875) regarding the national and geographical characteristics of Europeans in the wider context of nationalism and literature at the time. In other words, this article shows that Kingsford reproduced stereotypes between Northern and Southern Europe and that these stereotypes were occulculturally colored, also serving her spiritual perceptions, her longing, and themes she pursued in her occult works.⁹

The Novella "The Painter of Venice"

Several of Kingsford's literary works were published in a book called *Rosamunda the Princess, and Other Tales* (1875). This book includes a novella of about sixty pages entitled "The Painter of Venice" (the actual date of its writing is unknown). In the tradition of Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who situated parts of their work in Italy, this story is set in Tuscany and has direct connections to Venice, as its protagonist is a master painter from this city.

The novella is one of her longest stories and has been chosen for its representative use of stereotypes transferred to the English-speaking world and for the connection with themes in Kingsford's later occult works. The novella can be related to different genres, but its play on mystery and murder and its elements of a ghost story are similar to the gothic genre. It also has a spiritual-ethical message, which is often found in spiritual works that are focused on finding one's soul and warning of dangers of materialism, jealousy, and matters of the world.¹⁰

The plot is set in the fifteenth century and follows a Dominican friar and his two adopted children, Angelo and Teresa. They meet a master painter from Venice, Domenico Veneziano and his companion, a painter named Andrea del Castagno; they are both working on a commission to paint in the Santa Maria Chapel of Venice for Cosimo de' Medici.¹¹

The story is mainly composed of dialogue. The young boy, Angelo, whom the friar adopted, engages in long dialogues with the Venetian painter, and through these dialogues we learn that this boy does

8

Natasha Rebyr Coulthard, "Becoming What You Eat: Anna Kingsford's Vegetarian Posthuman," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 50, no. 2 (2022): 325–53; Mitch Goldsmith, "The Unfinished Business of Anna Kingsford: Towards an Enchanted Animal Ethic," *Trace* 7 (2021): 24–45; Ruby Ekel, "Vegetarians, Vivisection and Violationism: Gender and the Non-Human Animal in Anna Kingsford's Life and Writing," *Lilith* 28 (2022): 73–96; Amanda Kluvel, "Kingsford, Anna Bonus," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. W. J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 663–65.

9

In this article the use of "occulture" refers to the aesthetic and literary use of themes and symbols that are often associated with occultism, the occult, and esotericism, such as higher knowledge, secret knowledge, gnosis or the intuitive faculty, correspondences, analogies, living nature, transformation, initiation, spirits, ghosts, demons, etc. See the editorial of this special issue by Giuliano D'Amico.

10

Algeron [Anna B.] Kingsford, "The Painter of Venice," in *Rosamunda the Princess: An historical romance of the sixth century, and other tales* (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1875), 155–217, 214–17.

11

Kingsford, "The Painter of Venice," 156.

not possess a bright, strong intellect but has other abilities. He is very pure, or “close to his soul,” as Anna Kingsford would probably say.¹² The master painter possesses the knowledge of art and beauty. Their conversation thus sparks the notion that it is possible to connect with the soul of things, the more sublime side of life. An individual is pure and escapes the dominance of the intellect, opening up to intuition; this connection can happen through art. The story thus deals with themes such as art versus materialism and art as the key to both the nature of beauty and the soul.¹³ A similar theme is present in *Zanoni* (1842) by Bulwer-Lytton, whom Kingsford certainly was familiar with, at least later in life.¹⁴

In addition to these themes, stereotypes about the North and the South are present. As the narrator writes,

We cold blooded, dull-hearted denizens of unspeculative England, can but dimly comprehend the deep mysteries that lay hidden beneath the simple wording of those Italian and also German ferry stories [. . .] We miss the philosophical thought, the daring guesses at truth, the wonderful, powerful idea that underlays all of this.¹⁵

The narrator adds:

But farther South, where a brighter sun enlightens the eyes and souls of men by day, and where the skies are so pure and clear that at night one can see the stars down to the very edge of the earth, high and low and water all around the horizon [. . .] there too, the hearts and understanding of the people lay nearer their lips and ears than they do among themselves, so that they speak in allegories of things we do not dare to dream about.¹⁶

Certain stereotypes about the British and the Italians are clearly seen here. Kingsford’s motivation, filtered through her literary text, seems to be an admiration in the form of an opening of a more mystical, allegorical interpretation of mysteries among the Italians, compared to the dull-hearted, unspeculative English. The significance of this quote, however, requires some historical contextualization.

The Positive Other in a Time of Nationalism

Cultures have always nurtured images of other cultures. For the ancient Greeks, it was the uncultivated “Barbarians,” for the Romans the brutal Gauls. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nationalism played a pivotal role in most cultural discussions and literary genres. It was intertwined with various literary movements and genres to foster a sense of national identity and pride. The Romantic movement, in particular, was deeply connected to nationalist sentiments. Romantic writers such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) celebrated their national landscapes, folklore, and cultural heritage, thereby promoting a unique national identity. Their works often highlighted the beauty and distinctiveness

12

See the following section below: *Secret, Living Knowledge, and Other Modes of Knowing*.

13

Pert, *Red Cactus*, 22.

14

Maitland, *Anna Kingsford*, 2:83.

15

Kingsford, “The Painter of Venice,” 159.

16

Kingsford, 159.

of their homelands, encouraging readers to take pride in their national heritage. As a significant genre during this period, historical novels emerged with authors like Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) in Britain and Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) in Italy, using their narratives to evoke national history and identity. These novels not only entertained but also constructed and maintained stereotypes about their nations' past and the characteristics of other nations and their people.

The creation of national epics was another manifestation of literary nationalism. Cultural nationalism was thus expressed in literature with writers striving to construct and promote their native languages and traditions. German poets like Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) emphasized the importance of folk culture and language in national identity. Herder's works, amongst others, emphasized the belief that the true spirit and character of a nation is embedded in its language and cultural practices, thus advocating the preservation of these elements as a means of strengthening national identity and distinction from other nations and peoples.¹⁷

Theories about how climate impacts the temperament had also been widely discussed and formulated into stereotypes in literature. Among many others, Germaine de Staël-Holstein, also known as Madame de Staël (1766–1817), tried to portray European differences, famously calling Northerners productive, honest, and rational and Southern Europeans more lazy, sensual, and passionate. The climate was a cultivating factor the deeply ingrained idea that Northerners were melancholic and Southerners more passionate and lively.¹⁸ Such stereotypes permeated literature and philosophy at the time, and the English and the Italians were portrayed as extreme contrasts.¹⁹ Accordingly, Maria Schoina writes,

Apart from the political system, economy and religion, the sharp contrast in geographical latitude and climate between England and Italy was deemed largely responsible for the existence of difference in human physiology, character and *Weltanschauung*. Stretching in diametrically opposite directions and being separated by the sublime Alps, Italy and England, despite their island (or near island) identity, were often associated with two different worlds in the atlases of literary imagination, namely, the countries *north* of the Alps and the countries *south* of the Alps.²⁰

Studies in moral behavior were also published at the time, such as *Thoughts on the Moral Order of Nature* (1831) by Anne Marie Winter. Quotations from this book point out that “among the various people whom I know best, the Scotch and the Italians seem to me, the only ones distinguished by a sensibly directed imagination,” and that “the imagination of the English and French, is of a middle kind. That of the former, is more inclined however, to direct itself on sensible objects, and that of the latter, on metaphysical.”²¹ In other words, such studies cultivated an understanding of cognitive traits based on nation and geography. In anthropology, it was similarly common to use a ladder to divide the advancement of different cultures. The foundational anthropological work *Primitive Culture* (1871) by Edward B. Tylor

17

John Breuilly, “Nationalism and National Unification in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 149–74; Walter Schnee, “Nationalism: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2009): 1–18.

18

Robert Casillo, *The Empire of Stereotypes: Germaine de Staël and the idea of Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 26–33.

19

Casillo, *The Empire of Stereotypes*, 14–27.

20

Maria Schoina, *Romantic “Anglo-Italians”: configurations of identity in Byron, the Shelleys, and the Pisan Circle* (New York: Routledge 2016), 35–36.

21

Anna Maria Winter, *Thoughts on the Moral Order of Nature* (Dublin: J. Chambers, 1831), 1: 410.

(1832–1917) includes a line of progress ranking different peoples; the Italians or Europeans *in toto* were placed above others.²² Thus in the nineteenth century, this was an ongoing train of thought, which was an integrated part of the scientific and nationalist thinking and expression of the time.

It is, however, often overlooked that many of the stereotypes constructed about other nations and peoples in the quest for identity were not always meant to demonstrate superiority. In fact, the cultivation of stereotypes could result in a fascination for the other, the foreign, which came to serve as a literary screen for longing. Similar to the theosophists and their romantic portrait of India, Kingsford clearly talked about Italy with a positive, romantic notion of its culture. Kingsford was, however, not alone in this. It had become common among the creative and upper classes in Great Britain to cultivate an almost double identity or Anglo-Italian identity.²³ Some were very critical of the Italians, like Percy Bysshe Shelley, even though he enjoyed the landscape and parts of the ancient culture.²⁴ Others, like Lord Byron, praised the Italian “temperament.”²⁵ As Schoina continues,

Mediterranean philosophy suited Byron’s temperament, especially for its sensuousness, exuberance and freer moral code—qualities which northerners were believed to lack. The south provided him with an abundance of cultural and physical stimuli and, above all, with abundance of space that could accommodate his overwhelming personality, extravagance, flamboyance and instability of temperament.²⁶

Kingsford’s construction and transfer of stereotypes about the North and South should be understood in this context, but as will be shown below, they also connected with her overall spiritual themes.

Esoteric Connections

As shown above, it was common to essentialize the characteristics of European neighbors in the age of nationalism, and Kingsford clearly reproduced some of the same stereotypes, such as the “dull-hearted English” and the “passionate or flamboyant Italians.” Kingsford, however, used such stereotypes to express attractive traits that were lacking back home in the North, but could be approached more closely in Southern Europe.

These stereotypes, especially of the South and the “occultural” mysteries of Italy, furthermore connect with the theme in Kingsford’s “The Painter of Venice,” especially how beauty and contact with nature can inspire the soul and how true art can enlighten the hearts of men beyond reason, not cultivated in Northern Europe to the detriment of its people.

This theme in Kingsford’s work runs parallel to Bulwer-Lytton’s famous “occultural” novel *Zanoni*, in which the connection between art and the supernatural (or occult) is central, as is the Italian setting. The novel suggests that true artistic inspiration and genius are deeply intertwined with higher, mystical realms of existence. The protagonist,

22

Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1891), 1: 27.

23

Schoina, *Romantic “Anglo-Italians,”* 89–123.

24

Schoina, 127.

25

Schoina, 100, 106.

26

Schoina, 102.

Zanoni, is an immortal Rosicrucian adept and teacher who possesses profound occult knowledge. His mastery of the supernatural is depicted as a source of his artistic and intellectual powers, implying that true art transcends the mundane and taps into the divine or mystical.²⁷

When Kingsford, in her later occult works, sought to rehabilitate what she perceived to be true Christianity (i.e., esoteric Christianity), the pictorial in the form of allegory became the true esoteric key to interpreting all the stories of the Bible and the Greek myths. To her, this was the spiritual key to unlocking the texts, whereas all the materialistic, literal interpretations had ruined spirituality in modern times. Allegory thus revealed the secret or esoteric truths in the ancient texts, but such knowledge is, in the end, a result of intuition or living knowledge.²⁸

Secret, Living Knowledge, and Other Modes of Knowing

In “The Painter of Venice” the “occultural” theme of secret and living knowledge is very present. A destructive force is represented by Castagno, the jealous companion of the master painter, who seemingly ends up killing the master painter. Throughout the story, Castagno tries to lure the secret from his master’s art, as his master’s living knowledge and practice are clearly superior.²⁹ When he is convinced he has received the secret transmission of the art of beauty, he kills the master painter.³⁰ Twenty years later, at the end of the story, he does not recant, rather he recounts; he does not regret his action, but he is haunted by the ghost of the master painter. His only motivation for telling his version of the story is to get it out of his mind and perhaps get rid of the ghost of his master. He says:

Twenty years ago the invitation of Cosmo [sic] de’ Medici associated me with Domenico of Venice in the work of adorning the chapel of Santa Maria Novella. My colleague was master of a great secret which I longed to possess, the secret of a new and marvellous art, transcending in importance and effect all the former discoveries of our sublime calling.³¹

The secret art, of course, only shows itself to the pure and cannot be gained by passion or power.³² Both the transfer of secret knowledge from master to disciple on the art of painting and the soul of things are a part of this story, but it also shows that a possible consequence of the longing for these qualities can lead to certain forms of jealousy.

The novella also includes ideas about other modes of knowing, which often play a part in esotericism. Kingsford focuses on this theme when young Angelo, more in touch with his intuition than most, experiences nature and the Italian landscape:

“Uncle,” said Angelo, stretching out his hands towards the purpling landscape before him, “how is it that, when I look upon all this beauty in such calm moments as these, I feel that it is not enough to look at it? [. . .] I seem to want other modes of apprehending and enjoying it, some other sense than mere sight

27

Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1842), 202–5, 243.

28

Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *The Perfect Way; or, The Finding of Christ* (Boston, MA: Esoteric Publishing Company, 1888), 6–10, 13–16; Anna Kingsford, “Clothed with the Sun”: *Being The Book of the Illuminations*, ed. Edward Maitland (London: George Redway, 1889), 16–18.



“Veneziano and Castagno, surrounded by various implements of their craft,” image and caption from *Rosamunda the princess, and other tales* by Anna Bonus Kingsford, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/rosamundaprince00kinggoog/page/n251/mode/2up>.

29

Kingsford, “The Painter of Venice,” 213.

30

Kingsford, 213–14.

31

Kingsford, 213.

32

Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *The Perfect Way*, 35.

or touch. I want to lose myself in it, to embrace it, to drink it in, to take it all to my soul and become identified with its perfect peace and loveliness.”³³

This boy, who can be said to represent the faculty of intuition important to Kingsford, expresses this other mode of understanding the world, which is beyond the senses and can bring one closer to the soul of things. Thus, before Kingsford wrote any esoteric works, these themes were present in her literary work.

It is clear, when reading both *The Perfect Way* and *Clothed with the Sun*, her so-called esoteric works, that intuition is one of the central points of her doctrine.³⁴ To Kingsford, the faculty of intuition is the secret source of all religions. It illuminates higher things and is the feminine principle that can complete the human being and reveal the secrets of heaven. As Kingsford puts in *The Perfect Way*:

This then is the nature and function of the intuition by living so purely in thought and deed as to prevent the interposition of any barrier between his exterior and interior, his phenomenal and his substantial self; and by steadfastly cultivating harmonious relations between these two—by subordinating the whole of his system to the Divine central Will whose seat is in the soul—the man gains full access to the stores of knowledge laid up in his soul, and attains to the cognition alike of God and of the universe. And for him, as is said, “there is nothing hid which shall not be revealed.”³⁵

This synthetic ability can unite the outer and the inner in a higher form. Kingsford’s early fascination with Italy and the stereotype of a southern European temperament was thus a longing for something more occult she felt was lacking in the Northern people, but she perhaps sought to transfer it through her work and emphasis on intuition.

The Hermetic beauty of nature also runs through her writing and is important to this notion. *Hermeticism* has always emphasized the importance of reflections and even meditative practices, of understanding the order of the beauty of nature, how nature is permeated by a continuous divine creation, and how the Hermeticist can help restore or advance nature in the divine likeness.³⁶ Nature, Kingsford writes, is constantly seeking to bring the earth closer to heaven. Her writing thus reveals this idea of a mirroring process and an advancement of nature, bringing nature to a more perfect state, which is also what art can do. This is a process that, much like alchemy, transforms base metal into gold, thus accelerating nature. Later, in *Clothed with the Sun*, Kingsford wrote: “God manifests, rises gradually through nature to meet God unmanifest. Every level of nature rises out of itself to merge in every other level.”³⁷ In *The Perfect Way*, she added: “This perfect condition was, and still is, reached-in the aggregate, as in the individual, by a process of evolution, or gradual unfoldment and growth from the lowest to the highest.”³⁸

The Perfect Way depicts a progress or evolution, a gradual unfoldment and growth from the lowest to the highest. Such a Hermetic process of spiritual evolution or transformation is present in her early



“With marble face and gasping lips the aged Maestro [Andrea del Castagno] rose in his bed and stretched his hands to heaven,” image and caption from *Rosamunda the princess, and other tales* by Anna Bonus Kingsford, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/rosamundaprince00kinggoog/page/n251/mode/2up>.

33

Kingsford, “The Painter of Venice,” 160.

34

Ferguson, “Anna Kingsford and the Intuitive Science of Occultism,” 114–35.

35

Kingsford, *The Perfect Way*, 35.

36

Brian P. Copenhaver, “Corpus Hermeticum V,” in *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*, ed. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 18–20, 67–92.

37

Kingsford, “*Clothed with the Sun*,” 202.

38

Kingsford, *The Perfect Way*, 158.

as well as in her later work, which indicatively shows how her imaginative nature, focusing on poetry and fiction about nature, beauty, and art might have led her to esotericism later in life. Such themes also clearly resonate with the Italian Renaissance and its mixture of art, nature, beauty, and esotericism. As Bulwer-Lytton puts it in *Zanoni*,

39
Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni*, 203–4.

40
Kingsford, “The Painter of Venice,” 159.

Nature is not to be copied, but exalted [. . .] the loftiest order of art, selecting only the loftiest combinations, is the perpetual struggle of Humanity to approach the Gods. The great painter, as the great author, embodies what is possible to man, it is true, but what is not common to mankind.³⁹

In this sense, Kingsford’s early interest in exploring art, beauty, and secret knowledge in her “The Painter of Venice” and the stereotypical imagining of the South, “where a brighter sun enlightens the eyes and souls of men by day, and where the skies are so pure and clear that at night one can see the stars down to the very edge of the earth, high and low,”⁴⁰ were an expression of nationalist European identity politics. But they also connected with occult themes that later became the core of her esotericism, which emphasised allegory and intuition, rather than what might be perceived as lower reason. Kingsford thus sought the beauty of uniting high and low in nature and art.

Conclusion

Anna Kingsford was a significant occultist whose contributions to literature have often been overlooked. Focusing on the novella “The Painter from Venice,” this article has shown that part of her early fictional writing reproduced stereotypes about Northern and Southern Europe, reflecting an essentialized nationalism that was part of her time and British background. However, such stereotypes also served another purpose in her work because the distinction highlighted her positive fascination with Italy and the “Southern temperament,” which she depicted “occulturally” as associated with intuition, allegory, soul, beauty, art, and secret knowledge. Kingsford’s portrayal of Italy contrasted sharply with her view of Britain, which she saw as lacking these more intuitive and aesthetic qualities. While this idealization or stereotyping in some respects was a product of nationalism, it was not merely a reflection of contemporary stereotypes, but a projection and occultual aestheticization of a longing for a more spiritually and artistically fulfilling environment, which was projected onto the South and transferred to the English-speaking world through her writings. Kingsford also used the stereotypes and the setting of her novella as an early platform for her development of themes in her occult works, where the connection between allegory, intuition, nature, transformation, and beauty clearly shines through. In this sense, Kingsford’s writings embraced the occultual prior to the occult.

A Finnish Fin-de-Siècle Synthesis of Idealized North and South

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Abstract

The article focuses on the esoteric ideas of the Finnish artist and writer Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa (1870–1946). Wettenhovi-Aspa claimed that most languages had their origins in Finnish. He also claimed that the ancient Egyptian language and culture were of Finnish origin. Wettenhovi-Aspa studied painting and sculpture in Paris in the 1890s, where Swedenborg's ideas, theosophical ideas on the unity of divinities and mythological texts, and the interest in ancient Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Oriental cultures converged. As for the culture of the Nordic countries, it was seen as inspirational by both local artists and, for example, Swedish and Finnish artists as well. Wettenhovi-Aspa was also influenced by contemporary writers such as August Strindberg and Joséphin Péladan. From the 1910s onwards, Wettenhovi-Aspa combined these idealized notions of Northern and Southern cultures in his literary works concerning language and history. He emphasized the nature of the Finnish language and The Kalevala as the source of a secret wisdom. This article examines the origins of Wettenhovi-Aspa's occult synthesis of Northern and Southern ideals and the various ways he represented those ideals in his writings from the 1890s to the 1930s.



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According to the Finnish artist and writer Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa (né Sigurd Asp, later Wetterhoff-Asp, 1870–1946), Finns had a great past: the Western civilization in its entirety was of *Fenno-Celtic* or *Fenno-Egyptian* origin. He claimed that the civilization of ancient Egypt had been created by ancestors of the contemporary Finnish people. For Wettenhovi-Aspa, *The Kalevala*, the national epic of the Finns, was a holy book and a source of secret wisdom, and the pure and uncorrupted Finnish language was the closest surviving relative of the original biblical languages of mankind.

In Wettenhovi-Aspa's thought, the occultural and national romanticist idealization of Nordic cultures and an occultural interest in ancient Egypt converged. He sought to demonstrate the hidden connection between the cultures of north and south, both of which were idealized among the fin-de-siècle artists. Wettenhovi-Aspa's multifarious activities and controversial views often provoked reactions ranging from amusement and confusion to embarrassment and offence. These reactions seem to have prevailed in later interpretations: in Finnish newspapers and periodicals of the post-war decades, Wettenhovi-Aspa was marginalized as a quaint curiosity of the past or demonized as a representative of extreme nationalism and irrational pseudohistory.¹

However, when studying Wettenhovi-Aspa's agency in contemporary sources, an ambivalent reality is revealed, in which the protagonist himself often played many roles at the same time. For instance, his appearance in *Fyren*, the fin-de-siècle Finnish-Swedish magazine known for its humor and satire, was characteristic, as he could be present both as a caricaturist and an object of parody or satire in the same issue. This article is an attempt at mapping out and studying his esoteric ideas and how they epitomize an occultural transfer between Nordic and Southern cultures.

Wettenhovi-Aspa also had contemporary sympathizers. In November 1915, Pekka Ervast (1875–1934), a leading Finnish Theosophist and editor-in-chief of the Theosophical monthly journal *Tietäjä*, described a lecture he had heard to the readers of his journal:

I recently listened to a lecturer who was extremely fascinating. Mr. Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp, formerly known as a painter, later as the initiator of a canal proposal and most recently the author of the book *Finlands Gyllene Bok*,² gave a presentation in Swedish at the New Student House in Helsinki on Egyptian hieroglyphs and of their relation to the Finnish language, making evident, as in his book, that he, besides his other activities throughout his life, and at least in recent years exclusively, has conducted extensive research in the field of linguistics. His appearance as a speaker was calm, serious and self-aware. "Here I stand. I have done a lot of research and thinking. I know what I want. You can laugh at me, for you cannot see what I see. But I know what I believe." His voice echoed resonant and bright. He did not rant, did not get excited, did not try to "orate." With scientific dryness he presented his views. But these views! The hall was only half full of the audience—educated and academic audience—but this presentation was after all a true landmark event in our cultural life. Now think about it: at a

1

Even the writers of the only biography about Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa were not free of this tradition of prejudice, although some effort towards a broader perspective is evident. See Harry Halén and Tauno Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello: Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan elämä ja teot* (Helsinki: Otava, 1984). In academic research Wettenhovi-Aspa was rarely even mentioned in the twentieth century, despite his agency in many areas of life and the potential of the large corpus of his writings on various contemporary subjects as historical sources. In recent years his existence as an artist has been recognized again, as some of his works have been displayed, e.g., in several exhibitions of the Finnish National Gallery.

2

"The Golden Book of Finland." All translations are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.



A portrait of Wettenhovi-Aspa probably taken in France in the late 1890s, with his recent medals from various French art exhibitions and competitions. From the cover of the exhibition catalogue *Expositiones Artis Finlandensis Liberae. Katalog jämte några ord om konst och konstnärer* (Den fria utställningen, Helsingfors 1900).

time of crisis when learned people consider it almost a shame to believe in anything great, idealistic and sublime, at a time when civilized manners require that a master or doctor with a few years of superficial learning sneers at “the dreamer,” who devotes his life and his soul to a cause—at such a time a man will appear, who wholeheartedly commits himself to a research of his own, who intuitively foresees a marvellous final solution, and who, with all the force of his sincerity, believes and trusts to the vision of his spirit! Isn’t such a man admirable in his originality? Does he not deserve our respect? Isn’t his appearance A landmark case?³

That same year, Wettenhovi-Aspa had published his work *Finlands gyllene bok* (“The Golden Book of Finland”),⁴ in which Wettenhovi-Aspa presented ideas he had been developing for some time about the Finnish language as the original language among the world’s languages. For Wettenhovi-Aspa, who was a native Swedish speaker and wrote his manuscript mostly in Swedish, it was important to also publish the work in Finnish. “The Golden Book of Finland” was published as a translation, *Suomen kultainen kirja* by J. Raekallio only a few weeks after the original work.⁵



Artists Eero Nelimarkka, Ali Munsterhjelm, Sigurd Wettenhovi, Aspa, and Santeri Salokivi in Turku, Finland in 1912. Finnish Heritage Agency.

Wettenhovi-Aspa’s views were similar to those of the Theosophists, and they showed interest in his views in the 1910s. In 1916–1917 Wettenhovi-Aspa wrote several articles for the Theosophically oriented weekly magazine *Sunnuntai*, edited by prominent Finnish writers Eino Leino (1878–1926) and L. Onerva (1882–1972). He also published a series of articles in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* entitled “Kalevalan teos-oppi—teosofia” in 1916. However, Wettenhovi-Aspa’s views differed from those of the Theosophists in their originality, such that a closer connection to the Theosophical movement proved to be im-

3

“Kuuntelin äskettäin erinomaisen mieltäkiinnittävää luennoitsijaa. Herra Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp, ennen tunnettu taidemaalarina, sittemmin kana-vaehdotuksen laatijana ja nyt viimeiseksi kirjan ‘Finlands Gyllene Bok’ (Suomen kultainen kirja) tekijänä, piti ruotsiksi esitelmän uudella ylioppilastalolla Helsingissä Egyptin hieroglyfeistä ja niiden suhteesta suomenkieleen, osottaen tällä, kuten kirjallaankin, että hän muiden harrastuksiansa ohessa pitkin elämänsä ja ainakin viime vuosina yksinomaan on tehnyt laajoja tutkimuksia kielitieteen alalla. Hänen esiintymisensä puhujana oli tyyntä, vakavaa ja itsetietoista. ‘Tässä minä seison. Olen paljon tutkinut ja ajatellut. Tiedän mitä tahdon. Te voitte minulle nauraa, sillä te ette näe, mitä minä näen. Mutta minä tiedän mitä minä uskon.’ Hänen äänensä kaikui sointuvana ja selvänä. Hän ei intoillut, ei lämmennyt, ei yrittänytään ‘puhua.’ Tieteellisen kuivasti hän toi asioitaan esille, mutta nämä asiat! Sali ei ollut kuin puolillaan yleisöä—koulunkäynnistä ja akadeemista yleisöä—mutta tällöinen esitelmä oli sittenkin merkkitapaus kulttuurielämässämme. Ajatelkaa nyt: meikäläisellä murrosajalla, jolloin oppineet ihmiset pitävät miltei häpeänä uskoa mihinkään suureen, ihanteelliseen ja ylevään, jolloin sivistys vaatii, että muutaman vuoden ulkoluvuilla vernissoitu maisteri tai tohtori ivahymyllä katselee ‘haaveilijaa,’ joka omistaa elämänsä ja henkensä jollekin aatteelle—sellaisella ajalla ilmestyy mies, joka sielunsa koko hehkulla antautuu tutkimuksiin omin päin, joka henkensä intuisiolla aavistaa ihmeellistä loppuratkaisua ja joka vilpittömyytensä koko voimalla uskaa ja luottaa henkensä näkemykseen! Sanokaa, eikö semmoinen mies ole omaperäisyydessään ihailtava, eikö hän ansaitse meidän kunnioitustamme? Eikö hänen esiintymisensä ole merkkitapaus?” [Pekka Ervast], “Toimittajalta” [anonymous editorial], *Tietäjä: Teosofinen aikakauskirja* 12 (1915): 495–96.

4

Among other things, Wettenhovi-Aspa participated with his book in the ongoing language strife in Finland. The previous year, Swedish-speaking students of the University of Helsinki, who were enthusiastic about Pan-Germanist nationalistic ideas, had published a book called *Svenskt i Finland* (“Swedish/Swedishness in Finland”) emphasizing the importance of Swedish civilization in Finland. Wettenhovi-Aspa responded to many of the views presented in *Svenskt i Finland* with his ideas about the Finnish language. Svenska studentsens partidelegation, eds. *Svenskt i Finland: Ställning och strävanden* (Helsingfors: Söderström & Co, 1914). Pekka Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit. Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan (1870–1946) näkemykset suomen kielestä ja suomalaisten historiasta” (master’s thesis, University of Turku, 2010), 60–66, <http://www.utupub.fi/handle/10024/92657>. See also Matti Klinge, *Vihan veljistä valtiotaloushistoriasta: Yhteiskunnallisia ja kansallisia näkemyksiä 1910- ja 1920-luvuilta* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1972), 53–54, 107–8.

5

[Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok I: Svar på “Svenskt i Finland”* (Helsingfors: n.p., 1915); [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultain-*

possible. Esoteric movements and ideas were present at different stages of Wettenhovi-Aspa's life: in the 1890s he participated in Joséphin Péladan's *Salons de la Rose+Croix* in Paris; in the 1910s he related his research to Finnish Kalevala-centered Theosophy, and in the early 1920s he was one of the founders of the newly established Masonic Lodge in Finland.⁶ However, he did not commit himself to any particular esoteric movement for a longer period of time, which was characteristic of many of his contemporaries.

I argue that Wettenhovi-Aspa was essentially a *seeker*.⁷ In this article, the description of how Wettenhovi-Aspa's agency and participation in the various esoteric movements and currents is a description of occulture in the making. However, as a seeker Wettenhovi-Aspa was also a *bricoleur*, as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a jack-of-all trades using whatever was at hand.⁸ Wettenhovi-Aspa's seeking of the truth, as well as his agency in general, were defined by unintentionality and chance. That said, wouldn't a certain lack of intention, and even an aversion to systematic thinking, in favor of intuition, characterize a *seeker* when we talk about occulture?

Becoming an Artist

Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa was born in Helsinki in 1870 as the third child of Georg Asp, Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at the University of Helsinki, and Mathilda Asp (née Wetterhoff⁹), a teacher of gymnastics and a social activist in the women's rights movement.¹⁰ Sigurd initially started school in Helsinki. At different stages he went to a Swedish-speaking lyceum for two years, but was mostly taught by private teachers his parents had hired for him and his siblings. At the age of twelve, he was sent to boarding school in the northern Schleswig town of Christiansfeld.¹¹

Christiansfeld, in present-day Denmark, a small town founded by the Moravian Church, belonged to Prussia at the time. The language of instruction at the international boarding school was German, and in addition to compulsory Latin, it was possible to study French, English, Danish, and Swedish. There is no exact information about Sigurd's language studies, but he later published texts in all those languages except Latin. The religious and pedagogical basis of the school was in the Moravian religion, but a significant number of pupils were of other Christian denominations as well as Judaism. Moravian pedagogy has been characterized as a combination of discipline and kindness, and despite its discipline, the school of Christiansfeld was freer than most Prussian or Danish boarding schools of the time.¹² Sigurd's literary and artistic interests were acknowledged, and he was allowed to produce a play he had written for the school stage, including set design and costumes.¹³

In 1886, sixteen-year-old Wettenhovi-Aspa¹⁴ moved to Copenhagen, where he studied fine arts as an apprentice to court painters, and from 1886 to 1887 at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. From 1891 to 1892, Wettenhovi-Aspa studied at the *Kunstnernes frie studieskoler*, founded under artists Kristian Zahrtmann (1843–1917) and Peder Severin Krøyer (1851–1909) as an alternative to the conservative Royal Academy. Wettenhovi-Aspa made his debut as an artist at the

en kirja I, trans. J. Raekallio (Helsinki: n.p., 1915).

6

Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 106–7, 110; Reijo Ahtokari, "Salat ja valat: Vapaamuurarit suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa ja julkisuudessa 1756–1996," *Bibliotheca historica* 54 (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000): 110, 117, 119, 343; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 293–95. See also Pekka Pitkälä, "Suomen kansan menneisyys ja pyramiidein pyhä taika: Muinaisten kulttuuriryhteyksien kansallisromanttinen etsijä Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa," in *Uuden etsijät: Salatielten ja okkultismin suomalaisen kulttuurihistoria 1880–1930*, ed. Maarit Leskelä-Kärki and Antti Harmainen (Helsinki: Teos, 2021), 65–91.

7

On the concepts of *seeker* and *occulture* see especially Nina Kokkinen, "Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art," *Aries* 13, no. 1 (2013): 7–36; Nina Kokkinen, "Artists as truth-seekers: Focusing on agency and seekership in the study of art and occulture," *Approaching Religion* 11, no. 1 (2021): 4–27. In the latter article Kokkinen writes about the prominent Finnish artist Akseli Gallén-Kallela as a seeker. Gallén-Kallela (1865–1931) was a friend of Wettenhovi-Aspa and a fellow artist of the same generation. They remained friends and sustained correspondence even after Wettenhovi-Aspa had moved on from visual art to his writings, which are the subject of this article.

8

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), 27–33.

9

Sigurd's mother was known as Mathilda Wetterhoff again from 1891 on, after the couple's divorce.

10

Georg Asp had studied and done research in Stockholm, Prague, Leipzig, and Jena, and his wife Mathilda had familiarized herself with the pedagogy of both Swedish and German gymnastics during these periods abroad. The couple became known especially as pioneers and developers of women's gymnastics, school gymnastics, and medical gymnastics in Finland. All of their children went abroad to study and pursue careers in sciences, arts, and business: Valborg or Vala Danning (née Asp, 1868–1953), also known by the pen name of Widar Wide, became a writer and lived in Denmark for many years after marrying composer Christian Danning. Bertel Asp (1873–1936) was an engineer who became rich from his inventions and moved to the Philippines. Thore Asp (1875–1947), a doctor in political science, banker, and businessman, moved to Argentina. Artist and art teacher Ragnar Asp (1877–1966) and Gudrun Asp (1882–1973), who became a doctor in ichthyology, ended up in Sweden with their mother Mathilda after the divorce of the parents in 1891 and lived the rest of their lives there. The success of his siblings probably inspired some of Sigurd's multifarious endeavors. Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 14–19; Leena Laine, "Asp, Mathilda (1840–1920)

Finnish Art Society's¹⁵ autumn exhibition at the *Ateneum* in Helsinki, 1891. In the autumn of 1892, he received a grant from the Finnish Art Society for a study trip to Paris, where he stayed at first for three years. He returned to Finland with his French wife, Divina (née Pailard, 1861–1915)¹⁶ in 1895, but lived in Paris for several long periods during the same decade, as well as later in his life.

The 1890s and the first decade of the 1900s were the most active periods of Wettenhovi-Aspa's artistic career: during that time, he participated in exhibitions in the Nordic countries, Germany, and France. At the same time, his caricatures and articles were published in newspapers and magazines in several European countries besides Finland.¹⁷

New Acquaintances and the Origins of Wettenhovi-Aspa's Esoteric Interests

The years spent in Paris in the 1890s had a decisive impact on Wettenhovi-Aspa's later activities. In Paris, he studied sculpture with the Finnish sculptor Ville Vallgren (1855–1940) and wrote about the city's art exhibitions and theatre performances for the Helsinki newspapers *Hufvudstadsbladet* and *Nya Pressen*. Wettenhovi-Aspa had already exhibited his works in the spring of 1893. He was invited to attend the Rose+Croix salon of Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), an art critic and writer who combined Catholic mysticism and esoteric ideas and theorized about symbolistic art.¹⁸ Vallgren had already participated in the Péladan Salon the previous year in its first exhibition, and was considered one of the key artists of Rose+Croix salons. Of the six Rose+Croix salons between 1892 and 1897, Vallgren participated in three and Wettenhovi-Aspa in two. In 1893, Wettenhovi-Aspa exhibited a relief of the maiden Aino of *The Kalevala*, which was original enough to be noted in newspaper criticism out of three hundred works. The tone of the criticisms was positive, although the work could be considered either immature or peculiar.¹⁹ In the 1895 Rose+Croix salon, Wettenhovi-Aspa exhibited two funerary urns. His mentor Ville Vallgren had achieved success with urns in the salons of previous years, and one of them was purchased by the State of France. The symbolism and design of Wettenhovi-Aspa's urns were however very different; instead of Vallgren's grieving female figures, he presented more grotesque imagery of death with grim reapers, and the works were a departure from the tradition of classical vases or urns.²⁰

Wettenhovi-Aspa described the Rose+Croix salon to *Hufvudstadsbladet* readers as a protest against realism and naturalism: "One wants to see fantasy, poetry, ideas; one wants to have bread instead of stones."²¹ He characterized the salon as the most modern in Paris, as well as the only one with a declared program.²² In Péladan's salon, certain subjects were prohibited—for example, history paintings, still lifes, landscape paintings, and depictions of contemporary life. By contrast, Catholic, mystical, mythological, or oriental religions, life studies, and allegories were preferred. Péladan's symbolist and occult theories, as well as imagination, fantasy, and the mythological atmosphere of his salon, appeared to have greatly influenced the young Wettenhovi-Aspa. Using the name Sâr Mérodack (King Marduk), Péladan's writings also included references to Egyptian, Babylonian

voimistelunopetuksen kouluttaja," *Suomen kansallisbiografia* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/>; Lars-Folke Landgren, "Asp, Georg (1834–1901) anatomian professori, voimistelunopetuksen kehittäjä," *Suomen kansallisbiografia* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2002), <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/>; Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 4–5.

