Techno-Kabbalah

The Performative Language of Magick and the Production of Occult Knowledge

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And begin by combining this name, YHVH, at the beginning alone, and examine all its combinations and move it and turn it about like a wheel, front and back, like a scroll, and do not let it rest, but when you see its matter strengthened because of the great motion, because of the fear of confusion of your imagination and the rolling about of your thoughts, and when you let it rest, return to it and ask it, until there shall come to your hand a word of wisdom from it, do not abandon it.

—Abraham Abulafia (in Eco 1987:27)

It [the Sepher Yetzirah]’s a book on mysticism, not mysticism itself.

[...] But I suspect someone is trying to play a trick on you.

—a Hebrew scholar to Agent Mulder

The X-Files, “Kaddish,” 16 February 1997

The Text Is Out There

In the X-Files episode entitled “Kaddish,” FBI agents Scully and Mulder find a copy of the Sepher Yetzirah, the Jewish book of mysticism, under a corpse that has been desecrated. That corpse belongs to Isaac Luria, a Hasidic Jewish victim of a hate crime, who had been rumored to have risen from his grave to exact revenge on the young racists who killed him in the name of white supremacy. Mulder comments on how redundant the act of desecration is just before the book bursts into flames. Later, when questioning a Hebrew scholar on the book, Scully and Mulder are told that the Sepher Yetzirah is “a book on mysticism, not mysticism itself.” The scholar then adds, “But I suspect someone is trying to play a trick on you.” The entire episode plays on a complex dialectic of magical action (tricks) and speech-act theory, in which the hate speech encouraged by a paranoid propagandist who publishes and disseminates anti-Semitic pamphlets leads to murderous acts. When the propagandist berates the teenage boy who murders Luria, the boy retorts that unlike the propagandist, who hides behind words, he takes action. He then adds,
“Do you think they killed my friends with words?” Ironically, words are exactly what bring about the creation of a golem, an abomination born out of language, given life to seek revenge.

The Hebrew letters aleph, mem, and teth, written on the golem’s hand, spell the word emet (truth), bringing the golem into existence. To destroy the golem, one must erase the first letter, aleph, transforming emet into met (dead). The golem, then, is the truth that becomes a way to fight back, based on what the Hebrew scholar describes as “the power of the word to create as well as destroy.” The golem-maker’s father further proves this by emphatically asserting that he has given Mulder the truth after being questioned about the deaths of the racist boys. In fact, he has literally given Mulder the “truth,” but in the physical form of the golem. All of these connections tie in nicely with the show’s overall theme of the search for truth, demonstrated by the show’s opening tag line, “The Truth Is Out There.”

Howard Gordon, the episode’s writer, has chosen the golem as a particularly fantastic example of how the Hebrew mystical philosophy and practice of Kabbalah utilizes words that, in an Austenian performative sense, “do something.” The Kabbalistic principles central to “Kaddish” are caught up in the corpse and the redundancy of the golem, the body without a soul (or organs), the form without content, the cipher without meaning brought to life by truth. For my purposes, *The X-Files* becomes a fitting example of a highly disseminated media golem, illustrating how occult knowledge becomes produced and broadcast for both adept and uninitiated audiences. However, *The X-Files* is not only a popularization of the “occult” in terms of its content, but the program, with its cult status and highly recognized presence on the internet, also engages in a play on language, epistemology, and media trajectory. With
internet technology, consumers can obtain information on the occult just as they can about *The X-Files* through episode guides, chat rooms, merchandising, etc. Commercial availability, promotional literature, and consumerism characterize the reciprocal relationship between technological media and the occult: both participate in an exchange that blurs their distinctions. Proliferation, dissemination, and access are the magic words in this constant dance between secrecy and revelation that has threatened to implode the meaning of “occult” as “hidden” since the advent of late modernism. Indeed, when both Aleister Crowley and Israel Regardie scandalized the other members of the Golden Dawn—the highly influential magical society formed in late-19th-century England—by publishing “secret” rituals and knowledge about the Dawn, they insured its uneasy survival into the present day. But the typically occultist wink and nudge hinted that, of course they didn’t reveal everything, that knowledge was more than books, and the experience of initiation was key.

