

ESSWE

European Society for the Study
of Western Esotericism

Image: Detail from Robert Vaughan (c.1400–1660), Engraved illustration depicting two men, one seated and one kneeling below two celestial, winged angels, n.d., Mixed material, 19cm, Benedek Library.



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Words from the Editor

Chloe Sugden

Welcome to the Winter / Spring 2021 edition of the ESSWE Newsletter! I hope that you are all keeping well, despite the malaise of this ceaseless pandemic. With great pleasure, I continue the work of our previous editors: my friends and colleagues, Dr. Christian Giudice and Dr. Per Faxneld. Thanks to the Board and designer, Boris Fernandez, we have a refreshed layout. The structure of the Newsletter remains unchanged, though I have reintroduced the 'PhD Projects Features' section and altered the 'New Publications' section to include occasional author and editor interviews.

This edition, ESSWE President Dr. Andreas Kilcher makes several important announcements concerning conference postponements and online events. I also interview Dr. Egil Asprem and Dr. Julian Strube on issues raised in their book, *New Approaches to the Study of Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2021). Doctoral student, Hedvig Martin-Ahlén and Dr. Juan Pablo Bubello generously provide scholar interviews, and the

PhD projects of Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir and Matt Wiemers are featured. Dr. Marco Pasi also brings us updates from the HHP. Finally, there are several updates on upcoming Zoom events this year. As a new season is very soon upon us, I'll leave you with some springtime promises from William Blake:

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells' cheerful sound.
While our sports shall be seen
On the Echoing Green.

Extract from *Songs of Innocence* (1789)

This Newsletter is edited by Chloe Sugden, Chair for Literature and Cultural Studies, ETH Zürich, Switzerland (csugden@ethz.ch)

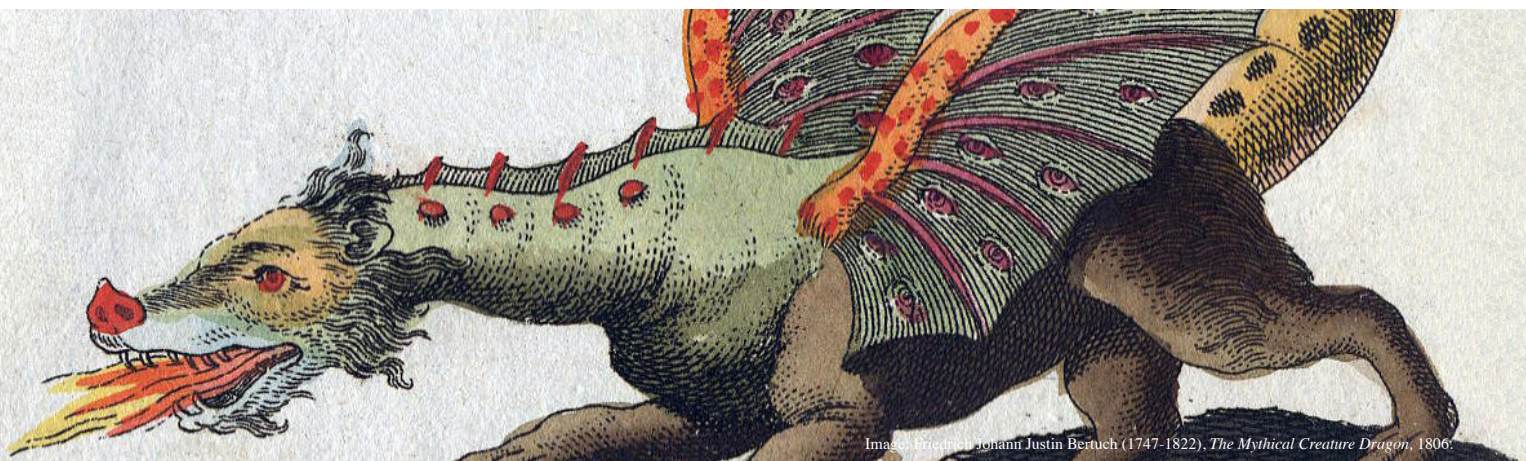


Image: Friedrich Johann Justin Bertuch (1747-1822), *The Mythical Creature Dragon*, 1806.

Letter by the President of ESSWE to the Members

March 1, 2021

Dear members of ESSWE,

I do hope you are all healthy! As you may have guessed, the pandemic is affecting the functioning of our Society well into 2021. Nevertheless, we try not only to come to terms with it, but also to find new ways and means to maintain the initiatives and operations of ESSWE under these circumstances. This means concretely the following — please note these important changes and announcements:

ESSWE8: The biannual ESSWE Conference, which was scheduled for July 5-7, 2021 at the University College Cork, Ireland, has to be postponed for one year until July 5-8, 2022. Further information will follow from the Conference Organizers and on our website.

The Board Meeting, as well as the Members Meeting of the current year, will be held online at the scheduled date of July 5, 2021, 6pm. More information and a Zoom link will follow.

The Thesis Workshop 2021 has to be postponed once again. We will evaluate possibilities during the Board Meeting and inform you about this at the Members Meeting.

I can furthermore inform you about the following:

Elections of two new members of the Board of ESSWE took place online at the beginning of this year. I am very happy to welcome Liana Saif (University of Amsterdam) and Georgiana Hedesan (University of Oxford).

ESSWE Online

As announced, we initiated the platform “ESSWE Online”; cf. our homepage (esswe.org).

Two online lectures will be held during the spring semester:

March 25, 2021, 18:00 CEST, Dr. Korshi Dosoo: ‘What are the Magical Papyri?’

May 20, 2021, 19:00 CEST, Dr. Susan Jean Palmer: ‘Children of Chiasm: Concepts of the “Child” in Contemporary Spiritual Movements.’

The ESSWE Online program includes additional online lectures and conferences organized by members. Cf. our homepage. You are all warmly invited to participate in these online events. Please note that

you may have to register.

I look forward to seeing you at these online lectures and at the online Members Meeting in July.

Until then, take care!

Andreas Kilcher
President of ESSWE

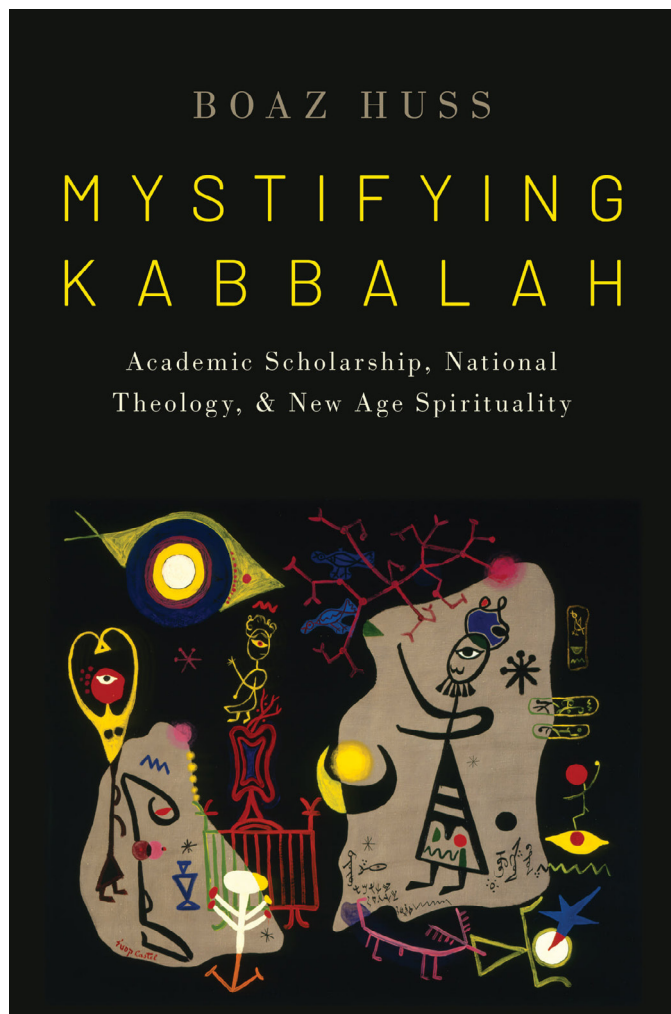


New Publications from ESSWE Members

Huss, Boaz

*Mystifying Kabbalah: Academic Scholarship, National
Theology, and New Age Spirituality*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020



This book is a survey of the key developments in Jewish mysticism studies, and the influence of such scholarship on modern Kabbalistic movements. At the end of the nineteenth century, mysticism rose in popularity as a concept. In *Mystifying Kabbalah*, Boaz Huss notes that many thinkers of this era, including prominent neo-Romantic Eugen Diederichs (1867-1930), refuted the existence of mysticism in Judaism, which they viewed as a 'rational' religion. Others, including Zionists Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Gershom Scholem (1882-1897), argued that sources such as the classical Jewish *Sefer ha-Zohar* and *Sefer Yetzira* were guided by ecstatic encounters. They approached Kabbalah and Hasidism as movements aimed at unmediated connection with transcendent reality. Scholem adopted the term 'Jewish mysticism,' establishing an academic field devoted to the category. In his book, Huss investigates the genealogy of this concept and research field.