11

Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 21–25; Jens Holdt, "Kostskolerne i Christiansfeld," *Sønderjydske Aarbøger* 56, vol. 1 (1944): 113.

12

Jens Holdt, "Elev-Fortegnelse fra Christiansfelds Kostskoler 1775–1891," *Sønderjydske Aarbøger* 55, vol. 1 (1943): 3–4, 17–18, 45–48; Holdt, "Kostskolerne i Christiansfeld," 95–96.

13

Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 24–25.

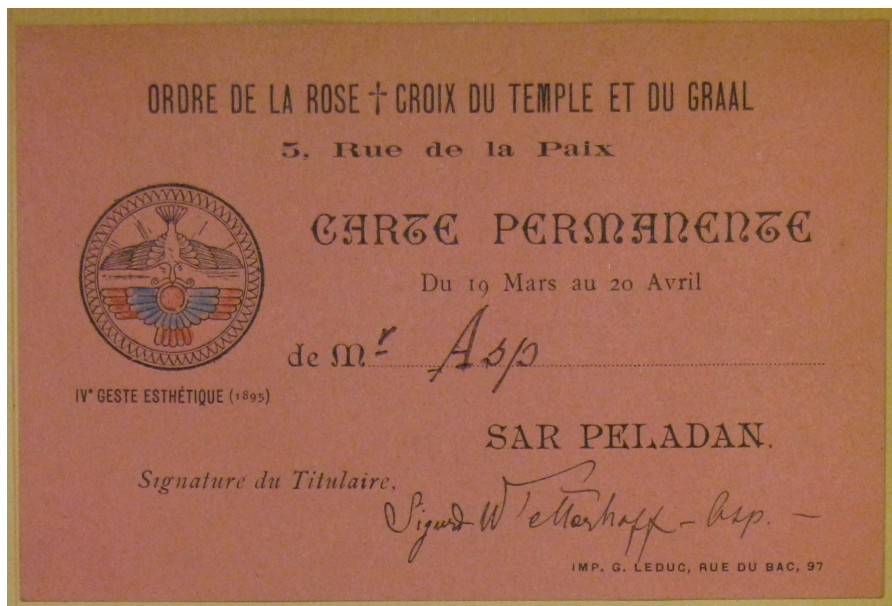


One of Wettenhovi-Aspa's funerary urns exhibited in the Salon de la Rose+Croix of 1895 as reproduced in 1912 in Öhquist, *Suomen taiteen historia*, p. 550. An original photograph of worse quality of the same urn can be found in Wettenhovi-Aspa's scrapbook, FNG, SWA.

14

For the sake of consistency and clarity, I use the name Wettenhovi-Aspa, although in the early 1890s he still used the name Sigurd Asp, and from about 1890 to 1914 the name Wetterhoff-Asp, which he still used in some newspaper articles as late as the 1920s. The artist often appeared with only his last name, and friends called him by the nickname Asp or Aspa. His official name was Georg Sigurd Asp, but already in Denmark in 1890 he had added his mother's surname Wetterhoff to his name and signed his works "S. W.-Asp." In Parisian newspapers, Wetterhoff-Asp was already a more common name in the exhibition reviews of the spring of 1893. The name Sigurd Asp appeared in the 1890s, especially in Swedish-speaking contexts, until about 1895, after which the name form Wetterhoff-Asp seems to have become established. The Finnicized name Wettenhovi-Aspa was not made official until 26 September 1939, even though he

and other ancient cultures. Péladan was inspired by the Orient and considered himself a descendant of the ancient Chaldeans. Péladan's example probably also led Wettenhovi-Aspa to ancient cultures and the East.²³ There was interest in Eastern cultures throughout the 1800s, and in Paris in the 1890s, artists were influenced by the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Japan.²⁴



Carte permanente of Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp, issued by Sar Peladan, for the Salon de la Rose+Croix of 1895. Wettenhovi-Aspa's scrapbook, FNG, SWA.

In Paris, Wettenhovi-Aspa also became acquainted with the writer August Strindberg (1849–1912), who at the time sought to redefine the natural sciences by turning to monism, which emphasized the unity of all existing things; the Swedenborgian theory of correspondence; and neo-alchemy, which rejected modern science. Strindberg had adopted his monistic views especially from the ideas of the German naturalist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel.²⁵

Strindberg was influenced by and found support for his ideas in occultist and alchemist circles in Paris. According to Strindberg, the chemical elements could change into each other because everything was essentially of the same origin. Later in the 1910s, Strindberg and Wettenhovi-Aspa discussed the origins of the world's languages.²⁶ In addition to Haeckel's monism, Strindberg was influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg, from whom he had adopted the idea of the common origin of languages and the notion of Hebrew as a seminal language. All matter was of common origin according to the monistic principle, and languages were also related and of the same origin.²⁷

Similarities: Wettenhovi-Aspa and the Enchantment of Etymology

The writings published by Wettenhovi-Aspa in the 1910s and 1930s were intrinsically linked to the atmosphere of his youth, where the demands of materialism and positivism had given way to open-minded spiritual exploration. An original feature of Wettenhovi-Aspa's works

had used the name since about 1915. At that time, he published his book *Finlands Gyllene Bok I* under the name Wettenhovi-Aspa, after having tried alternative Finnish translations. See Pekka Pitkälä, "Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute Concerning the Common Origins of the Languages of Mankind 1911–1912," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 29 (2020): 50, 78, <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.89215>.

15

Finska Konstföreningen / Suomen Taideyhdistys, established in 1846.

16

Wettenhovi-Aspa taught his wife sculpture and the works of Divina Asp / Wetterhoff-Asp were shown from 1895 to 1901, e.g., in exhibitions of Finnish artists at the Ateneum, exhibitions of the Tampere Art Society, and "free exhibitions" organized by Wettenhovi-Aspa in Finland and the Nordic countries. According to Halén and Tukkinen, Divina Wetterhoff-Asp fell ill with "manic-depressive psychosis" in 1907 while her husband was abroad, and in 1908 she was admitted to Lapinlahti Psychiatric Hospital in Helsinki for treatment. The illness "worsened into schizophrenia" and Divina Wetterhoff-Asp died in Lapinlahti on August 15, 1915. On Divina Wetterhoff-Asp, see Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Jutelmia ja muistelmia 1890-luvun Parisista ja August Strindbergin Inferno-vuosista: Paljon mukana olleena Strindbergin ystäväinä kertonut Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa* (Helsinki: Kirja, 1927), 79–101, passim; Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 5, 8, IV; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 53–56, 62, 65–66, 74–75, 116, 121, 124, 142–47, 156–58, 160–61, 166–68.

17

Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 20–33, 37, 65; Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," I–IX; Pitkälä, "Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute," 54–55.

18

Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 5–8, V–VI; Pitkälä, "Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute," 54–55; Sasha Chaitow, *Son of Prometheus: The Life and Work of Joséphin Péladan* (Munich: Theion, 2022), 120–25.

19

Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa's scrapbook, 1890s, Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Archive Collections (FNG), Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa Archive, 1892–1942 (hereafter cited as FNG, SWA); Mary Slavkin, "Dynamics and Divisions at the Salons of The Rose-Croix: Statistics, Aesthetic Theories, Practices, and Subjects," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014), 39–40, 56, 110, 293, 295, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/385.

20

Wettenhovi-Aspa's scrapbook, FNG, SWA; see also Johannes Öhquist, *Suomen taiteen historia*, trans. Helmi Setälä (Helsinki: Kirja, 1912), 544–45, 550; Ylinka Barotto, "Ville Vallgren," in *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris, 1892–1897*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York:

was the search for connections between Finnish and Egyptian cultures.

Wettenhovi-Aspa recalled later that he had started comparing Finnish and Egyptian languages in Paris when he visited the collections of Egyptian art in the Louvre and papyrus interpretations for a painting of Cleopatra.²⁸ In his “Golden Book of Finland,” he said he paid attention to several Egyptian words that reminded him of the Finnish language. For example, the word *Kemi* was an ancient word for Egypt and a Finnish place name. Egypt’s ancient Egyptian name was *Kemet*, meaning “black earth,” which referred to the fertile mud spread by the floods of the Nile.²⁹ The goddess of the earth, *Maat* (in Wettenhovi-Aspa *Má*) resembled the word *maa*, which is Finnish for earth; and the goddess of truth and wisdom, *Thoth* (in Wettenhovi-Aspa *Tott*), was similar to the word *totta*, which is Finnish for true. The words *puna* (“red”), *sini* (“blue”), and *meri* (“the sea”) correspond with each other exactly in modern Finnish and ancient Egyptian.



S. WETTERHOFF-ASP: CLEOPATRA.

Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp, *Kleopatra, Egyptin viimeinen kuningatar* (“Cleopatra, the last queen of Egypt”). 1894. Oil on canvas 200 × 300. *Katalog öfver den fria utställningen 1898 i Ateneum* (1898), plate [12].

Wettenhovi-Aspa’s own research was largely based on etymological evidence he conceived of himself, according to which, for example, the word meaning sphinx was of Finnish origin: *Harmakis* meant grey cat, which is *harmaa kissa* in Finnish. In this respect, Wettenhovi-Aspa’s studies resembled the Gothicist historiography of the Swedish Empire of the seventeenth century. Etymological evidence was typical for science in the 1600s, as was the presentation of one’s own language as a close relative to the languages of *The Bible*.³⁰

It was not until the 1910s that Wettenhovi-Aspa began to express

Guggenheim, 2017), 100–101.

21

“Man vill se fantasi, poesi, idéer ; man vill ha bröd i stället för stenar,” Sigurd Asp [Wettenhovi-Aspa], “Rose+Croix Salonen i Paris,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, April 20, 1893.

22

Asp, “Rose+Croix Salonen i Paris.”

23

Wettenhovi-Aspa’s scrapbook, FNG, SWA; Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 5–8, V–VI; Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” 54–55; Sasha Chaitow, “Return from Oblivion: Joséphin Péladan’s Literary Esotericism,” *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, ed. Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), 113–36; Chaitow, *Son of Prometheus*, 267–68, 310–21. Péladan had a distinct view on ancient Chaldeans and Egyptians, see Chaitow, *Son of Prometheus*, 269–76.

24

Salme Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaissymbolismi ja sen lähteet: Tutkielma Suomen maalaustaiteesta 1891–1895* (Helsinki: Otava, 1966), 10, 43–45, 84–87.

25

A[xel] B[erndtson], “Bref från Paris. Strindberg, ‘Fadern’ á théâtre de l’oeuvre,” *Nya Pressen*, December 21, 1894; Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” 55–57; See also Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Jutelmia ja muistelmia*.

26

See Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute.”

27

August Strindberg, *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk 35: Naturvetenskapliga skrifter I, Antibarbarus* (Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet; Norstedts, 2010), 25–44 (*August Strindbergs Samlade Verk*, “Nationalupplagan” of Strindberg’s Collected Works, hereafter cited, e.g., as Strindberg, SV35); Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 31–34, 45–51; Henrik Johnsson, *Det oändliga sammanhanget: August Strindbergs ockulta vetenskap* (Stockholm: Malört, 2015), 219–20, 225–26; Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” 60–63.

28

Kleopatra, Egyptin viimeinen kuningatar (“Cleopatra, the last queen of Egypt”), 1894, Oil on canvas 200 × 300. See *Katalog öfver den fria utställningen 1898 i Ateneum* (1898), plate [12], and the untitled four-page catalogue supplement with details and prices of the exhibited works; the work was sold in 1901 in Copenhagen and its current whereabouts are unknown. The painting of Cleopatra was completed in 1894 and in the same year he also made a painting on the theme of Osiris. Egyptian motifs figured occasionally in Wettenhovi-Aspa’s works of visual art. Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 28–29; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman*

these ideas in public. At the same time, Theosophists in Finland began to express national-romantic views more visibly than before. This was also when Strindberg began to publish his comparative studies on languages.

According to Strindberg, all modern languages could be traced back to Hebrew and all languages were related. By contrast, Wettenhovi-Aspa saw Hebrew as a decayed remnant of the original biblical language that had been destroyed in Babel. The Finns had survived Babel and the confusion of tongues and subsequent “Indo-Germanic transitions,”³¹ which is why the original language of humanity was preserved in its purest form in Finland. Wettenhovi-Aspa placed the primordial home of humanity in Java, which, according to him, was humanity’s lost paradise. The theory was supported by contemporary findings in the 1910s of prehistoric human remains found in Java. The people of the *Maa-laji* (“earth species,” cf. the Malays) living in Java were forced to spread throughout the world due to overpopulation. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, the language of the original *Maa-laji* people was close to the current Finnish language. He found remnants of the original language in China, Japan, and India, and especially in Egypt. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, the Egyptian pyramids, or in Finnish *pyhät raamit*, “sacred frames” of the tombs of the pharaohs, imitated the volcanoes in Java. The *Maa-laji* people migrated through India and Egypt to Stone Age Europe and finally to Finland.

Based on contemporary testimonies and written sources, Wettenhovi-Aspa began to devote himself to the study of languages and history in 1909–1910. These studies may have initially been prompted by August Strindberg’s views on borrowed elements of the Finnish language in his book *En ny blå bok* (1908).³² According to Strindberg, Finnish was “true Esperanto,” a language with almost nothing original.³³ Between 1911 and 1912, Strindberg corresponded actively with Wettenhovi-Aspa and two other Finns: Elias Lönnqvist (1875–1949), a railway station manager from Kuurila, and Lieutenant Theodor Finnilä (1868–1920) from Vaasa. The Finns tried to prove Strindberg wrong about his language studies and draw his attention to Finnish instead of Hebrew. From Strindberg’s point of view, the idea of the common origin of the world’s languages was essential: he considered Wettenhovi-Aspa, Lönnqvist, and Finnilä to be his followers, and explained his views to them in long letters with etymological word lists. The press also followed the debate between Strindberg and the Finns: Strindberg wrote about the correspondence in the Swedish newspaper *Afton-Tidningen* and Wettenhovi-Aspa replied in *Åbo Underrättelser*, a Swedish-language newspaper in Turku, Finland. Theodor Finnilä allowed a couple of letters sent by Strindberg to be published in the Helsinki newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet*, and the satirical magazine *Fyren* also reported the discussion in detail, illustrated with caricatures. The debate ended due to Strindberg’s poor health and his death in the spring of 1912.³⁴

Wettenhovi-Aspa presented his etymologies and notions of history publicly for the first time in a series of newspaper articles published in *Hufvudstadsbladet* and in *Uusi Suometar* in 1911, and in his book *Finlands Gyllene Bok / Suomen kultainen kirja* (“The Golden Book of Finland”) published in 1915.³⁵ In the 1920s and 1930s he developed his ideas further and focused increasingly on Egypt. In the book *Kalevala*

kello, 121, 123–24, 206, 402.

29

On Egypt’s ancient Egyptian name Kemet, or “black earth,” see Rostislav Holthoer, *Muinaisen Egyptin kulttuuri* (Helsinki: Otava, 1994), 11. Wettenhovi-Aspa drew attention to the occurrence of the place name *Kemi* in connection with a river valley in Northern Finland as well: *Kemi* did not mean black earth at all, but he explained the name through the word *kemesk*, which means “mystical, semi-dark, mysterious twilight” in the Sámi language. According to him, the words “alchemy” and “chemistry” were of the same origin. Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp, “Till frågan om “Värdsspråkens rötter.” Filologiska ströftåg och meditationer af Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp. III,” *Hufvudstadsbladet* August 19, 1911. In his book *Kalevala ja Egypti: Suomen kultainen kirja II* (“The Kalevala and Egypt: The Golden Book of Finland II,” 1935), Wettenhovi-Aspa had already rejected the explanation of Egyptian words with the help of the Sámi language and accepted the explanation of the word *Kemi* as “the land of black soil.” At the time, he explained that the word “alchemy” originated in Lower Kemi, i.e., Lower Egypt, where the art of embalming was highly developed. [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti: Suomen kultainen kirja II; Riemujuhlajulkaisu Kalevalan satavuotispäiväksi 28/II 1835–28/II 1935* (Helsinki: n.p., 1935), 24; Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 29; Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” 58–59.

30

Maurice Olender, “Europe, or how to escape Babel,” *History & Theory* 33, no. 4 (1994): 5–25; Jan Balbierz, “Strindberg bland hieroglyfer,” *Strindbergiana* 20 (2005): 28–35.

31

“[I]ndogermaniska förskjutningar,” Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp, “Till frågan om “Värdsspråkens rötter.” Filologiska ströftåg och meditationer af Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp. I,” *Hufvudstadsbladet*, July 9, 1911.

32

Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute.”

33

“Däremot synes ordförrådet i finskan vara hämtat ur alla världens språk, vilket gör finskan till ett sannskyldigt esperanto.” Strindberg, SV66 (*En ny blå bok*, 1908, 1999), 837. In Sweden the Esperanto movement was already strong in the 1890s, and spread from there to Finland, so that by 1907 the Finnish Esperantists already had their own association. Strindberg’s words were probably understood by most contemporaries both in Sweden and in Finland.

34

Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute.”

35

Wetterhoff-Asp, Sigurd, “Till frågan om

ja Egypti: Suomen kultainen kirja II (“The Kalevala and Egypt: The Golden Book of Finland II”), published in 1935 to celebrate the centenary of the publication of *The Kalevala*, he compared Finnish mythology with the Egyptian and Classical mythologies: Osiris was the supposed equivalent to Lemminkäinen in *The Kalevala*, and Kullervo was a reincarnated Egyptian sun god and, at the same time, Heracles of the Greeks and Hercules of the Romans.

Relations with Theosophists and Different Views on *The Kalevala*

In terms of the politics of history Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa related his writings, not unlike the contemporary Fennomanian³⁶ historiography, to the goals of the idea of nationalism, in which emphasizing the great past of the nation was a central part of creating national consciousness. Wettenhovi-Aspa’s project was to create mythology for the Finnish nation. This goal was linked to the aspirations of Romanticism, for which the nationalism that emerged in his studies was essential. From his point of view, academic methods and academic approval were secondary issues; producing nationalistic research and nationalistic literature was also essential. The contemporary academic study of borrowed elements in the Finnish language and *The Kalevala* could not serve this national romantic goal.

In his work, Wettenhovi-Aspa referred to the German archaeologist and linguist Gustav Kossinna (1858–1931), according to whom Finns were the native people of Northern Europe and inhabited German territory 5,000 years ago. According to Kossinna, who was already heavily criticized in his own time, the distinct cultures identified based on archaeological finds were produced by groups of people who differed from each other both in terms of language and race.³⁷ Wettenhovi-Aspa also referred to the Viennese professor Heinrich Winkler (1848–1930), according to whom Finnish and Japanese were from the same Uralic-Altai language group.³⁸ The origins of the Finnish people and the classification of the Finns among human races, as they were understood in contemporary science, were a subject of scientific debate and speculation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁹ From this speculative debate Wettenhovi-Aspa picked whom he thought to be the most suitable scholars of his time as authorities to refer to in his own writings.

For Wettenhovi-Aspa, Finnish was the seminal language, and as such it also had an aspect of holiness. The language from which all other languages descended could explain the true meanings of words from other languages, and could thus shed light on the history of mankind. Wettenhovi-Aspa studied the Finnish language, its hidden wisdom, and Finnish folklore from this point of view in the same spirit as the Theosophists of his time. The aspiration to see connections to ancient Egypt and other ancient cultures in the poems of *The Kalevala* was also common to Wettenhovi-Aspa and several Finnish Theosophists.

In “The Golden Book of Finland,” and in the preceding articles in *Hufvudstadsbladet* and *Uusi Suometar*, Wettenhovi-Aspa presented his view that the Finnish language and Finnish folklore had remained

“Världsspråkens rötter.” Filologiska ströftåg och meditationer af Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asp,” I–IV, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, July 9, 1911, July 31, 1911, August 19, 1911, October 7, 1911; Vedenhovilinnan Aspa-Haapets [Wettenhovi-Aspa], “Kysymykseen ‘Maailmankielien juurista’: Filologisia partio-kulkuja ja aprikoitsemisia,” *Uusi Suometar*, November 5, 1911; S. W. Aspa-Haapets, “Kysymykseen ‘Maailmankielien juurista,’ II,” *Uusi Suometar*, December 10, 1911; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*.

36

Fennomania was a Finnish nationalist movement that started in the first decades of the nineteenth century, demanding official recognition for the Finnish language and culture. See more, e.g., Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” 74.

37

About Kossinna see, e.g., Inkeri Koskinen, *Villi Suomen historia: Välimeren Väinämöisestä Äijäkupittaan pyramideihin* (Helsinki: Tammi, 2015), 184–85; Aira Kemiläinen, *Suomalaiset, outo Pohjolan kansa: Rotuteoriat ja kansallinen identiteetti*, *Historiallisia tutkimuksia* 177 (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1993), 221–25; Aira Kemiläinen, *Finns in the Shadow of the “Aryans”: Race Theories and Racism*, *Studia Historica* 59 (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1998), 172–75.

38

Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*, 89–97; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 254–55; Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 69.

39

See Kemiläinen, *Finns in the Shadow of the “Aryans”*; Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 57–58, 68–70.

intact “in the Finnish forests.” The Migration Period, and Western civilization, which Wettenhovi-Aspa saw as decadent, had not spoiled the original language and original wisdom.⁴⁰ Views emphasizing the purity and originality of Nordic cultures appeared among symbolists and Theosophists in the 1890s in Paris, where Wettenhovi-Aspa began his artistic career. Finland’s National Romanticist art was born in the same environment and atmosphere. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), one of the founders of the Theosophical movement, considered *The Kalevala* to be a sacred book and pointed out its connections to Asian myths. *The Kalevala* was an adequate source of spiritual knowledge for the Theosophical movement, which emphasized equality of divinities. Both European Theosophists and Finnish National Romanticist artists saw a new renaissance of the human spirit incubating in pristine Scandinavia and Finland.⁴¹ The ideas of the epoch developed in interaction with each other; National Romanticism combined nationalism and various currents of mysticism.

In the 1910s, *The Kalevala* was diligently studied among Finnish Theosophists. The studies of Kaarle Krohn, a leading figure in Finnish research on *Kalevala poetry*⁴² and Finnish folklore, famous for his geographic-historic method, were lacking spirit according to the Theosophists. This was also echoed by Wettenhovi-Aspa, according to whom Krohn wanted to deprive the Finnish people of *The Kalevala* by researching elements borrowed from other nations in the epic.⁴³ Among Theosophists, *The Kalevala* was interpreted especially by Pekka Ervast, who in 1916 published his book *Kalevalan avain* (*The Key to The Kalevala*), considered the most important Theosophical interpretation of *The Kalevala*.⁴⁴ Like Blavatsky, Ervast considered *The Kalevala* as a holy book equal to *The Bible* and other religious texts. In his work, Ervast also touched briefly on Wettenhovi-Aspa’s views and mentioned the relations between Finns and Egyptians: “[. . .] The speculation is probably too bold.”⁴⁵ As reinterpreters of *The Kalevala*, Ervast and Wettenhovi-Aspa were also in a similar position: both stood against the mainstream of academic research.⁴⁶ Ervast felt that Wettenhovi-Aspa’s thinking was close to his own aspirations and was ready to encourage him, although for the time being he doubted the existence of Finnish-Egyptian connections.

For Ervast and other Finnish Theosophists, the connections between Finnish and Egyptian mythology were not only the ideas advanced by Wettenhovi-Aspa, but also those of Väinö Valvanne, one of the most important contributors to the *Tietäjä* magazine who had written an article in 1911, entitled “Reincarnation in the Kalevala.”⁴⁷ Valvanne compared *The Kalevala* and Egyptian mythology based on Classical sources and, among other things, presented the view that the Finnish myth about Lemminkäinen and the Egyptian myth of Osiris were essentially the same. Valvanne’s article was published only a month after the comparisons between Lemminkäinen and Osiris presented by Wettenhovi-Aspa in *Hufvudstadsbladet*, and it is probable that both had independently come to the same conclusions. Valvanne did not mention Wettenhovi-Aspa in his article.⁴⁸

In his review of “The Golden Book of Finland,” Pekka Ervast stated that Wettenhovi-Aspa’s intuition brought him “close to the facts of the occult notion.”⁴⁹ According to Ervast, the prevailing view among

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Wetterhoff-Asp, “Till frågan om ‘Världsspråkens rötter,’ I–IV;” “Kysymykseen ‘Maailmankielien juurista;’ S. W. Aspa-Haapets, “Kysymykseen ‘Maailmankielien juurista,’ I–II; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*, 5–7, 30, passim; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*, 9–11, 37, passim.

41

Nina Kokkinen, “Totuudenetsijät. Vuosisadanvaihteen okkulttuuri ja moderni henkisyys Akseli Gallen-Kallelan, Pekka Halosen ja Hugo Simbergin taiteessa,” Turun yliopiston julkaisuja, Scripta Lingua Fennica Edita 469 (Turku, University of Turku, 2019); Marja Lahelma, “From Nostalgia to Where...? National Romanticism, Esotericism, and the ‘Golden Age of Finnish Art,’ ” in “European Revivals: From Dreams of a Nation to Places of Transnational Exchange,” special issue, *FNG Research* 1 (2020), <https://research.fng.fi/2020/01/20/european-revivals-from-dreams-of-a-nation-to-places-of-transnational-exchange/>; Sarajas-Korte, *Suomen varhaisymbolismi* 57, 258–60, 331–32; Jöns Carlson, “Kalevalan salainen oppi,” in *Kalevalan kulttuurihistoria*, ed. Ulla Piela, Sepo Knuuttila, and Pekka Laaksonen, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 1179 (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2008), 416–17; Erkki Anttonen, “Kalevalan uskonnollisia ja teosofisia tulkintoja 1900-luvun kuvataiteessa,” *Kalevala kuvissa: 160 vuotta Kalevalan innoittamaa suomalaista taidetta*, ed. Riitta Ojanperä, Ateneumin julkaisut 55 (Helsinki: Ateneum, 2009), 185.

42

The Finnish national epic *The Kalevala*, compiled by Elias Lönnrot and first published in 1835, is based on a vast corpus of *Kalevala poetry* or *runic song*.

43

Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*, 86; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 72–73; Carlson, “Kalevalan salainen oppi,” 424.

44

Pekka Ervast, *Kalevalan avain* (Helsinki: Teosofinen kirjakauppa ja kustannusliike, 1916).

45

“[...] spekulatit vielä lienevät liian rohkeita,” Ervast, *Kalevalan avain*, 280.

46

Before publishing his magnum opus, *Kalevalan avain* (“The Key to The Kalevala”), Ervast had presented Wettenhovi-Aspa’s views in the Finnish Theosophical Society’s journal *Tietäjä*. P[ekka] E[rvast], “Kirjallisuutta. Wettenhovi-Aspa: Finlands Gyllene Bok,” *Tietäjä: Teosofinen aikakauskirja* 7–8 (1915): 309. At the beginning of this article I quoted Ervast’s description of the lecture by Wettenhovi-Aspa, which appeared in the *Tietäjä* magazine in December 1915. Ervast admired Wettenhovi-Aspa’s courage in expressing his views, although he could not fully support them. He wanted more evidence of Wettenhovi-Aspa’s theories

the Theosophists considered the Finns to be “some tribe of the seventh Atlantean subrace.”⁵⁰ Wettenhovi-Aspa’s theories would mean that the Finns belonged to the sixth, Akkadian subrace of the fourth root race of Atlantis, which also included many peoples in the Mediterranean region. Ervast and many other Theosophists assumed an ancient continent of Atlantis was buried at the bottom of the sea. For Ervast, this also involved the concept of a special “Atlantean” and prehistoric human type who understood nature better and whose daytime consciousness was organized as in a dream.⁵¹ Atlantis was also referred to by the aforementioned Väinö Valvanne, according to whom the similarities of *The Kalevala* with Egyptian and Greek mythology could be explained by a common Atlantean past and origin.⁵² Wettenhovi-Aspa occasionally made a passing reference to Atlantis in his work; he described the British Isles as “an Atlantean, then Egyptian, Phoenician, and finally a Roman colony.”⁵³ However, the theory of Atlantis was not of any great importance in his oeuvre.⁵⁴

What Wettenhovi-Aspa and Pekka Ervast had in common was not only the unique combination of Theosophical thought and patriotic ideology, but also the view that the peaceful nature of *The Kalevala* made the epic particularly sublime. In *The Kalevala*, disputes were resolved by singing rather than by sword, which had led some contemporary Swedish-speaking Pan-Germanist extremists in Finland to reproach *The Kalevala* for the lack of “cheerful military spirit,” according to them typical of Germanic epics. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, *The Kalevala* was therefore the result of a more advanced culture than the Germanic culture.⁵⁵

The Hidden Theosophical Wisdom of *The Kalevala*

In 1916 and 1917, Wettenhovi-Aspa wrote several articles and poems for the Theosophically oriented *Sunnuntai* (“Sunday”) weekly magazine. Some of the articles dealt with *The Kalevala* and the Finns’ connections to Egypt, but the editor Eino Leino also published his translations of Wettenhovi-Aspa’s poems and his articles on other topics.⁵⁶ The magazine’s contributors also included Pekka Ervast and J. Raekallio, who translated Wettenhovi-Aspa’s *Finlands Gyllene Bok* into Finnish. Wettenhovi-Aspa’s views on the Finnish language, world history, and *The Kalevala* were presented in his articles “Kulttuurin kulta-ura Europassa,” the two-volume “Kalevala-tutkielmia” and “Sfinksin salaisuudet.”⁵⁷

In his “Kalevala-tutkielmia” (“Studies on *The Kalevala*”) Wettenhovi-Aspa criticized the Germanic peoples for their jealous attempts to take credit for the poems of *The Kalevala*. He stated that Finns were allowed to keep *The Kalevala* as their property at a time when it was considered “just a childish fantasy of the Ural-Altai birch bark culture.” The Germanic people’s interest had been awakened when they had discovered that *The Kalevala* contained “Theosophy, philosophy, cosmology, and astronomy—as well as physical-mathematical, physiological and anatomical, even magical-pharmacological information, etc.”⁵⁸ At the same time as the Germanic peoples tried to take credit for *The Kalevala*, they also tried to show that the Finnish language was of Germanic origin in terms of vocabulary, according to Wetten-

about the ancient connection between Finns and Egyptians before formulating his final opinion on the subject: “I want to hear more—much more—about his evidence, because his ideas arouse my deepest interest.” Ervast, “Toimittajalta,” 495–98. Before his death, Ervast was said to have regretted that his contribution to the study of *The Kalevala* was ignored by academic researchers. Carlson, “Kalevalan salainen oppi,” 421–22.

47

V[alvanne], V[äinö] H[eikki], “Jälleensyntyminen Kalevalassa,” *Tietäjä* 7–8 (15 August, 1911): 196–210.

48

Wetterhoff-Asp, “Till frågan om ‘Värlsdsspråkens rötter,’ I;” Valvanne, “Jälleensyntyminen Kalevalassa,” 196–209; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*.

49

“[...] lähelle salatieteellisen näkemyksen tosiseikkoja,” Ervast, “Kirjallisuutta,” 309.

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“[...] seitsemännen atlantilaisen alarodun jonakin heimona,” Ervast, “Toimittajalta,” 497.

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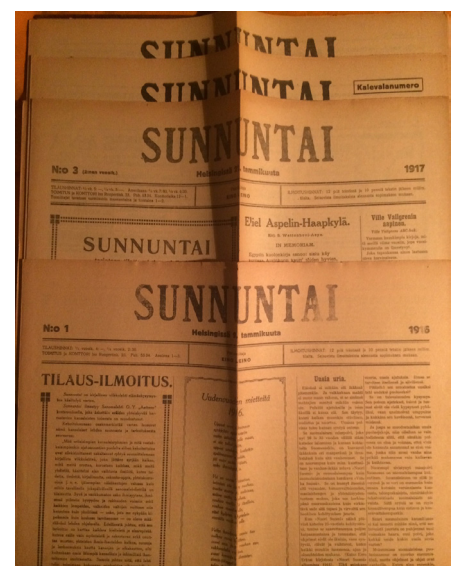
Ervast, “Toimittajalta,” 497; Anttonen, “Kalevalan tulkintoja kuvataiteessa,” 191–92.

52

Valvanne, “Jälleensyntyminen Kalevalassa,” 204–5; Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” passim.

53

“[...] atlantilainen, sitten egyptiläinen, foiniikkialainen ja viimein roomalainen siirtola,” [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalatutkielmia II,” *Sunnuntai*, March 5, 1916.



Issues of the weekly periodical *Sunnuntai* from 1916–1917.

hovi-Aspa. As can be seen from the quote, Wettenhovi-Aspa considered *The Kalevala* to be a multidisciplinary source of knowledge, by no means just poetry as such. In his articles, Wettenhovi-Aspa pointed out the connections between the Finnish language and *The Kalevala* with Egypt and European culture and clearly stated his position that the connections he showed were not the result of “borrowing” between languages and cultures, but the concrete migration of the ancient Finns across Europe. Wettenhovi-Aspa disapproved of the scholars of his time for assuming that Finns would have remained within the borders of their country and at least had no influence in Western Europe.⁵⁹

In a manner befitting a Theosophically oriented journal, Wettenhovi-Aspa expressed his views on the Finnish origin of the names given to God; God had been a “sower” in its original sense, and so the “Hebrews” had already named him *Jupiter*, in the dialect *Jovispaater*, based on the Finnish words *jyvän piittaaja*.⁶⁰ According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, during the captivity of Babylon, the word changed to *Javan*—*Javas*, based on the Sanskrit word *Java*, which in turn was synonymous with Finnish *grain*. Later Hebrew variants included the forms *Yahweh* and *Jehowa*. Wettenhovi-Aspa concluded his writing by describing in Theosophical style the origin of various forms of God’s name, also mentioning “The Forger of the Firmament,” the epithet for Ilmarinen of *The Kalevala*: “It is evident that the infinite and incomprehensible World Soul cannot in itself attribute to itself any name known to us humans, but when the human spirit became aware of the existence of the World Soul, all sorts of names were given according to how He was thought of at the time, sometimes as a Forger of the Firmament, sometimes as a Sower, as a Father, etc. These titles and words of respect were passed on as a legacy from generation to generation as the ‘name of God.’”⁶¹

More directly than in his articles in the *Sunnuntai* magazine, Wettenhovi-Aspa discussed Theosophy in a series of four articles published in *Helsingin Sanomat* in 1916 entitled “Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia.”⁶² In the first article in the series, he stated that *The Kalevala* was at least as justifiably suitable as the basis of a Theosophical worldview as the Eastern religions: “All that H. B. [sic] Blavatsky and A. Besant sought in the religions of Great Asia, we find in our old poems and folklore, and by means of our ancient language.”⁶³ In his writings, Wettenhovi-Aspa denied metempsychosis and argued that the ancient Egyptians did not believe in it either, because they even embalmed corpses at great expense. Quoting *The Kalevala*’s poem “Aino,” he stated that even the ancient Finnish belief was that man united with the universe after death. Wettenhovi-Aspa stated that the ancient Finnish pre-Christian worldview was Theosophical in nature. This manifested itself in the representation of the connection between the visible and invisible worlds, as in *The Kalevala*: “the birch moans, the bush sighs, the pine speaks; Animals converse with humans, who also understand the language of birds. There’s a spirit in stones, too. In all particles lives ‘haltia’⁶⁴ (“In-halt” as the Germans still say).”⁶⁵ He explained that in ancient Egypt animals were worshiped precisely because of “creative power” manifested in them, not because the animals were reincarnated humans. This creative force, he explained, also resides in inanimate matter: “The sharper microscopes (magnifying apparatuses)

54

Valvanne, “Jälleensyntyminen Kalevalassa,” 204–5. Elias Lönnqvist, one of Strindberg’s three Finnish correspondents on languages, and Wettenhovi-Aspa’s apprentice on comparative language studies, also wrote about Atlantis. See, e.g., Elias Lönnqvist, *Suomenkieli kaikkien kulttuurikielten avaimena II* (published by the author, 1945), 154–83; Pitkälä, “Wettenhovi-Aspa, August Strindberg and a Dispute,” *passim*. Lönnqvist mentions Theosophists, but in his conceptions of Atlantis he relies above all on Plato, Heinrich Schliemann, and Hermann Wirth, who served as the director of the *Deutsches Ahnenerbe* in the 1930s. More about Wirth below. Lönnqvist, *Suomenkieli*, 154–83. About theories concerning Atlantis, see also Koskinen, *Villi Suomen historia*, 40–43.