These negotiations between secrecy and revelation become what I would call “occult performances”: performed acts that simultaneously illuminate and obscure. In the context of a popular television show, occult performances are a series of nested operations that begin at a narrative level (the secret government agencies in relation to the protagonists), continue into content analysis (the series’ writers in relation to the viewers), and land in media analysis (the *X-Files* phenomenon in relation to the fan who reads the books, uses the CD-ROM, accesses the website, etc.). However, these negotiations are not simply unidirectional. Occultism also describes the attitude of the consumer/producer acting as the interpreter who deciphers the text or the performance, thus insuring the continuation of the performance. *The X-Files* is the most salient example of this set of operations, and one of the most accessible forms of occultism available to consumers. Yet, this formula is certainly not limited to television viewing. Occultism becomes a methodology for approaching history, textuality, and media itself, including especially the proliferation of internet technology and its possibilities for widespread dissemination of information. This method is characterized by making connections between seemingly disparate facts and events and assuming a hidden discourse behind these facts and events. Like the *X-Files* viewer who weaves a conspiratorial narrative based on information the show’s writers supply, the occultist consumer interprets perception and information according to self-determined laws, creating a system of coherence where one previously did not exist.

*The Metaphysic of Dunces*

Occultism in the West has not been taken seriously very often. However, after Hitler’s blatant use of black magic and occultism as a propagandist tool, the world was forced to take notice. Once it was seen that occult belief and practice could not only influence politics, but could lead to dangerous, shocking, and earth-shaking events, occultism as a movement and belief system had to be studied. Writing in 1947, and still feeling the shock waves of fascism and anti-Semitism, Theodor Adorno laid out his “Theses against occultism,” not only as a critique of late capitalism, but also as groundwork for his subsequent content analysis–based study of Los Angeles Times astrology columns entitled “The stars down to Earth.” In this essay, Adorno would contend that the occult does have a “rational” place in popular culture, evidenced by the popularity of the astrology column as a text. Making a significant leap in thinking on the occult, he posits the concept of secondary superstition:

By this we mean that the individual’s own primary experience of the occult, whatever its psychological meaning and roots or its validity, rarely, if ever, enter the social phenomenon to which our studies are devoted.
Here, the occult appears rather institutionalized, objectified, and to a large extent, socialized. (1994:33–36)

The social phenomenon that Adorno describes is an occultism somehow separate from the psychic or supernatural experiences traditionally associated with the occult. Adorno claims that the occult, which he pejoratively categorizes as “the metaphysic of dunces,” leads to a regression in consciousness. He argues that “occultism is a reflex-action to the subjectification of all meaning, the complement of reification” (1994:129), in which meaning, no longer easily recognizable in rationalist forms, is desperately attributed to irrational practices. In this way, Adorno believes, occultism can become a tool for ideological domination.

Although Adorno presents this irrational belief as the reason for the popularity of astrology columns, there is a crucial difference between this passive, irrational belief and what I would argue is an active, nonrational method for interpreting social phenomena and textual relations. His concept of secondary superstition certainly is valid in that those who practice this method may not have experience with supernatural or psychic phenomena as such. However, as authors in and out of the inner folds of magical practice have attested, this magic is nomadic, dependent upon the context in which it operates and the intention of the user. As Starhawk mentions in The Spiral Dance, one of the most widely read contemporary books on neopagan witchcraft and magic, “Magic, like chemistry, is a set of techniques that can be put to the service of any philosophy” (1979:28). Similarly, Michael Taussig, in The Magic of the State, ascribes to magic this status of free-floating signifier, claiming “these very same powers of confusion and illusion can be turned against the state and used by ordinary people” (1997:121). Thus, magic can be used to resist and empower just as easily as it can be used to manipulate and control.

The distinction here between occultism and magic is important because, as scholars like Richard Kieckhefer (1994) have gone to great lengths to prove, concepts of magic, specifically anachronistic anthropological theories, cannot be freely applied to every culture or every historical period. Occultism, then, is a series of attitudes, operations, performances, negotiations, and discourses that may or may not involve the practice of actual magic. In this context, magic consists of acts that are ritual performances enacted to achieve specific results. These acts are always grounded within a given culture, time period, and setting, and are contingent upon the personality of the magician(s). However, slippage between occultism and magic can become quite common, and acts like interpretation, performance, and dissemination—already occupying an occult space—take on the efficacy of magical acts.

**Suspect, Only Suspect**

The magical text used by *The X-Files* as a *grimoire* for the manipulation of bodies and language is the Sepher Yezirah, the Book of Formation, one of the earliest Kabbalistic texts. This work is a primary example of an occult text that can be used as foundational building blocks for magical ritual. The book’s occult quality is first established by its unclear origin. The inability to mark precise origins becomes a defining factor for the occult text, allowing for easy reification. Although its precise date of composition has been disputed to be anywhere from between the third and sixth century C.E., legend claims that the

2. A scene from the *X-Files* episode “Kaddish” found on the internet. (Image courtesy of J. Lawton Winslade)
text was transcribed by Abraham 4000 years ago. The Sepher Yetzirah, a remarkably small book of a few hundred words, contains the secrets of the universe encoded within the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in a direct application of what might be called a Kabbalistic semiotics. This encryption, achieving recent popularity thanks to Michael Drosnin’s unlikely bestseller The Bible Code (1997), is a code that Kabbalists have spent their lifetimes trying to crack. According to legend, some magic-using Kabbalists have used the code for more practical applications, like golem-making.