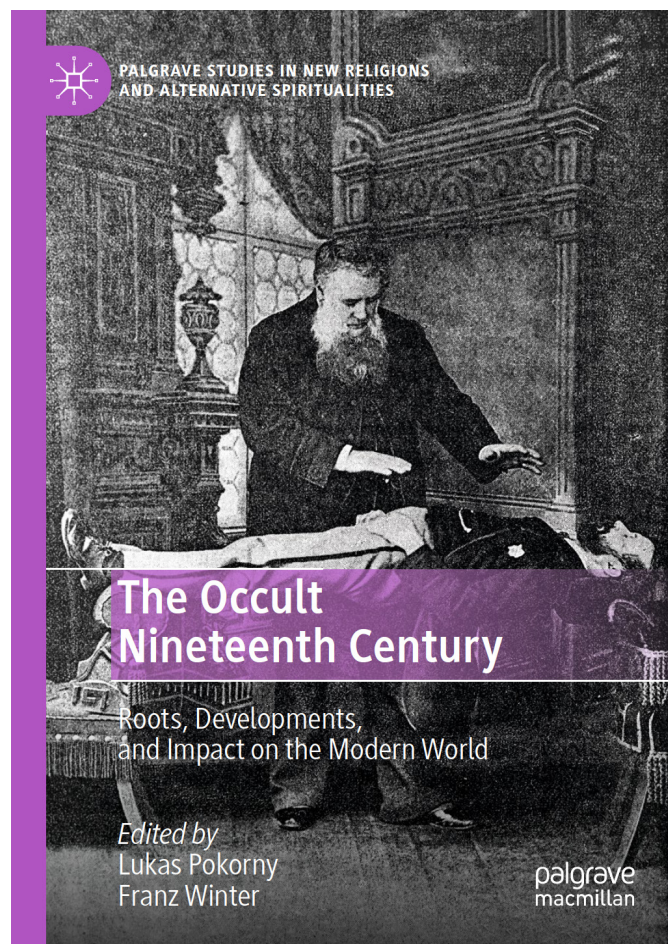
Mystifying Kabbalah critically examines the conditions that have established the designation of Kabbalah and Hasidism as products of mystical experience. Huss foregrounds theological oversights entrenched in the academic concept of Jewish mysticism, noting how sweeping revisions in the field that began in the 1980s contested many of Scholem's theoretical and methodological approaches. Huss argues

that these new approaches, however, shared essentialist logics that shaped many of Scholem's theological assumptions. Critical of universalising presuppositions, Huss approaches mysticism as a modern, discursive category originating in Western Europe and the United States, rather than a transhistorical, global phenomenon. 'Jewish mysticism,' he argues, functioned to organise a wide range of social collectives, doctrines and practices. The book thus examines modern Kabbalistic movements in the contexts of New Age spirituality and Jewish Nationalism.

Pokorny, Lukas, and Franz Winter, eds.

*The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and
Impact on the Modern World*

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021



The Occult Nineteenth Century is composed of seventeen contributions from specialists in nineteenth century alternative religious currents and practices. This book contributes to a growing body of scholarly literature, demonstrating that the nineteenth century 'occult' influenced wide-ranging aspects of society, including politics, theology, philosophy, science, medicine and aesthetics. The significance of this book lies in its many individual contributions, with case studies on lesser-known figures from countries that are underrepresented in the literature, such as Sweden and Poland. This collection covers diverse subjects and geographies in four parts: 'Mesmerism,' 'Occultism in America and Europe,' 'Occultism in Global Perspective,' and 'Occultism and Modern Yoga.' Across its chapters, the book contrasts far-reaching topics, including spiritualism, spiritism, mesmerism, occultism, somnambulism, modern yoga and physical training, *Naturphilosophie*, Romanticism and Theosophy, with aspects of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Afro- and African-American religions. The volume thus speaks to the nineteenth-century rise of alternative religious movements and spiritual discourses, and the multifaceted occult amalgam of interwoven references, practices and currents. The 'global dimension' of these contributions is explored, as

case studies extend to East Asia, South Asia and Latin America, and past emphases on ‘East’ and ‘West’ are displaced in search of more appropriate terms for a comparative approach.

Throughout *The Occult Nineteenth Century*, a crucial point of departure is an emphasis on mesmerism as a significant yet often overlooked tradition, particularly with respect to the shaping of modern occultism across multiple cultures of modernity. Special attention is also given to nineteenth-century yogic practices and their engagement with the occult. The influence of concepts of the occult tradition on the nineteenth century are central to the book, as well as the influence of the nineteenth century occult across twentieth and twenty-first century modernities.

Hedenborg White, Manon, ed.
Special Issue: Rethinking Aleister Crowley and Thelema. Aries — Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism
vol. 21, no. 1 (December 2020)

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EDITOR INTERVIEW

Asprem, Egil, and Julian Strube, eds.
New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism
Leiden: Brill, 2021

This book provides new approaches and distinctive case studies in its aim to address persistent challenges and complexities in the academic study of esotericism. In lieu of a book review, I posed four questions via email to the editors of the volume, Dr. Egil Asprem and Dr. Julian Strube.

Post-Publication Statement

With the publication in March 2021 of this interview with Julian and Egil in the ESSWE newsletter and a subsequent blog post by Wouter that was circulated on Facebook and Twitter, our community has been given an unfortunate impression of a deep personal conflict. After a good constructive conversation between the three of us, we hereby wish to declare our agreement on the following points:

1. That we do hold different positions on some scholarly issues, which we look forward to continue discussing in appropriate academic forums;

2. That we recognize and respect that we hold different perspectives on how recent exchanges unfolded and the appropriateness of each move (the interview, blog post and social media postings);
3. That we trust each other to have acted with good intentions and will strive for a professional and collegial debate moving forward.

Egil Asprem, Wouter Hanegraaff, Julian Strube

CS: In contemplating how useful or conversely, inhibiting it is to use the term “Western” as a qualifying adjective of esotericism studies, you argue that this “ideological” descriptor invites cultural essentialism and Eurocentric diffusionist approaches. In 2021, a more inclusive agenda in the field is clearly necessary: new perspectives, methods and actors. Yet the discipline of Western esotericism is by no means culturally or geographically indifferent. In terms of historical locus, from the nineteenth century onwards, some may suggest that ‘Western’ remains a valid signifier. Do you believe that esotericism studies should, therefore, retain a primary locus?

JS: There is a lot to unpack here, as you address some of the most pressing issues that motivated us to compile the volume. Let me begin with the point that “Western esotericism” is a historical term that emerged in the nineteenth century. It has a concrete history that is open to scrutiny. Empirically speaking, that is, from the historical perspective that our volume promotes, the concept of “Western esotericism” is a historical reality whose meaning was always hotly contested. This is precisely what makes it a fascinating subject, as it arose from occultist polemics that can only be understood within their historical context: a context that was marked by colonialism, orientalism, the relationship between religion and science, the meaning of modernity, social issues including gender and race, and so on. Consequently, “Western esotericism” is a historical object of study, and it naturally should form part of the study of esotericism.

Yet, the crucial point is this: scholars must not uncritically reproduce the historical positions they investigate, but they must strive to understand how they were shaped. In contrast, “Western esotericism” ended up functioning, not only as an object of scholarly inquiry, but also as the identity marker and conceptual framework for a field of study. The tensions arising from this have been pointed out repeatedly in the past, however, without drawing the logical consequences, namely, revision or at the very least substantiation of the field’s demarcation. Quite the contrary, some scholars—most prominently, Wouter Hanegraaff—doubled down on use of it and the related problems forcefully came to the fore in recent debates, wherein the study of “Western esotericism” was promoted as a means to explain “the true meaning of Western culture.” Such a position aims to actively redefine identities. The contrast with our perspective, which aims to explain how these identities emerged, could hardly become more obvious.

EA: That’s right. What we’re advocating is that terms like “Western esotericism,” but also “the West,” should not be taken as second-order categories that we as scholars use to classify various materials from the past or present, but rather as historical objects of study that we should analyse and explain. This project runs diametrically opposite to various attempts at revising what we mean by the West. Wouter Hanegraaff suggests “writing better narratives” about the West, for example, and a similar idea has been suggested by Matt Melvin-Koushki who says we must “expand” the West to include the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and so on. In both those approaches, “the West” becomes something that the scholar should actively negotiate, refine, and in the end continue to use for delimiting their field of study. Our suggestion is quite different: we are not interested in intentionally influencing broader socio-political discourses on what the West is or ought to be, but rather to take the historical actors who’ve constructed and negotiated this term as part of our source material. We of course recognize that all scholarship on these issues will inevitably also influence such “normative” debates. For us, however, it is not an explicit and active goal to do so. A scholarly reflexivity on the issue is part and

parcel of the approaches we advocate. In a sense, this parallels the discussion in religious studies, where scholars have long evaded pontificating on what “religion” or specific “religions” ought to be, rather examining how people and societies have shaped them. So, as I see it, these are clearly two very separate lines of reasoning about “the West” in the field right now.

In our view, this really matters as the “Western” in Western esotericism is not just a neutral filler; it is deployed in specific ways that build on and reproduce a longer history. That history starts in late nineteenth-century occultism, as Julian mentioned, where the point was to distinguish those who valued what they saw as “Hermetic,” “Gnostic,” “Rosicrucian” and other “Western” impulses from those who also spoke about “yoga,” “karma,” “Tibetan masters,” “Buddhism,” and all that “Eastern” stuff. Once adopted in scholarship, the term has functioned in much the same way. It *creates* the westernness of esotericism by putting in place predefined borders—a “negative heuristic” for the research programme. Cultural essentialism is the methodological by-product of this maneuver of insisting that esotericism will always remain western. It means, for example, that when magic squares originating in China and India eventually end up in European manuscripts on magic by way of Persian and Arabic “intermediaries,” these become mere *influences* on Western esotericism “proper.” But when Indian Theosophists expand on Blavatsky through the conceptual resources of the Indian intellectual landscape, and in response to local concerns on the subcontinent, the end product remains “Western” esotericism, possibly with certain mutations to its cultural genome. The methodological reorientation that we suggest obliges us to follow all these global transfers, negotiations, and transnational entanglements in an open-ended way. Europe, of course, doesn’t disappear as a result of this, but it does get *decentered*.