55

Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*, 65–66; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*, 79–80. Pekka Ervast’s pacifism was based on the biblical Sermon on the Mount and in *The Kalevala*; he found support for this ideology. Anttonen, “Kalevalan tulkintoja kuvataiteessa,” 195–96.

56

Leino’s translation of Wettenhovi-Aspa’s poem *Suomen Kansalle*, “To the Finnish People,” which contained references to Egypt, was also published in *Sunnuntai*. The poem featured Wettenhovi-Aspa’s central ideas, such as the Finns’ connection to Egypt and thoughts about the ancient wisdom preserved in Finland and the forthcoming new era of greatness. S[igurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Suomen kansalle,” trans. Eino Leino, *Sunnuntai*, January 9, 1916. Eino Leino also published the poem in his next poetry book, see Eino Leino, *Leirivalkeat: Runoja* (Helsinki: Kirja, 1917).

57

[Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kulttuurin kulta-ura Europassa,” [“Golden Furrow of Culture in Europe,”] the title contains an agricultural etymology of the word “culture,” explained with Finnish “kulta-ura,” a factitious word that refers to plowing furrows in the fields before sowing, in the Valley of the Nile in Ancient Egypt] *Sunnuntai*, January 16, 1916.; [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, Kalevalatutkielmia I, *Sunnuntai*, March 5, 1916; Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalatutkielmia II;” S[igurd]: Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Sfinksin salaisuudet” [Secrets of the Sphinx], *Sunnuntai*, March 25, 1917.

58

[...] vain urali-altailaisen tuohisivistyksen lapsellisena kuvitelmana [...] teosofiaa, filosofiaa, kosmologiaa ja astronomiaa—sekä fyysismatemaattisia, fysiologisia ja anatomisia, vieläpä maagilaisfarmakologisia tietoja y.m.” Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalatutkielmia I.”

59

Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalatutkielmia I–II.”

60

This is untranslatable nonsense as a whole, but *jyvä* means grain and *piittaaja* could be translated as someone who takes care of, or cares for something.

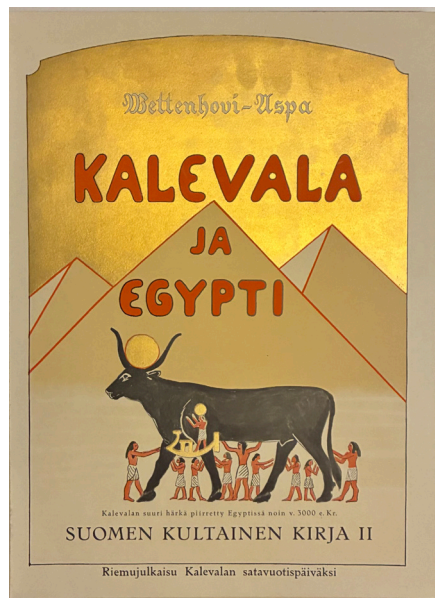
are invented, the more life will be seen in millions of particles. And at last, we also come to fully understand that the force attached to ‘dead’ matter is not dead at all, but real life. Then the stones do not only live, but also speak, as in *The Kalevala*.⁶⁶

According to Wettenhovi-Aspa the poetry of *The Kalevala* was about the deep connection of the Finnish people to nature. He saw “Western civilization” as a threat to maintaining this connection. He presented the view, which had already existed among Theosophists at the end of the nineteenth century, that the ancient wisdom had been preserved in the northern forests:

It is a great misfortune for our Theosophy (“Teos-oppi”), for our people and mankind, that so-called ‘Western civilization’ tries, like a nightmare, to suppress and kill by silence everything that would be enlightening the whole world in our folk poetry, proverbs, and fairy tales. The Finnish people of Finland are the ancient abode of true Theosophy. Here, ancient wisdom has been preserved throughout the ages, as if protected by ice and snow, cherished by the ancient, wonderful Finnish language.⁶⁷



Suomen kultainen kirja (“The Golden Book of Finland”) of 1915.



Kalevala ja Egypti. Suomen kultainen kirja II (“The Kalevala and Egypt – The Golden Book of Finland II”), published in 1935 to celebrate the centenary of the publication of *The Kalevala*.

Wettenhovi-Aspa also expressed this view in other words in “The Golden Book of Finland,” published in 1915.⁶⁸ In addition to the content, the work was linked to Theosophical literature by the Theosophical symbolism that appeared on the covers. The linen binding had a snake biting its tail printed on the cover, a crown, and a swastika, on which blood from the snake’s tail dripped. Both symbols still appear today in the emblem of the Theosophical Society and had already been used by the international Theosophical movement in the 1800s. Ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail, symbolizes, among other things, eternity and infinity, and the swastika epitomizes the solar system, incessant movement, and creation. In relation to the content of Wetten-

61

“On selvää, että ääretön ja käsittämätön maailmanhenki ei itsessään voi omistaa itselleen mitään meille ihmislapsille tunnettua nimeä, mutta kun ihmishenki heräsi tajuamaan maailmanhengen olemassaolon, sai tämä kaikenlaisia nimityksiä aina sitä mukaa, miten häntä kulloinkin ajateltiin, milloin taivaankannen takojana, milloin kylväjänä, isänä j.n.e. Nämä arvonimet ja mainesanat menivät ‘Jumalan nimenä’ perintönä suvusta sukuun.” Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalatutkielmia II.”

62

[Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia, I–III,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, February 10, 1916, February 20, 1916, March 9, 1916. Wettenhovi-Aspa presents an etymology of the word Theosophy, based on the Finnish words “teos” and “oppi,” and related to *The Kalevala*. The title of the article could be translated as “The Doctrine of the Opus Kalevala = Theosophy,” or more freely, “Theosophy, or how to read *The Kalevala*.”

63

”Kaikkea sitä, mitä H. B. Blavatsky ja A. Besant etsivät suuren Aasian uskonnoista, löydämme me vanhoista runoistamme ja perintötiedoistamme, ikivanhan kieleemme avulla.” Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia I.”

64

A kind of spirit in Finnish mythology; can also be translated as “elf.”

65

”[...] koivu valittaa, pensas huokailee, honka puhuu; eläimet keskustelevat ihmisten kanssa, jotka myös ymmärtävät lintujen kieltä. Kivissäkin on henki. Kaikissa kappaleissa asuu ”haltia”. (”Inhalt” kuten saksalainen vieläkin sanoo).” Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia I.”

66

”Mitä terävämpiä mikroskooppeja (suurennuslaitteita) keksitään, sitä enemmän elämää tullaan näkemään hiukkas-miljooneissa. Ja vihdoinkin opitaan myös täysin käsittämään, että ‘kuolleeseen’ aineeseen kiinnitetty voima ei olekaan kuollutta voimaa, vaan todellista elämää. Silloinpa kivetkään eivät ainoastaan elä, vaan myös puhuvat, kuten Kalevalassa.” Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia I.”

67

“On teos-opillemme, on koko kansallemme ja ihmiskunnalle suurena onnettomuutena, että n. s. ‘länsimainen sivistys’ kuin painajainen koettaa tukahuttaa ja vaitiololla tappaa kaiken sen, mikä olisi koko maailmalle valistukseksi kansanrunoudessamme, sananlaskuissamme ja saduissamme. Suomen suomalaisen kansa on todellisen teosofian ikivanha asuinsija. Täällä on ikivanha viisauts säilynyt kautta aikojen kuin jään ja lumen suojelemana, ikivanhan, ihanan suomen kielen vaalimana.” Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia I.”

68

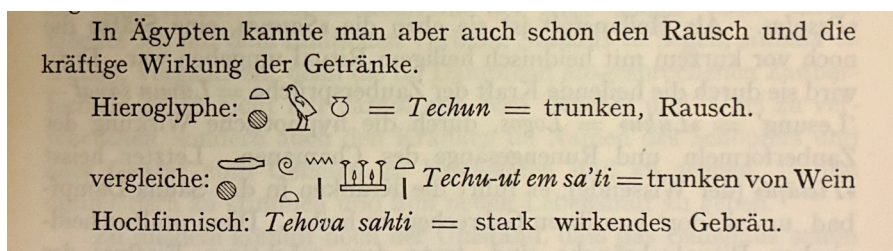
Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*, 5–7, 30,

hovi-Aspa's book, the emblem was precisely a symbol of eternity; in his work, he emphasized the essence of *The Kalevala* and the Finnish language as a preserver of hidden wisdom.⁶⁹

In 1922, Wettenhovi-Aspa was reviving Finnish Freemasonry after a one-hundred-year hiatus under the Russian regime. At the founding meeting of the Suomi Lodge No. 1, the composer Jean Sibelius, who had promised to compose ritual music for the Finnish Freemasons, and Wettenhovi-Aspa, who had been appointed as the historian of the lodge and author of the history of Finnish Freemasonry, were exempt from the membership fee. Sibelius fulfilled the task assigned to him with his *Musique Religieuse*, Op.113, but Wettenhovi-Aspa produced only a few articles in newspapers and magazines in his role as a historian. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa the Masonic rituals originated in ancient Egypt. He suggested a national ritual based on *The Kalevala* and *The Bible* for Finnish Freemasons. Wettenhovi-Aspa's plans for Finnish Masonic rituals were not carried out. He had already stopped attending lodge meetings in the 1920s but he never resigned from the Freemasons. This was not uncommon behavior among his fellow artists.⁷⁰

The Kalevala and Egypt

Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa's works of the 1910s were placed in the context of Theosophical literature of the same period and he participated in discussions among Theosophists. That said, they embodied national romanticist ideals, which were not foreign to theosophists either. A distinctive feature of Wettenhovi-Aspa's works was the search for connections between Finnish and Egyptian cultures. Egypt was constantly present in Wettenhovi-Aspa's lectures and writings, but apparently, he still felt uncertain about his research on Egypt in the 1910s, so he did not publish more extensively on the subject. In the 1930s, he had not only had time to develop his ideas for years, but had also gained a wealthy supporter and partner, Doctor of Pharmacy and pharmacy owner Hanna Lappalainen (1881–1966), who spared no expense in acquiring Egyptological literature from abroad, making it possible for him to publish his works.⁷¹



An example of the use of the hieroglyphic alphabet from *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt*. Wettenhovi-Aspa connects the Ancient Egyptian language with *sahti*, the traditional Finnish farmhouse ale. Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung*, 137.

Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa was an early advocate of Egyptological research in Finland. In his writings, he demanded several times the establishment of chairs of Egyptology in Finnish universities. With these demands, it was not essential that he try to prove connections between

passim; Vettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*, 9–11, 37, passim.

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Vettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*, book cover; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*, book cover.

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Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa, "Frimurarfesterna i Helsingfors," *Hufvudstadsbladet* August 22, 1922; S[igurd] W[ettenhovi]-Aspa, "Frimureriets kulturallians; Amerika – Finland," *Veckans Krönika: Illustrerad veckoskrift*, September 9, 1922; S[igurd] W[ettenhovi]-Aspa, "Salaseurain historiaa" *Suomen Kuvalehti*, September 23, 1922; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 293–95; Ahtokari, *Salat ja valat*, 110, 117, 119, 343; Reijo Ahtokari, *Ruusu, miekka ja risti: Puoli vuosisataa kristillistä vapaamuurariutta Suomessa* (Helsinki: Suomen Rose Croix yhdistys ry., 2008).

71

See, e.g., [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, *The Diamondking of Sahara* (Helsinki: n.p., 1935); [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt: Kommentare zu den vorhistorischen Völkerwanderungen*, Eingeleitet von Philipp Paneth (Leipzig: Genius-Verlag 1935); Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*; [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, *August Strindberg intim: Aufzeichnungen eines Zeitgenossen* (Helsinki: Kommissionsverlag K. F. Puomies Buchdruckerei A. G., 1936); [Sigurd]: Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt: Kommentare zu den vorhistorischen Völkerwanderungen*, Zweite Auflage (Helsinki: Kommissionsverlag K. F. Puomies Buchdruckerei A. G., 1936).



Hieroglyphic alphabet imported from Berlin in the 1930s for printing Wettenhovi-Aspa's books in 1935–36. Media Museum and Archives Merkki, Helsinki, Finland. (Collection of K. F. Puomies printing house, Helsinki. Photograph by Annika Johansson).

Finns and Egyptians in his own research. He saw the study of ancient Egyptian culture as intrinsically valuable, justifying its importance by, for example, Egyptian influence on Greek culture.

The first of Wettenhovi-Aspa's studies focusing on Egypt was *Kalevala ja Egypti: Suomen kultainen kirja II* ("The Kalevala and Egypt: Golden Book of Finland II"), published in 1935 to celebrate the centenary of *The Kalevala*. Outwardly impressive and illustrated by the author, the work presented the connections between the poems of *The Kalevala* and ancient Egyptian and Classical mythology. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, the Finnish-Egyptian connection was evidenced by, for example, the names of Egyptian gods, as discussed above.

Wettenhovi-Aspa continued to base his argument largely on etymology. He explained the etymology of the name *Egypt* by referring to the Kupittaa spring in the city of Turku. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, Egypt was *Aiguptos* in Greek, and in original "*Fenno-Egyptian*," *Äijänkupittaa*, which meant the great spring, the Nile.⁷²

In *The Kalevala and Egypt*, the etymologies were accompanied by other kinds of material; the central content of the work was the comparison of mythologies. Among other things, Wettenhovi-Aspa compared the creation story of *The Kalevala* with Egyptian conceptions of the origin of the world. He also explained the great bull of *The Kalevala* as a metaphor for the Nile and found equivalents for Väinämöinen in the Greek Orpheus and Apollo, which, according to him, were based on Egyptian mythology.⁷³ In one chapter Wettenhovi-Aspa also briefly discussed the connections between Lemminkäinen in *The Kalevala* and Osiris of Egypt, which he had already written about in 1911.⁷⁴ In addition to comparing etymologies and myths in this book, he also compared Egyptian hieroglyphs to traditional Finnish house marks and embroidery.⁷⁵

The Kalevala and Egypt was illustrated by the author with numerous drawings interspersed within the text and with plates bearing illustrated verses from *The Kalevala*. The front pages proudly announced that "in this book real ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, acquired from Berlin by K. F. Puromies Printing House, O.Y., have been printed for the first time in Finland."⁷⁶ Wettenhovi-Aspa's life-companion⁷⁷ and sponsor Hanna Lappalainen wrote in 1941 that she had ordered several hieroglyphic alphabets from Germany for the printing of the book, and at the same time mentioned the deplorable state of Finnish Egyptology: "Since our country does not have a chair of Egyptology, we do not have hieroglyphic printing alphabet either."⁷⁸ In earlier publications by Wettenhovi-Aspa, hieroglyphs had been self-drawn.

The Kalevala and Egypt did not contain any direct references to Theosophy. In the book, Wettenhovi-Aspa discussed, for example, the connection with nature in *The Kalevala*'s poem "Aino" and wrote of the hidden wisdom of *The Kalevala* in a Theosophical way, but without explaining this connection.⁷⁹

Nor did the reception of the work recognize its Theosophical features but rather emphasized its peculiarity or strangeness. In the biggest Finnish newspapers of the time, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Uusi Suomi*, *The Kalevala and Egypt* were discussed by the newspaper columnists Tiitus (pen name of Ilmari Kivinen) and Olli (pen name of Väinö Nuorteva) in their humorous causeries.

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Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 24–25.

73

Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 77–82, 89–91, 109–14.

74

Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 83–85, tables "Osiris – Panu – Lemminkäinen" and "Lemminkäinen's mother." For Osiris and Lemminkäinen, see also Wetterhoff-Asp, "Till frågan om 'Värlsdsspråkens rötter,' I;" Wettenhovi-Aspa, "Kalevalan teos-oppi = teosofia I."

75

Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 29–31.

76

"Tässä kirjassa on ensi kerran Suomessa painettu todellisia muinaisegyptiläisiä hieroglyfiä, mitkä K. F. Puromiehen Kirjapaino O.Y:n toimesta on Berlinistä hankittu." Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, [2], passim.

77

The couple lived together from the beginning of 1930s until Wettenhovi-Aspa's death in 1946, but never married, which was considered highly unconventional at the time, especially for an elderly couple. Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 16.

78

"Kun meidän maassamme ei ole egyptologian oppituolia, ei meillä myöskään ole hieroglyyffistä painoalfabeettia." Hanna Lappalainen, "Välähdyksiä Wettenhovi-Aspan elämäntyöstä" [last part of a series of four articles], *Forum* 1–2 (1941): 7. The hieroglyphic printing alphabet imported to Finland in the 1930s for printing Wettenhovi-Aspa's books is preserved in the collections of Media Museum and Archives Merkki, Helsinki.

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Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 137–39.

In his causerie, Olli presented Wettenhovi-Aspa's views in a neutral tone. He stated that he refrained from evaluating the work because he had heard the author would curse anyone who dared to disagree with him. Finally, Olli mentioned that the work proves the originality of its author: "We are convinced that the work as a whole has at least made its author deeply convinced of the Egyptian origin of *The Kalevala*. And the readers for the author's originality."⁸⁰ Tiitus's review began with the exclamation, "A remarkable book!" and continued with examples of the work's content. At the end of his introduction, written in a positive tone, Tiitus praised the patriotic spirit of Wettenhovi-Aspa's work: "Be that as it may, there has never been a more broad-minded and imaginative friend of Finnishness and the Finnish language than Wettenhovi-Aspa!"⁸¹

The author Ilmari Kianto (1874–1970) reviewed *The Kalevala and Egypt* in the newspaper *Ajan Suunta* in more depth than the cause-rie writers.⁸² Kianto was a friend of Wettenhovi-Aspa, and his text reflected an understanding of the author of *The Kalevala and Egypt*. According to Kianto, it had to be remembered that Wettenhovi-Aspa did not want to present himself as a scholar, even though he dealt with subjects studied by scholars. This deflected possible attacks, although according to Kianto, Wettenhovi-Aspa wished nothing more than attacks to defend his views. Kianto also pondered, in a way that is rare for contemporaries, how to deal with Wettenhovi-Aspa's writings:

Should we take Aspa's linguistics seriously, or is the entire *Golden Book* series just conjuring tricks and unparalleled grim humor? Wettenhovi-Aspa has become a great sage who in all seriousness reels off his truths—with a twinkle in his eyes. We shout to him in chorus, "You're crazy!" but he answers, like Väinämöinen, stroking his silver beard: I tell tales of ages long forgotten, / Now the legends of creation, / Once familiar to the children, / By our children sung no longer, / In these mournful days of evil, / Evil days our race befallen.⁸³

We laugh at this poor old man, but he waves his hand and says, smiling: look at who laughs last—truth will out.

Lucky fellows, those who have a fly buzzing inside their head! In the head of Wettenhovi-Aspa, there is not only an ordinary fly—there is a real Ancient Egyptian buzzbugs, a desert wasp, a gigantic hornet.⁸⁴

Kianto's view seemed to be that the work deliberately contained both humor and more profound food for thought, presented as shamanist visions rather than with academic orthodoxy. According to Kianto, Wettenhovi-Aspa placed himself above his critics with his ambiguous writing, which could prove to be serious in its humor, or contain humor presented in a serious tone.⁸⁵ According to Kianto, Wettenhovi-Aspa was "[. . .] the most broad-minded, wide-ranging sage and witch of our obscure antiquity, the sorcerer, the medicine man, the magician and shaman, whose investigative soul wanders the banks of the rivers of Egypt thousands of years ago [. . .]"⁸⁶ Kianto treated Wettenhovi-As-

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"Olemme vakuutettu siitä, että teos kokonaisuudessaan on saanut ainakin tekijänsä syvästi vakuutetuksi Kalevalan egyptiläisperäisyydestä. Ja lukijat tekijän omaperäisyydestä." Olli [Väinö Nuorteva], "Väinämöinen egyptiläisenä," *Uusi Suomi*, February 27, 1935.

81

"Merkkillinen kirja! [...] Oli miten oli, suuripiirteisempää ja omaperäisempää ystävää ei suomalaisuudella ja suomen kielellä ole ollut kuin Wettenhovi-Aspa!" Tiitus [Ilmari Kivinen], "Kalevala ja Egypti," *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 19, 1935.

82

Ajan Suunta was the newspaper of the far-right party Finnish Patriotic People's Movement (IKL, *Isänmaallinen Kansanliike*). Ilmari Kianto was not a regular contributor to the newspaper or a party member.

83

Kianto quotes *The Kalevala* from memory, combining verses. The quote is translated by paraphrasing *Rune III* from *The Kalevala: The Epic Poem Of Finland*, vol. 1, trans. John Martin Crawford (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1898), 27, 37.

84

"Onko meidän otettava ihan vakavasti Aspan kielitiede, vai onko koko kultainen kirjasarja pelkkää silmänkääntäjätempuilua ja ennenkuulumatonta hirtehuumoria? Wettenhovi-Aspa on noussut suureksi tietäjäksi, joka vakavasti jymähtyttelee totuuskiansa—veitikka silmäkulmassa. Huudamme hänelle kuorossa: Sinä olet hullu! mutta hänpä vastaa kuin Väinämöinen haroen hopeaista partaansa: Puhun syntyjä syviä, / Asioita ainoisia, / Joit' ei laula kaikki lapset, / Eikä pojat puoletkana / Tällä inhalla iällä / Katovalla kannikalla! Me nauramme tälle utralle ukolle, mutta hän huiskauttaa kämmentään ja huomauttaa hymyhuulin: katsokaapa, kuka viimeksi nauraa—totuus ei pala tuleksakaan. Onnenmyyrät ne ihmiset joilla on kärpänen päässään! Wettenhovi-Aspan päässä ei ole ainoastaan tavalista kärpystä—siellä pörisee oikea muinaisegyptiläinen pörriäinen, aavikon ampiainen, hiiden herhiläinen." Ilmari Kianto, "Wettenhovi-Aspan eriskummallinen riemujuhlajulkaisu: "Kalevala ja Egypti," *Ajan Suunta*, April 3, 1935. The last paragraph of the quote is based on Kianto's poetic imagination rather than on common idioms of the Finnish language.

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Kianto, "Wettenhovi-Aspan riemujuhlajulkaisu"; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Kalevala ja Egypti*, 26.

86

"[...]meidän hämärän muinaisuutemme suuripiirteisin, leveäeleisin tietäjä ja noita, velho, poppa ja myrrysmies, taikuri ja šamaani, jonka tutkijasielu vaeltelee tuhansien vuosien takaisilla Egyptin virtojen rannoilla [...] Kianto, "Wettenhovi-Aspan riemujuhlajulkaisu.

pa's book as a work of art and praised its inventive patriotic spirit. For readers, there was no reason to get caught up in the details, but to understand the broad outlines.⁸⁷

In 1935, when *The Kalevala and Egypt* was published, Wettenhovi-Aspa also published an extensive German-language work, *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt. Kommentare zu den vorhistorischen Völkerwanderungen*. The book summarized Wettenhovi-Aspa's views presented in his "Golden Books" and other publications on the "Fenno-Egyptian origin of the culture of the Old World," as the title of the book indicated. The German edition contained extensive glossaries comparing Finnish and Ancient Egyptian, as well as other languages such as Japanese.

Seeking International Audiences

The publisher of the first edition of the *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt* was announced as Genius-Verlag in Leipzig. The publishing house was also said to be based in Amsterdam, Zurich, and Vienna. Behind the title of publisher was the author and journalist Philipp Paneth, who had come to Finland from Prague in 1935 to write a book with the working title *Das Reich ohne Rassen*. In Finland, Paneth was also a representative of several international news agencies and the publishing house Genius-Verlag. The Finnish police soon began to suspect Paneth's actions, and according to the police's investigation, there was no publishing house called Genius-Verlag in the cities mentioned. The news agencies Paneth referred to also consisted solely of himself. Paneth had also stated that he was a correspondent for the *New York Times*, which turned out to be false. The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs had provided him with support to write his book, among other things, and a police investigation had been launched due to suspicions that had arisen in the ministry. It was decided to deport Paneth from the country, and the police eventually took him to a ship by force. The incident attracted attention in the press, and the anti-Semitic periodical *Siniristi* ("Blue Cross") also attacked Wettenhovi-Aspa in its article, claiming he had invited an "international Jewish fraudster" to promote his book in a "Masonic spirit." The author of the *Siniristi* magazine was also irritated by Paneth's claim in his book that Jews would be particularly tolerated in Finland and that Finland would therefore be "Das Reich ohne Rassen," a raceless state.⁸⁸

The Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt attracted less public attention in Finland than *The Kalevala and Egypt*. The book was apparently thought of as an extended translation, and it was not considered necessary to present Wettenhovi-Aspa's views again during the same year.

Of course, the German-language work was primarily intended for an international audience. In Europe in the 1930s, Wettenhovi-Aspa's works, influenced by the Theosophical-occult and national romanticist discourses of the *fin-de-siècle*, were now associated with a new reference group: the study of Aryan origins and the ancient history of the Northern peoples that had emerged in National Socialist Germany. Wettenhovi-Aspa presented his Egyptocentric theory most prominently in the 1930s, and also in German, so it is worth discussing the rela-

"Kansainvälinen juutalaishuijari Suomen vapaamuurarien luottamushenkilönä" ("An international Jewish fraudster as a trustee of the Finnish Freemasons"), *Siniristi* 1 (1936): 8–11; "Lupasi tehdä Suomi-propagandaa, kirjoittikin politiikkaa. Tri Panethin vierailu muodostui kalliiksi erälle tšekäläisille liikkeille. Hän jätti laskunsa maksamatta joutuessaan karkoitetuksi maastamme" ("He promised to promote Finland, he wrote politics. Dr. Paneth's visit was costly for some of the local businesses. He left his bills unpaid when he was expelled from our country"), *Helsingin Sanomat*, January 7, 1936; [Pseudonym] X, "Tri Paneth: Karjalan ja Inkerin ystävä! Ulkopoliittisia näköaloja" ("Dr. Paneth: Friend of Karelia and Ingria! Foreign Policy Perspectives"), *Ajan Suunta* January 8, 1936; Jari Hanski, *Juutalaisvastaisuus suomalaisissa aikakauslehdissä ja kirjallisuudessa 1918–1944* (PhD diss., University of Helsinki, 2006), 275–76. Despite the investigations of the Finnish police, Genius-Verlag was not a completely non-existent publishing house, but at least a business name of Philipp Paneth; between 1932 and 1935, Paneth published at least five books, which were reportedly published by Genius-Verlag at the locations mentioned above. While in Finland, Paneth had also been the editor-in-chief of a magazine called *Maailman kaiku* ("The Echo of the World"). Its three sample issues in the autumn of 1935 published articles by foreign journalists and politicians translated into Finnish. The Finnish editor in charge of the latter two issues was Pertti Uotila, a friend of Wettenhovi-Aspa. The magazine did not publish articles under Wettenhovi-Aspa's name, but every issue advertised his book, and it is likely he participated in the making of the magazine in some way. The author of the *Siniristi* magazine said that Wettenhovi-Aspa and Paneth had jointly edited and published the magazine. The publication of the magazine ceased with Paneth's expulsion, and his apparently completed books *Das Reich ohne Rassen* and *Finnen bedrängt* also remained unpublished, with the exception of excerpts published in the magazine *Maailman kaiku*.

tionship between Wettenhovi-Aspa and the Third Reich in more detail in this context.

In National Socialist Germany, studies on the origins of culture and Aryan antiquity had gained state-recognized status. A key role in these aspirations was played by the *Deutsches Ahnenerbe*, a research institution under the SS led by Heinrich Himmler, whose first director from 1935 to 1937 was the Dutch-born philologist Herman Wirth (1885–1981). Wirth had suggested that the ancient Northern race originated in the sunken Atlantis and created a civilization and a writing system inherited later by other peoples.⁸⁹

Herman Wirth was mentioned in some published reviews of *The Kalevala and Egypt* and *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt*. Wirth was referred to, for example, by Arthur Gleye (1867–1937), a linguist from Riga, Latvia. Gleye had studied comparative linguistics at the University of Tartu and worked as a lecturer in German at Tomsk University. He stated that “Wirth was an ‘antipode’ of the theories of Wettenhovi-Aspa.” According to Gleye the strong patriotic foundation of the studies was a common feature for Wirth and Wettenhovi-Aspa, as well as the assumption of the historical influence of the Northern people in the south. Gleye was in favor of Wettenhovi-Aspa—in his own research, the ancient Cretans were a Finnic people.⁹⁰

Another writer who referred to Wirth was the architect and sculptor Ilmari Wirkkala, who had published nationalist works on the historical significance of the ancient Finns. Wirkkala explained Wirth’s theory of Atlantis and stated he had interpreted writings dating back thousands of years through Sumerian, Sanskrit, and Hebrew, although according to Wirkkala, 90 percent of his example words were in plain Finnish and thus easy to explain. Wirkkala stated that Wirth’s work *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* had “almost the status of *The Bible*” in Germany. Although Wirkkala did not support Wirth’s theories, he admired the patriotic attitude of both Wirth and Wettenhovi-Aspa, and believed this type of research should have been further pursued in Finland as well.⁹¹ He considered Wettenhovi-Aspa’s *The Kalevala and Egypt* to have broadened horizons and wished that Finnish researchers would follow Germany’s example:

[Wettenhovi-Aspa] is one of the most monumental champions of this trend, starting from the premise that by proving a nation its great and true origins, the nation itself can be raised to a height, to a sense of great unity and to a strong national elevation. It is only in the last decade that this kind of “scientific” research has risen to its full bloom in nations striving for national integrity, and the distribution of works in dozens of editions has produced miraculous results. When we know, for example, what racial theory means in Germany today, we can only sense the influence of the works of one scientist, Hans Günther, and yet there are German scholars who in their criticisms say that Günther turns everything upside down. It has seemed all the more strange for me, that there are Finnish scholars who think that even these critics are still impossibly extreme in their conclusions, at least—when it comes to the influence of the Finns in ancient Europe.⁹²

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Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (New York: Hyperion 2006), 53–62, passim; Malte Gasche, *Der “Germanische Wissenschaftseinsatz” des “Ahnenerbes” der SS 1942–1945: Zwischen Völkung der “völkischen Gemeinschaft” und dem Streben nach “Erlösung.”* Studien zur Archäologie Europas, Band 20 (Bonn: Habelt, 2014), 44–48, passim; Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Nazism: Antroposophy and the Politics of Race in the Fascist Era* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 89–90; Julian Strube, “Nazism and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 341.

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Arthur Gleye in the *Mitauer Nachrichtenblatt* newspaper (published in Jelgava, Latvia) on April 18, 1936, quoted in book advertisement leaflets *Wettenhovi-Aspa'n fenno-egyptiläispropagandasta ulkomailla* (Helsinki: K. F. Puromies, 1936) and *Wettenhovi-Aspa's philological nyorientering på erövringstag ute i Europa* (Helsinki: K. F. Puromies, 1936). By the time Gleye’s book review was published, Wettenhovi-Aspa had already sent his book to Wirth, but Gleye and Wettenhovi-Aspa probably corresponded with each other. The posthumous work of Arthur Gleye, *Die Wiedergeburt der westfinnischen Geisteskultur* (Tallinn: Eesti kirjastusühisus, 1937) also has references to the works of Wettenhovi-Aspa. Wettenhovi-Aspa wrote a positive review of the book in the Estonian magazine *Uus Eesti*. See Gleye, *Die Wiedergeburt*, passim; S[igurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Läänemere soomesoo vaimukultuuri uuestisünd,” *Uus Eesti*, May 6, 1937; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 314–16. Arthur Gleye also wrote about Wettenhovi-Aspa’s work in the *Libausche Zeitung* (published in Liepāja, Latvia), and many other reviews appeared in Estonian, Latvian, and Hungarian newspapers. See the advertisement leaflets *Wettenhovi-Aspa'n fenno-egyptiläispropagandasta ulkomailla* and *Wettenhovi-Aspa's philological nyorientering på erövringstag ute i Europa* and Lappalainen, “Välähdyksiä,” 11–14. Wettenhovi-Aspa already referred to Gleye in the first part of “The Golden Book of Finland,” see Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Finlands Gyllene Bok*, 120–21; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Suomen kultainen kirja*, 130–31; Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 108.

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Ilmari Wirkkala, “Kalevala ja Egypti,” *Aitosuomalainen*, May 28, 1935, 7–9. On Wirkkala, see Koskinen, *Villi Suomen historia*, 180–90. Elias Lönnqvist, at least, kept up with Wirth’s research in Finland; he even replicated Wirth’s bibliography in *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* as a supplement to his own book *Suomenkieli*, 200–206.

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[Wettenhovi-Aspa] on eräs monumenttaalisimpia sen suunnan esitaistelijoista, jotka lähtevät siitä, että osoittamalla kansakunnalle sen suuri ja oikea alkuperä, itse kansa voidaan nostaa korkealle, suuren yhteyden tuntoon ja voimakkaaseen kansalliseen nousuun. Vasta viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana on tämänlaatuinen “tieteellinen” tutkimus

Wirkkala's references to racial theory and the German race theorist Hans Günther (1891–1968) say more about his own ideas than about Wettenhovi-Aspa's work. Wettenhovi-Aspa mentions races occasionally in his oeuvre,⁹³ but rather as a loosely used synonym for a people or ethnic group than as an articulated concept of race. He did not believe that racial characteristics were culturally significant. Wettenhovi-Aspa stated on many occasions that he opposed anti-Semitism and acted against it at different stages of his life: for example, in 1920 he condemned the publication of the Swedish-language translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Helsinki in a newspaper article.⁹⁴

Wettenhovi-Aspa, who sought to reach international audiences, promoted his work by sending copies of his book in German between 1936 and 1937 to European researchers who expressed like-minded views, more traditional university professors, as well as heads of state such as Kemal Atatürk and Kaiser Wilhelm II. In the catalog of the Kemal Atatürk library, the work is still mentioned, marked “gift signed by the author.”⁹⁵ Wettenhovi-Aspa could use the polite thank-you letters received for the promotional copies in the advertising of his work.⁹⁶



Akseli Gallén-Kallala, *Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspan muotokuva* (“Portrait of Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa”). 1919. Oil on canvas 29 × 31,5. Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum (Photograph by Yehia Eweis). The bottle, carafe and glass in the portrait were probably an intentional reference to Wettenhovi-Aspa's activism against the Finnish Prohibition Act which had entered into force the same year, on June 1, 1919. Wettenhovi-Aspa campaigned against the alcohol prohibition legislation by writing a book with instructions to make various alcoholic beverages at home. It was released both in Finnish and in Swedish, and was an instant success. See Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 72–73, II. He also exhibited his caricatures on the subject and of the politicians who supported the act. According to Wettenhovi-Aspa, wine was an ancient Fenno-Egyptian invention, and he did not hesitate to use this as an argument in the debate. The prohibition act in Finland, however, lasted until 1932.

noussut kansalliseen eheyteen pyrkivissä valtakunnassa täyteen kukkaansa ja teosten levittämisellä kymmenin painoksin on tultu ihmeitä tekeviin tuloksiin. Kun tiedämme esimerkiksi, mitä rotuoppi merkitsee Saksassa nykypäivinä, voimme aavistaa vain yhden tiedemiehen, Hans Güntherin, teosten vaikutuksen, ja kuitenkin on saksalaisia tutkijoita, joiden arvostelujen mukana Günther asettaa kaikki asiat pääläelleen. Sitä merkillisemmältä on tuntunut allekirjoittaneesta, että on meikäläisiä tiedemiehiä, joiden mielestä nämä arvostelijatkin ovat vielä aivan mahdollottoman äärimmäisiä päätelmissään, ainakin—kun on kysymys suomalaisten vaikutuksesta muinaisessa Euroopassa.” Wirkkala, “Kalevala ja Egypti,” 7.

