

# Occult Performances and Reflections: The everyday occult in visual culture

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The occult – the hidden – has been prevalent in various art forms for centuries. Christopher Partridge coined the term ‘occulture’ in 2004 in an effort to recognise the occult in the everyday, theorising the processes involved when popular culture disseminates occult ideas and beliefs to a wider audience. These occult and esoteric traditions are no longer hidden; instead the culture in which they are embedded has become familiar – they are ordinary and everyday.

Visual culture, as part of a broader popular culture, represents a fertile vehicle for the occult to enter everyday consciousness, even when the esoteric origins of those ideas remain unknown to the receiver. This is in opposition to secretive practices of a cultic milieu, when the occult was intended for an exclusive audience privileged with sacred and mysterious knowledge, such as, for example, ritual performances by and for adepts of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

This session will investigate the reflection and representation of occult ideas, beliefs and practices that manifest in everyday and popular forms of art. Focusing particularly on performance art, such as theatre and dance, as well as film, photography and print, this session explores occult currents in visual culture from the 1870s to the present day.

## Speakers and Abstracts

### **Occultism on the Pacific: Theosophical performances in San Diego, 1898 – 1915**

*Grace Converse (University of Southern California)*

In 1898, Katherine Tingley, the leader of the American Section of the Theosophical Society, moved the Society’s headquarters to the San Diego-adjacent Point Loma peninsula. With this new headquarters – known as Lomaland – Tingley not only brought theatrical occultist rituals to the area but established venues for the performing arts. Founded when San Diego’s population hovered near 18,000, Lomaland became central to the city’s cultural development. Its novel architecture – inspired by ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt, and turquoise and amethyst glass domes that were visible from afar – was a popular attraction for guests of the nearby Hotel del Coronado. Among the site’s structures that evoked antiquity was North America’s first open-air Greek theatre. Here, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the Lomaland community performed Shakespeare’s masterworks and Greek tragedies and gave classical music concerts; children danced in seasonal recitals. While those involved in these productions were Lomaland residents, the performances were often open to the public. Tingley’s theatrical imprint on San Diego extended beyond Lomaland into the centre of the growing city, where she purchased the Fisher Opera House in the city’s downtown and renamed it the Isis Theater. This paper explores the influence of Lomaland and theosophical performance on the cultural development of San Diego from the founding of Lomaland in 1898 to the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. Tingley’s initiatives at once introduced classical performance traditions to a young city while mitigating public scepticism of Lomaland’s occultism.

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### **An Unfinished Transformation?: Occult symbolism in Leonora Carrington’s *Pénélope***

*Rachael Grew (Loughborough University)*

The occult interests of Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), particularly her knowledge and use of alchemical imagery, are well-known and often discussed in relation to her painting and prose. However, her use of such imagery in the context of theatrical design has received less attention. This paper will examine Carrington’s use of alchemical and other occult symbolism and iconography in her 1946 play *Pénélope*.

Based on her 1939 short story ‘The Oval Lady’, Carrington’s play tells the story of a young woman in love with her rocking horse, and their struggle to escape the clutches of her sinister bourgeois father and his cronies. Beneath this fantastical narrative lies the tale of a gendered struggle between mundane reality and

the magical, in which the female element defies the conventions of not only mid-20th society, but also the gender binaries of alchemical doctrine. By analysing Carrington's set and costume design for *Pénélope*, I argue that her use of occult symbolism and iconography produces a female identity that is manifold and constantly in flux.

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### **'Total F\*\*\*ing Armageddon'? Disentangling the Mythologies of Early Norwegian Black Metal** *Lucy Weir (University of Edinburgh)*

The enduring legacy of the Satanic panic is etched upon the recent histories of popular and underground cultures alike. Concern for the safeguarding of children and young people, it seems, readily slips into histrionic indictments of malevolent forces at work, encompassing such diverse media as horror films, video games, and even the seemingly-innocuous territory of Peppa Pig's YouTube channel.

The highly-performative realm of alternative music has frequently been the target of public anxiety; accusations of Satanism became commonplace throughout the 1980s, often coupled with fantastical allegations of deviant sexual practices, violence, and even cannibalism. Within this febrile landscape, the early Norwegian black metal scene is a rare example of moralising angst being founded on actual instances of arson, suicide, and murder. Nonetheless, these documented events are beset by exaggeration – a mythology has enveloped the movement, one that may have been initiated by the musicians themselves, but was ultimately cemented by the popular press.