JS: Exactly, and this is what appears to have been misconstrued during the debates that preceded our volume. We are not set on simply “deconstructing the West”—or “Western esotericism,” for that matter—but we aim at historically understanding how people have shaped the meanings of those notions in diverse ways. Including ourselves! The diffusionist reaction, that properly began with Wouter’s “Globalization of Esotericism” article (2015) and escalated in the intervening years, highlighted the urgent need for reflection and theoretical-methodological sophistication in this regard. For many years, Wouter has insisted that his approach to “Western esotericism” carries only “light” theoretical baggage; that his approach was “strictly historical” and “empirical,” and that he was merely “listening to the sources” in contrast to those who merely do theory. I support the criticism of scholars who do not have the philological competence to work with necessary source material, and I do not deny the existence of scholars who neglect historical expertise to the detriment of their theoretical arguments. What we can clearly observe in our recent debates, however, are the consequences of neglecting theoretical and methodological reflection. Wouter ventured into the subject area of global, colonial and imperial history without engaging with the relevant scholarship and sources, while making far-reaching, categorical, and at times unnecessarily polemical claims. The self-referential style of argumentation in the 2015 article is emblematic for some of the most pressing issues in the study of esotericism, which is why it bears so much emphasis. Not least, it also contradicts the fairly well-established self-understanding of scholarship on “Western esotericism” as “anti-essentialist” and “anti-religionist.” When we read that “*Western(!)* esotericism” [sic] was diffused from Europe and then “mutated” among people outside of “the West” to be later “(mis)understood” as “authentic,” we glimpse into a reasoning that is quite evidently essentialist, but that is also following a religionist narrative. To avoid misunderstandings, my problem with that is not essentialism per se, as I would have no issue with fruitfully discussing these matters with a scholar who openly identifies as a phenomenologist, or who designates his work as theology. I take issue with the obvious self-contradictions and inconsistencies that have concrete ramifications for our field of study.

EA: Another related point that Julian touched on is that the debates about cultural identity markers like “Western”—and especially how to study them—have become increasingly polemical in recent years. We’ve started seeing broad-brush labels like “postmodernism,” “deconstruction” and “critical theory” used as polemical fighting words, apparently directed against imagined, (at any rate unspecified), radicals who are threatening to demolish “western culture.” I’ll let Julian speak to that issue further shortly—unlike myself, he’s drawing to a larger extent on theoretical perspectives that could, conceivably, be seen as the target of such polemics. Yet I’d like to point out that this is not the first time that the “labels” for specific methods or theoretical orientations are used as fighting words. In fact, some of my own work, which builds on a naturalistic epistemology and happily draws on cognitive science, evolutionary biology and sociology, is more likely to be targeted by the big boo-words of the 1980s and 1990s: “reductionism” and “positivism.” Back then, the enemies were sociologists and social scientists, some of whom were cast as having an “anti-esoteric” agenda. Now, some of the sociological work on “the occult” that pioneers in our field targeted at that time was indeed problematic, inscribed as it was in the wider postwar vogue of explaining various kinds of “deviance.” Yet instead of engaging in a critical and productive dialogue with those perspectives—which did have valuable things to say about contemporary esotericism—an entire body of literature was thrown out. As I argue in my own chapter of *New Approaches*, this has had consequences for current debates. If the discussions about deviance, marginalization, and indeed “rejected knowledge” that unfolded in the sociology of the occult in the 1970s had been part of honest debates in our field from the outset, I am sure that the recent rejected knowledge model of esotericism would have looked different. Scholars like Marcello Truzzi, for example, already stressed the need to ask when, where, and by whom a certain piece of knowledge was construed as deviant, and also what the consequences were for the consumption and dissemination of such knowledge. He related all this to expert systems, patterns of socialization, and even cognitive dimensions. The sociologist Edward Tiryakian developed a whole model—built on problematic structural-functionalist principles, but still worth discussing seriously—which held that esoteric “rejected knowledge” serves an important cultural function in societies, especially in times of experienced crisis.

Now my point is this: just as the rejection of social science perspectives thirty years ago means we now must reinvent the wheel, I fear that the current polemic against “postmodernism,” “critical theory” and so on will lead to another exclusion of perspectives that are, in fact, much needed as we tackle questions about “the West” and colonialism, but also race, class, gender, and a whole range of related critical issues that haven’t been engaged with rigor in the field until recently.

JS: That’s an important point. Clichéd, sweeping rejections of both “positivism” and “postmodernism” as boo-words don’t get us anywhere. Our approaches, as different as they might be, aim at doing scholarship on a solid theoretical-methodological basis. To achieve this, different perspectives must be in dialogue rather than painting each other as enemies, as Dimitry Okropiridze pertinently argues in his chapter. The polemical use of “postmodernism” indeed lies at the core of many of these issues. I have observed that many scholars are alienated or outright excluded, although the study of esotericism would greatly benefit from their perspectives. Obviously, some of the contributions to our volume, including my own, draw from the repertoire of poststructuralism and postcolonialism, albeit critically and by no means exclusively. The problem is not that such notions could be reasonably subsumed under “postmodernism,” but that this label has been used polemically in specific political contexts. We cannot delve here into the widespread narratives about postmodernism, cancel culture, woke radicals, or freedom of speech, as a lot would have to be unpacked and clarified. The point is, as Egil noted, the polemics of recent years take up these fighting words and narratives, and these polemics are entirely unprovoked. If we stick to the study of esotericism, I wonder: who are those “radicals?” We are arguably dealing with a strawman here, as there is no concrete engagement with authors, publications, even abstract notions or concepts. The *bête noire*

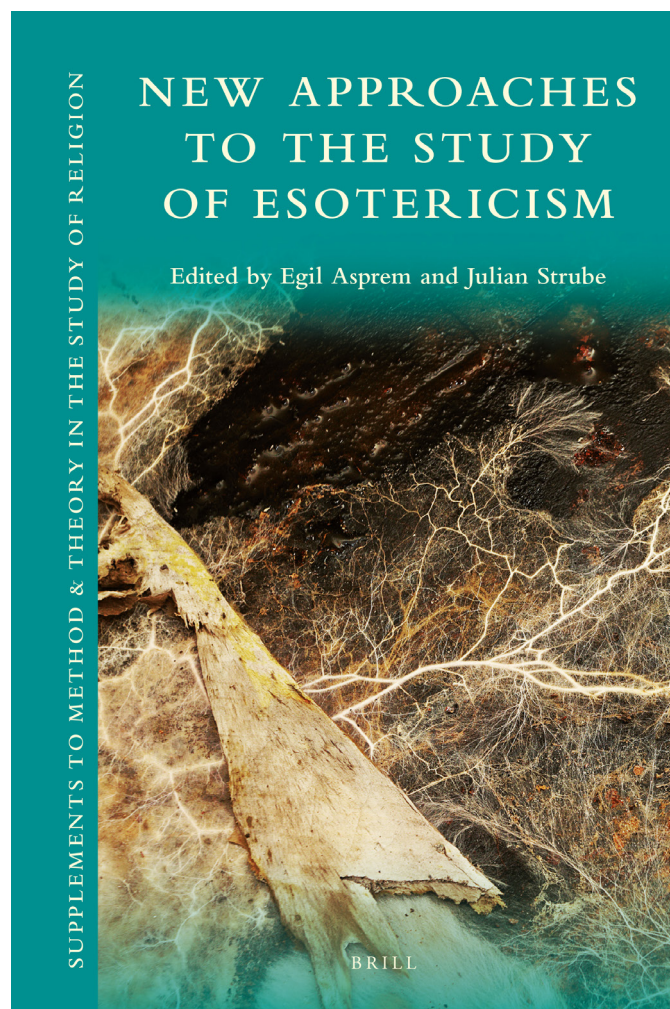
of the Frankfurt School regularly arises, but its conflation with all manner of unnamed entities into the category of “postmodernism,” demonstrates a rather fleeting engagement with its highly diverse repertoire—beyond “Adorno wrote something bad about occultism.” Further, it is less a scholarly argument than an exercise in identity politics. It advances a (possibly unreflected) political agenda, using a specific rhetoric and argumentative structure, and defining its stance against the foil of an unspecified opponent. We know these dynamics from broader socio-political developments, and we should state unequivocally that they must not have a place in scholarly discourse.

It bears emphasizing that these were not marginal remarks. They were placed at the center of key academic publications, and Wouter notably used them to unilaterally frame the entire anniversary volume of the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, *Hermes Explains* (2019), whose purpose it was to portray the study of esotericism and argue for its relevance. Each contribution to that volume, and by extension the field as a whole, was thus associated with Wouter’s political statements. The severity of this issue can hardly be overstated, which is only underscored by an even more polemical interview published in this newsletter (vol. 10, no. 1/2), the official ESSWE organ, following our ESSWE7 roundtable questioning “Should We Drop the ‘Western’?” in July 2019.

These developments marked a tipping point that motivated us to assemble our volume. Much more could and should be said about this, yet we should focus here on how scholarship on esotericism is done in practice. There is one irony that I would like to make explicit: this relates to the accusation that whatever one wants to be part of “postmodernism” consists of self-serving, abstract theorizing detached from historical sources and reality (or even denying its existence!). The antidote we often hear is supposed to consist of rational arguments, work with sources, examination of empirical reality, etc. The irony is that these latter aspects are precisely what we propose in the volume, for the reason that they are insufficient in the work of authors who swiftly denounce the chimera of postmodernism for shortcomings that are eventually their own. Speaking for myself, I have detailed my approach of global religious history as much as the limited frame allowed, and I trust that—despite all my indebtedness to poststructuralist epistemology, genealogical historiography, or postcolonial perspectives—this approach hardly resembles the caricature called “postmodernism” that we have detailed.

