

ESOTERICISM AND THE HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACTS

Olav Hammer (University of Southern Denmark): “Esotericism and the literature of mysticism”

In the seminal work of William James, mysticism was described as a term denoting a specific class of experiences. However, experiences cannot in and of themselves have social effects and thus be constituent elements in the formation of religious currents. Only when presented to others, e.g., in narrative form, does the private become publicly accessible. Written accounts of mysticism in particular have had a major impact on the history of religions. These accounts intersect with the corpus of writings that is usually presented under the rubric of Western esotericism, and authors such as Jacob Böhme and Emanuel Swedenborg figure prominently in the scholarly literature on both mysticism and esotericism. Unfortunately for researchers, the definitions of both categories are essentially contested. My presentation will attempt to chart the definitional quandaries and suggest a path forward.

Benedikt Hjartarson (University of Iceland): “Edifying Form: On the Literary Esotericism of Þórbergur Þórðarson”

The paper will explore the rather peculiar oeuvre of the writer Þórbergur Þórðarson, whose writings belong to the canon of 20th-century modern literature in Iceland. The oeuvre (written in Icelandic and Esperanto) is traditionally seen as being characterised by its heterogeneity, including different kinds of works pertaining to the fields of literature, political propaganda, linguistics, ethnography, (auto)biography and esotericism. Literary scholars have tended to focus on a number of works that allegedly can be described as literary fiction. The paper will analyse Þórðarson’s writings from a broader perspective, taking his engagement with esoteric ideas (theosophy, yoga, spiritualism / psychic research) in the formative period of his career as a point of departure in an attempt to develop a holistic approach to his oeuvre. Following Sasha Chaitow’s definition of „literary esotericism“ Þórðarson’s writings can be described as a specific literary mode, in which fiction primarily serves as a „vehicle of spiritual praxis“. Þórðarson’s oeuvre can be seen as a coherent attempt to arrive at an „edifying form“, not in terms of aesthetic experimentalism, literary innovation or progressive / playful modes of expression, but rather in terms of rebirth or spiritual awakening.

Marja Lahelma (University of Helsinki): “Artists as producers and mediators of esoteric knowledge”

This talk explores the forms of knowledge that emerge on the common ground between art history and esotericism. Focusing on the ways artists and artworks produce and mediate esoteric content, I will address some of the challenges that researchers may encounter when dealing with this kind of material. Esoteric knowledge is by definition something that is hidden, occluded, and intended to be understood only by a small circle of like-minded individuals. In order to uncover this kind of

content, it is often necessary to be able to interpret subtle hints and read between the lines. This issue is particularly acute when dealing with visual material that has a suggestive and indirect manner of expressing things. There is always the danger of overinterpretation, but at the same time the requirement to provide direct 'evidence' in order to prove that a work of art is somehow connected to esotericism can lead to avoidance of material that appears difficult to interpret but can potentially have great significance. This is one of the reasons why connections between art and esotericism have frequently remained unrecognised, and hence these phenomena have appeared more marginal than they actually are. Moreover, it was typical among artists to explore different esoteric directions and draw eclectically from various sources, without necessarily committing to any particular ideology. In addition to artists who were directly connected to certain esoteric groups and engaged in esoteric practices, such as Hilma af Klint, there were many who had a more general interest in the phenomena that can be conceptualised as 'occulture'. My aim is to illustrate how esoteric influences functioned on several levels, contributing towards a reformulation of the whole purpose and meaning of art. I will provide examples from my own research which has mainly focused on Nordic art around 1900, and on artists like Ellen Thesleff, Edvard Munch, and August Strindberg, among others.

