Dossier, A Deep History of Arts of the Secret

Introduction

Laura U. Marks

It was a great pleasure, while I was teaching in the Visual and Environmental Studies department at Harvard in fall 2018, to share with students my new research on the medieval Islamic practices of magic that, swathed in practices of secrecy as attractive as the magic contents themselves, traveled into early modern Europe. Magic relies on the premise that, if the universe can understood as an interconnected, deeply folded whole, it is possible to carry out operations on it. These operations, and the knowledge that makes them possible, comprise the arts of the secret. The course argued that these sources in Islamic Neoplatonism, Shi‘i practices of secrecy, alchemy, and astrology, restyled in European Hermeticism, furnished the concepts of encryption, dissimulation, and enfoldment that are deeply woven into modern philosophy, art, and computation. We immersed ourselves in comparative cosmology and the making of talismans, read Leibniz’s *Monadology*, Deleuze’s *The Fold*, theories of the Baroque, theories of dissimulation and opacity from Jābir ibn Hayyān to Édouard Glissant, my theory of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, and concepts of operational images (Haroun Farocki’s term) that, I argue, comprise our modern-day talismans.

The students, undergraduates and graduates, rose to the challenge of my weird syllabus and baffling (but undeniably attractive) film series, every Wednesday night at the Harvard Film Archive. I was delighted with the way each student adapted the arts of the secret to their own interests and expertise. This dossier contains some of the beautiful essays they wrote.

Meanwhile, I have been sharing my research on the deep history of arts of the secret in a series of talks titled “Talisman-images: from the cosmos to your body,” a version of which will appear in *Deleuze, Guattari, and the Arts of Multiplicity*, ed. Radek Przedpelski and S.E. Wilmer (Edinburgh University Press). I compressed some of my most exciting findings into a catalogue essay, “[Disturbing Sympathies](http://nomegallery.com/chapter/disturbing-sympathies/),” for the exhibition “Agency” curated by James Bridle at Nome, Berlin.

Several students ran with the idea that secrecy, concealment, and encryption rightfully resist the tropes of transparency and enlightenment on which our disenchanted world relies. Nace Zavrl, Ph.D. student in Film Studies, gives an abstract of his cinephilic argument in “Frozen to Death: The Impasse of Analysis” that films retain a core of enfolded mystery that resist the most exigent efforts of close textual analysis and technological prurience. In “The Modern Condition of *Anaesthesis*,” MA student Ezra Lee builds a cosmology that arises from a mordant critique of modern de-sensitization. Lee turns to the Neoplatonist magical texts of the eleventh-century*Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* and fourteenth-century Florentine magician-philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino for models of an enchanted cosmology, in which sensuous materiality retains links to its divine sources. Scent is the sense Lee privileges for its capacity to disclose a world connected both vertically, to the heavens, and horizontally, among modern humans otherwise deodorized and anaesthetized. Lee writes with vividness, and also beauty, as when he elaborates how the senses can unfold immanent links to the cosmos.

Week after week we talked about folds, diagrammed folded cosmoses, and imagined how bodies and souls intermingle in a folded universe. BFA student George Liu’s “Possessive Perception in *The Love Witch*” introduces a strikingly original theory of possessive perception that synthesizes Leibniz/Deleuze’s theory of the monad, Alfred Gell’s art index, and other sources. “To be seen or perceived distinctly, for instance by a lover, is to be enfolded,” Liu writes. This thesis develops from Liu’s exquisitely perceptive analysis of Anna Biller’s provocative film *The Love Witch* (2016). Liu’s theory of the gaze is diametrically opposite to the well-known theory of the “male gaze,” for Elaine’s gaze threatens to possess and consume her beloved by completely filling its (Leibnizian) clear zone, while her glamour and masklike face repel the beloved’s attempt to know her. To be seen can be either medicine or poison, Liu argues, depending on the other ensouled bodies with which the monad mixes.