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A modern reader would consider many of these occasional references as unequivocally racist. See, e.g., Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung*, 126–27.

94

Wetterhovi-Aspa [Wettenhovi-Aspa], S[igurd], “Har Finland en judefråga?” *Judisk Krönika: Tidskrift för judarnas nationella kultur och samhällsintressen*, May 15, 1920. In his 1927 memoir, he recalls the Dreyfus affair of 1895, during which he was amazed at Strindberg's anti-Semitic attitudes. Wettenhovi-Aspa also stated that Strindberg had since then totally changed his attitude towards the Jews, as he eagerly began to study the Hebrew language. In connection with the Dreyfus case, Wettenhovi-Aspa was also sending telegrams of support from Finland to Mrs. Dreyfus and the writer Émile Zola, who participated in the case with his famous article *J' Accuse*. His speech against antisemitism at the time was published in the journal *Humanitas* in 1898. Wetterhoff-Asp, Sigurd: “Sigurd Wetterhoff-Asps andragande vid mötet för aflåtande af ett sympatitelegram till fru Lucie Dreyfus,” *Humanitas* 1 (1898): 28–30; Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Jutelmia ja muistelmia*, 112–13.

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Catalogue of the Kemal Atatürk Library. Atatürk ve Kurtuluş Savaşı Müzesi / Kitaplık https://www.anitkabir.tsk.tr/03_muzeler/kitaplik_vw.html.

96

Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 105, 108.

The Reception of Wettenhovi-Aspa by the Third Reich

Wettenhovi-Aspa actively sought to find kindred spirits abroad. Perhaps thanks to Wirkkala or Gleye, he also sent the work to Herman Wirth at the *Deutsches Ahnenerbe*. The correspondence Wettenhovi-Aspa preserved among the manuscripts he left behind clearly indicates that the copy sent in October 1935 had not arrived. In a separate letter sent at the same time as the book, he had asked Wirth to give his opinion on it, and in February 1936 *Ahnenerbe's* general secretary, Wolfram Sievers, wrote to Wettenhovi-Aspa that the book had not arrived.⁹⁷ Wettenhovi-Aspa immediately sent Wirth another copy. In the cover letter, he apologized for the fact that Wirth had not received his copy and said he would personally take care of sending the book this time. On the letterhead, his title was printed as *Fennoägyptolog*.⁹⁸ The cover letter and the accompanying work probably reached Wirth, although apparently, he never sent the feedback requested by Wettenhovi-Aspa—even a critical reply letter probably would have contained some sentences polite enough to be useful in promoting the book. It is not known how much Wettenhovi-Aspa knew about the institution run by Wirth, but he may have thought it possible to obtain financial or other support from *Ahnenerbe*. The generous research funding provided by the department attracted a wide range of researchers from universities and beyond.

At the end of the 1930s, Wettenhovi-Aspa knew the Finnish Yrjö von Grönhagen (1911–2003), who was on the payroll of *Deutsches Ahnenerbe*, and who in the 1930s made recordings of rune singers in Karelia on behalf of his German employer. Grönhagen had been appointed director of the Indo-Germanic-Finnish research institute at *Deutsches Ahnenerbe* in February 1936, when Wettenhovi-Aspa sent his book to Wirth.⁹⁹

In the end it was thanks to Grönhagen that the book did not go unnoticed in *Deutsches Ahnenerbe*. Wettenhovi-Aspa himself had already sent two copies of his books to *Ahnenerbe*, but via Grönhagen the book made its way to Heinrich Himmler, at the top of the institution.¹⁰⁰

It seems the SS-Reichsführer was at first enthusiastic about the book¹⁰¹ and ordered the newly appointed head of *Ahnenerbe*, Walther Wüst (1901–1993), to read and assess it. In the archives of *Ahnenerbe* there is a letter dated October 25, 1937, in which Himmler commented on Wüst's statement about *Kulturursprung*.¹⁰² Wüst and Himmler agreed on the fallacy of Wettenhovi-Aspa's views. Himmler stated that he was one of those researchers who “sees only a couple of sectors in a circle and therefore imagines those sectors as the origins of the whole circle.”¹⁰³ According to Himmler, the history of the Finnish and Egyptian languages had been influenced by the common, millennial past of both nations under the central state of Atlantis and its ruling class. The Finnish and Egyptian languages may have had common features, but this did not indicate the ancient kinship of Finns and Egyptians, but rather that the language and culture of both peoples had been marked by Atlantean colonial domination. According to him, the same influence of Atlantean culture was evident in most other languages, such as Chinese and Japanese.¹⁰⁴

Herman Wirth's continued influence on Himmler speaks to the

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Wolfram Sievers to Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa 2.10.1936, Turku University Library, Manuscript Collections, Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa's Manuscript Collection (hereafter cited as TUL, SWA), KK IV 184: XI: 6.



Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt: Kommentare zu den vorhistorischen Völkerwanderungen. (Genius-Verlag 1935)

98

Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa to Hermann Felix Wirth, c/o Deutsches Ahnenerbe, February 13, 1936 (carbon copy), TUL, SWA, KK IV 184: XI: 7.

99

Pringle, *The Master Plan*, 77–78, 81–90, 97–98, 302–3, passim; Pitkälä, “Pyramidit, pyhät raamit,” 109, 111. See also Yrjö von Grönhagen, *Himmler's Secret Society (Himmlerin salaseura, 1948)*, trans. and annotated by Ike Vil (Porvoo: Star Regulus Press, forthcoming 2025), passim. It was through Yrjö von Grönhagen that Wettenhovi-Aspa also became acquainted with the English-born Theosophical occultist Gaston de Mengel, who was also active in France, and who also lectured his Theosophical-oriental doctrines to the National Socialists in Berlin. According to von Grönhagen, de Mengel spent a few days at Wettenhovi-Aspa's villa in Vilniemi. Grönhagen, *Himmler's Secret Society*, 22, 141–42; Ike Vil, *Chasing the Green Dragon: French Occult Conspiracy, Nazi Mysticism, and Gaston de Mengel's Journey to the East* (Porvoo: Star Regulus Press, forthcoming 2025), 263–67.

100

Heinrich Himmler to Yrjö von Grönhagen, April 28, 1937, authenticated copy from 1940 in the archives of Valtiollinen Poliisi (The State Police, the security agency of Finland from 1937 to 1949), Kansallisarkisto (KA, Finnish National Archives),

understanding of history in the letter, built around the ancient Atlantean master race. The recipient of the letter, Walther Wüst, had been appointed head of *Ahnenerbe* in early 1937 because Hitler could no longer tolerate Wirth. Wirth's views on the ancient civilization of Atlantis and, for example, the replacement of Christianity with Germanic paganism were politically too risky for the Führer. Himmler was thus forced to get rid of Wirth. Wüst, dean of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Munich and professor of "Aryan culture and linguistics," was an academically distinguished Sanskrit scholar and a member of the National Socialist Party. With the change of director, *Ahnenerbe's* activities became more like a university research institute. Instead of Atlantis, well-known civilizations were to be studied, and *Ahnenerbe* researchers were now required to have academic merit.¹⁰⁵

Himmler's letter also indicates that Wüst had raised the issue of a possible ban on Wettenhovi-Aspa's book. Himmler stated this was impossible because the book had been published in Helsinki, Finland. According to him, books like this typically received little publicity; Wettenhovi-Aspa's should therefore be harmless. Himmler concluded by stating he believed that, for all the absurdity in the book, it would contain "a few adequate pieces to the great mosaic of world history."¹⁰⁶

Wettenhovi-Aspa's views did not fit in with National Socialist ideology: according to him, the Germans spoke a language that had degenerated from the original language, and their civilization was thus at a lower level than that of the Finns. In Wirth's view, literacy had been brought to Egypt by the native Aryans of Atlantis from the north, while Wettenhovi-Aspa thought that Finns had migrated from Egypt through Europe to the north, having first created a civilization in the south. The book sent by Wettenhovi-Aspa to *Deutsches Ahnenerbe* and the articles he wrote in German were mainly attempts to make the ancient language and culture of Finland known to Germans, who did not understand they were descendants of an ancient Finnish culture and were thus alienated from their origins. For him, the ancient common past of Europeans, a common original language and culture, was an argument for calling on the peoples of Europe to live in harmony with each other. He ended *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung der alten Welt* by urging the peoples of Europe to live peacefully with each other as descendants of a common Fenno-Egyptian ancient culture.¹⁰⁷

Yrjö von Grönhagen's expeditions to Karelia commissioned by Himmler sought, by their very nature, Aryan origins among the Finns. Himmler even displayed the image of rune singer Timo Lipitsä with his *kantele*¹⁰⁸ like an icon in his office and commissioned Grönhagen to acquire ten *kanteles* for SS use.¹⁰⁹ However, Grönhagen lost his position as head of department after Wüst took over the leadership of *Ahnenerbe*, coincidentally on the same day that Himmler wrote the letter concerning Wettenhovi-Aspa's book to Wüst.¹¹⁰ Like Wirth, Grönhagen was not fired, but was allowed to remain with *Ahnenerbe*: he was ordered to complete his studies at the expense of the research institute. Himmler's great enthusiasm for Finland somewhat faded around this time, which may already have been evident in the letter about *Kulturursprung*. The attention Wettenhovi-Aspa's work received was, of course, an indication of the interest in Finland.¹¹¹

Wettenhovi-Aspa's attitudes towards National Socialist Germany

Helsinki; EK-Valpo I 1919–1944; Personal Files; A3860, Valpo file on Yrjö von Grönhagen. See also Ike Vil, *Chasing the Green Dragon*, 263–64. I am grateful to Ike Vil for letting me read and cite his aforementioned forthcoming book, and his forthcoming translation of Yrjö von Grönhagen's memoirs of his *Ahnenerbe* days, first published in Finnish in 1948. He also generously shared the contents of the Valpo file on Yrjö von Grönhagen with me for this article.

101

Heinrich Himmler to Yrjö von Grönhagen, April 28, 1937; KA; Valpo A3860, Grönhagen.

102

Heinrich Himmler to Walther Wüst, October 25, 1937, authenticated copy in Heinrich Himmler's correspondence archive, Das Bundesarchiv (BA), Berlin-Lichterfelde; Einrichtungen der NSDAP; Parteilgliederungen und angeschlossene Verbände; NS 21 Forschungs- und Lehrgemeinschaft "Das Ahnenerbe;" 1. Der Kurator; 1.2. Schriftumsausschuss; NS 21/364 Bd. 7 1936–1945. Pitkälä, "Suomen kansan menneisyys," 87–89.

103

"Es ist selbstverständlich, dass alle diejenigen, die einen Sektor oder zwei Sektoren eines Kreises ansehen, leicht diese beiden Sektoren für den Ursprung des Ganzen halten." Heinrich Himmler to Walther Wüst, October 25, 1937; BA; NS 21/364 Bd. 7 1936–1945.

104

Heinrich Himmler to Walther Wüst, October 25, 1937; BA; NS 21/364 Bd. 7 1936–1945.

105

Pringle, *The Master Plan*, 92–98; Gasche, *Wissenschaftseinsatz*, 48–50; Strube, "Nazism and the Occult," 341.

106

"Was das Buch selbst anlangt, so können wir es gar nicht verbieten, da es ja in Helsingfors erschienen ist. Andernteils erscheinen diese Art Bücher doch so unter dem Ausschluss der Öffentlichkeit, dass sie keinen Schaden anrichten, und zum Dritten glaube ich, dass bei allem Unsinn, der darin enthalten ist, doch von Hunderttausenden von Mosaiksteinchen, die das wahre Bild der Entstehung der Weltsystems und ihrer Geschichte darstellen, auch in diesem Buch ein paar Steinchen enthalten sind." Heinrich Himmler to Walther Wüst, October 25, 1937; BA; NS 21/364 Bd. 7, 1936–1945.

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"Völker Europas, besinnt Euch Eueres gemeinsamen Ursprungs, Eurer einst gemeinsamen Sprache und Urkultur, reicht Euch in Frieden die Hände, denn Ihr seid alle Kinder des fenno-ägyptischen Älternhauses." Wettenhovi-Aspa, *Fenno-Ägyptischer Kulturursprung* [462]; see also Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 85–88.

108

A traditional Finnish and Karelian plucked string instrument.

were not unequivocally positive or negative. In an article “Finland und die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa” written for the *Forum* magazine during the Interim Peace¹¹² in 1940, Wettenhovi-Aspa pointed out, in German, that German place names were based on the “original Aryan language”¹¹³ spoken in Finland. In the same article, he wrote about Hitler as the “George Washington of Europe,” who, fighting against big business and British imperialism, was creating the “United States of Europe.”¹¹⁴

Wettenhovi-Aspa’s opinions on Hitler were at their most positive during the Continuation War (1941–1944), when Finland and Germany were allied against the Soviet Union. During the Winter War (1939–1940) in which the Soviet Union attacked Finland, Finland gained much sympathy from the West and the Allies. At the beginning of the Continuation War, the Soviet Union became part of the Allies against Germany, and for practical reasons, Finland was virtually allied with Germany, which provided an important source of material assistance.

At that time, Wettenhovi-Aspa wrote a poetic greeting to Hitler and the German people for the *Forum* magazine and painted two portraits of Hitler, probably intended for school education.¹¹⁵ However, Wettenhovi-Aspa’s literary legacy also included a manuscript in which he considered the presence of Germans in the Baltic Sea a threat to peace and wrote about the justified bitterness felt by the Northern peoples because of Germany’s ruthlessness.¹¹⁶ In the years preceding World War II, Wettenhovi-Aspa had admired the United States rather than Germany. In his poem “American Future,” published in English in the *Forum* magazine in 1938, he predicted that the United States and Japan would jointly rule the world, while Europe and England would take a back seat.¹¹⁷ Apparently, the Germans’ success in the early stages of World War II and Finland’s alliance with Germany made him reconsider his views. Germany, in his opinion, was also an important counterforce against the Soviet Bolsheviks.

... Ancient Egyptian Buzzbugs, a Desert Wasp, a Gigantic Hornet Inside his Head

Wettenhovi-Aspa’s studies published in several languages in the 1910s and 1930s and his efforts to prove the existence of a seminal language resembled the Gothicist historiography practiced in seventeenth-century Sweden. Gothicist historians sought to legitimize Sweden’s great power with a glorious past. The Swedish language was studied to find connections with biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek, and the Swedish Empire was considered to have been ancient Atlantis, the primeval home of human civilization. At this time Finland was a Grand Duchy of Sweden. In Finland and the Academy of Turku there were also Gothicist aspirations to etymologically prove that Finnish was close to the biblical languages.¹¹⁸ Wettenhovi-Aspa has often been portrayed as a curiosity, a late-born Gothicist whose writings have been seen either as purely humorous parodies of the nationalist culture and academic world of his time or, by contrast, as grandiose and desperate scholarly aspirations of an eccentric artist.

However, Wettenhovi-Aspa must be understood as part of the Western esoteric currents of his era. He was a representative of a larg-

109
Pringle, *The Master Plan*, 88–90.

110
Pringle, *The Master Plan*, 97–98; Gasche, *Wissenschaftseinsatz*, 147–49.

111
About Ahnenerbe’s relations with Finland see also Gasche, *Wissenschaftseinsatz*, 145–51, 184.

112
A period of peace lasting ca. 15 months, between the Winter War and the Continuation War and between the Soviet Union and Finland.

113
”[A]rnsche Ursprache,” [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Finland und die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa,” *Forum* 3–4 (1940): 77.

114
Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Finland und die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa,” 77–80.

115
Varia 7, certificates, etc., TUL, SWA, KK IV 184: XI: 7. In the 1930s and 1940s, Wettenhovi-Aspa painted portraits of prominent men, including a series of U.S. presidents purchased by the U.S. Embassy. An important motive for making these kinds of portraits was probably to earn a living. Varia 7, certificates, certificate of the portrait of the Marshal of Finland painted by S. W.-A., TUL, SWA, KK IV 184: XI: 7. [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Finnischer Gruss an Deutschland und seinen Führer,” in “Sondernummer für Deutschland,” special issue, *Forum* 1–2 (1942): 1–2; Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 344–45.

116
Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 343–44.

117
[Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “American Future (A prediction about the future of the United States—written by a Finn in 1920),” an offprint from *Forum* 6–7 (1938): 19. On Wettenhovi-Aspa’s relations with the United States, see Halén and Tukkinen, *Elämän ja kuoleman kello*, 291–300, passim; Glenda Dawn Goss, *Vieläkö lähetämme hänelle sikareja? Sibeliuksen Amerikka ja amerikkalaiset: 24 tarinaa*, ed. and trans. Martti Haapakoski (Helsinki: WSOY, 2009), 153–57. In the bilingual article “America – Finland. Debit – credit. America – Finland Debit and credit” Wettenhovi-Aspa underlined the importance of Finnish-born immigrants in the United States. See [Sigurd] Wettenhovi-Aspa, “Amerikka – Suomi: Debet – credit. America – Finland: Debit and credit,” *Forum* 9–10 (1936): 21–23.

118
For Gothicist historiography, see Tero Anttila, “The Power of Antiquity. The Hyperborean Research Tradition in Early Modern Swedish Research on National Antiquity,” *Acta Universitatis Ouluensis B Humaniora* 125 (Oulu: University of Oulu,

er cultural movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This cultural movement was characterized by an interest in Ancient Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Oriental civilizations, and Classical Antiquity on one hand and idealized cultures of the Nordic countries on the other. This movement manifested itself both in arts and religious and intellectual movements such as Theosophy, and in numerous ways, which could be best described with the concept of *occulture*. At the same time, especially in small countries like Finland and Sweden, an interest in building nationality by investigating and inventing ancient national myths emerged. These interests were combined in Wettenhovi-Aspa's texts. I argue that Wettenhovi-Aspa's writings represent occulture in a unique way, as he sought to combine the Northern and Southern ideals at the same time, in the particular, historical context of Finland. He was also an internationally very mobile and well-connected artist, representing European currents of thought in general.

Wettenhovi-Aspa's writings reflected the influences adopted in Paris during the 1890s: visual artists were oriented towards the art of ancient cultures, read Theosophists and Swedenborg, and expected a new renaissance to emerge in Scandinavia and Finland, among Northern cultures regarded as pure and uncorrupted. Finnish artists were also influenced by a strong nationalist ideology, which was fueled by language struggles in their home country and later by anti-Russification efforts. Wettenhovi-Aspa was inspired by the writer August Strindberg, who sought the roots of the world's languages in Hebrew and, in the 1890s, also sought to undermine established notions of the natural sciences.

The last productive period of Wettenhovi-Aspa's literary activity took place in the mid-1930s, after which he published only a few writings. His articles were published especially in the *Forum* magazine, which operated from 1934 to 1942. In the 1940s, Wettenhovi-Aspa was still writing his visions of the reorganization of the Suez Canal for the newspaper *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* ("Finnish Social Democrat").¹¹⁹ He also wrote manuscripts, but he no longer published books.

The general attitude of Wettenhovi-Aspa's contemporaries towards him was of varying degrees of amusement and astonishment, and at the same time acceptance of his patriotic ideas. The articles written by the causerie writers Olli and Tiitus and the author Ilmari Kianto on *The Kalevala and Egypt* give an idea of the different aspects of this attitude. Kianto's article also described the atmosphere in which Wettenhovi-Aspa presented his ideas and his status as a quick-witted eccentric of the artistic community, with an Ancient Egyptian fly buzzing inside his head.¹²⁰

This atmosphere and the humorous sounding board of Wettenhovi-Aspa's ideas are also illustrated by an episode related to Sibelius in the 1930s: in the summer of 1936, Sibelius received two American journalists, Cornelius Vanderbilt and Jack O'Brien, at Ainola, his home in Järvenpää. On the same summer day, Ainola was also visited by Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa, who may have arranged a meeting with Sibelius for Vanderbilt, as he knew both. Americans were able to read about the discussions on that day in *Time* magazine published on Finland's Independence Day in December 1937. In the interview, Sibelius

2015), 143–54, and Erkki Urpilainen, *Algot Scarin ja göötiläisen historiankirjoituksen mureneminen Ruotsissa 1700-luvun alkupuolella*, *Historiallisia Tutkimuksia* 171 (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura 1993), 141–42.

119

Pitkälä, "Pyramidit, pyhät raamit," 18, XVII.

120

Kianto, "Wettenhovi-Aspan riemujuhlajulkaisu."

first expressed his views on Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and other composers, but then added, with a twinkle in his eye: “All good composers lived in Egypt 5,000 years ago.”¹²¹

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[Cornelius Jr. (IV) Vanderbilt and Jack O’Brien], “Music: Finland’s King.” *Time*, December 6, 1937; Glenda Dawn Goss, *Sibelius: A Composer’s Life and the Awakening of Finland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 149–50, 155–57.

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Dividing the Avant-garde: The Circulation of Esotericism among the Situationists¹

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Abstract

For a brief historical moment the Situationist International (SI) united artists across Europe around its elusive but far-reaching aim to construct ludic situations. Launched in 1957, its network fragmented in the early 1960s. In the canonized narrative, which tends to interpret early, multinational SI through the eventual output of its French branch, it splintered because its Parisian core wanted to radicalize the SI message, dismissing the relevance of any purely artistic experimentations and thereby of most non-French members. Paying particular attention to the theoretical sources of inspiration to the SI project, which linked playing to sacrality and magic, this article will suggest another reading. I will argue that the status of such esoteric tropes divided the SI. It separated a Franco-German-Dutch center, which shunned them, from the northern and southern fringes that wished to engage them. I will show how the tropes' local connotations informed such differences and that, upon the network's split, a peripheral situationist grouping emerged that re-appropriated previously suppressed themes and motifs. One ex-situationist, Asger Jorn, even proposed an imaginary geography of their cultural circulation.



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In his afterword to Asger Jorn's *Le Jardin d'Albisola* (1974), Guy Debord eulogized their time together in the Situationist International (SI). He described his Danish friend as "the permanent heretic of a movement that cannot accept orthodoxy."² His choice of words was curious. For what did the ecclesiastically connoted questions of heresy and orthodoxy have to do with the art movement they co-founded in 1957?

The SI was a network uniting artists across the continent. Its elusive but far-reaching aim to construct ludic situations brought notoriety. It soon made them the most important avant-garde group in Europe.³ At its 1960 peak, the International included branches in Scandinavia and Britain, Benelux and France, West Germany and Italy, and associated chapters in Tel Aviv, Algiers, and Montreal. Shortly thereafter it fragmented. In most retellings of the SI story, which are numerous,⁴ the split is seen as due to a burgeoning divide between an increasingly politicized Parisian group led by Debord, which most often is cast as the true situationists,⁵ and a more artistically inclined network associated with Jorn.⁶

Following Debord's surprising choice of terms to describe Jorn, I will trace the existence of another division within and beyond the International. That divide hinged on questions of sacrality and magic, on whether it was (in)opportune to draw on the esoteric archive. And it separated a Franco-German-Dutch center from its northern and southern hinterlands. While ideas, motifs, and practices associated with esotericism were referenced in the International's geographically peripheral groups, they were dismissed and ridiculed in its core branches.

And yet, as I will show, esoteric expressions were nowhere far from the surface. However hard the core groups tried to banish them altogether, they kept coming back. They were not only unwittingly there from the start; the theoretical inspiration to the SI titular project of constructing situations—Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*—linked playing to ritual and to a sense of magic and the sacred. They were also consciously re-appropriated by the peripheral groups once they had set up a journal and organization of their own. Jorn, in his post-SI project excavating a vanishing trans-national heretical tradition, even proposed an imaginary geography of their cultural circulation.

This article will, in other words, explore two different kinds of occultural transfers. The first such transfer, in which Huizinga's insights circulated, was largely concealed, and once acknowledged, quickly silenced and rejected. This is a transfer whose itinerary can be traced only in hindsight with all the documents at hand. The second such transfer, which encompassed a much larger gallery of esoteric images and thought, took place in full public view. It would have been evident to any reader of the peripheral groups' journal. With reference to Giuliano D'Amico's introductory discussion to this special issue of the different uses of occulture, we could thus distinguish between a first transfer which *allows* for an occultural *interpretation* of the early situationist project and a second transfer which *invites* a *classification* of the later peripheral SI as occultural. As we will see, however, one aspect transcends such distinctions, and that is the underlying sensibility. In situationist hands, magic was always used for ludic ends, the sacred always treated irreverently. With Asger Jorn, we even have a cheeky seeker, pursuing a peculiar occultural path.

1

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2

Guy Debord, "De l'architecture sauvage," in Asger Jorn, *Le Jardin d'Albisola* (Turin: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974), 41. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from languages other than English are mine.

3

Roberto Ohrt, "Fin des modifications: Common and Contested Ground between Asger Jorn and Guy Debord," in *Asger Jorn Restless Rebel*, ed. Dorthe Aagesen and Helle Brøns (Copenhagen: Prestel, 2014), 177.

4

They have been estimated to be the most studied postwar avant-garde group: Raymond Spiteri, "From Unitary Urbanism to the Society of the Spectacle," in *Aesthetic Revolutions*, ed. Ales Erjavec (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 208.

5

See for example Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Pimlico, 2002); Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Arles: Editions Denoël, 2001); Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: La révolution au service de la poésie* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); Tom McDonough, *The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

6

This is not uncontested. For the politics of early, non-French SI, see for example Roberto Ohrt, *Phantom Avant-Garde: Eine Geschichte der Situationistischen Internationale und der modernen Kunst* (München: Galerie van de Loo, 1990); Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011).

From Holland to Italy and Paris: Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and the Emergence of the Situationist International

At first glance, Johan Huizinga seems like an unlikely theoretical source for an artist group with avant-garde pretensions. For while the logic of such pretensions has been described as “an arms race of increased bidding”⁷ which “contests the present as outmoded,”⁸ Huizinga had delved deep into the past. A Dutch cultural historian, Huizinga (1872–1945) had enjoyed a glittering academic career with a string of seminal works on topics ranging from Hindu theatre to medieval (European) culture. Published in 1938, *Homo Ludens: proeve ener bepalende van het spel-element der cultuur* (*Homo Ludens: A Study in the Play-element in Culture*) is his last major work. And in it he did not hold back: he outlined the social function of games during multiple millennia and across the globe. The very first line of the book gives a sense of its scope: “play is older than culture.”⁹

Huizinga did not stop there. Changes of and within civilizations, he argued, materialized through playing. This was so because games, as forms for playing, not only preceded all other social forms. Artistic, martial, political, judicial forms also initially emerged as games. Civilization, he insisted, “does not come from play [. . .] it [rather] arises in and as play.”¹⁰

Beyond good and evil, wisdom and folly, playing, Huizinga suggested, is a free activity, which establishes its own temporality and demarcates its own space. It sets itself off from normal quotidian life; it suspends that life. To show how playing follows its own logic, Huizinga not only drew on examples of playing in everything from board games to carnivals; he also mobilized the etymological roots of the words: *das Spiel* puts a spell on the player, absorbing the players in the illusion of *il-ludere*.¹¹ In that separate logic resides its power.

But if playing, rather than work or war, had historically tended to usher in civilizational changes, that was—due to modern developments—less and less the case. Positioning his ideal-type *homo ludens* against two others, *homo sapiens* and *homo faber*, Huizinga noted that the play impulse had lost ground to other worldviews, as crude materialist philosophies or the reductive behavioralism behind the then “new managerialism.”¹² His book showed what was disappearing with the emergence of a society guided by technocratic, productivist imperatives.¹³

Such claims proved attractive in post-war Paris. Shortly after *Homo Ludens* appeared in French translation, a small group of young marginal artists, who called themselves the Lettrist International, started articulating their project with its help.¹⁴ Led by Guy Debord and his wife Michèle Bernstein, they claimed that what their time period needed was not a higher standard of living, not more bread, but new games.¹⁵ And they claimed they could provide them. In fact, they lived them. They subsumed their art practices under the conceptual umbrella of their playful lifestyle.¹⁶

In their reading, Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* vouched for their importance. The Dutchman's argument seemed to give their bohemian way of life a civilizational importance. Debord, Bernstein, and their group announced: “consciously and collectively, we are working towards establishing a new civilization.”¹⁷ Huizinga's theories allowed

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Niilo Kauppi, *Radicalism in French Culture: A Sociology of French Theory in the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 2010), 8.

8

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcom DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 91.

9

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1968), 1.

10

Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 173.

11

Huizinga, 38, 11.

12

Thor Rydin, “In the Image of Loss: A New Perspective on the Works of Johan Huizinga (1872–1945),” (PhD diss., Uppsala university, 2022), 217, n. 642.

13

With his book he also rejected other claims advanced at his time of writing (in the late 1930s), such as by a Soviet economism, which banked on material factors, or Carl Schmitt, the so-called Nazi “crown jurist,” whose friend-enemy principle underlined existential struggles between ethnic groups (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 191–92, 209–11).

14

They did so at multiple occasions. See Guy-Ernest Debord, “L'Architecture et le jeu,” *Potlatch: Bulletin mensuelle d'information du groupe français de l'Internationale Lettriste* 20 (30 mai 1955).

15

Michèle Bernstein, André-Frank Conord, Mohamed Dahou, Guy Debord, Jacques Fillon, Gil J. Wolman, “Le Minimum de la Vie,” *Potlatch* 4 (13 juillet 1954).

16

“Soft Drugs,” *Potlatch* 6 (3 août 1954).

17

Potlatch 1 (22 juin 1954).

them to cast their project as a laboratory that linked the micro to the macro level; Huizinga enabled them to connect a fringe group on the Parisian art scene to the roots and on-going formation of (Western) civilization.

Around this time Debord and his friends established contact with Asger Jorn. While they were young and still marginal in Paris, Jorn had already earned some fame and recognition as a painter in groups such as Høst and Linien in Scandinavia and in Cobra, Nuclear art, and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus on the continent. He was an actor in transnational artist networks, living between Scandinavia, Paris, and Italy.¹⁸ He was also a published thinker, participating in a public debate in Denmark and Sweden, where he had established a position as an idiosyncratic critic of functionalist aesthetics and of the instrumental rationality guiding public policy.¹⁹

Like Debord's group, Jorn rejected the standardization of life to which the increased standard of living had led. But while he had a large transnational network and a keen sense of which aesthetic and political developments were threatening the free imagination in post-war Western Europe, he did not have a clearly defined vision of how art practice could form groups and thereby engender social changes. Thanks to Huizinga, Debord and his group did.²⁰

So in the summer of 1957, Jorn organized a meeting in Italy, to which he invited his artist friends from across Europe—and among them was Debord. Jorn had asked Debord to outline his vision of ludic art and its potential. Debord responded with an argument for their need to construct situations.²¹ This piqued the other participants' interest. The two camps, the French and the continental, also needed each other: while belonging to a trans-national network would bolster Debord and his group's claim to importance on the Left Bank, Jorn and his friends were in want of editors in French and interlocutors in Paris, the crucial hub of European intellectual exchange and avant-garde consecration.²² Only there could an art group's claim to change Western civilization as a whole be seen as credible.²³ After a few months of negotiations between the various artist groups about the implications of Debord's keynote address, they united as the Situationist International.²⁴

In the first issue of its journal—published in French and in Paris—the SI did not try hiding Huizinga's influence.²⁵ Ahead of an article on the nascent international's titular project—the construction of situations—the journal ran one on playing. From its framing perspective of history, noting the idealization of production to the detriment of the play impulse, to its last sentences citing *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga's importance is on display. “What one has to see as *the* accomplishment of playing,” they wrote, echoing Huizinga's sense of how the game suspends the normal ordering of the world, “is the very establishment of an ambiance, and the constant increase in intensity and reach of that ambiance.”²⁶ They articulated their own project through his framework: “the work of the situationists is precisely the preparation of future ludic possibilities.”²⁷

Playing is also given a larger, political importance: “its aim must be at least to bring about conditions favorable for living directly. In this sense, it is a struggle and a performance: a struggle for a life made to the measure of desire, and a concrete performance of such a life.”²⁸

18

For studies of Jorn, see Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: En biografi* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1997); Guy Atkins, *Jorn in Scandinavia 1930–1953* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 1968); Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn 1954–64: The Crucial Years* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 1977); Graham Birtwhistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn's Comprehensive Theory of Art Between Helhesten and Cobra* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1986); Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The avant-garde won't give up* (London: Ashgate, 2014); Peter Shield, *Comparative Vandalism: Asger Jorn and the Artistic Attitude to Life* (London: Ashgate, 1998).

19

To my knowledge, Jorn's role as a public intellectual in Scandinavia remains to be fully studied. I explored some of it in my dissertation: Pehr Englén, “The Network as Artwork: Asger Jorn and the Situationist International” (PhD diss., Drew University, 2018). I will return to it more in detail in the concluding section.

20

Upon meeting Debord, Jorn did not know of Huizinga (see the second edition of Asger Jorn, *Held og hasard* [Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1963], 61).

21

Debord's contribution was later published as Guy-Ernest Debord, “Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale,” in *Textes et documents situationnistes 1957–1960*, ed. Gérard Berréby (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2004).

22

Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 24.

23

In postwar Europe, Paris was the only city, Tony Judt maintains, “whose obsessions and divisions could both reflect and define the cultural condition of the continent as a whole” (Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* [London: Penguin, 2005], 209.) Debord agreed: in his “Rapport sur la construction des situations,” he argued that Paris trends had a decisive influence in Europe and America (Debord, “Rapport,” 6).

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I have offered a more detailed account of the negotiations that went into forming the International elsewhere: Pehr Englén, “The Construction of an International: Debord, Jorn, and Situationist Praxis,” *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 6 (2019).

25

Nor does Jorn in hindsight, stating unambiguously that Huizinga was the main influence on the SI: Asger Jorn, “Livet er en drom: Gaston Bachelard og ildens billede,” *Demokraten*, August 20, 1972.

26

“Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 10.

In the secondary literature, such a performance of ludic immersion is usually set against the pacifying spectacle of commodity exchange.²⁹ That reading is hard to dispute if one's gaze is predominantly trained on Debord: from his 1957 "Rapport sur la construction des situations" via his SI texts, to his 1967 magnum opus *La Société du spectacle*, a guiding thread is his ever more uncompromising critique of contemporary reification. But if we refrain from positing *La Société du spectacle*—a work that mentions neither playing nor the constructed situation—as the telos of SI theories, and instead try to account for the diversity of opinion in the international's early years, different articulations of ludic art's possibilities come into view.

As I will aim to demonstrate below, placed centrally in such articulations, there are sacred and magical dimensions. In fact, they are at the heart of Huizinga's argument. They were also, however, deemed inopportune in Paris. The French SI branch found them unfit to advance their claim to avant-garde status.

Ludic Construction and Magic Ritual: Paris Positions and Sanctions

Soon after launching as an international, the French SI members positioned the constructed situation and the international network on the Paris art scene. In a then recently published article, Henri Lefebvre had evoked a revolutionary romantic tendency.³⁰ It was based on an *awareness* that, with post-war material progress, a different kind of life was possible. Debord dismissed its applicability to the SI. They would rather *practice* that possibility.³¹

But it was one thing to boastfully declare a coming situationist culture, another to properly situate its mode of emergence. In that same first issue, the SI acknowledged that a constructed situation would not be formed merely by "a unified use of artistic means which contribute to an ambience." Such construction would also have to include "the gestures found on the stage of a moment," gestures at once produced by that setting and by themselves.³² In other words, ludic actions, which could be defined as situationist, would somehow be generated by a dynamic integral to the constructed situation itself; it could not be pre-planned or fully scripted.

That uncertainty dogged the International. A year later, the members cast themselves as "in favour of a certain future of culture and life," but acknowledged that such future "situationist work is a vocation that we are yet to practice."³³ They therefore compared themselves to a research laboratory. To what would its experiments lead? The gist of their project, Debord had asserted already in his response to Lefebvre, "is about producing ourselves."³⁴

In maintaining that the momentary establishment of a unique ludic experience would make them situationists, they (unwittingly or not) drew on the point in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* where he links playing to ritual. "A play-community generally tends to become permanent after the game is over," Huizinga had written, because it involves "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms."³⁵ In doing so, playing, "has all

27

"Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu," 10.

28

"Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu," 10.

29

See sidenote 5.

30

Henri Lefebvre, "Vers un romantisme révolutionnaire," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 59 (October 1957).

31

Guy Debord, "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 20–21.