CS: There is friction between esotericism as an object of study and as a discipline of study. Despite the delineation of the field leading to its self-marginalisation, many rely on the discipline of (Western) esotericism to sustain their careers, and also to orient themselves as to which materials and methods you simply have to consider in the study of esotericism. How do you address this question of discipline from within your new, wide-ranging paradigm?

EA: I have never considered esotericism a “discipline”, but rather an interdisciplinary field of research. There are two senses in which the study of esotericism is not a discipline, in my view. First in the sense that there are no specific methods, theories, explanatory frameworks or epistemological assumptions that distinguish an esotericism scholar from other types of scholars. Second in the sense that scholars of esotericism are always also scholars of something else: they may be historians of religions, art historians, anthropologists, or work in cultural studies departments. Even in Amsterdam, you cannot get a PhD in “esotericism”—and if you could, there wouldn’t be any other departments for the study of esotericism requiring such a diploma in order to hire you. In other words, there is a “scholarly-internal” discussion about disciplinarity in terms of specific methods, epistemologies, etc., and a “pragmatic” or research-political discussion about the status and value of esotericism research in wider academia. It’s important to keep these discussions distinct, but also to see how they are linked. For example, there may be a *desire* for disciplinary status because it could be used to legitimize university departments, and hence unlock resources (research money, positions, teaching



programs, prestige). But that’s putting the cart before the horse. Moreover, it is once again important to realize that despite the fact that we have organizations like ESSWE and specialist journals like *Aries* and *Correspondences*, such a situation of recognized disciplinarity within university structures is very far from reality today.

If we instead begin with the scholarly-internal question, I would say that thinking of esotericism as a discipline instead of a field is also not desirable. In light of what we have already discussed, disciplinarity entails not only uniting around a set of core methods, research problems, and data sources; it also entails excluding other such perspectives. This is exactly what our book argues we should not be doing. We should not be doing it *both* for internal and for pragmatic reasons. Internally, the research problems and data sources that are now producing most excitement in the field are precisely of a sort that requires new methods and perspectives. Contemporary esotericism requires social science, anthropology, netnography, and media studies approaches. Esotericisms in South America, India, Iran, or Japan require engagements with postcolonial theory, decolonialist perspectives, and global history. Queer esotericism requires gender studies. Esotericism in literature requires literary theorists, the aesthetics of esotericism would benefit not only from art historians but from architects, philosophers, cognitive scientists, fashion studies—and so on and so forth. Even from within the field, then, concrete research interests and new types of sources are driving a need for expanding the methodological or disciplinary toolkit.

But not seeing the study of esotericism as a discipline is also wise from a pragmatic point of view. As I said, the job market for a scholar of esotericism lies in a broad range of departments in the humanities and social sciences that are not primarily about esotericism. To be able to find employment, it is necessary to make esotericism relevant to the debates of those disciplines. To do that, you need once again a field

that actively engages such debates, or at the least does not cut off such engagements as detrimental to what the field is or should be all about. This brings me to a final point, since you mentioned specific kinds of materials that a scholar of esotericism simply has to consider. While there is of course need for a shared frame of reference, the question is what that shared frame must consist of. We have suggested that a necessary minimum is knowledge of how the concept “esotericism” was constructed, what sorts of ideas, references, motifs, and practices were inscribed in it, and what, in turn, these connections built on. That’s a starting point for digging further, for example, through genealogical or reception historical methods, and for avoiding false starts—like assuming the existence of an actual Esoteric Tradition running through history. Presenting some kind of canon of “great esoteric thinkers” as the necessary shared basis is problematic. It’s ironic that a field which often prides itself on *destabilizing* “the canon of Western thought” (as e.g. rational, monotheist, disenchanted) ends up producing its very own counter-canon, and that attempts to decenter the “Western esoteric” counter-canon are then met with resistance. In that respect, the field reproduces the wider dynamics of canonization and, yes, cultural essentialism, that it may have set out to challenge.

JS: Considering what has transpired during the last six years or so, we should be well aware of the fact that engagement with disciplines and fields necessary for the study of esotericism hasn’t only been inadequate, but that some of them are being misrepresented and actively misconstrued as opponents. As Egil pointed out, this specifically pertains to global history, postcolonial studies, gender studies, critical theory (which, by the way, isn’t simply identical with “the Frankfurt School”), etc. An essential ingredient to the argument for esotericism’s relevance, for instance, consists in pointing out that “it” is not merely the Other of modernity but an integral part of its heterogeneous, complex, and contested emergence. We all know how eager scholars of esotericism are to point out its modernity; how it is not simply opposed to Enlightenment rationalism, technology, and social transformations, right? Yet as Mariano Villalpa puts it so aptly in our volume, those scholars must also take its historical context into full account, and that context is largely determined, as I mentioned in the beginning, by the historical facts of colonialism and all that is related to it. Consideration of the global entanglements, which gave rise to the notion of “Western esotericism” in the first place, should go without saying, yet this is somehow perceived as an attack on “Western culture.” As I argue in my chapter, this is not what postcolonial approaches, global history, or the perspective of entangled histories are about.

Further zooming in on your question, Chloe, the crucial point is that scholars of global history or South Asian studies, for instance, are actually *aware* of the importance of esotericism, for instance with regard to the Theosophical Society. There is *huge* interest in these subjects, as anyone who doesn’t move exclusively within the confines of “Western esotericism” will have experienced. This also pertains to European history, as reactions from fairly conservative audiences to my work on French socialism and Catholicism have shown me. However, when scholars, (specifically those in leading positions, reviewing grants, deciding over the creation of new positions, and all that), from such disciplines and fields turn to the debates within “Western esotericism” that we are talking about here, they are bewildered if not appalled. This doesn’t help the careers of esotericism scholars. I totally agree with Egil that this status quo can only work as a self-fulfilling prophecy when it comes to the marginalization of the study of esotericism, or esotericism as a scholarly subject in its own right. There is so much potential for engagement, so much interest. It needs to be tapped more sincerely, in a sophisticated and open-ended manner. Certainly, this must not be prevented by oppositional posturing and hyperbolic claims to declare what Western culture should truly be about.

CS: To what extent do you deem approaches from other disciplines—such as the histories of science, literature, or art—suitable to esotericism as an object of study?

EA: Literature and art history are, of course, two of the disciplines in

which interest in esotericism is growing fastest—and has been for some time. History of science has long been a central discipline for the study of esotericism, but primarily with regard to Europe, and especially early-modern materials. That needs to be expanded in multiple directions. Scholars like Matt Melvin-Koushki, Noah Gardiner, and Liana Saif are doing important work on extending history of science perspectives to esotericism in Islamic contexts, and there have been attempts in the past to extend it to esotericism and scientific knowledge production in a colonial context, for example in Alison Winter’s work on Mesmerism. My own work on esoteric and scientific discourses in the early twentieth century had the history of science as a central methodological pillar. I think there’s much to be gained from extending it further towards contemporary times as well. This would, however, entail entering the broader field of “science studies”, which again borrows approaches not just from history, but also from sociology and anthropology. Studies of science and esotericism since WWII must account for a radically different social, political, and economic situation, with increased professionalization, the emergence of “Big Science”, increased instrumentalization and technologization, but also a tremendous market for popularized science that often plays on the “mysterious” and even “occult” as marketing devices. To disentangle the contemporary relationships between science and esotericism, you need much more than a historical approach.

JS: I have made my point about global history, etc. earlier in our conversation and in my chapter. Perspectives from other disciplines are more than suitable; they are what the study of esotericism depends on for its very existence. Taking up what Egil discussed in terms of a differentiation between academic fields and disciplines, I would further stress that it is not other disciplines that are dependent on the study of esotericism. On the contrary, we must make clearer how perspectives from the study of esotericism are beneficial *for other* fields and disciplines. This is the only way that the study of esotericism could be further established beyond its existing structures. Personally, I am working towards a systematic exploration of what “esotericism” in Asian contexts could mean, especially since orientalist scholarship has employed the notion and related terms since the late eighteenth century, (prior to the emergence of self-referentially “esoteric” currents!), and it did so through an engagement with the vast Asian intellectual landscape. In present-day Indology and South Asian studies, esoteric vocabulary is omnipresent. This is due to global exchanges that finally deserve a lot more serious and sophisticated attention. Going further, we will also have to investigate the diachronic developments that conditioned and structured those exchanges: my approach is by no means limited to the modern colonial period. Respective tools have been introduced to the study of esotericism for over 15 years, most notably by Michael Bergunder, to whose perspective I am significantly indebted. In 2016, I even guest-edited an *Aries* issue placing our global historical program at the heart of “Western esotericism.” Yet, at ESSWE7 in Amsterdam, we could hear that global approaches had never been introduced to the study of esotericism and could hence not have been taken up. In terms of engagement with other fields and disciplines, as well as expanding and solidifying the study of esotericism, this says a lot. It’s bad enough when people argue that certain approaches could not have been taken up as they weren’t actively presented to the field. But isn’t it telling when new approaches aren’t even noticed when they are proposed in the field’s flagship journal?

CS: Having worked on *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* and the questions it deals with for some time, in releasing this book, how do its propositions change your work? How do you operationalise these new approaches?