Taking letters from the Yetzirah and using them to create the golem is just one example of how language from a sacred, mysterious text can be decontextualized and rearranged according to the will of the reader/magician. The most extreme textual use of magical Kabbalah can be found in the method of gematria, developed by 13th-century Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. Abulafia used the Hebrew language as a technique to find correspondences between phrases. Each Hebrew letter is represented by a number, and the numbers that make up a word or phrase are added together, creating a mathematical sum. Words or phrases with identical sums are then connected and interpreted in order to find subtle meanings in the text. Depending on how the letters are combined, arranged, recombined, and rearranged, an innumerable set of hidden meanings can be discovered. Not only is the text never finished, but it continually hides a secret.

On the subject of the encoded text, Jacques Derrida points to that text’s willing participation in the trick of hiding. He then denies that this hiding and disappearance is due to a secret, implying that one would always assume a secret discourse. He states:

A text is not a text unless it hides from its first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, imperceptible. Its laws and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of the secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception. (1981:63)

Derrida, as trickster magician, must deny the existence of the secret, while at the same time propagating it by assuming an occult relationship with the text that must be disproven. This dance between what Taussig calls “the skilled revelation of skilled concealment” is the magical act predicated upon language, an esoteric art itself. This is the closely guarded knowledge that must be controlled. In order to speak about or write occult, one must always be in the act of erasure, constantly creating palimpsests.

In a recent translation and exegesis of a medieval magical text entitled Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer’s Manual of the Fifteenth Century (1998), Kieckhefer recounts several tales of heresy trials in which magician’s books were ascribed a personality, then accused, defended, and punished as if they were people. The reading of the text is tantamount to a dialogue with evil, and the text is treated as a co-actant in the assumed performance of magical rites. This unique relation between script and performance marks “a point of contact between sacred texts (permanent authoritative repositories of power) and their performance (which utilizes this power for specific occasions)” (1998:8). Thus, books were burned not so much because they were the magician’s tools but because the texts themselves were guilty of heresy. Considering the frequency of such practices, the spontaneously combusting book of magic in The X-Files episode is an apt image.

Magical performance, then, assumes a particular relation between performer and text. In the magical act of citation, for instance, authoritative powers are evoked and bent to the will of the writer/performer. Like the academician,
the magician is constantly interacting with available texts. Indeed, in studies on the library of the renowned Elizabethan mathematician and magician John Dee, much of his work was considered to be marginalia: notes written in other texts that constitute Dee’s particular utilization of these texts for his own purposes, both magical and mundane (see Sherman 1995). Many modern magician/authors, when dealing with the medieval grimoires, like the Goetia or the Lesser Key of Solomon, usually agree that these texts assumed a certain amount of magical training that would help the magician avoid the traps intentionally laid in the text to protect the operations from being performed by the wrong hands (see Greer 1997; Kraig 1988). Similarly, magical miscellanies, the subject of Kieckhefer’s book, were often simply notes and marginalia intended to aid the magician who presumably already knew what to do with the information at hand.

Therefore, the text is only raw material for the action, as in the case of the Sepher Yetzirah and the act of golem creation. The possible letter combinations that can create the golem are always predicated upon holy names, the most important name being the tetragrammaton: YHVH, Yod-He-Vav-Heh, the unspoken four-lettered name of God, the sacred and unknown acronym. The basis for Kabbalistic magic must be an uncertainty that is at the same time a basis for a faith and a technique. Derrida speaks of the holy name in terms of:

its untranslatability but also its iterability (which is to say, of that which makes it a site of repeatability, of idealization and therefore, already, of technoscience [...] of its link to performativity of calling in prayer, of its bond to that which appeals to the faith of the other. (1998:6)

The vibration of the holy name then becomes a technique, using language as a magical tool, a prosthesis. The goal is transformation of spirit into matter, as in the golem, or conversely, transformation of the matter of the magician into spirit attuned to the divine. As Derrida states in “Faith and Knowledge”: “the space of such technical experience tends to become more animistic, magical, mystical” (1998:56).