32

"Problèmes préliminaire à la construction d'une situation," *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 11.

33

"Le Détournement comme négation et comme prélude," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 10–11.

34

Debord, "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," 20. Agamben believes that precisely that ambition is what turns the SI into a political movement, Giorgio Agamben, *Le feu et le récit*, trans. Martin Rueff (Paris: Payot & Rivage, 2018), 185.

35

Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 12.

the formal and essential characteristics of [the ritual act] [. . .] [for] it [likewise] transports the participants to another world.”³⁶ Playing, in other words, has a lasting effect insofar as it leads to a new kind of subjectivity. It can do so, even though it is temporary, because it is a liminal practice; that is, it is a practice, which, like rituals of various spiritual kinds, straddles the divide between different orders, between different worlds. That aspect “retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.” And in doing so, Huizinga argued, it “promotes the formation of social groupings.”³⁷

When Huizinga talks of the magic of the game, it is not just a loose metaphor. In doing so, recent scholarship has shown, Huizinga stresses the *intimate* connection between playing and various kinds of religious and spiritual practices.³⁸ Huizinga’s distinction between playing and quotidian normality engaged with other such distinctions being proposed at the time, notably that between the sacred and the profane. In fact, one scholar argues, the former can be mapped onto the latter.³⁹ Huizinga indeed writes that “in the form and function of play [. . .] man’s consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression.”⁴⁰ Play makes the ritual possible; playing lies at the foundation of the worshippers’ sense, not only of repeating “a cosmic happening,” but to “participate in the sacred happening itself.”⁴¹

That the SI drew on such an argument can be seen as surprising. In its first incarnation, which lasted from 1957 to the early 1960s, the SI predominantly cast their game as a practice with a political meaning.⁴² It was framed as a response to a daily alienation and, in Paris, put in (critical) conversation with the thought of Lefebvre and Lucien Goldmann, as well as the theories presented in journals such as *Arguments* or by groups as *Socialisme ou barbarie*. It was a heterodox Marxist tradition—not a heretical spiritual one—that furnished the horizon of meaning.⁴³

And yet, if we look at the available play theories, we may point to a number of possible reasons for SI’s choosing Huizinga’s. The crucial contender would have been Roger Caillois. While his main work on playing, *Les jeux et les hommes*, was published after the SI had already launched, the 1950 edition of his *L’homme et le sacré* included a new chapter on ludicity and Huizinga. In it, Caillois defined play as diametrically opposed to ritual. But when doing so, he disputed the part of Huizinga’s focus that had made games attractive to the SI—thus enabling the situationists to assert their civilizational importance—namely the focus on playing’s form.⁴⁴

Another, not irrelevant, reason for Huizinga’s attraction is to be found in his background. As he was not French, and thus did not belong to any competing faction on the Paris art scene, he could be made “theirs.”⁴⁵ It was with the foreign Huizinga’s help that an early French-influenced SI articulated an aesthetic vision that demarcated them not only from the Lettrist milieu from which the Parisian situationists sprung, but also from a still dominant Sartrean committed literature and Bretonian Surrealism. If their name could be seen as a cheeky re-appropriation of a key concept of Sartre’s—while turning its meaning inside out: from being something to be unveiled to something to be constructed—it was Surrealism that cast the longest shadow. The

36
Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.

37
Huizinga, 12.

38
Stef Aupers, “Spiritual Play: Encountering the Sacred in *World of Warcraft*,” in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Michiel Lange et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 75.

39
Laurent di Filippo, “Contextualiser les théories du jeu de Johan Huizinga et Roger Caillois,” *Questions de communication* 25 (2014): 290–92. Filippo focuses on a mostly French interwar discussion, featuring Caillois and his *collège de sociologie* with Bataille and Leiris, as well those setting the terms of the discussion, such as, among others, Durkheim and Mauss, Henri Hubert and E. Beneveniste. Already the proto-situationists placed themselves, however ironically, in such a context by naming their journal *Potlatch*.

40
Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 17–18.

41
Huizinga, 15.

42
There were glimpses of exceptions, even among the Francophone members: Gilles Ivan, for example, wrote that “Nous nous ennuyons dans la ville, il n’y a plus de temple du soleil” (*Internationale situationniste* 1 [June 1958]: 15).

43
As noted above, in the scholarship situating the SI in a heterodox marxist conversation, the French branch is usually given a central role, see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (2001) or Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: La révolution au service de la poésie* (2001). An early exception to this rule is Richard Gombin’s *The Radical Tradition: A study in Revolutionary Thought*, trans. Rupert Swyer (London: Methuen Books, 1978).

44
Roger Caillois, *L’Homme et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 199–213.

45
Here we should note Bakhtin’s theories of the carnivalesque were not yet known in the West. For their arrival in Paris with Julia Kristeva, see Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

first article of the first SI journal addressed Surrealism. “Breton was,” according to one scholar, “the éminence grise of the post-war avant-garde in France.”⁴⁶

But Huizinga would not be “theirs” for very long, and his newfound wider popularity brought into focus the magical aspect of playing. In 1957 Breton had helped publish *L’art magique*. Around the same time, Huizinga’s work caught his attention.⁴⁷ The SI tried to make light of such developments, casting Bretonian Surrealism as one of the invariants of French public life, next to de Gaulle and the Catholic Church.⁴⁸ But there was no denying that they were concerned.⁴⁹ An indulgent attitude to magic and a renewed interest in the esoteric tradition had, by common Parisian art scene consent, made Surrealism lose its avant-garde crown.⁵⁰ Debord did not want to go down this route: there would be no talk of magic.⁵¹

That was easier said than done. Early SI was not a uniform movement with a “party line” dictated from the top. It was more like a discussion forum cohering through disagreements: its journal is in part made up of long renditions of their negotiating about divisive topics. And though some branches were more influential than others—in a way that mirrored how some national intellectual conversations were more influential than others when setting the cultural agenda in Western Europe at large—none could just impose their opinion. This was also the case with the question of magic. As I will demonstrate below, the SI contained members more receptive to esoteric discourses. And they could not just be censored. They could, however, be outmaneuvered. This, I will suggest, is how an SI-core emerged.

From Past Magic to Utopian Futures: A Core Opposes a Periphery

The ludic construction’s links to ancient sacred rituals were far from off-putting to certain crucial SI members, such as Asger Jorn. In fact, that was probably part of what attracted him to the ludic framing of artistic practice; he had recently evoked art’s links to magic. But, as we will see, such links divided the network he had attracted to the International. While resonating in its northern and southern peripheries, such associations found no favor in its continental heartland. And some of those skeptical of esotericism’s applicability would soon speak with one voice, solidifying the network’s geographical division.

To Jorn, what was crucial with aesthetics (or art production) was that it opened a window to the unknown. It did not do so through a contemplation of the cosmos. It did so through action. In *Pour la forme*, which was composed of essays written throughout the mid-1950s, but re-edited and published in French in 1958, Jorn argued that art was a kind of know-how or skill. It was linked to “techniques.”⁵² As such, it differed from modern-day technology, which, Jorn had learned from Jacques Ellul’s *La Technique: l’enjeu de siècle* (1954), was increasingly concerned with measuring.⁵³ It rather kept the links to an older understanding of *techné* alive. It was at once a kind of making and knowing, as is suggested in compound terms shared in German and the Scandinavian languages, such as *smede-kunst* (blacksmithing) or *koge-kunst* (cooking).⁵⁴ “In its original sense,” he concluded, “the word

46

Alastair Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path: Magic and Modernism in Psychogeographical Walking,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42, no. 3 (2017): 475.

47

Tessel Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 186.

48

“Suprême levée des défenseurs du surréalisme à Paris et révélation de leur valeur effective,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 33.

49

Bonnett notes that Breton’s “orientation to magic helps explain both the familiarity and the nervousness towards the topic among newer strands of the avant-garde” (Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path,” 475).

50

Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 159–61.

51

Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path,” 476; Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 80.

52

Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme: Ébauche d’une méthodologie des arts* (Paris: Editions Alia, 2001), 27.

53

For the way in which technology had changed the world according to Ellul, see Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1967), esp. 323–25. For a commentary on it, see David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1991), esp. 65–70.

54

Asger Jorn, *Held og hasard* (1952; Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1963), 88.

art (*Kunst*) means what we can do, our capacity (*können*) in any given domain” (italics and German in the original).⁵⁵ The fine arts only differed insofar as they had no specific domain; they worked at the limits of domains. Doing so evoked the ability to make “that which cannot be made, that one can do what is considered impossible.”⁵⁶ They redefined what was considered possible. They transcended the existing boundaries.⁵⁷

While he had not read Huizinga before meeting Debord, Jorn was already a keen reader of religious ethnology, particularly of Mircea Eliade,⁵⁸ and in his views of art’s links to *techné* that shines through. Jorn did not pit *homo ludens* against *homo faber*, as had Huizinga, and, implicitly, Debord; like in Eliade’s *Forgerons et alchimistes* (1956), he rather returned to the moment before *homo faber* morphed and technology’s links to *techné* were cut. As we saw above, Jorn evoked a time when art was still connected to artisanal practices.⁵⁹ This was a time when such practices were invested with spiritual meaning, indeed cosmological import. What had originally informed such belief in the extraordinary capacities of artisanal practices was, according to Eliade, the mastery of fire. With its use, natural processes could be accelerated; alchemy was a particularly telling example of a longer development.⁶⁰ For onto the practice of *homo faber* all sorts of magical beliefs with pre-historical roots were projected.⁶¹ Evoked through a different set of semantic associations, such beliefs remained present for Jorn. Like the shoemaker (*skomager*) or watchmaker (*urmager*), the artist, he pointed out, *makes* things. The artist is a “maker of thought, word and imagination.”⁶² But unlike the other kinds of makers, the artist has no prefix. This makes him a (-) *mager*, i.e., a magus. And this gives him *magt* (power).⁶³

Behind such grandiloquent claims lay an etymology that was consciously made up in part.⁶⁴ The semi-flippant discovery of magic is here what Hanegraaff would call a conceptual invention.⁶⁵ With its help, Jorn advocated for the contestatory potential of art. His doing so followed a mold. As some scholars have observed, when evoked by artists aspiring to an avant-garde status, magic comes with a transformative promise.⁶⁶ It is put to discursive work in the service of their claim to spark an aesthetic revolution. Such a perspective spoke to the branches at the International’s southern and northern margins, such as in Italy, where certain members themselves alluded to magic and the cosmological import of situationist practice,⁶⁷ and in Britain, where aesthetic radicalism and magic would soon intertwine.⁶⁸ But it was shunned in the geographically more central branches of the International. As we will see, this was not due to their embracing of an opposing—nationally anchored—definition of magic; it was rather due to the local valence of the ideas, images, and practices associated with Western esotericism, which circulated across (Western) Europe. Such ideas, images, and practices did not connote radical transformation everywhere.

In West Germany, they surely did not. In the article “Homage à C. G. Jung,” a German SI member describes a tram ride. But instead of having stops in their Munich home, it leads to places such as Aurora Consurgens, Ars Chemica, Rosarium Philisophorum, and Hermes Trismegistus. Indeed, the article—peppered with references to the

55
Jorn, *Pour la forme*, 27.

56
Jorn, 27.

57
Because of their connection to the unknown, Jorn would eventually compare artists to shamans (see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 171–72).

58
Many of Eliade’s works are to be found in the extant Jorn library at the Jorn museum in Silkeborg, Denmark. But, as if aware of the fact that Eliade was not an opportune source to cite in all contexts, Jorn, to my knowledge, never did so. Before drawing too many conclusions from this, we should remember that Jorn was not a scholar, and only had a loose relationship to the scholarly apparatus of referencing and citing.

59
Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018), 119.

60
Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, 145–49, 237–56.

61
Eliade, 235.

62
Jorn, *Held og hasard*, 158.

63
Jorn, 158.

64
It should be noted that the word *magt* (power) cannot be etymologically traced to *mager* (magus). But, as Shield points out, Jorn was “fond of puns, homonyms and homophones, which he felt were the result of resonances in the human unconsciousness” (Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 85).

65
Wouter Hanegraaff, “Magic” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 399.

66
Bonnert, “The Enchanted Path,” 473.

67
See Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, “Discours sur la peinture industrielle et sur un art unitaire applicable,” *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 31–35.

68
The Scottish situationist Alexander Trocchi would eventually go on to associate with the Chaos Magick scene and musicians such as Genesis P-Orridge. For Trocchi, see Kasper Opstrup, *The Way Out: Invisible Insurrections in the UK Underground, 1961–1991* (Brooklyn: Minor compositions, 2017). For its occult links, see Christopher

esoteric pantheon and its contemporary interlocutors, such as Eliade, Jung, and other Eranos-affiliated thinkers—spoofed holistic thinking. But beneath the humorous veneer, there was a serious kernel. The German branch was on the run. In Munich their art had been tried for sedition. Like in the spoof, theirs was “a city whose [. . .] titans [. . .] had decided on our destruction.”⁶⁹ The German SI members associated alchemy—and its tropes and motifs—with the local establishment rather than with opposition.⁷⁰ Esoteric discourses were of no use.

Nor, it seems, were they important to the Dutch. After having read *Pour la forme*, Constant, the most prominent Dutch member, frontally attacked Jorn’s aesthetic theory in the second issue of the SI journal. “Industrial and machinal culture is an indisputable fact, and artisanal practices and techniques, including painting [. . .] are doomed,” he proclaimed.⁷¹ Indeed, he goes on with reference to Jorn, “painting [is] linked to a mystical attitude.”⁷² As such it had to be discarded. The SI, he believed, should draw inspiration from future technological possibilities, not past beliefs.

The evidence suggests that the French members shared that opinion. As editors of the journal issue, they did not let Jorn respond to Constant himself. They had a conversation with Jorn, and based on it, a response was formulated.⁷³ From their perspective, this issue clearly had to be handled with care. As if it was not enough to keep at bay Breton’s approach of Huizinga, Jorn’s Eliade-inspired take on the ancient, magical belief in *homo faber*’s ability to remake the world had caught the attention of Estivals, a crucial avant-garde theorist in Paris.⁷⁴ Upon finishing Jorn’s *Pour la forme*, he announced that SI was nearing a rupture.⁷⁵ The new International would not withstand such internal diversity.

To stem the centrifugal tendencies, the French SI members threw in their lot with the Dutch. They substituted the titular project, the construction of a situation, for what had become the Dutch project of a unitary urbanism.⁷⁶ Previously, unitary urbanism had been merely one of all concepts, denoting practices, under the umbrella of the situation, the macro-concept.⁷⁷ That relationship now changed. In Debord and Constant’s jointly signed “Amsterdam declaration,” the situation was subsumed under unitary urbanism.⁷⁸ If the former would establish a temporary ludic ambiance, the latter envisioned something larger and more enduring. Constant and his Dutch colleagues even worked on the blueprints of a new city. Eventually named New Babylon, this city, standing on pillars above an existing urban fabric, would be an experiential jukebox, through labyrinths and other means, where different sectors catered to and amplified different kinds of affects.⁷⁹

The Dutch plans seemed to be spared links to any compromising, pre-historical past. Couched in the future tense, they severed the connection of ends and means in the constructed situation: “Play,” one scholar has noted, “was the whole point of [Constant’s project] but not its mode of production.”⁸⁰ Playing would only take place upon the plans’ completion. The situationist artwork would no longer (magically) produce the situationist artists.

Shortly after, Amsterdam shared Paris’ position as the network’s hub. This was in part due to external factors. In the late 1950s, as the war in Algeria spilled over into metropolitan France, Paris became

Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (London: Routledge, 2014). For the more general case of the British situationists, see Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path.”

69

Dieter Kunzelmann, “Homage à C. G. Jung,” *SPUR* 6 (November 1961): 16.

70

There are clear historical reasons for this. This was an establishment whose complicity with the Nazi regime was a poorly kept secret, least of all from the German SI members, who in various cheeky, if coarse, interventions wanted to bring it out. With this article they are trying something more subtle: in associating esotericism to the post-Nazi city, they reproduce a figure of Frankfurt School thought—of which they were devoted students (McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, 110)—according to which myth, and its scholarly proponents, were linked to fascism: Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 313.

71

Constant, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 24.

72

Constant, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” 25.

73

Unsigned author, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 23.

74

An association with Eliade was possibly worse than one with Breton. A Paris resident until recently, Eliade’s fiercely anti-communist stance was hardly a secret, even if his fascist past was less well known. A voracious and eclectic reader, Jorn seemed oblivious, or possibly indifferent, to this; his concern was not positionings in the Paris art world.

75

Guy Debord to Asger Jorn, July 6, 1960 in Guy Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957–August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale [Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009], 367).

76

This concept originated with the Parisians. Constant first heard of it in the first tentative meeting between Jorn’s artistic network, to which Constant as a former Cobra member belonged, and Debord’s lettrist splinter group in summer 1956. Informing his thoughts on art, Constant would become its main proponent, even setting up a separate office for unitary urbanism in Amsterdam. For Constant’s adoption of the concept, see Mark Wigley, *Constant’s New Babylon: The hyper-architecture of desire* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 14–16.

an inhospitable site to many subversive activities, so too to certain SI practices.⁸¹ At the same time, Amsterdam's Stedelijk museum invited SI to mount an exhibition, their first as a group.⁸² Bolstered by French backing, the Dutch led the exhibition planning. Meant to take place in spring 1960 and to feature all the national branches, the exhibition, by including various kinds of media and engaging multiple senses, was to spill out onto the streets, blurring the distinction between in- and outdoor spaces. Its aim was, according to the Dutch, to create "a means of studying and playing with the urban environment [. . .] which would be on the path leading to unitary urbanism."⁸³

Did that finally wash away the traces of ludic construction's connection to sacred rituals? As we will see in the next section, this was not quite the case, neither in this performance nor in the future of the situationists. It would rather inspire the start of an alternative, more esoterically inclined, situationist grouping.

The Labyrinth Goes North: The International Splits and the Esoteric Archive Re-Emerges

Even when led from Amsterdam, the SI had not put the esoteric associations to rest. As its name reveals, "Die Welt als Labyrinth," the exhibition aimed, like Constant's New Babylon, to make the world a labyrinth.⁸⁴ But unlike the Dutchman's plan, that labyrinth was not to be set in the future; it would take place in the present. And that it would do so was seen as momentous: in spite of the Dutch framing, among the other members the exhibition was considered an attempt at constructing a situation.⁸⁵ The members were, in other words, hoping that their labyrinth would engender a situationist subjectivity, a situationist vocation. To invest such hopes in a labyrinth alludes to its ancient function as a site of initiation.⁸⁶ As such—Eliade and other dismissed writers would probably have argued—the labyrinth is hard to detach from spiritual rituals. That was how it had been used a decade prior by Bretonian Surrealism⁸⁷ and how the situationists' exhibition has been interpreted recently.⁸⁸ It is a possibility that even seems to have been shared by Jorn.⁸⁹

Such meanings would soon be actively pursued. Constructing the Amsterdam situation failed. By their own definition, the SI members never fully became situationists. Jorn called the event an "anti-situation."⁹⁰ And as that failure, and its aftermath, became acrimonious rather than ludic, it eventually broke the international apart. Many geographically peripheral members ended up in a new Situationist grouping, which published a rival journal in which the Northern Europeans—the Brits, the Scandinavians, a new set of Dutch artists—were prominent and in which a few Italians and eventually even some Germans took part. Without the need to position themselves in Paris, a whole range of heretical spiritual questions opened up.⁹¹

While the Paris-centered situationists abandoned Huizinga and the labyrinth at this point,⁹² the peripheral situationists continued their interest in these themes. Edited by the new Dutch SI member, Jacqueline de Jong, and published mostly in English—with some texts in French, German, Dutch, and Italian—their journal, *The Situationist Times* (ST), devoted a thematic issue to the labyrinth, featuring articles

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That the "situation" sat at the apex of SI praxes is illustrated in a 1958 leaflet, "Nouveau Théâtre d'opérations dans la culture," produced by the French SI section (reprinted in *Textes et documents situationnistes 1957–1960*, ed. Gérard Berréby [Paris: Éditions Allia, 2004], 47).

78

Constant and Guy Debord, "La Déclaration d'Amsterdam," *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 31. For their relation, Debord-Constant, see Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 121.

79

For a description of Constant's long work with New Babylon, see Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*.

80

Mark Wigley, "Paper, Scissors, Blur," in *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, ed. Mark Wigley and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 37.

81

Due to racially selective curfews, the Algerian SI member was prohibited from engaging in SI practices (Khatib, *Internationale situationniste* 2 [December 1958]: 18). The police also questioned Debord (Debord, *Correspondence*, 145).

82

Its curator, Willem Sandberg had already exhibited many of the SI artists; Jorn, Constant, and Pinot Gallizio had all mounted shows there.

83

"L'Urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 14.

84

"Die Welt als Labyrinth," *Internationale situationniste* 4 (June 1960): 5–7; Paula Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths: Strategies of Disruption," *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 7 (2018): 2.

85

Ager Jorn to Guy Debord, undated letter, Summer 1960 (Archive of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark); Guy Debord to Constant, 7 September, 1959 (Debord, *Correspondence*, 279).

86

For this use of the labyrinth, see Joël Thomas, "Labyrinthe: Rome antique," in *Dictionnaire de l'esotérisme*, ed. Jean Servier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013). Debord and his Parisian friends had treated the existing city as a labyrinth in their various psychogeographical experiments, but as Bonnett notes, the description of them was flatly descriptive, shying away from any esoteric flights of fancy (Bonnett, "The Enchanted Path," 476).

87

In its attempt at a postwar launch, Bretonian Surrealism had notably curated a labyrinth as exhibition (Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 168.)

by a wide array of interdisciplinary scholars, that explicitly explored the labyrinth's spiritual, mythical angle. In one such instance, a scholar celebrated the ritual practices within labyrinthine spaces, seeing them as part of how "a waking of myth has announced itself in our present day," a search "for a new model of life."⁹³ Similar tunes were sung by the Northern situationists themselves.⁹⁴ In the "Labyrinth Project," the Anglo-Scandinavian artist Gordon Fazakerley acknowledged the Stedelijk museum fiasco, but upheld the relevance of labyrinths. We have, he argued, an existential need for cults. Religions and States have exploited that necessity. His proposal was to fulfill it by bringing labyrinths to the people. As "an anti-bible,"⁹⁵ they would be the basis of a new type of cult.

The peripheral situationists did not stop at the labyrinth. Their journal had thematic issues on interlaces and rings as well. To Jorn, who greatly influenced these issues, such symbols hid a secretly transmitted knowledge of space.⁹⁶ The new situationist grouping wanted to prove their ubiquity across history and culture.⁹⁷ In fact they did not even shy away from reaching beyond history. Interests in a mythic past and in ritual asserted their place next to the old ambitions to establish a different future. These issues showed an interest in trolls (ST 3), tarot cards (ST 4), and cosmogony, alchemy, and demons (ST 5). They ran pieces with references to Eliphas Levi's occultism (ST 5) and to people like Karl Kerényi and Erich M. Neumann, who were associated with the Eranos foundation (ST 4 & 5).

The entire esoteric archive was up for grabs: "We are stealing and borrowing as we feel like," a group of Scandinavians proclaimed. "We are using the heritage." Be it European or African, "we allow ourselves to play with it."⁹⁸

That wish to play around with esoteric lines of thinking is also visible in the journal's layout. The issues feature collages where what has been called an "eccentric archive of divergent images" is on display.⁹⁹ While drawn from different time periods, places, and sources, the images all speak to the journal theme, showing, e.g., interlaces, and interlace-like forms, from the ancient to the modern worlds. In setting such varied images in a historical continuity, the journal lets us follow how these forms have morphed (Fig. 1); these situationists were interested in what Jorn termed "transformative morphologies."¹⁰⁰ The collages can also be seen to associate ancient artefacts with modern-day products or phenomena, even to establish hidden correspondences between them (Fig. 2, 3, 4). In doing so, the collages reference the famous definition of magic, proposed by Tylor and Frazer, as an analogical way of thinking, which confuses similarity with identity.¹⁰¹ But they do so in a facetious way. The display of phenomena's different manifestations through time and across cultures expresses a familiar avant-garde irreverence (Fig. 5 and 6). One such manifestation does not seamlessly lead to another. In their wild linkages, their collage operations rather accentuate the sutures.¹⁰² This is a ludic re-appropriation of "magic."

But is it situationist? These montages grafted esoteric lines of thinking onto prior situationist practices. De Jong, the ST editor, thought of them somewhat surprisingly as *dérives*, the kind of aimless drift through various ambiances that often resembles a stroll in an urban space.¹⁰³ They can equally be said to resemble *détournements*, the

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"As an anti-monumental architecture, often predicated upon darkness and confusions [. . .] the[ir] labyrinth was the ideal stage on which a kinetic, ritualistic play of the body ensued." Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths," 5. It was cast, Burleigh goes on, "as a space of temporal collisions [. . .] gesturing simultaneously back to a mythic past and forward to a utopian future" (Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths," 1).

89

To Jorn the labyrinth needed to be studied topologically (Asger Jorn to Guy Debord, undated letter, Summer 1960 [Archive of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark]). And in an unpublished speech from the subsequent SI meeting, Jorn called topology "the magic of the artist" ("Die Topologie als Magie des Künstlers"). See *SPUR* 2 (November 1960): 20.

90

Asger Jorn to Guy Debord, undated letter, Summer 1960 (Archive of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark).

91

In their manifesto, the Northern Situationists explicitly rejected the need to take positions (Jørgen Nash, Jens Jørgen Thorsen, Gordon Fazakerley, Hardy Strid, Staffan Larsson, Ansgar Elde, Jacqueline de Jong, Patrick O'Brien, "The Struggle for the Situcratic Society: A Situationist Manifesto," in *Cosmonauts of the future: Texts from the Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Copenhagen: Nebula, 2015), 92–95.

92

The colonial question demanded attention in France. Mobilizing a vocabulary from the anti-imperialist struggle, Debord now wrote that quotidian life was colonized (Guy Debord, "Perspectives de modifications conscientes dans la vie quotidienne," *Internationale situationniste* 6 [August 1961]: 20–27). There was no space for ludic construction. The stage was set for the argument in *La Société de spectacle*.

93

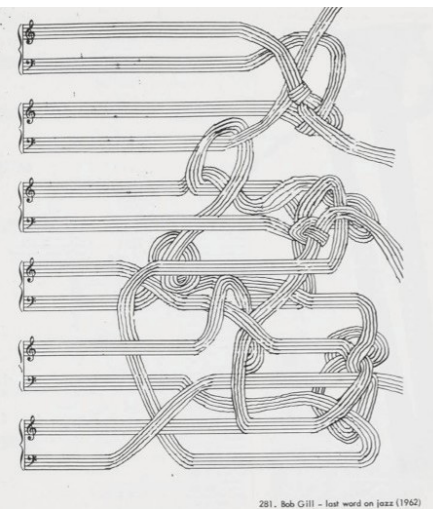
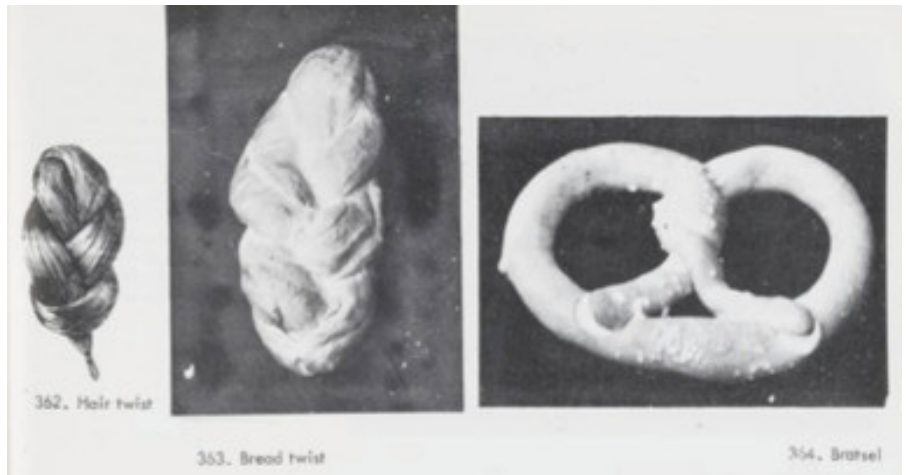
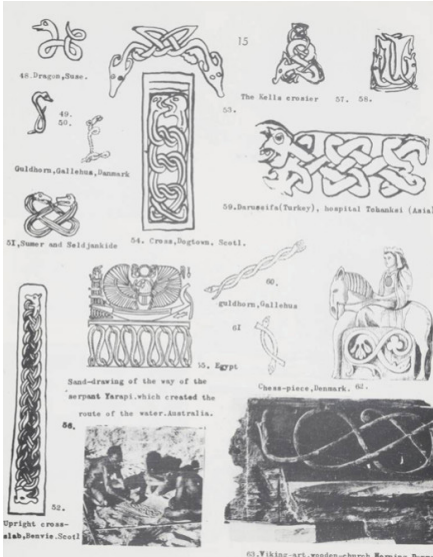
Hans Jaffé quoted by Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths," 5. Unsurprisingly, this was ridiculed by the French branch ("Les Mois les plus longs [février 63–juillet 64]," *Internationale situationniste* 9 [August 1964]: 34).

94

The journal did not, however, advance "a position." It ran articles with contradictory perspectives, and juxtaposed images from different contexts. *The Situationist Times* has thus been interpreted as heteroglossic (Karen Kurczynski, "Red Herring: Eccentric Morphologies in the Situationist Times," in *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen [Copenhagen: Nebula, 2011], 136).

95

Gordon Fazakerley, "Labyrinth Project," in *Cosmonauts of the future*, 213.



practice that takes an object out of a context and then reinserts it in a new setting to shed new meaning on it. Note, however, that here such practice uses different source materials and addresses a different horizon of meaning than in its more canonized Parisian versions. In the hand of the Parisian post-international SI, *détournement* prefigures a kind of ad-busting, where captions semantically reconfigure what is shown (Fig. 7 and 8). As such, it has been seen as allowing the situationists to “construct a language of negation out of fragments of the dominant discourse, out of the very depths of reification.”¹⁰⁴ As I will show in the concluding section, that aim—if with a different timeframe and another understanding of what and who dominated discourse—could be used to describe the project from which many of these images are drawn: Asger Jorn’s new venture of situationist esotericism.¹⁰⁵



Fig. 7. From *Internationale situationniste* 8 (Jan. 1963), 27.



Fig. 8. From *Internationale situationniste* 6 (Aug. 1961), 10.

Heresy Is Ordinary: The Circulation of Popular Sacrality

Although he officially left the SI in 1961, Asger Jorn remained connected to both situationist groupings. He helped fund their projects and contributed with pseudonymously written articles.¹⁰⁶ But Jorn also had a new project, articulated with a different set of concepts. After leaving the Paris-based Situationists, he no longer called the playful collages *détournements*, but incorporated them in his new interest in vandalism.¹⁰⁷ By that he did not mean that he vandalized these images in the common sense of that term. He rather claimed to trace the imprint of the historical Vandals—and others on the losing side in historiography—on European history. He wanted to turn the conceptual tables on what constituted “culture” by focusing on what had been deemed heretical aesthetic expressions. With some other northern Situationists (like de Jong), he traveled across Europe to document their remnants. Next to labyrinths, knots, and rings, his trips captured various kinds of pagan symbols, monsters, and ancient graffiti.¹⁰⁸ To Jorn, they expressed an unfairly overlooked worldview.¹⁰⁹

96

Asger Jorn, “La Création ouverte et ses ennemis,” *Internationale situationniste* 5 (December 1960): 41. For Jorn’s influence on these three issues of *The Situationist Times*, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 62n12; Kurczynski, “Red Herrings,” 133.

97

Burleigh, “Ludic Labyrinths,” 2. For their interest in topology, see Kurczynski, “Red Herrings.”

98

Jens Jørgen Thorsen, Jørgen Nash and Hardy Strid, “Co-Ritus Manifesto,” in *Cosmonauts of the future*, 126.

99

Kurczynski, “Red Herrings,” 139.

100

Kurczynski, 144.

101

Jorn, who had read these early anthropological texts, was very interested in various kinds of analogical and homological thinking, from Swedenborg to Tylor/Frazer (Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 52). In fact, in one of his works published around this time, *Naturens orden*—whose title was a reference to the theologian Johannes Scotus Erigena’s work—Jorn, inspired by Swedenborg, aimed to establish correspondences between various distinct domains (Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 52).

102

It thus makes what Wu Ming calls, a good use of esotericism. Wu Ming, “On Making ‘Good Use’ of Esotericism: Notes 2022,” *Religiographies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 116.

103

Burleigh, “Ludic Labyrinths,” 3.

104

McDonough, *The Beautiful Language of my Century*, 8.

105

Kurczynski, “Red Herrings,” 133.

106

He signed as Georg Kellner in *Internationale situationniste* and Patrick O’Brien in *The Situationist Times*.

107

Peter Shield, “Om at laese Jorn,” *Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter*, ed. Per Hofman Hansen (Silkeborg, DK: Silkeborgs Kunstmuseum, 1988), 18.

108

Burleigh, “Ludic Labyrinths,” 3.

109

For the way in which symbols and graffiti express a worldview, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 131. For the worldview being unfairly overlooked,

Jorn's new project aimed to raise what we with Cristopher Partridge might call "occultural awareness." It was "concerned with" what Partridge defines as "the conditions within which particular 'lifeworlds' are formed and within which plausibility structures are shaped."¹¹⁰ If the SI had cast itself as the laboratory for the emergence of new such structures—insofar as the ludic situation promised to be the performance of a future beyond instrumentalism, a world ruled by transfigured parameters, a transvalued lifeworld—Jorn now adopted the pose of an occultural archaeologist. Partly inspired by a book series aiming to resuscitate the history of sacred art for the twentieth century, he founded a new institutional structure—Skandinavisk institut for sammenlignende vandalisme (Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism)—with which he aimed to explore the residues of an overlooked but trans-national folk culture.¹¹¹

Jorn believed it urgent to embark on his new project now. As he explained in the five works that gave a theoretical background to the new institution—*Naturens orden* (the order of nature), *Ting og polis* (thing and polis), *Vaerdi og økonomi* (value and economy), *Held og hasard* (fortune and risk), *Alpha og omega* (alpha and omega)—the traces of such lifeworlds were vanishing. The ancient, original life rhythms, to which the objects and artistic expressions in his photos bore witness, were folding under the weight of imposed superstructures.¹¹² The most acute recent threat was the establishment of what would become the European Union.¹¹³ But it was merely one in a long line of institutional impositions.

His perspective was not entirely new. Ever since the end of the war, Jorn had warned about a creeping instrumental rationality's domination of life. While the employed concepts changed, his core idea remained: just as there had been a tension between an aristocratic and a popular culture, an Apollonian and a Dionysian tradition, so there remained one, Jorn believed, between abstract concepts and living rhythms, architecture and festivals, symmetry and dissymmetries.¹¹⁴ Where folk culture constituted a bank of lived memories and habits, "civilization" was merely its elite refusal. The Vandals interested him as rejects in the dominant narrative on Western civilization.¹¹⁵

The Vandals allowed Jorn to imagine an alternative geography of cultural circulation. With them, he sidestepped the hierarchical geography underpinning Debord's original understanding of *Homo Ludens's* potential; he circumvented the belief that an avant-garde project in Paris could, due to the city's continental influence, remake Western civilization as a whole. In his studies, he jettisoned chronology and hierarchies for transversal comparisons. Based on ornaments and symbols rather than architecture and philosophy, he connected the obscure meaning of northern imagery to that of the Middle Eastern arabesque.¹¹⁶ He assumed that, unlike the core cultures once constitutive of the Latin West, in the North as in the Southeast the image preceded the word.¹¹⁷ In the most organically northern institutional superstructure—the *Ting* (thing)—truth and meaning were not written in stone, as per the West's classical tradition; they were written in the sand and had to be sought, like Gnosis.¹¹⁸

Jorn now had a perspective with which to employ the rejected aspect of Huizinga's argument. With his set of oppositions, Jorn situat-

see Asger Jorn, *Ting og polis* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1964), 29–30. For an appreciation of what this meant to conceptions of the North, see Raphaëlle Jamet, "Asger Jorn et l'Institut Scandinave de Vandalisme Comparé: La création d'un boréalisme endogène," *Études germaniques* 2, no. 290 (2018).

110

Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," 118–19.

111

Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 11–12. The source of inspiration for sacred art was the Zodiaque publications in France.

112

Asger Jorn, *Naturens orden* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1962), 131–32.