This paper critically evaluates the mythologisation of the early black metal scene. The movement was riven by contradiction and internal conflict, leading to a brinkmanship that resulted in several deaths and the destruction of multiple churches. My analysis examines sensationalised reporting of arson and suicide, debunking allegations of organised Satanic violence in favour of a more critical evaluation of reporting standards around counter-cultures. Viewed in light of more recent moral panics (including the 2019 'Momo' conspiracy), I suggest that the black metal narrative might impart valuable lessons about media responsibility and the necessity of critical thought.

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### **Brexit and the Occult: Racism, whiteness, and visual culture** *Edwin Coomasaru (Courtauld Institute of Art)*

The occult has become an increasing preoccupation across the political spectrum, from Far Right memes to witchcraft imagery in Fourth Wave Feminist activism. In the context of Brexit, both Leavers and Remainers frequently use the occult as a metaphor to mock or attack the other side of the political divide. The press have also picked it up as a symbol for our current historical moment: from headlines exclaiming 'Tarot revival thanks to Brexit' (BBC News), or 'Cults, human sacrifice and pagan sex: how folk horror is flowering again in Brexit Britain' (*The Guardian*).

How much are such references be implicated in – or complicated by – histories of colonialism, racism, and whiteness? Rhetoric of 'civilisation' versus 'barbarism' may have underpinned an imperial imagination grounded on ideas of white saviours and custodians (the supposed 'rational' looking out for the 'irrational') – but such fantasies certainly still haunt: from the War on Terror, to the perception held by numerous journalists that before 2016 the UK ran on cold scientific logic and has since been taken over by 'emotion'. Alexandrina Hemsley and Jamila Johnson-Small's video-artwork *Saved* (2018) was commissioned by Somerset House to explore the building's naval history. In the film, two figures of colour in swimwear perform ritualistic ceremonies in a magical, other-worldly wasteland – their bodies multiplying and remixing in a disorientating hallucinogenic liquid landscape. This paper will consider how occult interest and anxiety are built into the structure of, but might also trouble, fantasies of whiteness in the context of Brexit.

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## **Peak Paraconceptualism**

*Grace A Williams (Artist, Independent Researcher)*

The term 'Paraconceptualism' surfaced from the field of visual cultures in 2006 with the authorship of Alexandra Kokoli in response to Susan Hiller's body of work, which sits just sideways of conceptualism, neighbouring the paranormal and highlighting a devalued site of culture where women and the feminine have been conversely privileged.

The definition of this site has been overwhelmingly marked by a spike in contemporary feminism that engages with the figure of the witch. The reclaiming of the stereotyped irrationality of the female body through the iconography of 'the hag' (Solee, 2017) marks a transformation of the transgressions towards the female sex during the witch hunts of the early modern period into a unique icon of protest. Contemporary women's rights issues, including abortion and sex working, have found a radical symbol in the figure of the witch, engendering an everyday performance of the Occult that speaks to the body politics of being a woman in the age of #metoo.

Historically, female bodies have been privileged in matters of the spiritual due to their impressionable and sympathetic constitutions, even their leakiness (menstruating, urinating, gossiping). The practices of spiritualism and black magick provided tangible power grabs for financial independence and in select cases a unique framework to support independent studio practice.

This paper presents a rich engagement with the supernatural female body in visual culture, critically examining how interaction with the occult often reflects moments of extreme social disorder (Adorno).

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## **Queer Heretics: The Convergence of witchcraft and queerness in contemporary art and art spaces**

*Kevin Talmer Whiteneir (Art Institute of Chicago)*

Within the west, the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed the rise of witches as icons of power for the disenfranchised. Their history is one of persecution, the quest for empowerment, and the utilisation of unsanctioned knowledge and rituals for survival. The queer and queered body follow a similar trajectory. In the contemporary era, both have largely emerged from their maligned positions as archetypes of counterhegemony. Queerness and witchcraft operate not only as tools but as identitarian positions, which proffer the birth of an era open to greater possibilities of being.

In this paper I will analyse the intersection of witchcraft and queerness in contemporary art. Focusing on my ongoing art series *Queer Heretics*, an intervention in the contemporary art world as both a queer artist and art historian of colour. Implementing the performative rituals and myths of witchcraft, I illuminate the queer, racial, ethnic, and cultural narratives that inform the historic and contemporary archetype of the witch. In doing so, I argue that the witch functions as an iconic symbol that represents unsanctioned knowledge, and that the utilisation of this knowledge can empower marginalised peoples to disestablish restrictive sociocultural systems and in their place manifest realities that extend the borders of our cultural boundaries.