EA: I’ve learned a lot from working with our authors. To take just one example, when I edited Dimitry’s chapter, which discusses the different epistemological strategies that underpin various approaches to defining esotericism, it turned into a really enjoyable and productive discussion between him, Julian and I. That was particularly enlightening since, as I hinted earlier in the conversation, Julian and I come from pretty different angles—him being influenced by

poststructuralist epistemology, while I am building on naturalistic grounds. Our collaboration on this volume is a testament to how it is still possible, and indeed very much desirable, to find common ground even when the epistemological starting points may be of opposite orientation, to use Dimitry's words. Writing the introduction and afterword with Julian has also shaped my view of the field as a whole in ways that will influence my future work. One challenge I'm working on is how the implications of the view of esotericism that emerge from the afterword to the book should be implemented in introductory presentations of what the field is about. At the moment, I'm also developing a new historically oriented research project where several perspectives from the volume, notably on race, class, transnational entanglements, and the problems with rejected knowledge play central roles. The gods of funding willing, you'll hear more about that in a year's time.

JS: It was a true pleasure to see the harmony between different approaches and perspectives from scholars working on distinct subjects. Since a genealogical method lies at the core of my own approach, I was excited to observe its synergy with the reception history operationalized by Dylan Burns, but also with Mariano's perspective on South America, Keith Cantú's take on South Asia, or Lianna's study of esotericism in Islamic contexts. These subjects are vastly distanced both chronologically and geographically, yet our perspectives complemented each other astonishingly well. I said that I "observed" this because these synergies weren't construed. Egil and I did not provide an agenda for the volume— everything just fell into place. I can recall very few collaborations that have taught me so much, and I am convinced that the potential of collaborations in such a spirit, and drawing from such repertoires, has become evident. Of course, I do not perceive the volume as providing definitive answers and obligatory paradigms. There are many lacunae, and many other scholars' positions and subjects should be part of this conversation. Our volume is an overall invitation to this conversation, and both Egil and I have tried our best to make this clear in our introduction and afterword.

EA: Indeed, there's much left to be done and many issues that we sadly couldn't include this time around as we also wanted an efficient and speedy process. Hopefully the reception of the book will identify the most pressing lacunae and inspire others to fill them.

Scholar Interviews

Hedvig Martin
PhD Candidate
The Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, Amsterdam University
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

It happened quite late for me and was far from a linear process. Although I grew up in an artist home that was in general positive towards New Age concepts, I was never particularly interested in it during my childhood and teenage years. Instead, I was drawn to art and history and pursued my BA in history with a focus on early twentieth-century urban planning and social engineering. However, as I started discovering certain mind-altering practises, I was unknowingly entering into the domain of the esoteric and soon confronted with experiences that affected my outlook on life. This also changed my intellectual interests and the feeling of pursuing the wrong academic path began haunting me. Eventually, I repealed my previous academic pursuits and, to the dismay of my supervisor, changed the scope of my MA thesis from urban history to a strange lady who talked to spirits (well, that's how he saw it at least!). The fascination for the Swedish occult painter Hilma af Klint, who had been on my radar for many

years, grew exponentially after my own explorations and so did my awareness of the insufficient research about her case. Soon, I also discovered the field of Western esotericism and was baffled when I realised that this was something you could in fact study. Not only was it a young and novel field, but its currents and perspectives cast a new light on historical narratives and periods which rejuvenated my whole view of academia.



What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future?

Setting aside the general problems that come with neoliberal politics, I would say that the major issue for our field is to find consensus about a definition and framework for the study of Western esotericism, including the central question of what to do with the term "western". To reach a mutual understanding would help to strengthen our profile and collaboration with other fields. Another challenge I see concerns gender diversity and the need for more women and queer scholars. Hopefully, the mix of students that are now attracted to Western esotericism and the rapid growth of the field will make this prospect possible within the coming years.

What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field?

I have many fun memories from visits to archives, exhibitions, and conferences. One that comes to mind is that of ESSWE7, and not only in reference to its high scholarly quality and wild parties. Since this was the first conference I presented at as a student, and the first time I met the people who would later become my colleagues and friends at the HHP — all of which took place in my future hometown of Amsterdam — it is a fond memory.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

I enjoy the usual things like good music, art, and food etc, and gladly indulge in all forms of history. I am a former art school student and therefore driven to create art, or nowadays to reconcile with the fact that I have no time for it. I am also very fond of nature and return every summer to the isolation of my lumber cabin in the Swedish forest to live a simple life without running water or electricity. With this lifestyle comes an interest in things I can grow or gather, like vegetable gardening, or medicinal herbs, plants, and mushrooms.

What is the best thing about having this as your speciality?

I like that this is an interdisciplinary field. Since it requires both a specialized understanding of esotericism and a more general familiarity with history, religion, and philosophy etc, I am often impressed by my colleagues' diverse knowledge. Also, the lack of a long tradition and the fascination for liminal subjects generates an open-minded atmosphere that I appreciate as a young scholar.

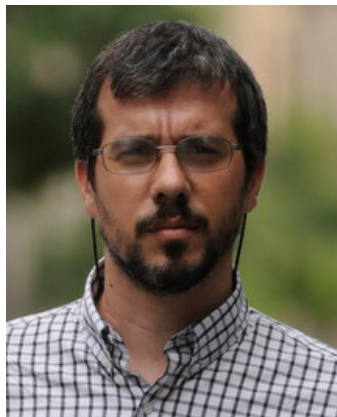
What is the worst thing about having this as your speciality?

To have to explain what Western esotericism is, over and over again. Some things were certainly easier as a historian!

Dr. Juan Bubello
Universidad de Buenos Aires / Universidad Nacional de La
Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina
Director of *Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental*
/ UNASUR

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

When I was studying at the University of Buenos Aires in the early 1990s, I learned the “Yates thesis” on Renaissance Magic from my Modern History professor, José E. Burucúa—he was (and still is) a promoter of Warburgian studies in Argentina. From 1999 and 2007, to my great honor, Burucúa directed my postgraduate research (master and doctorate) on the history of esotericism in Argentina (XIX-XX centuries), starting from its roots in Western Europe and using Antoine Faivre’s (today classic) model on “Western esotericism”. Since then, I have concentrated my intellectual efforts on, firstly, the history of Spanish esotericism in the 16th-17th centuries and its contacts with other regions of Modern Europe. Secondly, the history of the spread of esotericism in Latin America from Western Europe during the 17th-18th centuries. At the same time, ASE and ESSWE were created, so, in 2011, I decided to create the third association, our CEEO/UNASUR, to unite Latin American scholars (and postgraduate students) interested in “Western esotericism in (and from) Latin America”. Many scholars have joined us since then, including: Francisco de Mendonça Jr., Universidade Federal de Santa Maria; and, since 2016, current Director of our *Journal Melancolia*, José Ricardo Chaves, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; Johann Hasler, Universidad de Antioquia; and David Pessoa de Lira, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Further, many young researchers have joined: Guadalupe Domínguez Márquez; Mariano Villalba; Esteban Rodríguez Dobles; Karen Briano Veloz; Alejandra Galicia; Rafael Pereira; Andrés Rivero Aponte; Hernán López; Marcelo de Campos; and Carolina Tamayo. Also, in 2016, our CEEO established contact with the *REHMLAC* Central America network, led by my colleagues and friends, Ricardo Martínez Esquivel, Universidad de Costa Rica, and Ivan Pozuelo Andrés, Centro de Estudios Históricos de la Masonería Española.



What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future?

Perhaps the biggest problem is the theoretical question. The current debates about whether we should continue to speak of “Western esotericism” or just “esotericism” are very intense. I think we should continue to think about this question in the following years. Personally, as a Latin-American historian and due to historical reasons, I still prefer “Western Esotericism”.

What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field?

In the 90s, when there was no internet in Argentina and I wanted to read the papers by Antoine Faivre or Wouter Hanegraaff (etc.), I was attentive to the trips made to Europe by friends and asked them to buy me books or make copies! Today, that method of obtaining study material is Jurassic and most of my students have no idea how much effort it took!

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

I like to listen all kinds of music, especially medieval music, and I like to read books and watch science fiction movies. As a kid, I read all of the works of Jules Verne and Isaac Asimov. There are several good films: the ones I recommend are *Contact*, based on the novel by Carl Sagan, and *Twelve Monkeys* with Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt—both movies are marvellous.

What are the worst things about having this as your specialty?

When I started my postgraduate research at the end of 90s, I had to face the classical—almost positivistic—prejudices: “*History of magic? History of astrology? History of alchemy? That is not History!*” Fortunately, almost twenty-five years later, the academic world in Argentina is much more receptive and many scholars understand: this object of study can be approached seriously and it has as much legitimacy as any other topic in history.

What are the best things about having this as your specialty?

In my view, the best are the personal relationships, even friendships, that are formed between scholars in our field. For example, on my last trip to Europe, (January to February 2020, just before the pandemic started), I was honored to personally meet my colleagues Marco Pasi, Egil Asprem, Mark Sedgwick, Peter Forshaw and Jean-Pierre Brach. (I already had contact by email with all of them, and I had met Mark before when he came to Argentina). So, I defend the idea that personal contact is always much better than technological connection. Marco, Egil, Mark, Peter and Jean-Pierre, (also Wouter Hanegraaff, who was unable to attend my conference in Amsterdam due to a totally understandable private problem), helped me a lot during my trip across France, Denmark, Holland, Sweden, Spain and Germany. I am very grateful to all of them.