Therefore, it is no surprise that the tool for recombing letters in order to discover a secret plan in Umberto Eco’s novel Foucault’s Pendulum is a computer. Eco’s digital talisman is aptly named Abulafia. The character of Belbo celebrates his “totally spiritual machine” which, by way of its programmability and simple editing functions, can return writing to “the happiness of a first encounter” (1987:26). It is this highly mediated, almost ritualized, function of writing and programming with a computer that gives the illusion of unmediated immediacy. The computer screen becomes the Derridean Kabbalistic mirror, which simultaneously reveals and conceals. It is “the visible projection surface for images, and that which prevents one from seeing the other side” (1981:314). In Eco’s novel, Belbo acknowledges the occult possibilities of a computer that protects secrets with passwords and magically transfers information to disk, easily transported and easily erased if it falls into the wrong hands. The first operation he performs is a simple program that calculates possible permutations for the tetragrammaton. Belbo’s colleague Diotallevi resists the computerized golem, seeing it as a shortcut to divine wisdom:

My dear friend, you’ll never understand anything. It’s true that the Torah—the visible Torah, that is—is only one of the possible permutations of the letters of the eternal Torah, as God created it and delivered it to the angels. By rearranging the letters of the book over the centuries, we may someday arrive again at the original Torah. But the important thing is not the finding, it is the seeking, it is the devotion with which one
spins the wheel of prayer and scripture, discovering the truth little by little. If this machine gave you the truth immediately, you would not recognize it, because your heart would not have been purified by the long quest [...]. The word must be eaten very slowly. It must melt on the tongue before you can dissolve and reorder it. (1987:28–29)

Here, Diatollevi rejects technology for tradition, positing the notion of the “unwritten” Kabbalah, the book that is always in the process of being written even as it maintains its incorporeality: in essence, the ultimate readerly text.

The word not only becomes fragmented in order to facilitate permutation, it becomes erased even as it is invoked. Following the practice of Christian mystics, meditation on the word becomes more than just exegesis, it becomes a bodily digestion: a swallowing, as Michel de Certeau reminds us when he quotes Madame Guyon in “The Institution of Rot.” The mystical word in the act of intake occupies an interspace, and “demands attention even though it has nothing to justify it other than what it produces here and there: a ‘formula’ that is heard, a ‘small fragment of truth’—a splinter of what?” (1986:36). This mystical word, a name of God, is often invoked in Kabbalistic ritual as flaming letters—a substantive visualization. The power of the Kabbalistic magician consists in the ability to bring words, images, and thoughtforms into manifestation. The magician visualizes the holy name before it is uttered, and through an act of will, creates a simulacrum in the Yetziratic world, a realm of existence consisting of images and ideas awaiting manifestation. Often referred to by magical practitioners as “the astral plane,” this spirit world is the primary conduit through which magical acts are performed. The magician finally brings the power of the name into physical manifestation (the Assiatic world) by the act of utterance, performed in what is known as a vibratory formula, in which the word is loudly and resonantly chanted. The magical act consists, then, in traversing the astral gap between the potentially spoken and the actually spoken.

In a further Kabbalistic reference, the Jewish character who becomes golemized in the X-Files episode is named Isaac Luria, after the 16th-century Kabbalist who transformed Judaic thought by introducing the concept of zimzum to explain the creation of the universe. In an interesting twist on the word made flesh, Luria’s God creates the universe not by revelation or emanation, but by concealment and contraction:

How did he produce and create the world? Like a man who gathers in and contracts his breath, so that the smaller may contain the larger, so he contracted His light into a hand’s breadth, and the world was left in darkness, and in that darkness He cut boulders and hewed rocks. (Schlem 1974:129)

A space is created through contraction, concealment, and silence. This is the space of the secret that will inevitably be filled by esoteric knowledge accessible only to those who have the password. Creating a space for the secret to hide—like the swallowing of the word and the process of gematria—becomes a magical performative act only obtainable through a technique, a ritual, a vibration. This “spacing” of the secret is an operation always linked with initiation, a way of accessing the secret knowledge. Initiation introduces the novice to the secret knowledge, often by physically bringing the initiate into the space where the secret is hidden: the temple, the cave, the concealed alcove, the crypt, the library.

The characters of Foucault’s Pendulum learn that the process of gematria and the spacing of the secret become the ultimate technologies for finding hidden meanings:
Any fact becomes important when it’s connected to another. The connection changes the perspective; it leads you to think that every detail of the world, every voice, every word written or spoken has more than its literal meaning, that it tells us of a Secret. The rule is simple: Suspect, only suspect. (1987:314)

Although this rule becomes a problematic yet powerful postmodern tactic for reading texts, histories, culture, and media in an always already magical world, its roots are Kabbalistic. Indeed, the polysemy of the Torah, Sepher Yetzirah, and other Kabbalistic works become raw material for manipulation only through the kind of occult operation Eco’s characters theorize. In Derrida’s essay “Dissemination,” he recognizes the power of the absolutely disseminated Kabbalah, its correspondences, and computations of value. Taking into account both gematria and zimzum, Derrida states that “even while it keeps the texts it culls alive, this play of insemination—or grafting—destroys their hegemonic center, subverts their authority and their uniqueness” (1981:344).

