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## **The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice**

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### **Full Text**

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Lehrich, Christopher I. *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 246 pp. Cloth. ISBN 978-0-8014-4538-5. \$39.95.

At the heart of Christopher Lehrich's *The Occult Mind* several theses are articulated: that the works of certain occult thinkers are in need of reassessment in light of their intellectual proximity to contemporary theoretical debates, that the "problem of occult analogy" may be seen to haunt the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and its heirs, and that the question of "magic" is in need of urgent theoretical rehabilitation given the foregoing propositions. Each of these notions is pursued in order to explicate a more general problem for historians: Is it possible to overcome the distinction between historical and morphological methodologies in regard to the study of "esoteric" texts? At several points Lehrich posits that the solution to this methodological problem "would require a spell" and it is only at the end of the book that one realizes that that is precisely what he has done - *The Occult Mind* appears as nothing less than a twenty-first-century grimoire, a book of incantatory power for anyone interested in the tradition of Western esotericism and its recent academic legitimization.

The opening gambit is encapsulated by a single word, "Egypt." With a nod to John Crowley's novel of the same name, Lehrich proceeds to argue for the enduring persistence of this enigmatic topos, for Egypt is not only the (mythical) origin of the Hermetic texts and a Golden Age when the ancients were in possession of the secrets of the universe, it is also the fantasy of the "unimaginable rewards" of high scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge. It is this Egypt, rather than the already well-explored Egypt that thinkers must learn to investigate and map - and this is precisely what Lehrich manages to do over the succeeding chapters. Lehrich first closely examines the longest extant Hermetic text, the *Asclepius*, and, comparing it with Plato's *Phaedrus*, concludes that for the Egyptian hierophant Thoth a certain plenitude, an unsundered connection between language and the divine, has given way to the reign of the written word with the subsequent loss of presence and certitude in the face of a history of inscription. If this sounds like a foreshadowing of Derridean poststructuralism, this is no accident, because the greater part of the book is designed to lead one gently to the threshold of a poststructuralist understanding of the reality and effects of magic within Western intellectual discourse. The *modus operandi* for this is comparatively straightforward: Given that Western magical texts are generally systematic, they are thus comparable to other systematic analytical structures such as those of contemporary cultural theory. For Lehrich, Hermes (or Thoth) "becomes a peculiarly essential forefather of comparative scholarship" (16).

The chapters that follow pursue a fascinating zigzag path that leads us through John Mitchell's "ley lines" and Atlantis (an atemporal topos closely allied to that of Egypt); the "reactualization" of Giordano Bruno's world view in the work of Dame Frances Yates and the consequent "magical" aspect of her comparative methodology; a comparison of Bruno's

epistemology with that of structural linguistics; a decidedly eccentric but nevertheless brilliant reading of John Dee's Hieroglyphic Monad in terms of the ritual ontology of Japanese Noh theatre ("We need a new perspective," writes Lehigh); and an account of Athanasius Kirchner as a precursor of the comparative and structural tradition. From then on things become even more wild: "Tarocco and Fugue" proposes a tarot reading of Lévi-Strauss utilizing music as a conceptual bridge (Schoenberg, serialism, and Court de Gebelin's chapter on the tarot in his *Le Monde Primitif* are analyzed in an effort to demonstrate that "it is not only modern scholars who can think in terms of structural rigor" [154]), with the concluding chapter, "De (mon) construction," presenting the culmination of the endeavor - an understanding of magical thinking as aligned with Derridean *différance*.

While the connections between successive chapters at times seem forced, making one read the book as a somewhat disjunctive collection of individual essays rather than a continuous line of thought, the concluding argument more than makes up for the lack of continuity in the preceding chapters. For Lehigh, magical systems begin with the "most extensive and encompassing formulation of the problem of knowledge" (166) and, as such, should be properly treated as a set of epistemological problematics. Lehigh is not as highly critical of the work of Yates and Eliade as some recent scholars have been, and he states that "more recent approaches assert too strongly that [magic and the occult] are radically other" (46). His solution to this persistent scholarly (mis) recognition of magic as radical alterity is both bold and unexpected: Magic operates within both occidental and oriental culture as the very ground itself of discourses of difference. Following Derrida and the poststructuralists, Lehigh asserts that all signifying systems are forms of inscription, and magic operates by "allowing the possibility of thinking *différance* within the order of signs, things, and actions" (175). His elucidation of this notion is not always felicitous: "it is not the case that 'magic' is simply 'othering' itself but, rather, somehow different from difference..." (169). However, when one reads "Magic works by analogies and comparisons, yet at the same time it attempts to think itself and in such a way that it might escape its own formulations" (175), one realizes that *The Occult Mind* is itself an act of magic as Lehigh conceives of it; it is a new kind of magical papyrus for the new millennium, a new conception of "magic."

It is at this daring nexus, where intellectual rigor and endeavor can be understood as operating at the very center of magical thought, that *The Occult Mind* becomes of interest to scholars of the fantastic. If one can provisionally accept the idea that "magical thought" is at the very least a defining aspect of the literature and arts of the fantastic, then Lehigh has forcefully articulated the case that the history of human thought, of philosophy itself, is riven through with the fantastic as a differential principle. Even as the exact sciences sought to rid human thought of the excesses of the imagination, sought rigorously to define the boundary between the rational and the irrational, *The Occult Mind* proposes that such a program could not have succeeded (if indeed it has succeeded) were it not for this tertiary differential - the magical, and hence the fantastic - by which this duality could be effected. There is a great deal of scholarly activity yet to be mined from this provocative suggestion, and Lehigh himself admits that his book is only an initial foray into what may yet transpire as a paradigmatic shift in regards to the value of esoteric and occult texts. It is this reader's suggestion that *The Occult Mind* (if read with attention by scholars of the fantastic) may well become a key text in the recognition of the fantastic as being at the very center of human thought and endeavor.

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