Cecilie Endresen (University of Oslo): "Albanian esotericism, pseudo-linguistics and new religious authorities"

A recurrent theme in Albanian pop culture, pseudo science and nationalist discourse is that Albanian is the Ursprache, the key to lost wisdom traditions. Through pseudolinguistic comparisons various epistemological individualists seek to prove the "Albanian" character of foreign, unrelated religious traditions, cultures and languages. The emerging forms of new age spirituality among Albanians tend to give older nationalist conspiracy theories a new metaphysical twist by postulating that the language has transempirical origins and mystical qualities. Moreover, contemporary mythmakers show that Albanian is the key to the cosmic secrets. The "canon" consists of a handful of books published by Albanian-speaking authors in e.g. Greece and Italy during communism, who relied on rejected knowledge from prewar anthropology and 19th century linguistics. Initially, these speculations were more esoteric in character and focused on "hidden" Albanian history in the Balkans and in the ancient civilisations around the Mediterraneans, while references to Theosophy were often quite subtle. In any case, Albanian was construed as a universal glue that enabled them to appropriate adjacent cultural product and define their people as a master race with a potential for higher knowledge. Today, mythmakers in the Balkans and in the diaspora demonstrate a more obvious metaphysical interest when they influenced by religious globalisation, new age spirituality and theories of correspondences, elevate their mother tongue to a kind of cosmic essence and in fact construe it as a religious authority in itself. I have previously labelled this big, heterogenous discourse a multireligious conspiracy theory, an emerging pan-Albanian mythology, and a kind of "ethno-ontology". My latest take has been to lump it together and labelled it an emerging mythology and a subgroup of the modern esoteric tradition (Olav Hammer). In any case, the complexity calls for an interdisciplinary approach and represents some theoretical and terminological challenges, above all in delineating the "esoteric" parts of it.

Anne Kalvig (University of Stavanger): "Contemporary, spiritual stuff and how to label and study it as a part of culture"

As a scholar of religions specializing in contemporary, popular beliefs and practices, I will be looking at esotericism as a term compared to religion or spirituality as a term, and illustrate with some cases from my diverse fieldwork and data gathering and processing over the years. I will draw on examples

from crop circles, alternative therapy, Spiritualism, The Norwegian Church and Viking reenactment. Is it constructive to sort out and label some spiritual stuff as esoteric, whether by focus on gnosis or other features, and different from other spiritual stuff? I will rather point to the blurred borders and shifting frontiers of tension related to groups and mainstream society instead.

Henrik Johnsson (University of Tromsø): “Occult Fiction Considered as a Literary Genre”

The topic of this presentation is the usefulness, when studying occult fiction, of the various scientific methodologies used in the field of literary studies. The presentation takes as its point of departure the idea that occult fiction in general, and occult novels in particular, should be regarded as a distinct literary genre with certain recurring characteristics. Genre theory will be used to investigate this idea. In particular, the “family resemblance” theory of Alastair Fowler will be applied in order to identify common traits in a selection of occult novels. The historical, religious and political contexts of these traits will be studied using the methodology of new historicism, posing the question if occultism can be examined using Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of “social energy”. How the significance of these traits has shifted over time and their discursive transfer to and from the cultural mainstream will be analyzed using discourse theory. Finally, reader response theory will be applied to both the authors and readers of occult novels in order to identify patterns of production and reception differing from those found in non-occult literary works. Specific examples of the potential benefits and pitfalls of each methodology will be given throughout the presentation.

Dirk Johannsen (University of Oslo): “The mystical breakthrough - Naturalism and occult explorations in Nordic literature 1871-1897”

In 1894, the Norwegian literary critic Gerhard Gran pondered the rapid emergence of esoteric currents within the Nordic literary scene: "The magic word of my time used to be: reality, now it is: mysticism". The developments in the Nordic countries were of a peculiar dynamic. A new generation of writers had begun to carefully monitor developments within the occult and esoteric milieus in the UK, Germany and France, consolidating the impulses to serve as a counter project to Brandesian naturalism. The paper documents programmatic trends among cultural radical circles between the 1870s and 1890s. Methodologically, the analysis of esoteric currents within the naturalistic literary scene is guided by conceptual history (Koselleck, Hölscher) and constellation analysis (Mulsow). Reading literary works in the wider context of intellectual debates, literary circles, a changing book market, and the authors active work to establish new genres and cater to new audiences, the paper documents the dynamics by which the creative work of the novelist became conceptually interwoven with esoteric philosophy and even occult practice.