113

Asger Jorn, *Ting og polis* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1964), 12. To warn Scandinavian readers about its detrimental aspects, he changed from French to Danish.

114

See for example Asger Jorn, "Formspråkets livsnehåll," *Byggmästaren: Tidskrift för arkitektur och byggnadsteknik* 25, no. 18 (1946); "Apollon eller Dionysos," *Byggmästaren* 26, no. 17 (1947); "Poesins väg: Fragment ur en artikel av målaren Asger Jorn," *Byggmästaren* 30, no. 4 (1951).

115

Jorn, *Ting og polis*, 8.

116

Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 5.

117

For how this idea drove his new institution, see Dorthe Aagesen & Helle Brøns, "Foreword," in *Asger Jorn Restless Rebel*, ed. Dorthe Aagesen and Helle Brøns (Copenhagen: Prestel, 2014), 29.

118

Jorn, *Ting og polis*, 96. For an elaboration of how Jorn connected Scandinavian modes of thinking to Indian modes and to gnoseology, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 23, and Graham Birtwistle, *Living Art*.

ed the sacred and its aesthetic expressions. They were not confined to any organization or its taxonomies. “Sacred art is always bad art,” he claimed. “Good art,” on the other hand, “is always sacred.”¹¹⁹ The sacred is the crack in the wall of monumental architecture and its underlying hierarchical systematizations. It is “*begejstring*.” As the etymology of its Greek synonym—enthusiasm—suggests, it denotes a transcendental transport. And while the latter may no longer be a “divine transport,” it remains, Jorn insisted, “the transport of the spiritual forces.”¹²⁰

When embracing a heretical sacrality, Jorn could not be accused of approaching Bretonian Surrealism. For while endorsing living myths against ossified instrumental rationalities, sacred art against transparent lines of reasoning, he looked at a “low,” rather than a “high” esotericism.” His sacrality was heretical because popular.

In fact, Jorn in part turned away from Paris to a new set of references. Beyond the likes of Huizinga and Eliade, Jorn now drew on a motley crew of Scandinavian thinkers. Among those cast as precursors allegedly sharing his sensibilities, we find Emanuel Swedenborg and Carl Linneaus, Gustav Fröding and Ivan Aguéli, Søren Kierkegaard and Nikolai Grundtvig. He surely got his stress on popularity from Grundtvig,¹²¹ the communally focused theologian for whom faith’s common prevalence outweighed its conformity to dogma, and the vitality of speech acts overrode the accuracy of textual interpretation.¹²² This was in the reading of Jorn also a theologian who, as shown in his interest in myth, paid less attention to the institutional ruptures and geographical fault lines than formal continuities and trans-cultural similarities in spiritual history. This brought pre-Christian Scandinavian religiosity into conversation with that of Greek antiquity and beyond. His emphases are visible in Jorn’s suggestions.

Jorn briefly even entertained the possibility of giving popular expressions a firmer footing. “‘The art and ability to build a sacred temple’ for people’s creative playing is,” he asserted, “a reasonable programme.” Inspired by Grundtvig’s establishment of popular colleges for general education a century prior, “this temple must be reserved for the public, must become a popular college, must become popular cultural centres.”¹²³ With a basis in an all but lost lifeworld, he again envisioned a laboratory experimenting with ways of making and knowing and thus of living. But this time that would remain merely an idea.

119

Jorn, *Ting og polis*, 179.

120

Jorn, *Naturens orden*, 139.

121

For while there are scattered references to the other thinkers throughout the five works published as part of his comparative institute, *Ting og polis* alone includes an almost 40-page excerpt from Grundtvig’s work on myth: 41–77.

122

Urban Claesson, “Grundtvig, bonderörelse och folkkyrka: En historisk jämförelse mellan Danmark och Sverige,” in *Grundtvig: Nyckeln till det danska?*, ed. Hannes Sanders and Ole Vind (Göteborg: Makadam, 2003), 63–67, 74; Rickard Schönström, “Grundtvig och Geijer: Något om dansk och svensk identitet,” in *Theorier om verklig diktning: Festskrift till Per Erik Ljung*, ed. Birger Hedén et al. (Lund: Absalon, 2008), 27–29.

123

Asger Jorn, *Alpha og omega* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1980), 124.

“A Medianic Fact”: Occultural Radio Practices in Italy and Sweden

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Abstract

This article adopts a sonic-centered approach to the analysis of Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP): the occultural practice of communicating with otherworldly agencies via the use of audio technologies. The aim of this article is twofold. First, it introduces new research on an under-investigated aspect of paranormal studies: the rich and complex tradition of EVP practices that arose in Italy in the early 1970s. To do so, it traces the transfers between the Swedish origins of the practice and some relevant Italian cases, focusing on the sonic, experiential, and embodied dimension of such apocryphal modes of mediation. Second, it highlights an occultural resonance between the EVP practices within paranormal circles and their remediations in artistic contexts such as experimental music and sound art. This perspective will unveil a further transfer between Sweden and Italy. Common artistic approaches will emerge from the analysis of the practices of sound artists from both countries, whose work often displays deep intertwining between creative processes, occultural discourse, and performative engagement with the haunted histories of places.



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Introduction

This article adopts a sonic-centered approach to the analysis of Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), occultural practices of communication with otherworldly agencies via the use of audio technologies. The study focuses on the embodied, affective, and performative dynamics of such practices, tracing mediation processes and sonic interactions. In this sense, the aim of the article is twofold. On one hand, it studies the transfer of discourses and methodologies between the Swedish origins of EVP practices and the under-researched Italian scene of practitioners, arising in the early 1970s. On the other hand, it highlights another, interrelated occultural transfer: the remediation of EVP practices within experimental music fields, where sound artists utilize EVP techniques and technologies as creative means of sound production, abstracted from their original metaphysical or spiritual meaning. In this context as well a relevant connection between Sweden and Italy will be outlined, ultimately unveiling unexpected material-discursive feedback between art and occulture.

A Brief History of Electronic Voice Phenomena

The expression “Electronic Voice Phenomena” is usually associated with a varied set of methods, techniques, and technologies aimed at receiving vocal transmissions that are interpreted as having paranormal origins. Among the most used devices are commercial radio receivers, crystal sets,¹ signal generators, and audio recorders. The fidelity of the technology is usually deliberately very low to maximize the occurrences of noises, distortions, and interferences that—while creating the ideal conditions for the emergence of ambiguous and mysterious sonic events—are considered the necessary source of energy used by the disembodied entities to modulate their messages in the physical domain. The methods of EVP communication are disparate and multifaceted, but two recurring trends can be shown. In the first, the process involves the audio recording of a sound feed. Portions of the recording are then successively listened to in search of vocal fragments interpreted as messages from the beyond. In the second, the process happens in real time, with the performance of a two-way communication happening between the experimenter and the audio feed from a radio receiver.

The idea of radio communication with spirits of the deceased can be traced back to the origins of wireless research, and should be considered within the discursive connections between the paranormal and resonance-based processes, introduced by early pioneers of radio science and psychical research such as Oliver Lodge,² William Crookes,³ or Harry Price.⁴ However, the conceptualization of an actual practice to communicate via radio with spectral voices can be traced back to the late 1940s, with the American experiments of Attila Von Szalay and Raymond Bayless.⁵ It is, however, with the experiments conducted by Friedrich Jürgenson from 1959 on, and the successive formalizations operated by Latvian psychologist Konstantin Raudive in the 1960s, that the practice was brought to the mainstream, leading to global dissemination. From the 1970s on, numerous practitioners could be found in the United Kingdom—such as Peter Bander⁶—and in the

1

An early form of passive radio receiver now popular among DIY enthusiasts and makers, characterized by a poor tuning selectivity and a general low-fidelity reception.

2

Oliver Lodge, *The Survival of Man: A Study in Unrecognised Human Faculty* (London: Methuen & Company, 1909).

3

William Crookes, “On Radiant Matter,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 108, no. 5 (1879): 305–16.

4

Harry H. Price, “Presidential Address: Haunting and the ‘Psychic Ether’ Hypothesis; With some Preliminary Reflections on the Present Condition and Possible Future of Psychical Research,” *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 45, no. 160 (1938): 308–46.

5

For a detailed history of EVP see Steven T. Parsons and Cooper E. Callum, *Paracoustics: Sound & the Paranormal* (Guildford: White Crow Books, 2015).

6

Peter Bander, *Carry on Talking: How Dead Are the Voices?* (London: Smythe, 1972).

United States as well, with the research of Sarah Wilson Estep and the American Association of EVP. Later, from the 1980s on, George Meek and William O’Neill impacted the discourse with the invention of the Spiricom, a signal generator allegedly capable of mediating real-time conversations with spirits. In 2002, Frank Sumption released the so-called Ghost Box, a hacked radio receiver that would quickly become an almost ubiquitous tool in contemporary paranormal investigation, and which recently gained renewed popularity with the so-called “Estes Method,” introduced in the independent online docuseries *Hellier* (produced by Planet Weird in 2019).

This brief and partial list demonstrates how much the history of sonic media has always been deeply intertwined with the modern discourse on occultural practices, famously defined by Partridge as “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.”⁷ The importance of the practices of EVP within occultural communities—in particular ghost hunting groups and paranormal investigators—has attracted academic research, such as the studies of Jeffrey Sconce,⁸ Anthony Enns,⁹ or Richard J. Hand,¹⁰ to name just a few. The majority of the research recognizes the contribution of the two Swedish/Latvian initiators—Jürgenson and Raudive—and focuses its analysis on their influence on the English-speaking world. Conversely, there is little academic literature on relevant cases outside the United Kingdom and the United States.¹¹ This paper aims at partially filling this gap by focusing on the transfers and the influences between Sweden and Italy, where a wide network of practitioners began to emerge from the 1970s on. As the article will demonstrate, the study of the Italian case not only sheds light on the influence of the Swedish originators, but also manifests specific evolutions and transformations of the practice, operated in Italy, that can extend the understanding of EVP discourse at large. The Italian case, and its connections with the Swedish origins of the practice, takes on a particular relevance here, among the multiple instances of the EVP discourse emerging in Europe from the 1970s on. As will be highlighted below, there was a direct intervention of the originator Jürgenson in Italy, influencing the Italian scene in ways rarely found in other regional EVP milieus. At the same time, the occultural transfers between the Swedish and the Italian scenes of EVP were intended as a case study whose analysis could provide a framework applicable to the broader context of paranormal discourse. In particular, this paper proposes a focus on the experiential and embodied dynamics of occulture, less concerned with the dimension of belief or representation and more with praxis.¹² It thus looks into the ways of *doing* occulture through often apocryphal and non-normative interactions with technology, with perception, and with performance. In this sense, the first part of the article—exploring the discursive and methodological transfers between Swedish and Italian practitioners—will explore occultural modes of considering, interpreting, and interacting with material sonic events. In the second part, the analysis of sound artists inspired by occulture will highlight the continuous remediation of occultural experiences and performances in the arts, demonstrating how practiced occulture is intrinsically and irreducibly a creative practice.

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Christopher Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 1:68.

8

Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

9

Anthony Enns, “Voices of the Dead: Transmission/ Translation/Transgression,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 46, no. 1 (2005): 11–27.

10

Richard J. Hand, “Spirits on the Air: Ghosts, Sound, and the Radio,” in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (London: Routledge, 2017), 370–77.

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Relevant research in this context, for instance, is the work of Diana Espirito Santo and Gonzalo Barcelo, “New Media and the Digitized Paranormal: Instrumentation, Affective Atmospheres, and the Production of History in Chile,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27, no. 2 (2021): 321–39.

12

Nina Kokkinen, “Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art,” *Aries* 13, no. 1 (2013): 24.

Theoretical Framework

In studying EVP phenomena, the aim of the article is not so much “to seek out ultimate causes or foundational agencies, [. . .] to establish the ‘truth’ of this or that strange event, but [. . .] instead trace their mobile emergence in order to enliven our senses to the movement of the new and new movements.”¹³ Instead of focusing on the representational, the semiotic, and the linguistic elements of the alleged paranormal communications, the investigation will be concerned with their experiential aspects and how they emerge through relational configurations between subjects, technologies, and discourses, all mediated by specific sonic interactions. In other words, the occultural practices of Electronic Voice Phenomena will be considered as material-discursive processes that create the conditions for charging specific sonic phenomena with the potentiality of an intentional and invisible agency behind them.

To begin an interpretation of occulture based on material practices and experiential processes, a fruitful epistemological move is to consider the pre-representational dynamics of such experiences, and to shift from a problem of the representation of the supernatural *entity*, which allegedly intervenes in EVP practices, to how *agency* is constructed and embodied through sonic practices. In this sense, Mark Fisher’s conceptualization of the eerie is a relevant starting point defined as a “question of agency of the immaterial and the inanimate”¹⁴ that arises from a “failure”¹⁵ of clear onto-epistemological separation between presence and absence of agency, and between signal and noise. To further expand on such an agential approach, the concept of the eerie will be related to that of the affective atmosphere, formulated within non-representational theories as the expression of “something vague [. . .] that exceeds rational explanation and clear figuration, something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable.”¹⁶ The concept of atmosphere is particularly relevant in the context of this research as it is defined as being “neither solely located in material environment nor solely in the human body, but emerging from the resonances between its various components.”¹⁷ It thus provides a useful theoretical foundation to the observation of peripheral intensities—in between the subjective and the externally perceived—such as those produced within the practice of EVP.

Fisher claims that the eerie is particularly related to marginal and subtle feelings and modes of perception, and that “the shift to sound opens up the eerie.”¹⁸ Sound, in this sense, is understood as the mediation process that creates the conditions for the atmosphere of the eerie to emerge. Listening will therefore be conceived as a fundamentally relational process,¹⁹ in which listeners “do not merely occupy a space or a context, they are constitutive of the context set to sound-making.”²⁰ It is through this ecological conceptualization of listening that the sonic will be highlighted in its capability to produce, amplify, and modulate the sensation of the eerie, paving the way for the experience of the paranormal: “Listening I hear the possibility of life-worlds that are not delineated by the visible but conjured from the invisible in sound, whose actuality is negotiated continually rather than assumed.”²¹

Listening is thus conceived as a fundamentally active process that is productive of the eerie question of agency, as well as of the agential

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Julian Holloway, “On the Spaces and Movement of Monsters: The Itinerant Crossings of Gef the Talking Mongoose,” *Cultural Geographies* 24, no. 1 (2017): 35.

14

Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2017), 11.

15

Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 61.

16

Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (2009): 78.

17

Christoph Michels, “Researching Affective Atmospheres,” *Geographica Helvetica* 70, no. 4 (2015): 257.

18

Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 81.

19

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

20

Agostino Di Scipio, “The Politics of Sound and the Biopolitics of Music: Weaving Together Sound-making, Irreducible Listening, and the Physical and Cultural Environment,” *Organised Sound* 20, no. 3 (2015): 285.

21

Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 37.

relationships between EVP experimenter and the felt invisible entity at the other side of the audio device. In this sense, the EVP practice will be read through Barad's agential realism,²² where agency "is an enactment, not something someone or something has."²³ According to Barad, "[. . .] individually determinate entities do not exist [. . .]. A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an 'object' and the 'measuring agencies'; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them."²⁴ To conclude, listening is a process from which distinctions between noise and communication, or between random interference and otherworldly agency emerge. These theoretical viewpoints will guide the next section's analysis of the two fundamental originators of the EVP discourse, as well as the comparison with some relevant cases of Italian EVP practitioners.

Friedrich Jürgenson

Friedrich Jürgenson (1903–1987) was an artist, writer, documentarist, and classically trained singer. He was born in Odessa to a family of Estonian origins, but moved to Sweden in his childhood, where he lived for the rest of his life. He is widely recognized as the initiator of the practice of EVP, through decades-long experimentations whose beginnings are reported in his book *Sprechfunk mit Verstorbenen (Radio Communication with the Dead)*,²⁵ first published in German in 1967. In the book, Jürgenson tells of his first experience with disembodied voices, dated June 1959, during a spring vacation spent in a cottage in the Swedish countryside. On that day, inspired by the blossoming aliveness of the nature all around, Jürgenson installed a microphone at his studio's window, to record the song of a chirping finch. Playing back the magnetic tape, however, the artist was left aghast:

What I heard was very strange. I was hearing a roaring or hissing static sound, like a shower, in which you could identify the chirping of the finch, but as if it was coming from a distance. [. . .] Then all of a sudden there sounded a trumpet solo as if to announce something. I listened with continued surprise as suddenly a male voice began to speak in Norwegian. Though it was very quiet, I could clearly understand the words. The man was talking about "bird songs at night," and I heard a number of chattering, whistling and splashing sounds, and among them what seemed to be the chirping of a sparrow. Suddenly the bird choir fell silent and with that so did the hissing sound. In the next instant the twittering of a finch was audible and in the distance you could hear a titmouse—the tape recorder was working perfectly again. But what had actually happened? The fact was totally clear to me; this was a Norwegian radio broadcast. [. . .] Of course there is the possibility that under certain circumstances a tape recorder can act as a radio receiver. But—wasn't it remarkable, that I of all people who was searching for bird sounds should receive sounds of Norwegian night birds exactly in that moment when I turned on the tape recorder? Was there an invisible intelligence that with such a remarkable way was trying to get my attention? Very puzzling!²⁶

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Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007).

23

Karen Barad, "Agential Realism: Feminist Interventions in Understanding Scientific Practices," in *The Science Studies Reader*, ed. Mario Biagioli (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

24

Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 145.

25

Friedrich Jürgenson, *Sprechfunk mit Verstorbenen, Praktische Kontaktherstellung mit dem Jenseits* (Hamburg: H. Bauer Verlag, 1967).

26

Friedrich Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased* (Stockholm: Firework Edition, 2004), 14, <https://archive.org/details/JurgensonVoiceTransmissionsWithTheDeceased>.

This is the event that would trigger Jürgenson's interest in the possibility of obtaining otherworldly communications via audio media, effectively laying the groundwork for the beginnings of the practice of EVP. However, although certainly constituting an archetypical EVP experience, some particularities are also displayed that are almost absent from the accounts of later experimenters. In particular, it is interesting to note the role of sound in the experience: while the voice certainly represents the climax of the event, it is preceded and somehow prepared by ambiguous and mysterious sonic phenomena, whose source Jürgenson failed to recognize. It is from these very sounds that the potentiality of the supernatural emerges, by making the experiencer question the nature of such occurrences and by effectively introducing that "question of agency"²⁷ at the source of the eerie.

Moreover, in Jürgenson's writings the paranormal voice is often preceded by inexplicable behaviors of the tape recorder itself. These are sonic and vibratory events that are not semiotically organized, but instead carry intensities which are bodily felt even before being perceived by the ears: "I'm standing closely hunched over the rotating tape and suddenly feel a prickling and shivering on my face, spreading to my neck and down to my hands. It was as if I was in the middle of some vibrating electricity."²⁸

In these cases, Jürgenson's recollections focus on the expressivity of such events, on their physical intensity, which is felt as affective "resonation, or interference pattern,"²⁹ and interpreted as a form of primordial, non-verbal communication: "The equipment was giving off a series of deafening sounds. Should I consider that as an answer? The sounds were going right through my bones and the tape recorder was visibly vibrating."³⁰

Glimpses of this wild and unexpected sonic world shine through Jürgenson's recordings, released in 2000 by Ash International with the compilation *From the Studio for Audioscopic Research*. The audio tapes are noisy, distorted, with vocal fragments submerged in buzzes and waves of sound. At times, it is possible to hear distant whispers, voices, even music and choirs, coming from interfering broadcasts, which quickly get filtered away or superimposed on one another. It is from this chaotic sonic aliveness that Jürgenson first *felt* the intervention of otherworldly agencies, then heard fragments of messages that he interpreted as seemingly related to his life, his research, his loved ones. The noise and sound textures thus construct a temporary interactive space, a different territory where different agencies dwell and can be heard. Within this field of peripheral vibratory relationships and embodied interactions, the normal affordances of the tape recorder are transfigured, and the technology seems to behave almost autonomously, or moved by some invisible agency, thus producing the sensation of the eerie leading to the interpretation of noisy interferences as intentional communications.

Initially, the technological apparatus used by Jürgenson was a tape recorder connected to a microphone, placed in the middle of an empty room, recording the silence of the space in search of subtle modulations inaudible to the human ear. As hypothesized by Jürgenson himself, most of the recorded acoustic phenomena were radio waves interfering with the device's electronics: a natural phenomenon that

27

Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11.

28

Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*, 30.

29

Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 14.

30

Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*, 30.

was conceived as modulated by paranormal forces. Successively, after a suggestion channeled by the spectral voices themselves, Jürgenson moved to a radio receiver tuned in between frequencies, in zones of the electromagnetic spectrum where the lack of commercial broadcasts left room for the invisible spirits to freely intervene. In both the tape recorder and the radio configurations, the practice was slow and solitary: Jürgenson began by addressing potential spirits and asking questions, and started recording a portion of tape. He then played it back multiple times, listening deeper and deeper to separate any potential signal from noise, and to isolate the faint vocal fragments drowned in the distorted waves of radio sound. As Jürgenson recognized, his musically trained ear was an important aid for this “difficult task of listening.”³¹

It was here that my many years of voice and music training became useful, I would even say indispensable. [. . .] In this way my hearing was calibrated in such a way as to discriminate subtle differences among the most varied vocal timbres.³²

These “hours of concentrated listening”³³ delineate a process in which the “sonorous experience is central to enchantment,”³⁴ in particular when the senses are attuned to a “cultivated form of perception, a discerning and meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things.”³⁵ This dimension of listening is in Jürgenson’s approach a necessary condition, which, as will be highlighted below, will be maintained in successive iterations of the practice of EVP, formalized in particular by Jürgenson’s direct successor, Konstantin Raudive.

Konstantin Raudive

Konstantin Raudive (1909–1974) was a Latvian psychologist and professor at Uppsala University who was exiled to Sweden after the soviet occupation of Latvia in 1944. He is probably the most famous name in the context of EVP, thanks to the wide diffusion of his 1968 book *Unhörbares wird hörbar*,³⁶ translated into English in 1971 as *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead*.³⁷ Raudive, a former student of Carl Jung, had a lifelong interest in parapsychology. He began to experiment with spectral voices in 1964, after reading Jürgenson’s writings and subsequently establishing a personal collaboration with the artist. While Jürgenson can be considered the originator of the “classical” method of EVP, it is with Raudive’s *Breakthrough* that techniques and methodologies became formalized, even providing electronic schemes for the construction of audio devices. In his experiments, Raudive utilized the techniques introduced by Jürgenson, such as the tape recorder, and the radio tuned to “‘inter-frequency’ where nothing but a general atmospheric static noise would be audible.”³⁸ However, one of the most famous contributions by Raudive is a self-made circuit—simply called “the diode”—designed in 1968 and widely diffused among paranormal investigators in the following decades. The diode circuit reproduced the structure of early crystal radio receivers, whose tuning component was characterized by a bad selectivity that maximized the interference between

31
Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*, 30.

32
Jürgenson, 104.

33
Jürgenson, 19.

34
Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 36.

35
Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 37.

36
Konstantin Raudive, *Unhörbares wird hörbar* (Regen: Reichl, 1968).

37
Konstantin Raudive, *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead* (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1971).

38
Raudive, *Breakthrough*, xvii.

signals, paving the way for unexpected sonic phenomena to emerge.

Moreover, Raudive's book defined an interpretative and methodological episteme, seminal for many successive practitioners. Although the influence of Jürgenson is clear in the way the psychologist used radio technologies and audio recording devices, Raudive's writings revealed a different onto-epistemological perspective, repositioning the Swedish artist's original techniques within an experimental apparatus focused on scientific accuracy and the reproducibility of results. Raudive's methods manifested a clear distancing from Jürgenson's original aesthetical, almost artistic approach, substituting it with a rationalistic angle pertaining to the field of parapsychology. This is most evident in a profoundly different consideration of the role of the voice in the EVP recordings of the two practitioners. In Jürgenson, the voice phenomena represented only a portion of the enchanted and mysterious sonic world that the practitioner accessed through a creative use of the recorder and the radio. As for Raudive, his experiments were entirely focused on analytically assessing the credibility of the recordings, in search of voices as objective evidence of the survival of human consciousness after death:

The concrete results of this new method of research give substance to the assertion that the voices can be defined as belonging to transcendental beings. They appear as independent acoustic shapes that can be determined by a number of basic, characteristic features. This means that we can recognise the phenomenon in its acoustic manifestation.³⁹

In Raudive's interpretation of the phenomenon, the disembodied agencies intervening in the audio technology could manipulate the energy of the incoming electromagnetic waves, which they transformed into vocal fragments by manipulating their frequential content. Therefore, the low fidelity of the communication and the distortions that affected the recordings were considered constitutive elements for the phenomenon to occur.

Voice was the main object of interest for Raudive and was considered para-normal but "of an *objective, physical-acoustic nature*."⁴⁰ The vocal fragment captured on tape was conceived as a sonic object to be isolated from the rest and, once again through hyper-focused listening sessions, to be perceptually extracted from the noise. Raudive took the interpretative process initiated by Jürgenson to extremes, with a procedure in which "the original tape is re-recorded on to another tape and this process is repeated at least five times. [. . .] It is for this reason that a recording of, for instance, ten minutes, may take ten hours to analyse and verify."⁴¹ Raudive stated that "the verification of the voices depends on repetition, and the ear cannot hear the voices without technical aids."⁴² the experimental apparatus he set in motion involved audio technologies as much as human intervention.

In this sense, the "difficult task of listening"⁴³ became an even more productive act, a way to deterritorialize the noisy recordings from their everyday meaning and recontextualize them through different auditory affordances, to focalize on otherwise overheard peripheral sonic events and produce the sensation of an intentional agency at

39
Raudive, *Breakthrough*, 19.

40
Raudive, 8. Italics mine.

41
Raudive, 19.

42
Raudive, 18.

43
Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*, 19.

work behind them. Raudive's technologies were fundamentally malfunctioning radio receivers, tuning circuits (the diode) with no selectivity and thus incapable of properly isolating a specific carrier from the incoming spectrum of electromagnetic signals. The tuning component thus *shifted* from the radio receiver to the experimenter himself, who, through repetitive focused listenings, was effectively *the* component that filtered the voice from the noise, selecting certain sonic phenomena in place of others, and transforming interference fragments into meaningful messages. The radio medium itself was extended and completed by the experimenter's auditory apparatus and their psychoacoustic capabilities: the human and the technological element of the process had to coexist and resonate together for the spectral voice to come into existence. Barad stated that an apparatus of measurement "enacts a cut delineating the object from the agencies of observation"⁴⁴ and that this "agential cut enacts a causal structure among components of a phenomenon in the marking of the 'measuring agencies' ('effect') by the 'measured object' ('cause')."⁴⁵ The apparatus of experimentation created the conditions for specific phenomena to emerge, and the voices came into existence as autonomous agencies separated from the listener only through the experiment itself.

44
Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 131.

45
Barad, 140.

The Italian Case

With the diffusion of their books, the experiences of Jürgenson and Raudive received international exposure, becoming the global blueprint for the practice of EVP. However, even if most of the successive instances of the practice inherited elements of both, relevant differences can be found in the modes and extent of the two researchers' influences on the evolution of the practice. This is due to the publishing history of their writings, and to the extent of their personal involvement with specific practitioners and groups. On one hand, Raudive's book *Unhörbares wird hörbar*, initially published in German in 1968, came out in an early English edition in 1971—released by Colin Smythe under the title of *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead*. It became the first publication of its kind in English, impacting the budding scenes in the United Kingdom and the United States with its scientific and vocal-centered approach. Jürgenson's writings would not appear in English until 2004, with the publication of *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*, by Fireworks Editions, whose small-scale release was part of a monographic exhibition on the late artist's work on EVP.

46
Konstantin Raudive, *Voci dall'aldilà* (Firenze: Todeschi, 1973).

47
Friedrich Jürgenson, *Dialoghi con l'aldilà* (Milano: Armenia, 1977).

However, while virtually unknown among the English-speaking community for decades, Jürgenson became particularly influential in other areas, and particularly in Italy, thanks to his frequent professional and personal exchanges with the country. The artist had a deep connection with Italy throughout his life; he conducted multiple excavations in Pompeii, and worked as a painter in the Vatican City, painting the portrait of two Popes, Pius XII and Paul VI. During his travels, he contacted Italian EVP practitioners, who started to grow in number from the early 1970s on, thanks to the Italian publication of Raudive's book as *Voci dall'aldilà*⁴⁶ (1971) and Jürgenson's *Dialoghi con l'aldilà* (1976).⁴⁷ Jürgenson had the opportunity to personally

intervene in the budding Italian EVP community throughout the 1970s and 1980s, participating in numerous conferences on the topic, as well as establishing personal collaborations with various experimenters. Many Italian practitioners mention Jürgenson not only as the initial inspirator for their practice, but also as an active interlocutor, even personally intervening in their experimental sessions. As will be highlighted below, Jürgenson appears to have influenced the Italian case with his personal approach, which often evolved into unique forms of practice and discourse.

From the early 1970s on, a varied and active network of practitioners could be found in Italy, usually gathered around local groups and collectives: for instance, Roberto Magani's Gruppo Sperimentale per l'Audizione Metafonica in Udine; the Roman CRAM—Centro Romano Ascolto Metafonico; the Milan CeMM—Centro Metafonico di Milano; and the Centro Psicofonico di Grosseto. They developed around the influential figure of Marcello Bacci. In this context, numerous books focused on EVP—or, as it is often termed in Italy, “metaphonia” or “psychophonia”—were published.⁴⁸ Generally, these publications reveal a strong influence of Jürgenson's original approach and techniques, and it is possible to find a reemergence of the aesthetic and creative dimension of the recorded sounds, which was lost in Raudive's scientifically inspired experiments.

However, Italian EVPs have unique characteristics, which are worth mentioning to better contextualize the case studies below. First, there seems to be in Italy a closer connection with Spiritualism, with the EVP practitioners often becoming interested in the voice phenomena after being active among séance circles. Second, a particular recurrent theme is the approach to such paranormal practices in search of a possibility to contact departed loved ones. In fact, what seems to trigger many experiments with EVP in Italy is a personal loss, and the need to overcome grief by finding solace in tangible demonstrations of the survival of the soul: as practitioner Alvisi declared, the research on EVP is “born out of grief.”⁴⁹ Third, it is interesting to notice a closer vicinity to religious belief and Catholicism in particular. There are cases of priests directly interested in EVP, with the figure of Father Pellegrino Ernetti (1925–1994) who is a particularly relevant example: a Benedictine monk, notorious exorcist, as well as an academic in the field of musicology and pre-polyphonic and medieval vocal music. Ernetti was known in the field of the paranormal due to the alleged invention of the so-called Chronovisor, a screen-based time machine considered capable of materializing images of past events by tuning to the residual vibratory echoes of voices and actions of the past. Relevantly, Ernetti was also active in EVP research after an event in September 1952, thus predating Jürgenson's first experience of 1959. Brune and Chauvin⁵⁰ report the event, in which Ernetti and Father Agostino Gemelli—psychologist and founder of the Catholic University in Milan—were conducting music recordings on magnetic wire to “filter Gregorian chants to eliminate harmonics,”⁵¹ when a voice—recognized by Father Gemelli as that of his deceased father—emerged in the recordings, establishing a conversation with the two priests. This event, although isolated, would nonetheless contribute to the early formation of the Italian scene of EVP practitioners, in particular the Milan-based Virginia Ursi, analyzed below.

48

For instance: Colaciuri and Marco Foresti, *E.A.P. Voci paranormali al registratore: Teoria generale e tecniche di applicazione* (Milano: Galatea Editrice, 1973); Gabriella Alvisi, *Le voci dei viventi di ieri* (Milano: Sugar Company, 1978); Various Authors, *Voci dall'invisibile* (Milano: Armenia, 1978); Carlo M. Trajna, *Ignoto chiama uomo* (Milano: Salani, 1980); Marcello Bacci, *Il mistero delle voci dell'aldilà*, con audiocassetta (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1985).

49

Virginia Ursi, *Tra noi e loro l'arcobaleno* (Terni: Hermes Edizioni, 1998), 17, translation of the author.

50

François Brune and Rémy Chauvin, *In diretta dall'aldilà: La transcomunicazione strumentale: realtà o utopia?* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1955).

51

Brune and Chauvin, *In diretta dall'aldilà*, 39, translation by the author.

Marcello Bacci

Marcello Bacci (1927–2019) had been the pivotal figure of the Centro Psicofonico di Grosseto since the early 1970s, and gained international notoriety due to his peculiar approach to EVP, as well as the extraordinary quality and clarity of his channeled voices. Bacci's interest in the paranormal began in the late 1940s within Spiritualist circles in London, but it was the discovery of Jürgenson's work that sparked his interest in experimenting with EVP. Over the years, Bacci and Jürgenson even established a personal friendship and collaboration, as demonstrated by the preface that Jürgenson himself wrote for Bacci's book: "With regard to Marcello Bacci's research and achievements, I would particularly like to emphasise and argue that they are of exceptional importance, as his recordings of 'voices' are limpid and extremely clear to interpret."⁵²

Bacci's initial practice was indebted to Jürgenson's approach, first exploring the various techniques on the tape recorder, and then settling on the use of a vacuum tube radio receiver. The Swede's influence is particularly evident in Bacci's strong a-technical and a-scientific position regarding the role of technology. In contrast with the engineering and scientific paradigm proposed by Raudive, Bacci's approach resonates with Jürgenson's poetic and enchanted epistemology of the voice phenomenon as a supernatural, inexplicable occurrence, which fundamentally undermines the ordinary technical functioning of the radio device:

What is a radio? A radio is [just] a means of communication, [the spirits] know it. Where they come from, who they are, what they do, how do they come here: it's a medianic fact. When I say "medianic," I'm saying everything: we don't know how these phenomena happen. Therefore, you could even remove a tube from the radio, and we already did all the tests: we have removed all the three tubes of this radio.⁵³

The paranormal nature of the phenomenon is performatively instantiated, with Bacci physically removing the tubes—electronic components necessary for the functioning of the radio—to demonstrate the persistence of the voice phenomena:

By turning the tuning knob during the manifestation of "voices," they do not disappear. This means that the circuits intended for the reception and detection of radio waves are functioning anomalously: overwhelmed, as they were, by an unknown energy "field" that seems to use only low-frequency [acoustic] circuits.⁵⁴

Radio circuits are therefore "overwhelmed" by an unknown energy that bypasses radio tuning and the demodulation, intervening directly on the acoustic processes. It almost seems as if the radio had lost its technological and material qualities, to become instead a performative and discursive device, a pure mediation process unbounded by physical rules and instead obeying the realm of the imaginary. Radio

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Friedrich Jürgenson, foreword to *Il mistero delle voci dell'aldilà*, 8, translation by the author.

53

Guido Ferrari, "Marcello Bacci. Voci dell'aldilà. Documentario di Guido Ferrari, 2000," Guido Ferrari, documentary, 2018, YouTube Video, 5:20, <https://youtu.be/3YwecCZ0XHc?si=v10hxHm1x-EZo-Yh5>, translation by the author.

54

Bacci, *Il mistero delle voci dell'aldilà*, 16.

communication is thus subverted in its foundations, making it what Thacker defines as a dark medium, a medium that, while effectively malfunctioning from a rational-deterministic perspective, “works too well,” mediating between “different ontological domains,”⁵⁵ thus acting as a portal in which “a media object [. . .] serves as a passageway or conduit between the natural and supernatural.”⁵⁶ The components of the device—the tuner, necessary to establish a communication channel with a broadcasting station, and the detector, the component used for the demodulation of the radio signal into sound—lose their role and their function. The usual affordances of radio communication are thus disrupted, with the radio becoming itself a “black box” operating through a “medianic fact.”