The K-Files

Belbo and Casaubon are ultimately faced with the trick of the Secret: that there is no secret. Derrida brings this sort of paradoxical occultism into play when he imagines critics accusing deconstructionists of forming a secret society, in his essay on negative theology, entitled “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (1995). Just as Taussig concludes that it is this paradox that always resists the wedge of truth and is essential to the public secret upon which society is predicated, Derrida acknowledges that the existence of the insubstantial secret is a necessary part of apophatic discourse, and the spacing of the secret is tantamount to its existence: “It is necessary to stand or step aside, to find the place proper to the experience of the secret” (1995:90). In the past, this zimzum-like contraction was the necessary move for secret societies that initiate members. Now, the proper place for the experience of the secret has become virtual.

The attendant question becomes: Where does one find occult knowledge? When “occult” books, even ancient grimoires, are available at any bookstore, library, or computer, what is hidden? Widespread dissemination of once forbidden and secret occult knowledge in popular bookstores and on the internet has become an essential paradox in the study of esoteric magic. In fact, one could argue that the current explosion of internet use is tantamount to the point in medieval history when paper was made more available, allowing unprecedented access to books, wider dissemination of occult knowledge, and further opportunity for fear of literacy and heresy (Kieckhefer 1998). What happens, then, when the text implodes and the physical book gives way to the slippery dimensions of cyberspace?

The ancient quest for knowledge has become the web search, the pilgrimage to the sacred (web)site. Countless religious, magical, and mystical organizations have created sites as depositories of knowledge and nodes of networking. Prayers and requests for the Pope can even be sent to the Vatican’s website. The internet is the spiritual ether carrying prayers across an unseen divide, the occult operation par excellence. In cyberspace, the astral and the technological converge in a process Derrida calls “cederomisation,” the encoding of a text onto the medium of CD-ROM. He argues that religion—and I would also add the occult—fights its wars through technology, demonstrated by the cederomisation of papal encyclicals. The power of technological media is, according to Derrida, its power to bear witness, but is at the same time its magical ability to reveal and conceal, detaching and reattaching connections, playing with place: “It delocalizes, removes or brings close, actualizes or virtualizes, accelerates or decelerates” (1998:45). The written word becomes a hidden code and “information exhausts itself in the staging of
communication.” Stripped of its material textuality, “the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable” (Baudrillard 1994:83).

Type in “kabbalah.com” and you arrive at the sleekly designed website for the Kabbalah Centre in southern California (plate 3). An earlier version of the homepage greeted the seeker with a continually changing series of topics, questions, and answers—all with accompanying graphics (for example, the title “Immortality” appears with a picture of the later Elvis)—that the site will presumably address. The site hints that it contains secrets pertaining to the origins of humanity, parallel universes, soulmates, and many other topics. Of course, one would assume that the Centre will give you the Kabbalistic interpretation. Once you reach the site map, you can click on the link entitled “The K-Files.” Obviously, in reference to the popular television program, this particular page explains mysteries of the universe using pop-culture analogies. For instance, the Centre’s take on the subject of free will and destiny goes something like this: “Life is like a movie. Reality is like a multiplex cinema.” The page also presents gematria as a form of genetic engineering, in which DNA are a string of chemical letters, further connecting the body with the text in Kabbalistic style. Like its television namesake, the “K-Files” presents “secrets” in an appealing encapsulated form that never fully exhausts the quest. This tease is meant to intrigue and possibly urge the viewer to find out more information about the Centre and the teachings of Kabbalah.