Kristoffer Noheden (University of Stockholm): "Nature's Imagination: Surrealism, Esotericism, and Ecology."

In a footnote to a 1944 essay on the Chilean painter Roberto Matta, André Breton refers to Eliphas Lévi’s notion of “nature’s imagination,” which is animated by the astral light. The essay is a convoluted but radiant description of Matta’s attainment in his art of a “total animism,” achieved through his effortless penetration of phenomenal reality; accordingly, Breton describes Matta as “he who has *plunged into the agate.*” In an ongoing research project, I examine ecological tendencies in surrealism from the movement’s inception and up to the present. These ecological tendencies include explicit environmental and animal-rights concerns. But above all they encompass a wide spectrum of theoretical text, artworks, moving images, and literary narratives that question

human exceptionalism, envision interdependent connections between life-forms and their environment, and which present often speculative statements, images, or narratives that imbue the non-human world with a sense of agency, creativity, and even mind-like qualities that it has often been denied by Western philosophy, science, and common sense. In these latter cases, as exemplified by Breton's mentioned essay, surrealism's longstanding interest in esotericism often intersects its speculative ecological thought. In this paper, I will address how surrealism's ecological concerns are intimately bound up with three overarching esoteric themes: a mesmerist and romantic view of the open quality of the unconscious; a poetics of analogy that ascribes a transformative effect to the detection of correspondences; and a gnostic epistemology that privileges the flash of insight and, in a broader sense, eschews rational argumentation for suprarational syntheses of knowledge which in themselves are kin to Lévi's occultism. Furthermore, I will speak to some of the methodological challenges incurred by triangulating surrealism, ecology, and esotericism, including difficulties of defining the concepts, the tension between history and hermeneutics in approaching them, and the problem of tracing sources for surrealist thought, since the movement largely generates knowledge through exchanges in social and intersubjective settings.

Giuliano D'Amico (University of Oslo): "The Fantasy of Peer Gynt: appropriation, overinterpretation, or...?"

My paper's starting point will be *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt*, an adaptation of a selection of scenes from Ibsen's play that was played in Scotland in 1908 and published as book a year after. Isabelle M. Pagan, the translator and stage manager of the play, was an astrologist and theosophist linked to the so-called Orpheus Lodge of the Theosophical Society in Edinburgh, that used theatre and the arts as a means of spiritual training. *The Fantasy of Peer Gynt* can be considered as the culmination of a long-lasting theosophical interest in Ibsen's works, that started with the first British translation of *A Doll's House* (1882), which was packaged as a theosophical-feminist play, and continued through the years with a series of lectures and articles. Bringing in concepts like the astral plane, karma and reincarnation into *Peer Gynt*, Pagan's adaptation bears the mark of overinterpretation, and yet her statement about the play is the following: "Has *Peer Gynt* a Key? And how far is it legitimate to insist on the mystic interpretation of a work of art for which the author has emphatically disclaimed any hidden or esoteric meaning whatever? The question is most fitly answered by another: How far is it possible for a poet, writing in the full flow of what is loosely termed inspiration, to gauge, fully and accurately, the value – on all the planes – of what he has written?" This statement spurs a number of general methodological questions that I will be glad to discuss during the workshop. How can we make sense of "esoteric" interpretations of a work of art that *do not* claim to have found "the ultimate truth" about said work, as many such interpretations tend to do? How to deal with what Umberto Eco calls "overinterpretation", when the artistic result is nevertheless noteworthy? What about the author's intentions, a category which has been traditionally disregarded by modern literary theory, but that still pops up when assessing esoteric readings of literary and/or artistic works?