We studied the Afrofuturism movement as a key example of artworks that re-fold history, i.e., fabulate, for reason of political need. Inspired by Afrofuturism, Visiting Fellow Alina Khakoo identifies in “Raqs Media Collective and the Powers and Textures of the False” a recent movement of postcolonial fabulation in South Asian art. In an exquisite close analyses of Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective’s artworks and self-presentation, Khakoo shows that the collective, rather than try to rebut the colonial regime of truth, deploys the powers of the false (Nietzsche, Deleuze) to cultivate creative paths of ambiguity, meanwhile inkfishing audiences’ attempts to master their practice by overwhelming them with information. In a cameo, Hetain Patel’s *The Jump* devises a bootstrapping fabulation by appropriating the powers of Superman. Khakoo plans to devote her PhD to this topic, so we can look forward to more findings.

Several students examined the transmission of secret practices of magic, seriously putting their minds to how we can understand these practices to be effective. BA student Sarah Toomey’s complex and thoroughly original “Do Tattoos Function Like Amulets?” draws together a deep history of seafaring tattoos, Gell’s theory of the art index, amulet-like films, and original diagrams and charts to argue that tattoos function as amulets that may succeed in protecting the user from harm. Toomey builds a theory that tattoos and their users share a language insofar as the inks that penetrate the skin align inward and outward identity.

Also re-valuing practices of sympathetic magic, BFA student Kay Xia’s focused and fiercely feminist “Self-Possessed: The Witch as a Symbol of the Empowered Woman” shows that women of our time are turning Early Modern attitudes toward witches upside down. Damned whether they did or did not pass patriarchal tests, transgressive females of the early modern period were punished for their secret knowledge—knowledge that, Xia shows, forms much of the foundation of modern science. In closely guarded recipes and books of secrets then, as in the #MeToo movement now, women relied on the secret circulation of knowledge that the powerful dismiss as gossip. Xia celebrates, though not without critiquing, contemporary witchcraft movements that agitate among feminist, LGBTQ, and environmentalist movements.

Jack Spira and Zeynep Toraman explored the deep roots of artificial life in thrillingly original comparative works. Spira’s learned essay “Notes Toward a Supreme Friction: Divine Speech in *Sefer Yetzirah* and Jābirean *Takwīn*” examines Kabbalistic and Ismāʿīlī practices that veered perilously close to imitating God: the *Sefer Yetzirah*’s instructions for making a golem, and Jābir ibn Hayyān’s alchemical recipes for creating life. In divergent but remarkably parallel ways, both secret traditions allow practitioners to create artificial life by endowing words, letters and figures with transformative powers. Spira, studying a Bachelor of Science in Economics at MIT, examines the computational practices at work in each: the *Sefer Yetzirah*’s algorithmic and also surprisingly embodied recipe for creating a golem, and Jābir’s science of balance (*mizān*), crucial for his practical experiments in alchemy, that also yields a proto-computer.

Toraman’s “Dreaming of Emperors: The Occulted Geometry of a Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Manuscript and Its Reemergence in Neural Network Generated Images” argues that a sixteenth-century Ottoman portrait manuscript and Google’s computer-vision program DeepDream both appeal to an intimate, scrutinizing gaze that discovers life in non-figurative patterns. Toraman, a composer and Ph.D. student in Music Composition, draws on contemporary art historians who deploy Ibn al-Haytham’s theory of perception to argue that both bodies of work generate layers of ornament that initially overwhelm a viewer’s perception, then give it entry into the image by way of a small point. I’m delighted that Toraman fruitfully extends my comparisons of embodied perception in Islamic and contemporary algorithmic art in *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*. I can’t bring myself to agree that DeepDream’s software produces an immanent infinite, but Toraman’s comparison is boldly argued and her analyses of Nakkaş Osman’s portraits exquisite and convincing.

I am proud to share these fine essays with you. Please note that each work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Please contact me at marks[at]sfu[dot]ca if you would like to get in touch with any of the writers.

Also included here is the full text of the film series I programmed in association with the course, “Secrets, Enigmas, and Operative Images.”