PhD Project Features

Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir
Department of Philology, University of Münster
Münster, Germany

Subversive Esotericism of the Austrian Neo-Avant-Garde: A historical discourse analysis of Viennese Actionism

The creative appropriation of esotericism abounds in the avant-garde. Esoteric textuality can materialize in motifs, symbols, narrative and form (rituals, instructions, magical formulas, enumerations) and there are esoteric aesthetics, visual language and even methods (automatic writing, mediumistic art) to consider. Avant-gardists adopt these occult methods and narratives for their own project. Frequently esotericism is exploited for their subversive tactics or as a counter-discourse in their aesthetic rhetoric. It has been employed against such adversaries as state powers and institutions, rationalism, dualistic worldview, organized religion, gender norms and bourgeois morals. In my dissertation, I analyze the manifestation and subversive application of esotericism in the works of the Viennese Actionists, an Austrian neo-avant-garde group active in the years 1962-1973. The artists at the



center of my research are Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and to a lesser extent Otto Muehl and Adolf Frohner. Notorious for their transgressive art practice, the Actionists positioned themselves against the hegemonical culture of the Second Republic. Their aim was to revolutionize the Austrian consciousness and thereby society. The Actionists incorporated diverse esoteric knowledge and traditions into their works, which I argue is a key part of their artistic creation and radicalism. The Actionists were elected as a subject in part due to their location in history.

Historical contextualization is vital for my investigation, especially regarding the position of esotericism in post-war culture. By that I refer to its status in the cultural milieu of the time, in particular its links to radical politics. The sixties were a time of social unrest and political upheaval. The student movement, the rise of youth- and counterculture, and the sexual revolution all left a deep mark on the era. There was a rising demand for alternative systems of knowledge and a new way of life. For many, esotericism supplied the answer. It incorporates ideas of progress, new modes of living and radical thought, yet esotericism can likewise be reactionary and archaic. Its practices and symbolism have been adopted by various individuals and groups, including the far-right and Nazis. Since the first half of the twentieth century, there exists a discursive entanglement between fascism and esotericism, a factor that affected the reception of the occult after the Second World War. To understand esotericism in the context of actionism, its role in the protest culture and sexual revolution of the sixties, as well as the continued association and perceived links between fascism and esotericism, must be examined. The Actionists' art represents both ends of the spectrum.

The artworks are furthermore analyzed in light of the cultural matrix of post-war Austria and within the tradition of the avant-garde. The thesis examines the Actionists' relation to history and tradition, a subject matter that concerned them a great deal and is reflected in their works. This encompasses their artistic genealogy and the fascist history of Austria. A dialogue between the historical and neo-avant-garde materializes in their use of esotericism as well as in artistic tactics and motifs such as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, negation and utopianism. The Actionists' works pose questions regarding the continuity and rupture of these traditions. They engage with it in myriad of ways; as repetition, reconfiguration, reinterpretation and negation of tradition. First and foremost, they expose the failure of a true break with Austria's Nazi past, namely by pointing out the continuation of fascism within the institutions of state, in the art world and in the cultural discourse. The thesis reveals the various ways that esotericism serves as a counter-narrative for the Actionists, whether directed against the cultural landscape or the social control of church and state. I moreover address some of the complexities of the artists' employment of esotericism in their works, i.e., regarding its intersections with fascism, racialism and orientalist discourse.

Towards that end, I analyze selected works of the Actionists with the method of historical discourse analysis: The collective manifesto *Die Blutorgel* (1962), Schwarzkogler's text *Das Ästhetische Panorama* (1967/68) and the actions *Abreaktionsspiel* (1970) by Nitsch and Brus's *Zerreißprobe* (1970). The works were chosen due to their esoteric aspects, and how they reflect on the different manifestations of esotericism within actionism, namely, that they demonstrate the distinct ways the individual artists utilize it as a part of their aesthetic and subversive strategies. The method reveals a part of the objective, to retrace various discourses as they surface in the Actionists' works. The primary focus is on esotericism, however other relevant discourses are psychoanalysis, fascism, gender, sexuality, sex, pornography, aesthetics, science/biology, religion (Catholicism, mystery cults, eastern religions) and oriental discourse. I consider the interdiscursivity present in the works, in particular the relation between esotericism and the other discourses. This examination helps with decoding the Actionists' subversive application of esotericism. By analyzing the intertextual and discursive relationships in the artworks, I expose the disparate layers of meaning in the multifarious project of actionism

and dissect their socio-cultural criticism and aesthetic innovation.

Matt Wiemers
Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University
Brisbane, Australia

My PhD sets out to document what transpired when I applied an esoteric approach to scoring Curtis Harrington's 1956 film, *The Wormwood Star*. The film features occult artist Marjorie Cameron performing a sequence of ritual gestures amidst esoteric objects d'art, as well as a montage showcasing a selection of her artworks. Responding to *The Wormwood Star* has involved reflexive creative practice, discursive analysis of relevant literature, autoethnographic inquiry, and retrospective textual analysis. My textual analysis focuses on symbol sets related to cosmologies promoted by personalities relevant to the film. Whilst centred on music, my project also involves experimentation with various practical magical modalities. These include aspects of Thelemic and Golden Dawn systems, as well as older Greco-Egyptian and grimoiric traditions.



Whilst scoring *The Wormwood Star*, subjective interpretations of aspects of the occult ontologies of Marjorie Cameron, Jack Parsons and Aleister Crowley were coloured by awareness of discursive conflicts central to modern engagement with Western Esotericism. In an atmosphere of immersion in these themes, creative offspring developed through the utilisation of techniques allowing for the emergence of irrational factors associated with esoteric and unconscious agencies. These agencies commandeered much of the compositional process, whilst also heavily influencing the course of academic research shaping reflections on that process.

The resultant musical and exegetical outputs strive to realise individuated forms of aesthetic subjectivity in the Jungian psychoanalytic sense, through seeking to establish harmonious relations between conscious and unconscious psychic strata. Through retrospective analysis, these outputs can be seen to collectively constitute a divinatory and dynamically self-reflexive symbolic field.

The music I composed can be seen to function as a divinatory vehicle housing this field. Within it, esoteric essences have been constellated and transmuted through semiotic combination. Expansive insight into their occult significance and wider ontological ramifications can be furnished via numerological interrogation using esoteric modes of exegesis. This methodology has yielded valuable insights because its results speak in profound terms of powerful psychodynamic currents informing the lives of Cameron, Parsons and Crowley. Such dynamics have not been explored when it comes to academic and biographical accounts of these figures to date.

My work hopes to emphasise the importance of utilising methodologies geared towards understanding esoteric subjects on their own terms. It is a reaction in part to a) the preponderance of solely intellectual approaches to investigating the area within academia broadly, and b) treatises too reliant on superimposing logics from other disciplines onto the field, which, in my view, sometimes do more to convolute and distort an already historically convoluted and distorted area. My work seeks to balance such trends by privileging divinatory modes of specifically esoteric research, capable of moulding research

trajectories in innovative ways, yielding unique gnoses. In my experience, this approach has proven more substantive in terms of unearthing compelling insight than starting with an intellectual argument and seeking to refine and prove that argument on purely rational grounds. My overall aim will not be to discredit or do away with academic objectivity in this way, but to balance its intellectual bias with irrational, and uniquely esoteric, input.

Conducting research along these lines has enabled me to synthesise meanings from information generated via divinatory means that simply would not have been available to me if I were exploring the territory on a purely intellectual level. In this sense it has served a unique initiatory function, unveiling resonances drawing seemingly disconnected aspects of *The Wormwood Star*'s narrative together to construct a richly layered, overarching symbolic narrative that breathes life and coherent mythic syntax into its historiographical referents.



Image: Anonymous, *F. de La Rose*, c. 1700, 32.4 x 21.4 cm, 11 leaves, watercolour illustrations, Manly Hammer Hall collection of alchemical manuscripts, Manuscript 24.

News from the HHP

In 2019, the Centre for the History of Hermetic Currents and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam (a.k.a. HHP) celebrated its 20th anniversary since its foundation. So many things have happened in these twenty years! And quite a few things have also happened after the anniversary until today. I am sure most ESSWE members will be interested to hear about some recent achievements and the latest developments of HHP.

Let's begin then with the anniversary itself. HHP celebrated it with gusto, by organising the 7th ESSWE conference, held in Amsterdam from 2 to 4 July 2019. The conference was an extraordinary success, bringing together more than 300 participants. One of the highlights of the conference was the ceremony and reception at the Embassy of the Free Mind (the former Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica), during which the highest distinction of the University of Amsterdam, the Grote Sta-penning, was awarded to Ms. Rosalie Basten, the founder of the HHP Foundation, as a recognition of her merits in the creation and continued support of the HHP Centre.

Connected to the conference, and also as a way to celebrate our 20th anniversary, there was the publication of *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism* (Amsterdam University Press), a volume of collected essays by collaborators and friends of HHP, all prominent specialists of Western esotericism. A copy was given to each participant in the conference.

After twenty years of existence, HHP felt the necessity to make some changes and renew itself. Wouter Hanegraaff, who has been the director of the Centre since its foundation passed his functions on to me, and now I am in charge of leading HHP towards new challenges and achievements. Certainly the most important thing that has happened since I have become the director is the expansion of our Centre with two new positions of Assistant Professor, one for esotericism in Late Antiquity and the other one for esotericism in the medieval period. After a difficult selection, due to the high number of candidates, we are very happy to have appointed Dylan Burns for the former position and Liana Saif for the latter, both well known colleagues in our community and with an impressive record of publications and scholarly activities. Starting from the next academic year, our teaching programs will include courses on esotericism both in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. This will make our programs as comprehensive and complete as we could ever wish them to be! Apart from that, we have also recently restructured our BA and MA programs to make them even more attractive to international students.