In this context, Bacci’s performative apparatus distanced itself from most of the experiments conducted by Jürgenson, as well as his successors. The complete subversion of the mediation process freed Bacci’s voices from the dialectics between signal and noise that was constitutive of the process detailed by Jürgenson and Raudive. Indeed, by considering the otherworldly agencies as able to directly intervene upon the radio receiver—independently from any technical constraint—Bacci freed the spirits from the necessity of modulating human-made broadcasts and noise to make their messages perceptible to the ear. The consequence of this important paradigm shift is that Bacci’s voices, for the first time overcoming the necessity of the technology’s low-fidelity, were no longer fragmented, distorted, or obscure, but instead expressed their messages in full sentences and semantic consistency with unprecedented clarity and articulation. It is therefore the first time in which the necessity of trained, fine-tuned listening is lost, and with it the painstaking listening repetitions to slowly attune the ear to the noise, thus extracting the meaning of the channeled words. Moreover, the high-fidelity transmission of the voices, their conversational clarity, and the immediacy of their reception allow for a real-time interaction and a true two-way “dark” communication between the physical and the paranormal plane:

The typical fragmentariness of [EVPs]—isolated words and short phrases found on magnetic tape—constitutes the start of each session [. . .]. But they soon turn into continuous voices directly audible to the audience [. . .]. As in a normal radio audition, verbal productions (sometimes also musical choruses) are heard [. . .]. Sometimes there is a dialogue with the participants in the session, as if using a transceiver.⁵⁷

The important implication of such phenomena is a novel collective dimension of the EVP practice, where the experimenters are joined by an audience that actively participates in a communal, performative experience of mourning and enchantment. Grosseto’s Psychophonic Centre where Bacci and his collaborators operated was the scene of actual collective rituals where dozens of members of the local community gathered to hear the “miracle” of the voices and, most of all, to have a chance for a brief conversation with deceased loved ones.

In a typical session, the audience would sit in rows of chairs organized as in a concert room, all facing the old radio placed on a ta-

55

Eugene Thacker, “Dark Media,” in *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, ed. Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 102.

56

Thacker, “Dark Media,” 130.

57

Bacci, *Il mistero delle voci dell’aldilà*, 16.

ble against the room's wall. Bacci was in front of the radio, with his back to the audience and operating the radio's knobs, his head down in concentrated listening. Waves of radio noise alternated with eerie calm and warm voices: they gave spiritual teachings and talked about morality and the blessing of the afterlife. Music, chants, and choirs often emerged too, and were usually welcomed by the attendants, inspired by such heavenly music; it was considered a demonstration of the beauty and serenity of the Beyond. Then, at specific timings of the session, the voices of the attendees' dead loved ones followed one after the other, calling personal names and reassuring the audience about the survival of the soul.

Bacci's sessions were collective mourning performances, where private emotions and personal communications between the living and the dead became public and social, when the radio's loudspeaker irradiated the spectral messages in the room. Everybody was "touched" by a "coming and a passing, an extending and a penetrating"⁵⁸ of sound from the radio. The sound diffused from the radio created a connection between the sitters, one that was affective—with soundwaves physically touching and interacting with every-thing and every-body inhabiting the space—and emotional at the same time, with every sitter participating in each other's mourning, and in the enchantment of the possibility of the persistence of the voice across the insurmountable boundary of physical death. The EVP apparatus that Bacci set in motion can be considered what McCormack calls a device "for doing atmospheric things": "a device, by virtue of the cloud of constitutive affective relations in which it is immersed, which participates in the generation of an atmospheric sensing of something happening that can be felt."⁵⁹

The novelty of Bacci's EVPs is thus not only found in the unprecedented clarity of the voices he could channel, but also in the crucial spatial dimension that his experimental apparatus produced:

Registering the ghostly displaces and dislocates material geographies. [. . .] [N]o longer offering their normal course of practicable action, dislocated ghostly materialities disrupt our senses of space. In other words, the familiar object-spaces that endure through habitual practice are made strange and mysterious.⁶⁰

It could be said that Bacci's sessions created a ritual territory where the eerie "questions of agency"⁶¹ could be experienced almost as a temporary hierophany, which, while the radio played, re-centered the cartography of the everyday world, connecting the attendees' bodies and minds in resonance with otherworldly sonic, vocal, and musical intensities. What can therefore be traced is an influence and at the same time an evolution from Jürgenson's fascination with the radio's sonic world, here becoming the medium for a collective experience of enchantment.

Ce.M.M.—Virginia Ursi and Gabriella Alvisi

While representing a more traditional approach to EVP practice, the experiments of Virginia Ursi are an interesting example of the aesthet-

58

Nancy, *Listening*, 17.

59

Derek McCormack, "Devices for Doing Atmospheric Things," in *Non-representational Methodologies*, ed. Philip Vannini (London: Routledge, 2015), 91.

60

Julian Holloway and James Kneale, "Locating Haunting: A Ghost-Hunter's Guide," *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 3 (2008): 304.

61

Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11.

ical influence of Jürgenson as well as of the musicological approach of the aforementioned Father Ernetti. Together with Gabriella Alvisi, Ursi was one of the most active protagonists of the Italian EVP scene throughout the 1980s. In 1979 the two founded the Ce.M.M.—Centro Milanese Metafonia, the Milan Metaphonic Centre—which organized events and conferences in the fields of EVP and the paranormal. Both were in personal contact with Jürgenson—who participated in some of their events as well—and it is interesting how Raudive also re-emerged as a sort of spiritual mentor, recurrently intervening as a disembodied voice in the EVP sessions themselves: “[. . .] I ask if it is not possible to establish contact with Konstantin Raudive, an entity with whom I often establish a connection with, on the medium waves.”⁶²

From a technical perspective, Alvisi’s and Ursi’s practices reproduce the Swedish methods of silent microphone recordings, the tuning of the radio in-between frequencies, and manipulation of the magnetic tape, such as playing it at different speeds or reversing it. The process is fundamentally an asynchronous one, described as difficult and repetitive: a “long exercise of listening aimed at learning how to recognise the ‘invisible friends’ ”⁶³ by separating “the simple hisses and noises, avoiding charging them with meaning in order not to fall into acoustic hallucinations.”⁶⁴ However, similarly to Raudive’s approach, noise was not only a disturbance to be filtered out to interpret the otherworldly message, but also the very condition for the possibility of communication, conceived as the raw material used by spirits to modulate their disembodied voices into the physical domain. The spirits are considered “dynamic modulators who act upon the sounds, altering the acoustic frequencies.”⁶⁵ For this reason, the fidelity of the technological apparatus itself needed to be as poor and noisy as possible. Alvisi tended to prefer older, less advanced equipment:

In several [tape recorders] the Dolby method to silence the magnetic tape has recently been introduced. This is not particularly useful with regards to the reception of the “voices from the beyond,” as I have ascertained that they often use—although not always—carrier waves, sounds and noises.⁶⁶

Voice is only a portion of the spectrum of sonic phenomena that constitute the EVP experience in Ursi and Alvisi. As in the case of Jürgenson, in the writings of the two Italians the otherworldly sonic events in fact precede and prepare the paranormal phenomenon:

Sometimes on some sections of the reversed tape, the words previously recorded follow one another chaotically, like sounds from other planets, and the paranormal phenomenon seems to manifest itself.⁶⁷

To further demonstrate the aesthetical sonic dimension of these experiences, the paranormal voice often assumes, in Ursi’s accounts, the form of chants and choral music. For this reason, the EVP recordings are not only analyzed by the experimenter to extract the meaning of the words (in the form of lyrics), but also studied through their compositive and musicological character: some inexplicable elements of their

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Gabriella Alvisi, *Dimensione radiosa: Comunicazioni con i viventi di ieri* (Milano: SugarCo edizioni, 1983), 32. Translation by the author.

63

Alvisi, *Dimensione Radiosa*, 232.

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Alvisi, 236.

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Alvisi, 173.

66

Alvisi, 234.

67

Ursi, *Tra noi e loro l'arcobaleno*, 17.

style or the articulation of the singing technique are considered proof of their supernatural origin. In this context, Father Ernetti personally intervened in the analysis of the recording, connecting his expertise in the field of ancient sacred vocal music to the paranormal phenomena captured on tape by Ursi. Ernetti electroacoustically analyzed the tapes provided by Ursi—filtering the recordings to separate the different voices and identifying harmonical centers—allegedly identifying surprising and unexpected musicological details. He then transcribed the songs in musical notation, and even recorded them with the aid of singers “internationally famous as expert in Sumerian, Greek and Roman music”:⁶⁸

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Ursi, *Tra noi e loro l'arcobaleno*, 21.

69
Ursi, 21.

Father Pellegrino Ernetti began a thorough analysis, based on repeatedly listening to the songs, focused on the rhythm and articulation of the text [. . .]. Father Ernetti also took on the task of personally putting to music once again all the songs I had brought to him with the help of the two sopranos.⁶⁹

This musical dimension of the EVP can be seen as a form of evolution from Jürgenson’s original aesthetic and creative connotations. It is a recurrent phenomenon in the case of Ursi and other Italian practitioners, sometimes paired with a collective, performative dimension of the experimental session, such as in the case of Bacci. Moreover, the electroacoustic elaborations operated by Ernetti on Ursi’s recordings highlight the sonic focus of the case under examination, in which the voice is approached beyond its sole verbal meaning. The purely sonorous dimension of the EVP—an attempt at delving deeper into the inherent musical features in textures of noise, in radio interferences, and in fragmented, distorted choral music—has interest in and of itself. The musical connotation of the EVP practice I have outlined here is an invitation to move towards the next section of the paper, which traces the methodological, performative, and discursive resonances between the practice of EVP, an extended view of radiophony and forms of sonic art. In the section, occultural and artistic practices will be put in resonance with each other, not so much to identify a causal hierarchy between them, but to highlight how, in the case of EVP practices on one hand, and certain forms of experimental sound art on the other, two apparently distant and unrelated practices end up converging on similar use of technologies and similar dispositions towards the sonic effects of such uses.

From EVP Practice to Experimental Music

All the cases examined above portray, in their own ways, forms of subversive remediation of everyday audio technologies, which are performatively reformulated as dark media.⁷⁰ Nina Kokkinen considers that a relationship between the occultural and the artistic “should not be conceptualized as exotic, deviant or countercultural,” and that instead should be conceptualized—following Partridge—“rather a matter of ordinary, popular [. . .] practice.”⁷¹ In EVP practices, common tools such as the tape recorder, the microphone, and the radio are fundamentally misused, hacked, and even broken, producing behaviors that are

70
Thacker, “Dark Media.”

71
Nina Kokkinen, “Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art,” *Aries* 13, no. 1 (2013): 27.

interpreted as the key to extending their reception capabilities beyond the rationally possible. These apocryphal uses of audio technologies were conceptualized within a popular discourse on occulture during the 1960s and the early 1970s, which conceived of all paranormal phenomena as ontologically of a resonant, vibratory, or electromagnetic nature, as popularized by paranormal researchers such as John Keel⁷² or T. C. Lethbridge,⁷³ among others. In this context, the paranormal phenomenon emerges from material-discursive interactions mediated by sound, fundamentally because of a common origin of both electromagnetic and supernatural phenomena. It is within this conceptualization that an interesting transfer between EVP practices and the sonic arts emerges.

As highlighted above, the performative actions that constitute the EVP practice—such as tuning the receiver in between frequencies, amplifying the background noise of a silent ambience recording, reversing the tape, playing it back at a different speed—are productive of sonic phenomena which, within the temporary eerie territory of the EVP session, are interpreted as modulations and movements from otherworldly agencies. If abstracted from their occultural and spiritualist meaning, however, these technological interventions appear as practices to maximize the unpredictability of the medium's behavior, opening the way to different and surprising sonic interactions and phenomena whose occurrence, as Alvisi declares, “is always irresistibly charming.”⁷⁴ Seen from the point of view of their creative and aesthetical potential, it comes as no surprise that very similar practices of sound production and media manipulation exist in the apparently distant field of experimental sonic arts. From the first experiments of *musique concrète* by Pierre Schaeffer in the late 1940s, to the electroacoustic compositions of radiophonic studios,⁷⁵ up to recent forms of radical improvisation and noise performances, musical experimentation has often operated similar forms of subversion of everyday audio media. It is common to find practices of transforming tape recorders or commercial radio receivers into means of sound production of expressive possibilities beyond the traditional musical instruments.

The radio is in this sense particularly relevant. From its early days, the radiophonic medium has always oscillated between the role of receiver and that of revealer, between a tool to receive information and a source of creativity and imagination. The futurist manifesto of the Radia (the radiophonic art) is exemplary in this sense, in which the authors, Filippo T. Marinetti and Pino Masnata, imagine a “reception, amplification and transformation of vibrations emitted by matter. Just as today we listen to the song of the woods and of the sea tomorrow we will be seduced by the vibrations of a diamond or of a flower.”⁷⁶ They can even predate the occultural uses of the device, speculating on the “reception amplification and transformation of vibrations emitted by living beings by living or dead spirits, noisy dramas of states of mind without words.”⁷⁷ Such futurist dreams, although rarely explored in practice, would indeed become reality through the pioneering works for radio receivers by John Cage—*Imaginary Landscape n. 4 (March No. 2)*, a piece for 24 performers on 12 radios—or Berio's radio electronic works such as *Thema (Omaggio a Joyce)* (1954) or *Visage* (1960), where the radio medium unveils the sonic dramaturgy inherent in the

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John Keel, *The Eighth Tower: The Cosmic Force Behind All Religious, Occult and UFO Phenomena* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1976).

73

Thomas Charles Lethbridge, *Ghost and Ghoul* (London: Routledge, 1961).

74

Ursi, *Tra noi e loro l'arcobaleno*, 234.

75

With Karlheinz Stockhausen at the WDR Studio, Luciano Berio at Milan's Studio di Fonologia or at the BBC Radiophonic Studio with Delia Derbyshire, to name a few.

76

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Pino Masnata, “La Radia,” in *Manifesti futuristi*, ed. Guido Bonino (Milano: Bur, 2013), 214, translation by the author.

77

Marinetti and Masnata, “La Radia,” 214.

vocal utterance. More recently, creative uses of radio are found in the genres of ambient and noise music, with William Basinski's *Shortwave Music* being a relevant example: an album that investigates the musical sonic world accessible through the exploration of shortwave frequency transmissions.

The aforementioned examples highlight connections between EVP and experimental music practices beyond the mere technical similarity, tracing an analogous disposition towards creative and productive acts of listening. This listening deterritorializes from ordinary forms of sonic or musical communication, tuned instead to capture transitory, unexpected, and peripheral sonorous events as ways to create new meanings and new affects precisely for their otherworldliness. While the EVP practitioners' writings examined so far do not mention any influence from the electroacoustic music of the time, the correspondence between the artistic and the paranormal fields finds instead fruitful evidence when investigated from the opposite direction. Another relevant occultural transfer can be found transiting from the EVP to the sonic arts. This movement is demonstrated by the interest that EVP recordings fostered among communities of experimental music enthusiasts, manifested by the numerous publications of EVP-themed compilations recently published.⁷⁸

Furthermore, it is possible to find composers and musicians who identify Jürgenson and Raudive as major inspirators for their musical experimentations. In such cases, the influence is not only aesthetical, but also methodological, as these composers remediate and reproduce the original EVP techniques as forms of musical production. Once again, one of the major protagonists of this trend comes from Sweden. The influential artist, musician, and curator Carl Michael Von Hausswolff made the exploration of peripheral and unorthodox uses of audio technologies and low-fidelity equipment one of his principal artistic endeavors. Von Hausswolff has a deep and long-lasting connection with the EVP environment. He can be considered the rediscoverer of the work of Jürgenson: he curated the first English edition of Jürgenson's book⁷⁹ and is also responsible for the creation of the "Audioscopic Research Archive" at the ZKM Institute in Karlsruhe (Germany), which makes accessible the archive of Jürgenson's tapes, devices, and writings that Von Hausswolff himself obtained from the late practitioner's widow.

Von Hausswolff's interest in Jürgenson informs his artistic practice as well, as he often remediates the researcher's techniques of EVP communication as methods for sound production and composition. Especially in works such as *Operations of Spirit Communication* (Die Stadt, 2000) and his releases in collaboration with EVP practitioner Michael Esposito—*The Ghost of Effingham* (Ash International, 2010), *A Ghost Aghast* (Spectral Electric, 2007), *The Old Vicarage* (Firework Editions Records, 2009)—Hausswolff remediates Jürgenson's and Raudive's EVP techniques as modes of sonic processing and interaction. The artist's interest lies in the possibility to musically explore and extend Jürgenson's *sonic* findings, abstracting the EVP technologies from the spiritual and paranormal domain, towards a practice aimed "not [to] show up on the possibilities that there are other things around us [. . .] for me it has mostly been a tool [. . .] for making art."⁸⁰ As he continues,

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Such as *Spectra Ex-Machina* (Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2019), *The Ghost Orchid: An Introduction to EVP* (London: Ash International, 1999), as well as the monographic *From The Studio of Audioscopic Research* (London: Ash International, 2000) dedicated to Jürgenson's recordings or *The Voices of The Dead: Archives From Konstantin Raudive and Gerhard Stempnik* (Brussels: Sub Rosa, 2020), gathering together Raudive's recordings as well as remixes by multiple electronic music producers.

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Jürgenson, *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*.

80

"Carl Michael von Hausswolff & Michael Esposito about EVP," interview by Mike Harding, *Long Wave*, ResonanceFM, December 3, 2013. Audio, <https://cmvonhausswolff.net/2013/12/01/long-wave-resonance104-4fm-3rd-december-2013/>.

I'm the artist [who is] taking these things from my point of view [. . .] and these works are not intended to be any kind of works that actually show EVP [. . .]. It is just compositional tools, using the for instance the spiricom technique or diode technique or any kind of technique that EVP researchers use.⁸¹

81

Von Hausswolff, "Carl Michael von Hausswolff & Michael Esposito about EVP."

82

Von Hausswolff, "Carl Michael von Hausswolff & Michael Esposito about EVP."

83

Barad, "Agential Realism: Feminist Interventions in Understanding Scientific Practices."

84

Aldo Ammirata, "Empirical Evidence - Ether Voyage + (evp transmission)," accessed May 15, 2024, <https://archive.org/details/EmpiricalEvidence-EtherVoyageevpTransmission>.

The practice of EVP recording is occulturally remediated as a creative means of sound production, artistically reconnecting to Jürgenson's original fascination for the sonic manifestation of EVP. In this context, any metaphysical dimension of such practices is apparently lost or, at least, reconstructed from a performative and imaginative point of view:

We did a series [. . .] of these types of recordings in a church, [. . .] then [. . .] we took the recordings, that quite ambient recordings in the building itself, the atmosphere, and went through them [. . .] looking for speech anomalies or spectral anomalies of voices that weren't there.⁸²

This description might appear paradoxical, in relation to Von Hausswolff's stated artistic intent: why search for "spectral anomalies" in a church, when the use of EVP technical apparatus is purely exploited for its sonic processes? From an agential realist point of view,⁸³ every act of experimentation is never merely a descriptive act but rather a productive one, in which phenomena emerge from material-discursive practices. What composes the experimental apparatus of EVP that Von Hausswolff borrows from Jürgenson, therefore, is not just the noisy tape recorder, or the untuned radio. The apparatus is instead a network of agencies distributed between technologies, performances, spaces, expectations, and even intentions. In this sense, the technology is a medium through which the artist creates the conditions for the potential imprinting of voices and signals on the magnetic tape, resulting in a material-discursive attunement necessary for any process involving EVP techniques. In other words, to correctly apply the technique, the practitioner must search for spectral voices independently of whether their intent is artistic or occultural.

Similar occultural approaches to EVP practice are found, once again, in Italy, where various sound artists and composers reuse and rethink EVP techniques to produce experimental artworks, audiovisual installations, and music publications. The influence of Von Hausswolff's approach to EVP, as well as the knowledge of the occultural background of such practices, is made evident for instance in the liner notes of the programmatically entitled *Ether Voyage EVP Transmission*, a music publication by Sicilian musician Aldo Ammirata, who explores these themes and methods in his music published under the name Empirical Evidence:

The concert-performance wants to be a research and a highlighting of the metaphysical sound, of the microsounds and its effects on the human perception and inspired to the work of Leif Elggren (Elgaland Vargaland), C. M. Von Hausswolff, Nikola Tesla and Konstantin Raudive.⁸⁴

Here Ammirata aims at defining a lineage that moves from Raudive and Tesla⁸⁵ to Von Hausswolff and his collaborator Leif Elggren, demonstrating another occultural transfer from Sweden to Italy. This occultural-artistic movement is further manifested in the work of Pietro Riparbelli, an active sound artist and composer who often utilizes EVP techniques for his musical releases under the name K11, published by the independent label Radical Matters. Interestingly, Riparbelli mentions Marcello Bacci as one major influence for his work, as well as the reading of François Brume, a theologian who wrote extensively about Ernetti and his chronovisor:

My interests for machine-based transcommunication and for EVP [. . .] comes from meeting Marcello Bacci, director of the psycophonic group in Grosseto and subsequently from reading several essays on the topic by the theologian François Brume.⁸⁶

Similarly to Von Hausswolff's approach, Riparbelli stresses the purely artistic intentions behind the use of EVP practices, while remediating the paranormal meaning behind them from imaginative and speculative points of view:

What I find fascinating is the possibility of the existence of other dimensions that can overlap radio waves and the so called phenomena of "residual waves," often beyond the reach of our senses and of our technological means. [. . .] I am keen to stress, though, that my interest for this phenomena is exclusively poetic, with no desire to communicate with other worlds nor of being a medium.⁸⁷

Another central element in Riparbelli's art is the importance of space, the ecological dimension of sound phenomena, and how acoustics can mediate embodied dimensions of space and its spiritual, metaphysical, or imaginal connotations. This is particularly evident in the ongoing project Cathedrals, which is described as "a sort of sound archive collecting material from cathedrals, churches, and other sacred places."⁸⁸ The importance of sonic ecologies intersects with the EVP research as well, with the creation of installations in which Riparbelli physically intervenes in spaces with lo-fi technologies aimed at capturing subtle and peripheral modulations of sound. This is the case of *He Tries to Come To Us*, an audiovisual piece produced in collaboration with INFLUX and presented at the 2010's "Visions From the Future .:Iridescent Worlds:." Festival in Turin. The piece is subtitled as "Instrumental Transcommunication Action with Short Radio Receivers and Radio Video Camera Inside the Former Psychiatric Hospital in Volterra,"⁸⁹ and, in the words of the author,

The project's aim is to perform an instrumental transcommunication action working on rough footage taken during the actual performance and associate it with the audio/video footage taken during a December 2007 performance at the former Volterra psychiatric hospital. The performance was achieved using a

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Seminal Serbian physicist often associated with a paranormal approach to electricity and radio transmission.

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"Pietro Riparbelli," interview by Gianmarco Del Re, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://www.fluid-radio.co.uk/2012/07/postcards-from-italy-livorno-pietro-riparbelli/>.

87

"Pietro Riparbelli."

88

"Cathedrals: Pietro Riparbelli Audio Archive Project," Sonic Field, accessed on May 15, 2024, <https://sonicfield.org/cathedrals-pietro-riparbelli-audio-archive-project/>.

89

Pietro Riparbelli, "K11/INFLUX_HE TRIES TO COME TO US," Pietro Riparbelli, 2010, YouTube video footnote, <https://youtu.be/n6JrvkjETU?si=0ph0J1lxWRISyIQz>.

shortwave radio receiver and video receiver recording images and signals from a dipole antenna installed in the building. [. . .] Every light interference of the camera will be perceived both in the projection and in the live sound.⁹⁰

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Riparbelli, “K11/INFLUX_HE TRIES TO COME TO US.”

This project is clearly in resonance with Von Hausswolff’s work: in both cases, a historically, culturally, or spiritually-charged space is chosen as an apt place to apply the purely musical interpretation of the EVP practice. As mentioned earlier, this shows the need for maintaining a connection with the metaphysical aspect of the practice itself, as the experimental apparatus of EVP cannot be separated from its original paranormal context.

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L’Impero della Luce, “Bunker 5 Brigata Lucca,” program notes of Audiomanzia, Sonic Arts Festival (Padova, 2023).

This is also the case of the acousmatic piece *Bunker 5 Brigata Lucca* by L’Impero della Luce, an Italian electroacoustic experimental duo formed by Johann Merrich and eeviac. In this work composed for the Audiomanzia Festival of Centro d’Arte dell’Università di Padova, curated by the author and premiered at Circolo Nadir in Padova in 2023, the artistic intention merges with the awareness of the historical trauma connected to a World War I zone:

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L’Impero della Luce, “Bunker 5 Brigata Lucca.”

We went to a place where thousands of bloody deaths took place: we went to the banks of the Piave river, where the terrible battle of the Solstice was fought in June 1918. We entered bunker 5 of the Lucca Brigade and we recorded our stay in space.⁹¹

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L’Impero della Luce, “Bunker 5 Brigata Lucca.”

The duo used electromagnetic sensors and other devices for “sonic-paranormal research”⁹² to capture the vibratory and energetic oscillations in (and of) the place, recording them and then presenting them in an almost documentary fashion:

Sudden changes in volume and the appearance of a rhythmic pulsation can be heard: at this moment we are in the main room of the bunker, near the loophole used by the Italians to shoot at the Austrian soldiers on the banks of the river.⁹³

Similarly to Von Hausswolff and Riparbelli, a purely artistic object is produced by applying occultural practices to the exploration of an emotionally and historically charged place. It therefore seems that a novel, unexpected element emerges from the musical practices outlined so far. The composers declare that their use of EVP techniques is fundamentally artistic, incorporating them in their own practices for creative purposes, distinct from belief and spiritual frameworks, as well as from paranormal research intentions. However, they bring the EVP apparatus *in situ*, making the paranormal technique interact with specifically chosen spaces, often places of worship, or of collective grief and trauma. They choose a space, in other words, not so much for its acoustic quality, but for its hauntings: spaces haunted by their historical and cultural meaning, spaces where ghosts would be found. This connection between sound art and EVP practices, however, appears less and less contradictory. As demonstrated by Jürgenson and the influence he had on paranormal researchers and artists alike, the practice of EVP can have an inherent musical dimension. If this

could be accepted, then the reverse could be true as well: there could be an intrinsic spectral connotation of certain forms of sound art that establishes an ecological relationship to space and place. Indeed, these musical forms could tap into peripheral, hauntological dimension of acoustics, rendered manifest by specific material-discursive sonic apparatuses.

As acoustics—the ways sound waves travel and behave in space—is a direct consequence of the size, shape, structure, and materials composing a specific architecture, it is possible to consider room resonances, echoes, and reverbs as a physical reminder of the history of that place, its original functions, its use, and the story of what happened to make the place sound the way it sounds. This is a hauntology as the agency of what is no longer, which still affects the present day:⁹⁴ the sonic atmosphere of an abandoned asylum speaks of its residents, and the way the reverb of an empty war bunker affects sound events in the present, speaking of the soldiers who hid in it. The connection between acoustics and affective atmospheres is well documented: reverb can bring an “often involuntary revival of memory caused by listening and the evocative power of sounds,”⁹⁵ and emotions of “a personal or collective nature.”⁹⁶ Vast echoes and architectural resonances can trigger the experience of the numinous atmosphere⁹⁷ and can pave the way for a “metaphysical dimension of sound.”⁹⁸ This can work as well for any sonic or vibratory phenomenon technologically captured in the place—such as electromagnetic or radio modulations—as they all contribute to embodied, affective ecologies that escape from the rational logics of the visual, but immerse and transform. The musical use of EVP devices thus performatively re-instantiates the agencies of past communications, transmissions, and relationships, becoming a way to interact with the hauntological intensities inhabiting the place, from a non-visual, but relational and embodied point of perception, stimulating different, subtler emotions, imaginations, narratives.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was twofold. First, it introduced new research on an under-investigated aspect of paranormal studies, that of the rich and diverse tradition of EVP practices, which arose in Italy in the early 1970s. To do so, it traced the transfers between the Swedish origins of the practice and some relevant Italian cases, focusing on the sonic, experiential, and embodied dimension of such apocryphal modes of mediation. The connection between the two countries’ EVP scenes shows a constitutive importance of Jürgenson’s personal travels and interactions, delineating a heritage that constitutes a different trajectory from that of Raudive in the English-speaking world. Second, this paper highlighted an occultural resonance between the EVP practices within paranormal circles and their remediations in artistic contexts, such as experimental music and sound art. In this case as well, an interesting connection between Sweden—with the figure of Carl Michael Von Hausswolff in particular—and a scene of Italian sound artists emerged, unveiling that what seemed to be a mere artistic reduction of spiritual practices involves instead complex embodied performances of the histories and sociocultural hauntings of places.

94

Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16–24.

95

Jean-François Augoyard and Henri Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2006), 21.

96

Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 23.

97

Tonino Griffiro, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2016), 73.

98

Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, 130.

However, the research conducted until now is only the beginning of a broader and more structured approach to the field that needs further analysis, from multiple points of enquiry. First, a more systematic study of the Italian practitioners, as well as their connections with other occultural contexts, should be carried out. This would allow obtaining a more comprehensive map of the influences, similarities, and specificities of the field. Moreover, the sound-based approach introduced in this paper would benefit from a deeper analysis of the technologies involved, as well as of the existing recordings, often released as audio cassette or vinyl as part of book publications. Furthermore, the (oc)cultural feedback loop between EVP practice and experimental music outlined at the end of this paper could be further explored by highlighting the role of Father Ernetti as well as the possible connections with the Italian tradition of electroacoustic music. The breadth of these possible future trajectories demonstrates the richness of the field, and the scope of its interest for academia. Further investigations could greatly expand the aesthetical and inherently creative dynamics of a peripheral, but long-lasting and fascinating way of thinking about our relationship with the invisible, with technology, and with the enchanting nature of mediation itself.

Heterography

Conversations on Mexican Art

MARIANO VILLALBA and
EFRAÍN BECERRA CASTAÑEDA

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Efraín Becerra Castañeda is a Mexican visual artist of Nahuatl-Totonac heritage, born in Cuetzalan, Mexico. His artistic practice is deeply rooted in both the ancestral traditions of Mesoamerica and the classical techniques of Western art. His work reflects a profound engagement with, and understanding of, the cosmology of ancient Mexican cultures, while exploring their continued resonance in contemporary cultural, social, and ecological contexts.

Becerra's work moves fluidly between philosophy, visual art, and Mesoamerican cosmologies. Through his paintings, he reclaims the worldviews of his ancestors, giving visual form to a conception of life rooted in cyclical time and in the deep interconnection between body, nature, and cosmos. At the same time, he integrates the methods and disciplines of Western art without compromising the autonomy of his own cultural perspective.

I interviewed Efraín because his work offers not only aesthetic depth but also ontological significance. His voice represents a living continuity of Indigenous cosmologies and thought, articulated not from an external or academic viewpoint, but from within the traditions themselves. In a time of growing interest in decolonial aesthetics, Indigenous sovereignty, and the revaluation of native epistemologies, Efraín's perspective is particularly valuable. His reflections illuminate not only the visual dimensions of cultural memory and identity but also the potential of art to serve as a space of encounter—where diverse conceptions of time, nature, the sacred, and the human can enter into meaningful dialogue.

His practice invites us to reconsider the role of the artist not merely as a creator, but as a cultural translator—mediating between worlds and reclaiming ancestral knowledge within a contemporary context. For these reasons, I believe his work speaks directly to the core concerns of *Religiographies* and contributes meaningfully to the broader effort to expand the horizons of religious, philosophical, and aesthetic inquiry—both at the margins and beyond the boundaries of the Western canon.

1) You studied painting with a disciple of Gerardo Murillo, also known as “Dr. Atl,” who is considered the “father of Mexican muralism” and a key figure in the Mexican school of painting. This movement is known for its focus on monumental art, the exaltation of Indigenous cultures, and the representation of the Mexican people. How has this training influenced your artistic vision and the way you approach themes in your work?

Mexican culture owes much to Dr. Atl. He was an exceptionally sharp-minded man, admired and respected, though he also had his share of adversaries during his time. One of his most ambitious projects was the creation of a city of painters, which he planned to call *Olinca*, a Nahuatl term meaning “place in motion.” Unfortunately, he passed away before he could bring this vision to life. His own name, *Atl*, which means “water” in Nahuatl, reflects the fluid and dynamic nature that characterized both his life and his work.

I had the opportunity to study his artistic production closely, even holding some of his original drawings in my hands. These included landscapes, two intriguing self-portraits that he had once gifted and dedicated to his partners, as well as four remarkable self-portraits from the time when he owned the Parícutín volcano in Michoacán. These works, created using *acuarresina*—a technique he pioneered—reveal his profound understanding of both volcanology and astronomy. His paintings from this period stand out for their striking use of color and modern composition, influenced by *Art Nouveau*, which itself drew from the aesthetics of Japanese woodblock prints.

Beyond his artistic legacy, Dr. Atl was a crucial promoter of culture in Mexico. Together with José Vasconcelos, he laid the foundations for what we now recognize as Mexican muralism. While Atl encouraged artistic production, Vasconcelos propagated the concept of the “cosmic race” (*raza cósmica*), a reinterpretation of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, which was highly influential at the time. This idea celebrated mestizaje as a spiritual crucible, blending the pre-Hispanic heritage with the Christian tradition of the West—particularly the legacies of the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon empires—to construct a uniquely Mexican identity, in contrast to the European model previously promoted under Porfirio Díaz's regime.



Fig. 1. *Anawak*, Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 30 x 40 cm, 2018.



Fig. 2. *El ciclo de los jaguares* (The Cycle of the Jaguars), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 60 x 40 cm, 2022.

2) Your work explores both pre-Hispanic cosmologies and the colonial period, where Indigenous cultures and Christianity intertwine. What challenges do you face in visually representing these two eras, and how do your pieces reflect the conflicts, encounters, and syncretisms between them?

Being born into an Indigenous community is not enough; it is also essential to have mentors who teach us to value ourselves. In my case, figures such as Dr. Atl, my teacher Ángel D. Márquez, my parents, and my grandparents have been, and will continue to be, the most important influences in my life. Culture shapes our purpose as human beings in the face of life's challenges, but it is the way we define what it means to be human that determines the path we take.

In the Náhuatl language, the concept of “human” is expressed with the word *tlakatl*, which means “half” or “part of.” This notion suggests that human beings are like seeds: with proper cultivation, they can flourish and fully develop their potential. In this worldview, life is not conceived as a right granted by divine grace but as something that must be earned. An example of this is the ritual in which a child, upon eating their first bite of maize, became indebted to those who had made that sustenance possible. This act was called *masehualistli*, which can be translated as “precious merit,” meaning the beauty of achieving dignity through experience and effort.

In Latin America, social structures have traditionally been centered around the family, and Mexico is no exception. Its cultural foundation lies in the social organization around maize, which remained central even after the arrival of Christianity and the integration of Catholic festivals. Despite the process of syncretism, many of these celebrations still revolve around maize and its cycles, reflected in the role of the *mayordomos*, the successors of the ancient priests. These traditions have left their mark not only on ritual practices but also in codices, ancient astronomical centers, and various studies that continue to inspire my work.

Without understanding the relationship between maize, astronomy, and humanity, it is impossible to grasp the pre-Hispanic worldview. For these civilizations, hunger was a god that taught the discipline of labor. The achievement of transforming the *teocintle* plant into maize is a testament to the sophisticated social organization and profound environmental knowledge that these cultures possessed. My pictorial work revolves around this idea: organization as a fundamental necessity for any human group and the study of how my ancestors managed to structure their societies.

Above all, my work seeks to honor and respect my people. Indigenous communities were not simply “noble savages”; they were human beings with a profound capacity for observation and awareness. They constructed their worldview by asking fundamental questions about origin and existence. Their legacy is not only found in mythology and rituals but also in their architecture, astronomical observatories, calendars, and the vast body of knowledge they developed to understand the world around them.



Fig. 3. *El juego de los ciclos* (The Game of Cycles), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2022.



Fig. 4. *Ensueño de México* (Dream of Mexico), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 100 x 150 cm, 2024.

3) You use ancestral techniques to craft your own canvases, a practice that connects to the pre-Hispanic period. How do you integrate these traditional methods with Western pictorial techniques? What do you seek to achieve through this fusion of eras and techniques?

I studied in an *atelier* specializing in ancient techniques, following the tradition of the old European schools, where all students were initiated into these practices under strict rules. Among them was the confidentiality of material processes and the commitment not to compete with the master within his own workshop. Taking on this responsibility granted me access to technical knowledge that, to this day, helps me find the most suitable ways to express both my ideas and emotions.

One of my preferred techniques is working with *amate* paper, a traditional Mesoamerican support made from the bark of the tree of the same name. I also use high-quality natural pigments, such as cochineal red and Maya blue, both of which have exceptional properties. Additionally, I have learned to create my own colors, allowing me greater control over the materiality of my works. At the same time, I make use of a variety of industrial pigments available in the art market. I believe that traditional artisanal techniques are not in conflict with contemporary materials; rather, the key lies in selecting the best from both worlds.

Through my work, I aim to promote the value of tradition and establish a bridge between the past and the present, adapting ancient techniques to contemporary expressive needs without losing their essence.