When one attempts to research the history of Kabbalah and the Centre’s role in it, the site presents a very particular history of the teachings, from the Archangel Raziel’s gift of Kabbalah to Adam to the foundation of the Centre itself. We learn that the decree against teaching Kabbalistic principles was lifted by Rabbi Abraham Azulai in the 16th century. The narrative also tells the story of a woman who wanted to learn Kabbalah, unheard of because of the traditional belief that only orthodox married men over 40 may learn it. When she approaches a Rav Berg in Brooklyn, he refuses unless he is given a sign. In a typical tale of occult origins, the woman is visited in a dream by a Rav Brandwein, Berg’s late teacher, who not only gives her his blessing, but urges her to provide the opportunity for all to learn about Kabbalah. Berg and the woman, Karen (her maiden name is never given), are then married and open the Centre. However, in the FAQ page, the Centre still makes the distinction between the basics of Kabbalah (Ta’amei Torah) and the secrets of Kabbalah (Sitrei Torah). The Centre only teaches Ta’amei Torah, in accordance to the injunction by Azulai. The secrets are still limited to those orthodox married men in their forties who qualify to be initiates.
Secrets here are temporary and tenuous. The impermanence of the virtual medium establishes the internet as the ideal locus for occult activity. The insubstantiality of the unwritten text is most clearly displayed when sites and information disappear without a trace. Websites are often updated, demonstrating the unique ability of the internet (and its magician-like programmers) to erase its contents in order to further mystify and obscure. Through this method, information can simply disappear from the screen and live only in the realm of esoteric knowledge, accessible only to those who remember the information being there. Indeed, the impermanence of the text is a recurrent occult trope caught up in issues of orality and textuality. For instance, a rule in ancient Druidry forbade the written record of oral information and tradition, since the act of writing would somehow profane the secrets. When Derrida tackles this issue in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” he appropriately invokes the multivalent figure of Thoth, the Egyptian god whose gift of writing to humankind was ambivalently viewed as both a memory aid and a trick to encourage forgetting. Thoth becomes the god of the occult arts, which once included reading and writing, and also the inspiration for the semi-divine Hermes Trismegistus, the pseudo-mythical figure whose attributed writings became the foundation for Hermeticism. This occult philosophy, emerging from Neoplatonism, was combined with Christianized Cabala to form the foundation for Western magical practice in the Renaissance period. It is no surprise that a trickster figure is the namesake for a tradition that has influenced much of current magical practice involving initiatory systems.

A quintessential model for such systems, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (plate 5), now puts out the call for initiates who “are concerned about the development of society and the spiritual advancement of humankind” through the internet, instead of posting manifestos on academy and church walls like the Rosicrucians of old. The Dawn, formed in 1887 by three Freemasons who were also members of an English chapter of the German Rosicrucians, became the primary repository for occult knowledge in the Victorian era. Their origins were similarly shrouded in mystery; founding member W. Wynn Westcott “discovered” an encoded letter conveying the authority to open a temple for a new secret order. Although historians have

5. The Golden Dawn homepage. (Image courtesy of the Hermetic Order of the Morning Star International)
often cited this cipher manuscript as a hoax, the Dawn’s webpage claims it has new information that proves its validity. In time, the Order was responsible for synthesizing elements of Western occultism, including Egyptian mystery religion, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah. Producing members as varied as Aleister Crowley, W.B. Yeats, and the actress Florence Farr, the Dawn has been the single most important source of information and practice in occult history, influencing the neopagan movement and other magical systems, as well as contemporary knowledge on Tarot, alchemy, and astrology.

The current website for the Golden Dawn is introduced by the graphic of two pillars (plate 6), traditionally marking the entrance to the temple, with a frayed banner stating:

Before stepping between the Pillars, please be aware that any reference to the Golden Dawn is only to the authentic Order formed in 1887. At no time does this reference allude to any organization borrowing or claiming the name today. The True Order has operated under many names over the centuries. Its origins date back to antiquity [...].

Once again the battle call for authenticity is raised, and the internet traveler is taken through the pillars to the next screen for a further welcome. This time, the
initiate passes through two Egyptian Anubis figures, underworld creatures who traditionally served the role of guardians before the entrance to the temple (plate 7). Finally, the initiate reaches the informational homepage for the site. Like many websites, the Golden Dawn site enacts a journey from screen to screen before the reader is able to obtain the knowledge the site contains. This amounts to a virtual pilgrimage, a disembodied dream journey similar to the various levels of spiritual attainment in mystical traditions as varied as the Egyptian, Tibetan, Babylonian, Jewish, and Christian. In many cases, the entrance into the secret vault is only possible through a password, a magical word of passage.

*To Know, to Will, to Dare, and to Be Silent*

The Dawn thrives on the dialectic of concealment and revelation, demonstrated by a picture in the Initiation section of the homepage, in which the officers of the main temple in Los Angeles were pictured in full secret ritual garb, but with black boxes covering their eyes (plate 8). The picture demonstrates what Derrida calls “a halting [that] opens an access without mediation or representation, hence not without an intuitive violence” (1998:49). This operation, a central tenet of postmodern magical practice, is what Taussig characterizes as “intricately moving medleys of skepticism and faith, continuously deferred through the opening and closing of the secret” (1998:240). Inherent in the secret is its at least partial revelation—the secret’s own secretion. Taussig sees the secretion as a technical performance:

Secrecy is infinitely mysterious here because it is allied with and creative of what we might call the sacredness of a hiddenness within the theatricality that mediates between the real and the really made up, no less than between trick and technique. (1998:234)
Occult performance, then, becomes like Thoth’s gift of writing, a trick that hides further levels of meaning and meaninglessness.