Among some other initiatives that we have developed in the past couple of years I would like to mention our Summer School. This was originally planned for Summer 2020, but then had to be postponed because of the Covid pandemic. It was decided to move it to do it

online and to move it to January 2021 (which means that it became a Winter School!). Our former student and PhD graduate Christian J. Greer was invited to coordinate it together with me. The response of the participants was so enthusiastic and the experience was so positive that we have decided to do it again. So there will be now a Summer School in June-July 2021 and we will plan more in the future. Sadly, the format will have to be online only at this moment, but as soon as the situation will allow it, we will also go back to an on-site program.

Another important aspect of our current activities is the increased attention to our presence on social media and promotional activities. We opened a new Instagram account and, thanks to the collaboration of our graduate student Ninian Nijhuis, we are able to communicate about our activities and events to a much broader audience of interested persons. We have also established important forms of collaboration with podcasts such as the Secret History of Western Esotericism Podcast (SHWEP) and Rejected Religion.

We are also very happy with our long-term collaboration with the Embassy of the Free Mind, formerly known as the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica or Ritman Library. The link between our institutions has recently become even stronger since our esteemed colleague Peter Forshaw, specialist for Western esotericism in the early modern period, has been appointed director of the EFM research institute. The EFM is a unique institution that has been for many years frequented by scholars coming to Amsterdam from all over the world to work on the treasures of its collection. It is also recent news that the state-owned part of the Ritman Collection, which was held at the Royal Library at the Hague for a number of years, is finally coming back to Amsterdam and is going to be preserved at the Special Collections Department of the University of Amsterdam. This collection includes marvelous books, among which are first editions of works by Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, and Giordano Bruno, to name but a few.

The HHP Centre has become bigger in the past few years. Apart from our two new permanent staff members, Liana and Dylan, we also have very interesting PhD projects running, with Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, John MacMurphy, and Hedvig Martin-Ahlén. We would be happy to attract even more in the future. And then we have temporary research fellows, usually with an external post-doc project, such as Manon Hedenborg White, who has been with us in the past two years.

Finally, it is also important to mention the recent creation of an HHP student association, which gathers together all current students in our programs, but also alumni/ae who studied with us in the past. The association is already quite active and has great plans for organizing interesting events in the future.

The Covid pandemic has obviously posed many challenges to us, especially with respect to our teaching programs and a number of

events we were organizing. But we have been able to adjust to the situation and we are doing our best to assist our student community. We miss close contact with them, but this is the situation in many countries around the world at this moment. We look forward to when this will be over, and HHP will be able to resume all future plans and activities in a Covid-free, welcoming Amsterdam!

Marco Pasi
Director of the HHP Centre

Upcoming Events

ESSWE Online Lecture Series 2021

Dr. Korshi Dosoo: 'What are the Magical Papyri?'
March 25, 2021
18:00 CEST
Zoom

The Greek and Demotic magical papyri are probably the richest surviving source of information about the ritual practices of the Roman Empire, hundreds of texts attesting to the attempts of the inhabitants of Egypt to call upon the divine powers to intervene in their daily lives by cursing their enemies, attracting lovers, healing diseases, or revealing the future. Since their first publications in the 1820s, they have been the subject of many conflicting interpretations – are they the product of late antique gnostic groups, evidence of archaic survivals in classical Greek religion – or of Greek religion's decline – or of ancient Egyptian temple rituals reinvented by entrepreneurial priests? In this talk I will discuss some of the history of their reception, exploring how scholars came to such diverse conclusions, and consider some ways in which these different readings help us to understand these complex documents.

Dr. Susan Jean Palmer: 'Children of Chiliasm — Concepts of the "Child" in Contemporary Spiritual Movements, Questions of Identity, Symbolism and Ownership'
May 20, 2021
19:00 CEST
Zoom

What is the "Child" in new religious movements? This lecture explores the esoteric identities (Hanegraaff 2013) ascribed to children in NRMs, ranging from world saviour, endtime warrior, reincarnated saint, to alien hybrid babies. Based on archival and qualitative research, this study offers an analyses of the mythopoeic models and the symbolism associated with children in spiritual communes and apocalyptic sects. It is proposed that the pure, androgynous body of the child might recall a lost Eden (Olson 2015); represent a "perfect vessel" resistant to external contamination and assimilation (Douglas 1970); or become a symbol of hope and salvation for the new millennium (Duymaer Van Twist 2015).

This study is part of the Children in Sectarian Religions and State Control research project supported by the Social Science and the Humanities Research Council of Canada (spiritualchildhoods.ca)

Please register by mail for both lectures at sekretariat@lit.gess.ethz.ch. For more information on the ESSWE Online Lecture Series 2021, please visit lit.ethz.ch/ESSWE-OLS2021.

ESOGEN Symposium

Esotericism, Gender, and Sexuality
April 16, 2021
Zoom

The interdisciplinary, one-day ESOGEN Symposium – open to all, and geared especially towards MA and PhD students from all disciplines – approaches the nexus of Western esotericism, gender, and sexuality.

From antiquity until the present, individuals have deployed esoteric

ideas to explicate, challenge, or overhaul traditional binaries of sex and gender; as such, the history of Western esotericism overlaps with that of feminism, eugenics, sexology, free love, celibacy, gay and lesbian liberation, polyamory, gender non-conformity, and other such currents. The symposium celebrates the launch of the Esotericism, Gender, and Sexuality Network (ESOGEN), founded by Dr. Manon Hedenborg White and Professor Christine Ferguson in 2019 as a thematic network of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE). The event is hosted in collaboration with the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (University of Amsterdam). It is supported by the ESSWE Sponsorship Programme for Independent Scholarly Initiatives and the Amsterdam School for Historical Studies.

Event registration: uva-live.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_5Is-zaM-RQR-2QP4TyPjvRA

Program: drive.google.com/file/d/1xTRpdw5C_yjCps28GVJKfy-j5YbA-ox-9/view?usp=sharing

ETH Online Lecture Series, Spring 2021

Aesthetic and Scientific Epistemologies of the Occult in the XIX Century
Tuesdays in May, 2021
18:00 CEST
Zoom

Prof. Dr. Ehler Voss: 'Magic Tipping Points. On Deceptions and Detections'
May 4, 2021

Dr. Erin Yerby: 'The Body as Spectral Shape: Spiritualist Mediumship and Anglo-American Iconoclasm'
May 11, 2021

Prof. Dr. Victoria Ferentinou: "'Colours are Things": The Visionary Art of Frixos Aristeus'
May 18, 2021

Prof. Dr. Marco Pasi: "'Witchcraft with Capital W": The Magical Art of Chiara Fumai.'
May 25, 2021

We invite you to the Spring 2021 edition of our ongoing lecture series, as we continue our enquiry into aesthetic and scientific epistemologies of the occult during the long nineteenth century. On Tuesday evenings in May, through our second online series, we present approaches to the subject that combine methodologies drawn from art history, religious studies, media theory, anthropology and science studies. In our first lecture, anthropologist, Ehler Voss will take a look at the opposing views of two Californian magicians by relating them to nineteenth-century debates surrounding the credibility of magical practices. In the second lecture, with an approach similarly grounded in religious anthropology, Erin Yerby will investigate the role of the body as medium in the American Spiritualist tradition, which she contextualizes within broader Protestant-inflected iconoclastic tradition. In our third lecture, art historian, Victoria Ferentinou will explore the influence of esoteric discourses on artistic theory and practice of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her focus will be on the painting and theory of the Greek symbolist, Frixos Aristeus (1879-1951). Finally, in the fourth lecture, historian of religion, Marco Pasi will consider the presence of occult-related themes in the oeuvre of the late contemporary artist, Chiara Fumai (1978-2017).

Please register by mail at sekretariat@lit.gess.ethz.ch. Registration is mandatory for the participants

The lecture series is organized by Chloe Sugden, Jonas Stähelin and Andreas Kilcher as part of the SNSF project 'The Scientification and Aestheticization of "Esotericism" in the long 19th century'.

2021 Meeting of ENSIE

Islam and Esotericism—Societies, Politics, and Practices
September 29, 2021 - October 1, 2021
Zoom

CALL FOR PAPERS

The European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism (ENSIE) invites proposals for its 2021 meeting, to be held on Zoom 29 September - 1 October 2021. The theme for the meeting is "Islam and Esotericism: Societies, Politics, and Practices."

Religious studies, and especially the study of esotericism, tend to focus on text production and ideas. Societies, politics, practices—and also economics, social forms, and the material—are often neglected in the study of esotericism, partly due to methodological challenges. We would therefore like to invite scholars to submit proposals focusing on these dimensions of Islam and esotericism, of esotericism and Islam, and of Islamic esotericism.

We especially invite proposals from sociologists and anthropologists, as well as other scholars. The chronological scope stretches from medieval to contemporary times.

We invite papers that engage with these aims, but—as usual—proposals relating to Islam and Esotericism that do not relate to the meeting theme are also welcome.

The meeting will be held over successive afternoons to make it possible for both European scholars and scholars in American time zones to participate. There is no fee for attending the meeting.

The meeting is being held in 2021 rather than 2022 (when it would normally be held, following ENSIE's standard practice) because the 2021 meeting of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), of which ENSIE is a thematic network, has moved its 2021 conference to 2022 because of Covid, and ENSIE's 2022 meeting will therefore be part of ESSWE's 2022 conference.