Fig. 5. *Masewalistli* (Indigenous Identity), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 60 x 40 cm, 2018.



Fig. 6. *Quetzalcóatl* (Feathered Serpent), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2018.

4) How does your personal history and your Nahua-Totonac heritage influence your choice of themes and the way you represent them visually?

My childhood was spent between Cuetzalan, in the Nahua region, and Caxhuacan, in the Totonac region, both located in the state of Puebla, Mexico. Growing up in these places allowed me to engage directly with traditional festivities, which, on the surface, revolve around Catholic saints. However, it is essential to understand that maize is the central axis of these celebrations. Without maize, the concept of the gods, as well as the relationship between the body, space, and time, become incomprehensible. In these communities, visible elements and those that can only be perceived through intuition come together in their customs and traditions.

One of the main reasons I sought to reconnect with these childhood experiences was the impact of moving to the city of Puebla at the age of seven. There, I became acutely aware of the stigma surrounding Indigenous peoples; at one point, I even internalized that prejudice and went through a period of self-rejection. However, over time, I realized that cultural power is stronger than any ideology. From that moment on, I began to seek a sense of order in my life—to learn how to balance diversity with unity, and unity within diversity.

In this process, painting and interacting with people from different cultural traditions helped me develop a deeper sense of observation. After all, Mexico, as a nation, is in a constant search to explain its identity, its roots, and its potential, aiming to channel them in ways that allow it to flourish as a people. In this regard, food has historically been a defining cultural marker: it is often said that if you eat tortillas, beans, and chili, then you inherently share an understanding of what it means to be Mexican. In the past, a people's identity was closely tied to its agricultural products, and sharing them with neighboring communities was one of the primary ways of forging relationships. The richness of Mexican gastronomy and the structure of the *milpa*—the traditional system of cultivating maize, chili, beans, and squash—reflect this perspective. It is no coincidence that the Day of the Dead celebrations embody this same logic: even the deceased symbolically return to partake in a shared meal with the living.



Fig. 7. *Tonalpowki* (The Timekeeper), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2023.

5) Maize and death are central themes in pre-Hispanic worldviews, which you frequently explore in your work. What role do these elements play, and what meanings do you seek to convey through them in the context of contemporary culture?

Both maize and death remain central themes in Mexican culture. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, these elements were not merely symbolic but essential to the survival and structure of society. However, it is crucial to recognize that the political organization of the Americas—marked by a vertical territorial axis—functioned differently from Eurasia, where a horizontal layout facilitated interconnectedness and imperial expansion. While in the Old World the wheel was not invented for leisure but became a key tool for transporting war tributes and spoils, in Mesoamerica—although knowledge of the wheel already existed, as evidenced by various wheeled anthropomorphic toys—it was not used for transportation due to the absence of draft animals such as horses, cows, or donkeys and the region’s irregular topography. In this context, survival depended on direct adaptation to the natural environment.

In this vertical territory, maize production was a collective concern. If an Aztec lacked maize, it was likely that a Maya did as well, since climatic conditions affected the entire region. There was no nearby neighbor to turn to for assistance or to invade for resources, as was often the case in Eurasia. For this reason, Mesoamerican civilizations developed an exceptionally precise understanding of the agricultural calendar, which dictated their festivals and ensured the synchronization of their crops with natural cycles. Before contemplating philosophical questions about the purpose of existence, these societies first had to answer the fundamental question: “What will we eat today?” According to the *Popol Vuh*, human beings were created from maize, reinforcing its role as a symbol of humanity itself. Since maize cannot grow without human intervention, their relationship is one of interdependence: man is born as a seed, and without proper cultivation, he cannot realize his full potential.

Death, in turn, has been a central element in all cultures, but within the Náhuatl tradition, it takes on a particular meaning. Existence was perceived as a dream of the senses, where the difference between dying and sleeping lay in waking up to another reality—what we would call a new perception of existence. For the ancient Mexicans, the only dignified way to live was by cultivating a strong heart (inwardly) and a true face (a heroic attitude toward life).

I recall a master from Cholula who used to say: “Hunger is a great teacher. It teaches us to value effort and to understand suffering as part of the process of blossoming.” In this sense, human beings can adapt to almost anything—except the absence of food and sleep. Sustenance, in one form or another, is a constant necessity of life. A Náhuatl proverb expresses this with great clarity: “Whoever is born, is born with death.”

This principle is also reflected in Náhuatl poetry, where the flower—daughter of the earth and the sun—symbolizes truth and the fleeting nature of existence. A poem attributed to Tochiuitzin conveys this idea:

Zan Tontemiquico

*Zan tocochitlehuaco
zan tontemiquico
Ah nelli, ah nelli,
Tinemico in Tlaltipac.
Xoxopan xihuitl ipan
Tochihuacan.
On cuetlahuia.
Xochitl in tonacayo
Zan tontemiquico.*

We Came Only to Dream

*Suddenly, we emerge from a dream,
we came only to dream.
It is not true, it is not true
that we came to live on earth.
Like spring grass
our being flourishes,
then it withers.
Flowers sprout from our flesh,
we came only to dream.*

Death, as a cultural concept, is a matter of meaning and symbolism. The ability to symbolize is what distinguishes human beings from other species, which is why it is crucial to overcome the fear and taboo associated with it. In Judeo-Christian tradition, for instance, the myth of Adam and Eve tells how, upon eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, the first humans became aware of their own mortality—of their cultural condition as finite beings. A similar narrative exists in Mesoamerican mythology, particularly in the story of Quetzalcóatl. According to this tale, Tezcatlipoca shows Quetzalcóatl an obsidian mirror and tells him *Ximiximati* (“Know yourself”). At that moment, Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl becomes aware of his own mortality.

This myth suggests that the awareness of death (powerlessness) is what drives the pursuit of freedom (power). Following this revelation, Quetzalcóatl embarks on a journey to *Tlillan-Tlapallan* (“the place of red and black”), a *difrasismo*—a dual metaphor—representing knowledge. The image of Quetzalcóatl in death signifies the cognitive objectification of mortality: the deified king of Tula, embodying humanity, realizes for the first time his inescapable fate. When the ancient Nahuas sang and danced to this myth during their festivals, they experienced a form of *co-birth* into their mortal condition.

In Náhuatl, the word for *death* (*mikiliztli*) is linked to words such as *tlanamikiliztli* (“thought”), *tlalnamiqui* (“to remember” or “to think deeply”), *temiksoch* (“lucid dream”), and *temikmati* (“controlled or intentional dream”). This linguistic connection reveals an association between death, thought, and consciousness.

For these reasons, the Day of the Dead is a central theme in my work. Perhaps it is because I was born amidst the scent of *copal* and *cempasúchil*, surrounded by the celebrations of this festival. It is a tradition so deeply rooted that nearly every Indigenous community in Mexico has its own name for it: *Micailhuil*, *Xantolo*, *Xandu*, *Viko Ndi*, *Janal Pixan*, among others. Its meaning goes beyond folklore; it is a reaffirmation of life’s continuity and of the memory of those who came before us. As an ancient text from the *Florentine Codex* states:

*Will there truly be no death?
Where will we really go?
For death is our tribute...
It has claimed us all,
we have offered it here on earth.
For this is what our ancestors said:
... when we die,
... it is not true that we die,
... for we still live...
we exist, for we are reborn...
we awaken.*



Fig. 8. *Weyna* (The Grandmother), Encaustic on Amate (Mexican papyrus), 80 x 60 cm, 2022.

6) What is one key difference between the Western and Indigenous Mexican worldviews that could help foster respect for cultural diversity?

Writing and language emerged as techniques of communication, whose moral use depends on the culture that employs them. Thanks to the written records of chroniclers, we can study how these friars perceived the pre-Hispanic world and understand that each culture establishes a unique relationship with time and the environment.

In Western culture, the concept of time is a fundamental pillar. The notion of creation, derived from this temporal framework, justifies the existence of the Last Judgment and has profoundly shaped the Christian worldview. Within this framework, humanity seeks to restore a lost paradise—located in the past—by projecting it into the future through political and social models such as democracy, socialism, communism, liberalism, and neoliberalism. These ideologies do not arise in isolation but are the natural consequence of a linear perception of time, in which human history is often interpreted as the history of empires. Within this logic, peace is conceived as an order imposed by the dominant power of the moment—until another people replace it and establish their own system of order, which is also called “peace.”

In contrast, Mesoamerican peoples understood time as being intrinsically linked to natural cycles. Within their worldview, the idea of creation leading to a Final Judgment had no place; rather, the end of a cycle simply marked the beginning of another in a continuous and timeless process. In Mayan mythology, for example, the gods created humans so that they could name them, meaning that consciousness was born from the spoken word, reflecting the gods through human beings. According to this tradition, the Mayas’ sacred duty to their gods was to care for nature, as it was through nature that the gods would communicate with them. When asked about their understanding of the divine, the Mayas responded: “The gods are imprisoned within the cycles of the stars.” This perspective is reflected in their agricultural calendars, rituals, and astronomical centers—expressions of a cosmic dialogue that was also shared by other Indigenous peoples. Even today, these worldviews have been reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary life, coexisting with the syncretism inherited from our Novohispanic ancestors.

It is essential to recognize the respect that all worldviews and cosmogonies deserve, as they serve as mirrors that allow us to observe how different cultures have navigated their historical journeys through life. This diversity enriches us as a human species.

In the Nahua tradition, there is a fundamental concept: *neltiliztli*, which translates as “truth” or “rootedness.” For the ancient Nahuas, this term referred not only to a form of knowledge but to a way of life that was truly worth living. It was not about the mere accumulation of knowledge or the pursuit of individual ideals such as happiness, but rather about prioritizing the interrelation of the social group over the individual. Life was seen as a constant flow of change and challenges, and no matter how strong one might consider oneself, there was always the possibility of falling. In such moments, family and community were there to provide support and help overcome difficulties.

Similarly, Catholic tradition has developed the concept of the common good. However, the real challenge lies in its practical application, avoiding exclusionary ideas such as the notion of “chosen peoples” or “superior men,” which have historically been used to justify the subjugation of others and the perpetuation of inequality. These constructs, rooted in exclusion, only serve to create division and suffering within humanity. In this sense, art plays a crucial role: it can offer a vision that fosters mutual respect and understanding between cultures, helping to build bridges rather than barriers.

A few words about Mariano Villalba and Efraín Becerra Castañeda

Mariano Villalba is a historian trained in cultural history and religious studies, with a focus on the intersections of politics and spirituality in Latin America. He earned a joint PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Lausanne and the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in Spirituality and the Arts at the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), Harvard Divinity School. His current project, *Occult Movements and Mexican Mural Art*, examines the influence of Theosophy and other esoteric currents on the development of Mexican muralism, with particular attention to Mexican female artists such as María Izquierdo, Cordelia Urueta, and Sofía Bassi. He recently curated a digital exhibit

on the topic, hosted at the CSWR's website. His forthcoming book, *Occult Mexico: The Imagination of Mexican Antiquity, from the Colonial Era to the Revolution*, will be published by Oxford University Press. Link to Villalba's profile: <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/people/mariano-villalba>
Link to Digital Exhibit: www.occultmexicanart.com

Efraín Becerra Castañeda is a painter from Cuetzalan, Puebla, Mexico, professionally trained at the *Atelier Nova Escuela Poblana* in Puebla. His technical skill and artistic vision have established him as a notable figure in the tradition of *Traditional Mexican Realism*. Born into a family of Nahua-Totonac healers, Becerra grew up witnessing the practices of traditional medicine carried out by his grandparents—an experience that profoundly shaped the themes and spiritual depth of his work. His art is rooted in the legacy of the Mexican School and characterized by a distinctive *Costumbrista Surrealism*. Mastery of form, color, texture, and the symbolic use of imagery are consistent features in his paintings. Becerra has participated in numerous international exhibitions in the United States, Europe, and Japan, and has been involved in projects that promote cultural identity and respect for ancestral traditions as essential foundations of civilization.

Link to Becerra's website: www.efrainbecerracastaneda.com



Fig. 9. Efraín Becerra Castañeda.

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Heterography

Conversaciones sobre arte mexicano (original Spanish version)

MARIANO VILLALBA and
EFRAÍN BECERRA CASTAÑEDA

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Efraín Becerra Castañeda es un artista visual mexicano de ascendencia nahua-tononaca, nacido en Cuetzalán, México. Su práctica artística está profundamente arraigada tanto en las tradiciones ancestrales de Mesoamérica como en las técnicas clásicas del arte occidental. Su obra refleja un compromiso profundo con la cosmovisión de las antiguas culturas mexicanas y una comprensión sensible de ellas, al tiempo que explora su vigencia en los contextos culturales, sociales y ecológicos contemporáneos.

La obra de Becerra se mueve con fluidez entre la filosofía, el arte visual y las cosmologías mesoamericanas. A través de su pintura, recupera las concepciones del mundo de sus antepasados, dando forma visual a una idea de la vida basada en el tiempo cíclico y en la interconexión profunda entre cuerpo, naturaleza y cosmos. Al mismo tiempo, integra los métodos y disciplinas del arte occidental sin comprometer la autonomía de su propia perspectiva cultural.

Entrevisté a Efraín porque su obra ofrece no solo una profundidad estética, sino también un sentido ontológico. Su voz encarna una continuidad viva de las cosmologías y pensamientos indígenas, articulada no desde una mirada externa o académica, sino desde el interior mismo de esas tradiciones. En un momento de creciente interés por las estéticas decoloniales, la soberanía indígena y la revalorización de las epistemologías nativas, la perspectiva de Efraín adquiere un valor particular. Sus reflexiones iluminan no solo las dimensiones visuales de la memoria y la identidad culturales, sino también el potencial del arte como espacio de encuentro, donde diversas concepciones del tiempo, la naturaleza, lo sagrado y lo humano pueden entrar en diálogo significativo.

Su práctica nos invita a reconsiderar el papel del artista no únicamente como creador, sino como traductor cultural, mediador entre mundos e intérprete de un conocimiento ancestral reconfigurado en el presente. Por estas razones, considero que su obra dialoga directamente con las preocupaciones centrales de *Religiographies* y contribuye de manera significativa al esfuerzo más amplio por ampliar los horizontes de la investigación religiosa, filosófica y estética, tanto en los márgenes como más allá de los límites del canon occidental.

1) Usted estudió pintura con un discípulo de Gerardo Murillo, o “Dr. Atl,” considerado el “padre del muralismo mexicano” y una figura clave en la escuela mexicana de pintura, conocida por su enfoque en el arte monumental, la exaltación de las culturas indígenas y la representación del pueblo mexicano. ¿Cómo ha influido esta formación en su visión artística y en su manera de abordar los temas en su obra?

La cultura mexicana le debe mucho al Dr. Atl. Fue un hombre sumamente agudo, admirado y respetado, aunque también generó enemistades en su época. Entre sus proyectos más ambiciosos estaba la creación de una ciudad de pintores, a la que llamaría *Olinca*, término náhuatl que significa “lugar en movimiento.” Sin embargo, falleció antes de poder materializar esta idea. Su propio nombre, *Atl*, que en náhuatl significa “agua,” refleja el carácter fluido y dinámico que marcó su vida y su obra.

Tuve la oportunidad de estudiar de cerca su producción artística, llegando a tener en mis manos algunos de sus dibujos. Estos incluían paisajes, dos autorretratos curiosos que en su momento obsequió y dedicó a dos de sus parejas, así como cuatro impresionantes autorretratos realizados durante el período en que fue dueño del volcán Parícutín, en Michoacán. Estas obras, ejecutadas en *acuarresina*, técnica innovada por él mismo, revelan un profundo conocimiento de la vulcanología y la astronomía. Sus cuadros de esta etapa destacan por la riqueza cromática y la modernidad de su composición, influenciada por el *art nouveau*, movimiento que, a su vez, incorporaba elementos de la xilografía japonesa.

Más allá de su legado pictórico, el Dr. Atl fue un impulsor fundamental de la cultura en México. Junto con José Vasconcelos, sentó las bases del muralismo mexicano tal como lo conocemos hoy. Mientras Atl promovía la producción artística, Vasconcelos difundía la noción de la “raza cósmica,” una reinterpretación del concepto nietzscheano del *Übermensch*, que en aquella época gozaba de gran popularidad. Esta idea exaltaba el mestizaje como crisol espiritual, fusionando la herencia prehispánica con la tradición cristiana de Occidente—particularmente la de los imperios hispano y anglosajón—para forjar una identidad mexicana en contraposición al modelo europeo promovido durante el régimen de Porfirio Díaz.



Fig. 1. *Anawak*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 30 x 40 cm, 2018.



Fig. 2. *El ciclo de los jaguares*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 60 x 40 cm, 2022.

2) En su obra, aborda tanto cosmologías prehispánicas como el periodo colonial, donde las culturas indígenas y la cultura cristiana se entrelazan. ¿Qué retos encuentra al representar visualmente estas dos épocas, y cómo reflejan sus piezas los conflictos, encuentros y sincretismos entre ambas culturas?

No basta con haber nacido en una comunidad indígena; también es fundamental contar con maestros que nos enseñen a valorarnos a nosotros mismos. En mi caso, figuras como el Dr. Atl, mi maestro Ángel D. Márquez, mis padres y mis abuelos han sido, y seguirán siendo, las influencias más importantes en mi vida. La cultura imprime nuestro propósito como seres humanos frente a los desafíos de la existencia, pero es la manera en que definimos lo humano lo que determina el camino a seguir.

En la lengua náhuatl, el concepto de “humano” se expresa con la palabra *tlakatl*, que significa “mitad” o “parte de.” Esta noción sugiere que el ser humano es como una semilla: con el cultivo adecuado puede florecer, desarrollando plenamente su potencial. En esta cosmovisión, la vida no se concibe como un derecho otorgado por una gracia divina, sino como algo que debe ganarse. Un ejemplo de ello es el ritual en el que el niño, al ingerir su primer bocado de maíz, se hacía acreedor a devolver el beneficio recibido de quienes hicieron posible esa sustancia cultural. A este acto se le llamaba *masehualistli*, que podría traducirse como “merecimiento precioso,” es decir, la belleza de alcanzar la dignidad a través de la experiencia y el esfuerzo.

En América Latina, la estructura social ha estado tradicionalmente centrada en la familia, y México no es la excepción. Su raíz cultural se encuentra en la organización social en torno al maíz, eje fundamental incluso después de la llegada del cristianismo y la integración de las festividades católicas. A pesar del sincretismo, muchas de estas celebraciones continúan manteniendo al maíz y sus ciclos como centro de su cosmovisión, reflejado en el papel de los *mayordomos*, herederos de los antiguos sacerdotes. Estas costumbres han dejado rastros tanto en la práctica ritual como en los códices, los antiguos centros astronómicos y en diversas investigaciones que inspiran mi trabajo.

Sin comprender la relación entre el maíz, la astronomía y el ser humano, es imposible entender la cosmovisión prehispánica. Para estas civilizaciones, el hambre era un dios que enseñaba la disciplina del trabajo. El logro de transformar el *teocintle* en maíz es testimonio de la sofisticada organización social y el profundo conocimiento del entorno que poseían estas culturas. Mi obra pictórica gira en torno a esta idea: la organización como una necesidad fundamental de todo grupo humano y el estudio de cómo mis antepasados lograron estructurar su sociedad.

Por encima de todo, mi trabajo busca el respeto hacia mi pueblo. Los pueblos indígenas no fueron simplemente “buenos salvajes”; fueron seres humanos con una profunda capacidad de observación y conciencia, que construyeron su cosmovisión a partir de preguntas fundamentales sobre el origen y el sentido de la existencia. Su legado no solo se encuentra en su mitología y rituales, sino también en su arquitectura, en sus observatorios astronómicos, en sus calendarios y en el vasto conocimiento que desarrollaron sobre el mundo que los rodeaba.



Fig. 3. *El juego de los ciclos*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 80 x 60 cm, 2022.



Fig. 4. *Ensueño de México*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 100 x 150 cm, 2024.

3) Usted utiliza técnicas ancestrales para fabricar sus propias telas, una práctica que conecta con el periodo prehispánico. ¿Cómo es el proceso de unir esos métodos tradicionales con las técnicas pictóricas occidentales? ¿Qué busca lograr con esta fusión de tiempos y técnicas?

Estudí en un *atelier* especializado en técnicas antiguas, siguiendo la tradición de las antiguas escuelas europeas, donde todos los alumnos eran iniciados en estos conocimientos bajo reglas estrictas. Entre ellas, se encontraba la confidencialidad en el manejo de los materiales y el compromiso de no competir con el maestro en su propio espacio de trabajo. Asumir esta responsabilidad me permitió acceder a un conocimiento técnico que, hasta hoy, me ayuda a encontrar los medios más adecuados para expresar mis ideas y sentimientos.

Dentro de las técnicas que prefiero se encuentra el trabajo sobre papel amate, un soporte tradicional mesoamericano elaborado a partir de la corteza del árbol del mismo nombre. También utilizo pigmentos naturales de gran calidad, como la grana cochinilla y el azul maya, ambos con propiedades excepcionales. Además, he aprendido a fabricar mis propios colores, lo que me permite un mayor control sobre la materialidad de mis obras. Sin embargo, al mismo tiempo recorro a una amplia variedad de pigmentos industriales disponibles en el mercado del arte. Considero que las técnicas artesanales tradicionales no están en conflicto con los materiales contemporáneos; por el contrario, la clave está en saber seleccionar lo mejor de cada uno.

A través de mi trabajo, busco rescatar el valor de la tradición y establecer un puente entre el pasado y el presente, adaptando lo antiguo a las necesidades expresivas actuales sin perder su esencia.



Fig. 5. *Masewalistli*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 60 x 40 cm, 2018.



Fig. 6. *Quetzalcóatl*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 80 x 60 cm, 2018.

4) ¿Cómo influye su historia personal con la herencia nahua-tononaca en su elección de temas y en la forma en que los representa visualmente?

Mi infancia transcurrió entre Cuetzalan, en la zona nahua, y Caxhuacan, en la región tononaca, en el estado de Puebla, México. Crecer en estos lugares me permitió convivir de manera directa con las festividades tradicionales, en las que se rinde culto a los santos católicos. Sin embargo, es fundamental comprender que el maíz es el eje central de estas celebraciones. Sin él, no se puede entender el concepto de los dioses ni la relación entre el cuerpo, el espacio y el tiempo. Así, los elementos visibles y aquellos que solo pueden percibirse a través de la intuición se conjugan en los usos y costumbres de estas comunidades.

Uno de los principales motivos que me llevó a reencontrarme con estas experiencias de infancia fue el impacto que supuso mudarme a la ciudad de Puebla a los siete años. Allí comprendí, con cierta extrañeza, que los pueblos indígenas eran estigmatizados; incluso yo mismo llegué a interiorizar ese prejuicio y a experimentar una etapa de autodesprecio. Sin embargo, con el tiempo entendí que el poder cultural es más fuerte que cualquier ideología. A partir de ese momento, comencé a buscar un sentido de orden en mi vida, a aprender a equilibrar la diversidad con la unidad, y la unidad dentro de la diversidad.

En este proceso, la pintura y el contacto con personas de distintas tradiciones culturales me ayudaron a desarrollar una mayor capacidad de observación. Después de todo, México como nación también se encuentra en una búsqueda constante de explicación sobre su identidad, sus raíces y sus potencialidades, con el objetivo de canalizarlas de manera que permitan su florecimiento como pueblo. En este sentido, la alimentación ha sido históricamente un marcador identitario: se dice que si comes tortilla, frijol y chile, entonces compartes un entendimiento común de lo que significa ser mexicano. Antiguamente, el conocimiento de un pueblo se basaba en sus productos agrícolas y en la práctica de compartirlos con los vecinos, lo que servía como un medio de interacción y establecimiento de lazos. La riqueza gastronómica de México y la estructura de la *milpa*—basada en el cultivo conjunto de maíz, chile, frijol y calabaza—reflejan esta visión. No es casualidad que la festividad del Día de Muertos mantenga esta lógica: en ella, incluso los difuntos regresan simbólicamente a compartir la comida con los vivos.



Fig. 7. Tonalpowki (*El contador del tiempo*), encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 80 x 60 cm, 2023.

5) El maíz y la muerte son temas centrales en las cosmovisiones prehispánicas que usted aborda en su obra ¿que rol juegan estos elementos y qué significados busca transmitir a través de ellos en el contexto de la cultura contemporánea?

Tanto el maíz como la muerte siguen siendo temas centrales en la cultura mexicana. En el México prehispánico, estos elementos no solo tenían un significado simbólico, sino que determinaban la vida y la supervivencia de los pueblos. Sin embargo, es importante considerar que la estructura política de América, marcada por una franja territorial vertical, funcionaba de manera diferente a la de Eurasia, cuya disposición horizontal facilitó la interconexión y la expansión de imperios. Mientras que en el Viejo Mundo la rueda no fue un invento destinado al ocio, sino una herramienta clave para el transporte de tributos y botines de guerra, en Mesoamérica, la supervivencia dependía de la adaptación al entorno natural.

En esta franja vertical, la producción de maíz era un asunto colectivo. Si un azteca carecía de maíz, era probable que tampoco lo tuviera un maya, pues las condiciones climáticas afectaban a toda la región. No existía la posibilidad de recurrir a pueblos cercanos para pedir ayuda o invadir territorios lejanos como en Eurasia. Por ello, las civilizaciones mesoamericanas desarrollaron un conocimiento extremadamente preciso del calendario agrícola, que regía sus festividades y garantizaba la sincronización de los ciclos productivos con el maíz y otros cultivos esenciales. Antes de plantearse cuestiones filosóficas sobre el propósito de la existencia, estas sociedades debían responder primero a una pregunta fundamental: “¿*Qué comeremos hoy?*” Según el *Popol Vuh*, el ser humano fue creado a partir del maíz, lo que refuerza su papel como emblema de la humanidad. Dado que el maíz no puede crecer sin la intervención humana, la relación entre ambos es de interdependencia: el hombre nace como semilla y, sin el cultivo adecuado, no puede desarrollar su potencial.

La muerte, por su parte, ha sido un elemento clave en la cosmovisión de todos los pueblos, pero en la tradición náhuatl adquiere un matiz particular. La existencia se concebía como un sueño de los sentidos,

donde la diferencia entre morir y dormir radicaba en el despertar en el mundo de los sueños, es decir, en una nueva percepción de la realidad. Para los antiguos mexicanos, la única forma digna de vivir era desarrollando un corazón fuerte (en términos internos) y un rostro verdadero (una actitud heroica ante la vida).

Recuerdo a un maestro de Cholula que solía decir: “El hambre es un gran maestro. Nos enseña a valorar el esfuerzo y a comprender el sufrimiento como parte del proceso de florecimiento.” En este sentido, el ser humano puede adaptarse a casi todo, excepto a la falta de alimento y de sueño. La alimentación, en cualquiera de sus formas, es una constante en la vida. Un proverbio náhuatl lo expresa con claridad: “Quien alguna vez nació, nació con la muerte.”

Este principio se refleja también en la poesía náhuatl, donde la flor—hija de la tierra y del sol—simboliza la verdad y la fugacidad de la existencia. Un poema atribuido a Tochiuhitzin lo expresa de la siguiente manera:

Zan Tontemiquico

*Zan tocochitlehuaco
zan tontemiquico
Ah nelli, ah nelli,
Tinemico in Tlaltipac.
Xoxopan xihuitl ipan
Tochihuacan.
On cuetlahuia.
Xochitl in tonacayo
Zan tontemiquico.*

Solo vinimos a soñar

*De pronto salimos del sueño,
solo vinimos a soñar.
No es cierto, no es cierto
que vinimos a vivir sobre la tierra.
Como hierba en primavera
es nuestro ser,
luego se seca.
Germinan flores en nuestra carne,
solo vinimos a soñar.*

La muerte, como concepto cultural, es un asunto de significado y de símbolos. La capacidad de simbolizar es lo que distingue al ser humano de otras especies, por lo que resulta fundamental superar el miedo y el tabú que esta idea puede generar. En la tradición judeocristiana, por ejemplo, el mito de Adán y Eva explica cómo, al probar el fruto del árbol del conocimiento, los primeros humanos adquirieron conciencia de su mortalidad, es decir, de su condición cultural. En el mundo mesoamericano, un relato similar se encuentra en el mito de Quetzalcóatl. Según esta historia, Tezcatlipoca le muestra a Quetzalcóatl un espejo de obsidiana y le dice *Ximiximati* (“conócete a ti mismo”). En ese instante, Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl toma conciencia de su propia mortalidad.

Este mito sugiere que el reconocimiento de la muerte (impotencia) impulsa la búsqueda de la libertad (potencia). Tras esta revelación, Quetzalcóatl emprende un viaje hacia el *Tlillan-Tlapallan* (“el lugar de lo rojo y lo negro”), un difrasismo que simboliza el conocimiento. La imagen de Quetzalcóatl muerto representa, en este sentido, la objetivación cognitiva de la muerte: el rey-deificado de Tula, encarnación de la humanidad, comprende por primera vez su destino inexorable. Los antiguos nahuas, al cantar y bailar este mito durante sus festividades, experimentaban una especie de *co-nacimiento* festivo a su estado mortal.

En náhuatl, la palabra *muerte* (*mikiliztli*) está relacionada con términos como *tlanamikiliztli* (“pen-

samiento”), *tlalnamiqi* (“recordar” o “pensar profundamente”), *temiksoch* (“sueño lúcido”) y *temikmati* (“sueño controlado o intencional”). Esto revela una asociación entre la muerte, el pensamiento y la conciencia.

Por estas razones, la festividad del Día de Muertos es un tema central en mi obra. Tal vez se deba a que nací entre el aroma del copal y el cempasúchil, rodeado de las celebraciones de esta fecha. Es una festividad tan arraigada que cada comunidad en México tiene su propio nombre para ella: *Micailhuatl*, *Xantolo*, *Xandu*, *Viko Ndii*, *Janal Pixan*, entre otros. Su significado trasciende el folclore: es una reafirmación de la continuidad de la vida y de la memoria de quienes nos precedieron. Como dice un antiguo texto del *Códice Florentino*:

*¿Acaso... no habrá muerte?
¿A dónde en verdad se irá?
Pues es nuestro tributo, la muerte...
Nos mereció a todos
ofrendarla aquí en la tierra.
Pues así decían nuestros ancestros:
... cuando morimos,
...no es verdad eso de que morimos,
...pues todavía vivimos...
existimos, pues resucitamos...
Nos despertamos.*



Fig. 8. *Weyna (La abuela)*, encausto sobre amate (papel mexicano), 80 x 60 cm, 2022.

6) ¿Cuál es una diferencia que puede marcar entre estas dos cosmovisiones, la occidental en relación a las culturas indígenas de México para fomentar el respeto por la diversidad cultural?

La escritura y el lenguaje nacieron como técnicas de comunicación, cuyo uso moral depende de la cultura que los emplea. Gracias a las fuentes escritas de los cronistas, podemos estudiar cómo estos frailes concebían el mundo prehispánico y entender que cada cultura establece una relación particular con el tiempo y el entorno.

En la cultura occidental, la noción del tiempo es un pilar fundamental. La idea de creación, derivada de esta concepción temporal, justifica la existencia del Juicio Final y ha marcado profundamente la cosmovisión cristiana. En este contexto, la humanidad busca restituir el paraíso perdido—ubicado en el pasado—proyectándolo hacia el futuro, a través de modelos políticos y sociales como la democracia, el socialismo, el comunismo, el liberalismo o el neoliberalismo. Estas ideologías no surgen de manera aislada, sino que son consecuencia natural de una visión lineal del tiempo, donde la historia de la humanidad se interpreta a menudo como la historia de los imperios. En este marco, la paz es concebida como un orden impuesto por el poder hegemónico de turno, hasta que otro pueblo lo sustituye e impone su propio modelo de orden, también llamado “paz.”

En contraste, para los pueblos mesoamericanos el tiempo estaba ligado a los ciclos naturales. En su cosmovisión, la idea de una creación que conduzca a un Juicio Final no tenía cabida; más bien, el final de un ciclo marcaba el inicio de otro, en un proceso continuo y atemporal. En los mitos mayas, por ejemplo, los dioses crearon al ser humano para ser nombrados, es decir, la conciencia nacía del verbo, reflejando a los dioses a través de los hombres. Según esta tradición, la promesa de los mayas a sus dioses consistía en cuidar la naturaleza, pues si cumplían con esta misión, los dioses se comunicarían a través de ella. Cuando se les preguntaba cómo concebían a sus dioses, los mayas respondían: “Los dioses están presos en los ciclos de las estrellas.” Esta idea se refleja en sus calendarios agrícolas, rituales y centros astronómicos, expresiones de un diálogo cósmico que también compartían otros pueblos originarios. Aun en la actualidad, estas concepciones se han reinterpretado y adaptado al mundo contemporáneo, conviviendo con el sincretismo heredado de nuestros ancestros novohispanos.

Es importante reconocer el respeto que merecen todas las cosmovisiones y cosmogonías, ya que funcionan como espejos que nos permiten observar cómo diferentes culturas han resuelto su tránsito histórico por la vida. Esta diversidad nos enriquece como género humano.

En la tradición nahua, existe un concepto fundamental: *neltiliztli*, que se traduce como “verdad” o “enraizamiento.” Para los antiguos nahuas, este término aludía no solo a una forma de conocimiento, sino a un modo de vida que valiera la pena ser vivido. No se trataba de la mera acumulación de saberes ni de la búsqueda de ideales individuales como la felicidad, sino de la interrelación del grupo social por encima del individuo. La vida era concebida como un flujo constante de cambios y desafíos, y por más fuerte que una persona pudiera creerse, siempre existía la posibilidad de caer. En esos momentos, la familia y la comunidad estarían allí para sostener y ayudar a superar las dificultades.

De manera similar, la tradición católica ha desarrollado el concepto del bien común. Sin embargo, el verdadero reto radica en su aplicación práctica, evitando ideas segregacionistas como la noción de “pueblos elegidos” o “hombres superiores,” que históricamente han servido como justificaciones para ejercer dominio sobre otros y perpetuar desigualdades. Estas construcciones, basadas en la exclusión, solo generan división y sufrimiento en la humanidad. En este sentido, el arte tiene un papel crucial: puede aportar una visión que fomente el respeto y la comprensión entre culturas, ayudando a construir puentes en lugar de barreras.

Algunas palabras sobre Mariano Villalba y Efraín Becerra Castañeda

Mariano Villalba es historiador especializado en historia cultural y estudios de las religiones, con un enfoque en las intersecciones entre política y espiritualidad en América Latina. Obtuvo un doctorado conjunto en Ciencias de las Religiones por la Universidad de Lausana y la École Pratique des Hautes Études, y actualmente es investigador posdoctoral en *Spirituality and the Arts* en el Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) de la Harvard Divinity School. Su proyecto actual, *Occult Movements and Mexican*

Mural Art, examina la influencia de la teosofía y de otras corrientes esotéricas en el desarrollo del muralismo mexicano, con especial atención a artistas mexicanas como María Izquierdo, Cordelia Urueta y Sofía Bassi. Recientemente ha comisariado una exposición digital sobre este tema, disponible en el sitio web del CSWR. Su próximo libro, *Occult Mexico: The Imagination of Mexican Antiquity, from the Colonial Era to the Revolution*, será publicado por Oxford University Press.

Enlace al perfil de Villalba: <https://cswr.hds.harvard.edu/people/mariano-villalba>

Enlace a la exposición digital: www.occultmexicanart.com

Efraín Becerra Castañeda es pintor originario de Cuetzalan, Puebla (México), formado profesionalmente en el Atelier Nova Escuela Poblana de la ciudad de Puebla. Su dominio técnico y su visión artística lo han consolidado como una figura destacada dentro de la tradición del realismo mexicano. Nacido en una familia de curanderos nahua-totonacos, creció presenciando las prácticas de medicina tradicional ejercidas por sus abuelos, experiencia que marcó profundamente los temas y la dimensión espiritual de su obra. Su arte se inscribe en la herencia de la Escuela Mexicana y se caracteriza por un singular surrealismo costumbrista. El dominio de la forma, el color, la textura y el uso simbólico de la imagen son rasgos constantes en su pintura. Becerra ha participado en numerosas exposiciones internacionales en Estados Unidos, Europa y Japón, y ha colaborado en proyectos que promueven la identidad cultural y el respeto por las tradiciones ancestrales como fundamentos esenciales de la civilización.

Enlace al sitio web de Becerra: www.efrainbecerracastaneda.com



Fig. 9. Efraín Becerra Castañeda.

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