In one of several articles on the Golden Dawn homepage, the author, who signs his work with the initials of his order name, writes about the oath of silence, in which “inner” powers are only brought into “outer” existence through the methods of controlled speech, or silence. Being silent is preferable to breaking the flow of manifestation, which would loosely and indiscriminately disseminate the seeds of wisdom. The author sums up this tenet in a passage from a Golden Dawn ritual: To Know, to Will, to Dare, and to Be Silent. This is a closed, controlled, hermetic experiment, in which the vow is a technical mediation and, according to Derrida, “a political shield, the solid barrier of a social division.” The shield “protect[s] against access to a knowledge which remains in itself inaccessible, untransmissible, unteachable [...but] is nevertheless taught in another mode” (1995:93–94). Though the modes are now legion, the secret cannot truly be found in a text, or a website. It is more than between the lines and in the endless marginalia. It is in the experience and practice of magic rather than the reading. It is in the initiation.

Although self-initiation is often available through books and correspondence courses, it is usually discouraged by groups like the Dawn. Initiation must be given to the novice as a gift, an exchange that involves the immediacy of the teacher-student relation. This exchange is invariably both spiritual and economic, and in postmodern initiation, technological. In another article, disput-
ing a “vocal minority” who believe Dawn members shouldn’t pay dues, an author lists the resources that the order must provide to the hungry student: “over 900 sheets of paper, printing, audio tapes, etc. This doesn’t even include the twenty-four hour fax, personal proctor, 7-day a week on-line Adept for teaching help, Order newsletter and magazine.” The author then goes on to cite the Hermetic, alchemical principle called “exchange of energy,” in which energy takes the form of anything from knowledge, to money, to heat. In this “no such thing as a free lunch” philosophy, haunted by the ghosts of Bataille and Marx, the exchange of spirit becomes simultaneously virtual and astral:

The mystical thus understood allies belief or credit, the fiduciary or the trustworthy, the secret to foundation, to knowledge, to science as “doing,” to a faith, to performativity and to technoscientific or tele-technological performance. (Derrida 1998:18–19).

In The Magic of the State, Taussig explores economic exchange in terms of spirit possession. He asks, “Could it be that with disembodiment, presence expands? Language is like that too. In fact language depends on this lingering on as an idea tracing an outline around a once solid, breathing form, troubling the body’s once bodiedness” (1997:5).

The connection between the secret and disembodiment takes on further significance in the guise of astral travel, in which the astral form of the magician, a second body, may freely roam into higher spiritual planes or influence other forms of bodiedness. What Taussig describes above is undoubtedly the concept of the astral body. According to Kabbalistic theory, everything in the physical world has an astral double. This aura of energy surrounds everything animal, vegetable, and mineral. The astral body pre-exists its physical manifestation. To magically bring a desire or an object into manifestation, ceremonial magicians first create a double on the astral plane. During the act of astral projection, the magician sends his or her consciousness into the astral body, which is then allowed to travel through both time and space.

In another Golden Dawn homepage article, the concept of astral initiation is offered as an option for initiates who live more than 65 miles away from a temple. The astral plane, undeniably a model for the multinodal possibilities of entry and the free play of the internet, as well as the mystical journeylike aspects of virtual reality games, becomes a space where images, messages, encounters, and experiences take on the hyperreality of lucid dreams. At a point where the real and the hyperreal break down, the Golden Dawn homepage declares that the telltale signs of initiation, ranging from a tremendous influx of spiritual energy to resistance on a physical plane (illness and such), will undoubtedly affect an initiate living thousands of miles away. With respect to actual and astral initiates, the Dawn solemnly announces in bold lettering that there is no difference.

Techno-Magick and the Media Golem

Techno-magick is what articulates the channels of discourse that disseminate occult knowledge. Not only is technology caught up in the trope of magic, it becomes the medium through which this formerly hidden knowledge is now available to any individual with access to the internet. The virtual, mystical spaces are only available through technology. The technology of mystics was, at one time, language and writing, while today, the internet and cedermisation are the preferred magical tools. The Golden Dawn homepage is a prime example of how technology still participates in the dialectic of concealment and revelation, offering initiation to its applicants through a tease:
We can’t tell you everything, but we can tell you how to join and learn more. Thus, a leap of faith must be taken, a leap not unlike the one taken when the computer is turned on, or when one prays. Like the internet, the complex networks of occult discourse are impossible to constrain in a set structure. The knowledge is always fluid, disembodied and haunting, never fully locatable, accessible at many different possible nodes, and available to anyone who wishes to engage in the practice of magic. The discourse now winds its way through the astral plane of magical practice, the internet, and televised media.