Proposals by May 15, 2021, please send to ensie21@ensie.site:

- The title and abstract (250 words maximum) of your proposed paper
- Your name, institution, academic position and a brief biography
- A short CV

The meeting is organised by:

- Mark Sedgwick, Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University, and Convener of ENSIE
- Liana Saif, assistant professor in the History of Western Esotericism in The Middle Ages, University of Amsterdam
- Francesco Piraino, Postdoc, Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, and Fondazione Giorgio Cini
- Michele Petrone, Adjunct professor, Università di Milano

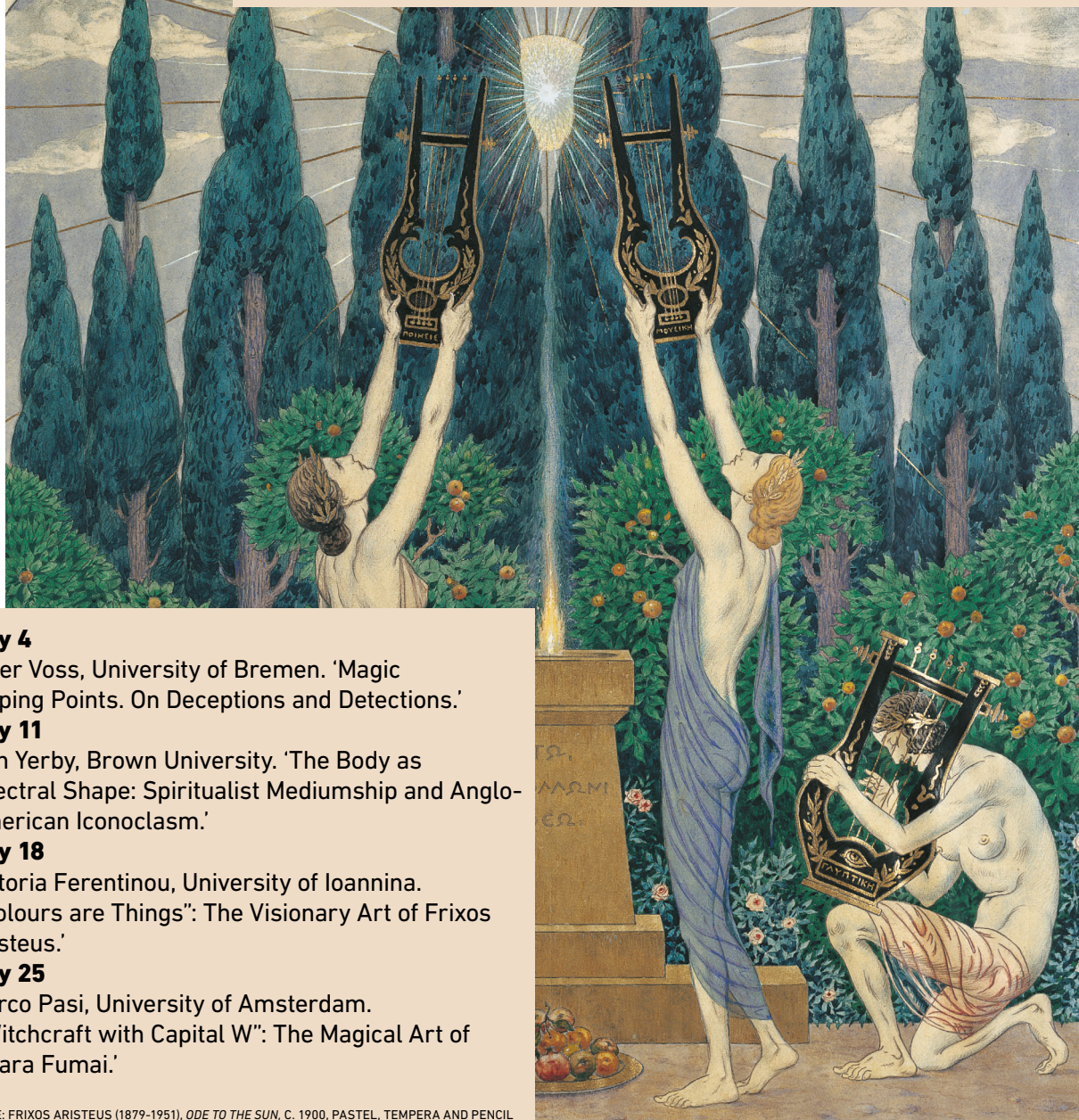
Updates at ensie.site/conferences.html.

Aesthetic and Scientific Epistemologies of the Occult in the XIX Century

Online Lecture Series, Spring 2021

Tuesdays in May at 18:00 CEST

Register to attend at lit.ethz.ch/occultism



May 4

Ehler Voss, University of Bremen. 'Magic Tipping Points. On Deceptions and Detections.'

May 11

Erin Yerby, Brown University. 'The Body as Spectral Shape: Spiritualist Mediumship and Anglo-American Iconoclasm.'

May 18

Victoria Ferentinou, University of Ioannina. '"Colours are Things": The Visionary Art of Frixos Aristeus.'

May 25

Marco Pasi, University of Amsterdam. '"Witchcraft with Capital W": The Magical Art of Chiara Fumai.'

IMAGE: FRIXOS ARISTEUS (1879-1951), *ODE TO THE SUN*, C. 1900, PASTEL, TEMPERA AND PENCIL ON PAPER, AGLG 114 © A. G. LEVENTIS GALLERY, NICOSIA. Φρίξος Αριστεύς, *Οδή στον Ήλιο*, Παστέλ, τέμπαρα και μολύβι σε χαρτί, AGLG 114 © Λεβέντειος Πινακοθήκη, Λευκωσία.

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ESSWE Online Lecture Series 2021

March 25 18:00 CEST

Korshi Dosoo, University of Würzburg. 'What are the Magical Papyri?'

May 20 19:00 CEST

Susan Jean Palmer, McGill University, Concordia University. 'Children of Chiasm: Concepts of the "Child" in Contemporary Spiritual Movements, Questions of Identity, Symbolism and Ownership.'

For mandatory Zoom registration visit lit.ethz.ch/ESSWE-OLS2021

IMAGE: HOROSCOPE FROM THE BOOK OF THE BIRTH OF ISKANDAR, 1411, CC BY 4.0.



ESOGEN SYMPOSIUM: ESOTERICISM, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

April 16, 2021, 9:00–18:30
Zoom

9.00–9.15 WORDS OF WELCOME

9.15–10.15 KEYNOTE LECTURE

Chair: Manon Hedenborg White (Södertörn University & University of Amsterdam)

Christine Ferguson (University of Stirling). "Rape, Reincarnation, and Cosmic Justice in the Woman's Occult Romance."

10.15–10.30 BREAK

10.30–11.30 BETWIXT, BETWEEN, AND BEYOND: FLUID, QUEER, AND TRANS IDENTITIES

Chair: Kateryna Zorya (Södertörn University)

Stephanie Shea (University of Amsterdam). "Exploring the Intersection of Other-than-Human Identities, Gender, and Esotericism."

Tove Ekholm-Meurling (Stockholm University). "Queering the Esoteric: Contemporary Spiritual Strategies against Hetero-Cisnormativity."

Brennan Kettelle (University of Amsterdam). "Beyond the Dark Feminine: Queering Lilith."

11.30–11.45 BREAK

11.45–12.45 IN SEARCH OF A PERFECT BEING: ENGINEERING ESOTERIC SEXUALITIES

Chair: Karen Swartz (Åbo Akademi University)

Fie S H Bakker (University of Amsterdam). "Love Devoid of Ape-Like Nature: Sex and Diabolic Beasts."

John MacMurphy (University of Amsterdam). "Sex as a Spiritual Practice in Jewish Kabbalah."

Jessica Albrecht (University of Heidelberg). "Isis as Superwoman."

12.45–13.45 LUNCH BREAK

13.45–15.05 FEMININITIES AND MASCULINITIES: IMAGINING OTHERS AND ALTERNATIVES

Chair: John MacMurphy (University of Amsterdam)

Tommy Cowan (University of Amsterdam). "Sex Enemies -- William Burroughs' Magical Misogyny and the Feminist Dilemma."

Misha Kakabadze (University of Amsterdam). "'Queen Bees' and 'Female Astronauts': The Role of Femininity in the Work and Thought of Joseph Beuys."

Kateryna Zorya (Södertörn University). "Taming the Runaway Monkey Mind: Gendered Esoteric Practices, Intellect and Happiness."

Jessica De Fauwe (University of Amsterdam). "Divine Feminism: Shakti Tantra as a Framework for Contemporary Feminism."

15.05–15.15 BREAK

15.15–16.15 TRADITION AND TRANSITION: FEMALE AGENCY AND CHANGING ESOTERIC MOVEMENTS

Chair: Stephanie Shea (University of Amsterdam)

José Leitão (University of Coimbra). "Gender Bending the Mage: Early 20th Century Portuguese Occult Publishing and the Rise of Female Occult Reading."

Karen Swartz (Åbo Academy University). "Women, Authority, and the Anthroposophical Society: The Case of Judith von Halle."

Philip Deslippe (University of California, Santa Barbara). "Demographics and Demonization: Women in the Early History of Yoga in America."

16.15–16.30 BREAK

16.30–17.10 LECTURE

Chair: Christine Ferguson (University of Stirling)

Manon Hedenborg White (Södertörn University & University of Amsterdam). "Accessing Female Authority: Women and Gender in Aleister Crowley's Thelema."

17.10–17.15 BREAK

17.15–17.50 LIGHTNING SESSION

Chair: T.B.A.

Laura Faith Pramuk (University of Amsterdam). "Immanent Flesh: Transgressive Corporeality in the Work of Ithell Colquhoun."

Jayne Phillips (Freie Universität Berlin). „Holy Heretics & Heathens in the Hills: Ecstatic Trance, Dance and the Feminisation of Magic in the Western Alpine Region of 15th Century Europe.”

Richard Mason (University of Amsterdam). “Houses of the Holy: A. E. Waite and his Notion of Secret Tradition.”

17.50–18.20 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

18.20–18.30 CLOSING REMARKS