*The X-Files*, in its identity as a cult phenomenon that has infiltrated television, print, and the internet, becomes part of a series of magically disseminated operations upon the consumer by occult media. The consumer is acted upon by the media golem, the body without a soul, while struggling to put the golem to use as a tool for interpretation. The writers make an interesting point when they transfer the golem’s holy name from the head, as accounted in legend, to the hand, the tool for manipulation. This subtle difference between head and hand makes a crucial link between speech-act theory and magical theory. But these words do not “do something” just by being uttered. They must be vibrated, chanted, ritualized. Magic is, after all, a technology, both a science and an art, if Aleister Crowley is to be believed. And one must not forget what the *X-Files* episode brilliantly demonstrates: that these vibrations are undoubtedly political. Although the Kabbalah is probably studied today by more non-Jewish students of Hermetic magic than Hasidic Jews, the show’s writers offer the viewer specific locations of culture, race, class, and gender that make the creation of the golem necessary: as a survival mechanism, a resistance to extermination and the power of hate speech. But this golem technology threatens the people with what Derrida calls “an expropriative and delocalising tele-technoscience” (1998:36), and the golem becomes what Jane Goodall refers to as an “agency vacuum” (1997) which runs amok. It must be lovingly destroyed by its creator by erasing the letter aleph, removing the first breath of God from truth, the yoke of union with the divine contraction, the breathing in and swallowing that creates the universe.

As I write this article on my computer, the cursor flashes on the screen and disappears. This performative vibration moves and turns a Kabbalistic cursor, appearing and disappearing in rhythm, invoking a recombination of the holy names: Jacques Derrida, Michael Taussig, Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, Richard Kieckhefer, Theodor Adorno, Starhawk, Michel de Certeau, Gershom Scholem. On the scrolling computer screen, the magic tablet upon which the ever mercurial word is written and erased, visions from the astral internet, constantly threatening to become media demons, must be manipulated deftly by the will and hand of the magician. I am talking about magic, performing it by the breath of its very mention. If my style has seemed overwhelmingly deceptive and in the romance of mystification it is because I am initiated in the secret society of academia whose secret I can only partially disclose; that “magic” (and I would add theory and discourse) “begs for and at the same time resists explanation most when appearing to be explained, and that therefore in its unmasking, magic is in fact made even more opaque, a point given a special twist here through the technique” (Taussig 1998:241).

But here I am circumambulating a much larger and more charged space than the well-worn trope of technology as magic. In this circle, the two are closer than twins. This is more than spirit possession, a ghost in the machine. These are recombined concepts whose numbers add up to the same sum. They take turns standing in for each other until you can no longer tell the difference between their borders, like an auric egg around an astral body. For my purposes, the term that best suits this confluence is Techno-Kabbalah, which holds in its definition of “received knowledge” the possibility for application involving an even more proliferated, decentered view of magic and language.
It is here, in this circumscribed space, that performance is truly embodied and disembodied in an oroboros-like cycle.

Notes

1. The wild success of a similar media golem, *The Blair Witch Project*, is due to the independent producers’ intense campaign on the internet, which began many months before the film’s summer 1999 release. Not only did the ads and the website include teasers for the film, they provided the entire background, the mythology, and informative reports on the film’s subject matter: the disappearance of three college filmmakers in the deep woods of Maryland and the discovery of their footage. The film, like *The X-Files*, is granted a life beyond the object of art itself, because of the clever deployment of its internet entity. This strategy is becoming increasingly trendy in “cult” television and film markets, where the target audience is internet savvy, and, in some cases, the cost of major print or television campaigns is prohibitive.

2. *Grimoire* is an older (presumably French) version of the word grammar used to describe a medieval book of magic, or a book written in that style. The archaic use of the word grammar to describe an object that is a text, particularly a magic one, points out another telling connection between language and occultism.

3. “Thoughtforms” are nonphysical entities created through ritual procedures to accomplish a specific task. They are, basically, thoughts that take on an astral form.

4. The Golden Dawn organization that runs this website has recently changed their name to the Hermetic Order of the Morning Star, following the move of the original order, which changed their name to Stella Matutina (Latin for Morning Star) after factional splits in 1900.

5. All quotes from the Golden Dawn website were taken from <http://www.golden-dawn.org>.

6. A salient example in Christian mysticism of this sense of levels is in Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle* ([1573] 1961), which tells of seven levels of spiritual attainment through prayer and meditation within a castle structure.

7. As another example of the occult nature of the impermanent internet text, the black box picture was replaced in late 1997 by blurred faces. The following year, no picture at all was posted.

8. In the episode, a woman actually makes the golem, even though historically, the Kabbalistic magician would have been male. As Mulder points out, the woman who makes the golem is not necessarily just motivated by revenge, but by love, since the golem is the double of her fiancé, killed by the white supremacists.

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