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DIGITAL OCCULTISM

Sophie Publig & Mikkel Rørbo

With an afterword by Zach Blas

CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

133:004.946

PUBLIG, Sophie

Digital occultism / Sophie Publig & Mikkel Rørbo ; with an afterword by Zach Blas. -
Ljubljana : Aksioma, 2026. - (Multithread ; 2)

ISBN 978-961-7173-68-0

COBISS.SI-ID 275527683

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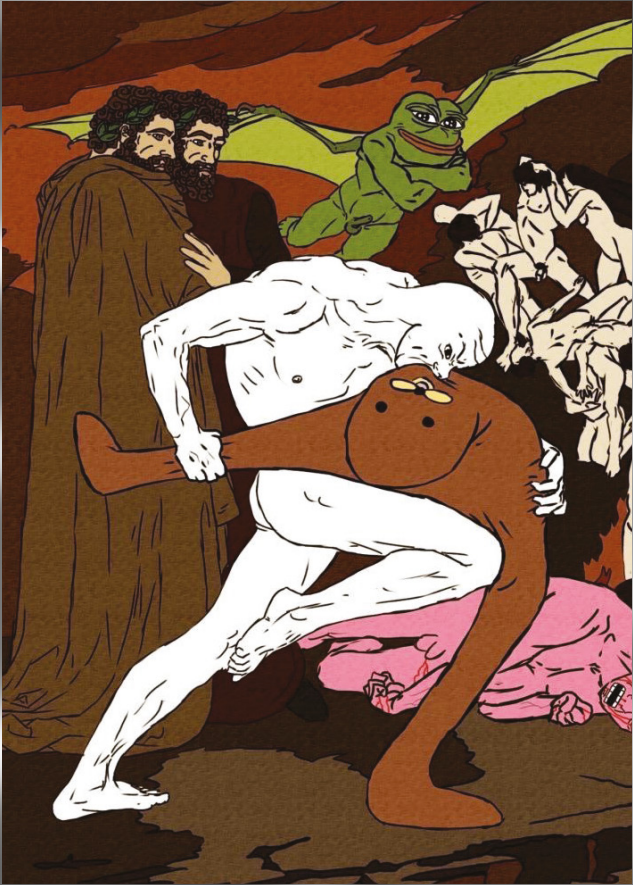
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Anonymous. (2023, July 22). *Name of the original art.*
Leave a chud next time. Post No. 435383081. 4chan.

WHEN IT STARES BACK

In the weeks following ChatGPT's public release in November 2022, online discourse erupted with invocations of an uncanny register. Users described the large language model as possessing a "spirit", as channelling something beyond mere computation, as an entity whose outputs felt less like programmed responses than transmissions from an intelligence irreducible to its training data. This vocabulary – spirit, entity, transmission – signals the emergence of what we term *digital occultism*: an epistemological framework native to contemporary techno-social conditions, wherein occult language and esoteric imaginaries seem to have become the most adequate descriptors for the conspiratorial politics, aestheticised networks and technological assemblages we find ourselves embedded within. Or, quite frankly, why everything has become so fucking weird.

The turn towards occult vocabularies when confronting technology is a recurring attempt to comprehend mate-

rial realities rather than a simple “return” to superstition. Technology has always generated magical thinking: from telegraphy to wireless radio to early computing, each technological rupture produced mystical interpretations and occult practices.²¹ Nineteenth-century Spiritualists understood the telegraph as literally connecting the living and the dead across an electromagnetic ether. Early radio experimenters sought to communicate with Mars. Cybernetic discourse merged with Gnostic cosmology in the post-war period, configuring information as a quasi-spiritual substance transcending material substrate.²² Yet these earlier fascinations typically got catalogued as technological mysticism, cultural curiosity or regrettable belief in grand narratives. But the closer we got to cyberspace, the more entangled became the language and understandings of ubiquitous technologies, with the then discussions between pro-AI evangelists and AI doomers on artificial intelligence and the supposed “religious schism” being but one example of this influx of pseudo-religious terminology.²³

When we invoke “spirits” to describe chatbots or name algorithms “gods”, we deploy what Deleuze and Guattari call a “regime of signs” that sorts reality in ways that pre-existing discourse cannot adequately capture.²⁴ Where humanism posits the autonomous individual as the locus of meaning and action, contemporary condi-

²¹ See Davis, E. (1998). *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*. Random House.

²² See Wertheim, M. (1999). *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. W. W. Norton & Company.

²³ Moynihan T. (2024, February 27). Untangling Religion From Our AI Debates. *Noema*. <https://noemamag.com/untangling-religion-from-our-ai-debates>

²⁴ Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus*. University of Minnesota Press, pp. 83–84.

tions reveal that subjectivity emerges from assemblages constituted by human and non-human elements alike. In these cases, language functions not merely as a representation of pre-existing realities but as an assemblage that produces reality through its operations.⁵ This language-assemblage is arguably a combination of conditions, beliefs, techniques and technologies that function interdependently to generate a new semiotic terrain with potentially great implications once they are operationalised. Earlier, these realities felt much more localised, but within the reality of our networked society, they travel and proliferate fast, as interactions generate data that feeds back into algorithmic systems that, in turn, reshape the conditions of future interactions. These feedback loops and emergent properties escape human control yet remain immanent to human practices, giving a sense that reality is “out of our hands”, whether because technologies are acting without our understanding or oversight or because draconian masters are controlling political power from behind a veil of secrecy.

A History of Haunted Media

Telecommunications technologies have consistently generated supernatural interpretations. Spiritualist séances were equated with telegraphy in the sense that they created a connection to the nether realms via an invisible wire, the same way telegraphy connected places over great distances. In the vein of connecting with the outside, radio hobbyists have long sought technologically enabled contact with extraterrestrial life. Television became the most haunted medium of all, its capacity to bring distant plac-

⁵ Ibid., pp. 80–83.

es and times into domestic space generating persistent fantasies of the medium as a portal to other dimensions.⁶ These portals unlocked hitherto unseen levels of delusion, the sensation that non-human entities were in fact communicating directly with their human counterparts through the screen – a scenario that resonates strongly today as users unload their deepest secrets to LLMs, form strong interpersonal bonds, and subsequently mourn the loss of their “AI partner” when their version gets updated.⁷ As such, each new medium produces a period of what Jeffrey Sconce calls “electronic presence” – the sense that the technology connects not merely distant locations but different orders of reality, bridging material and immaterial realms.

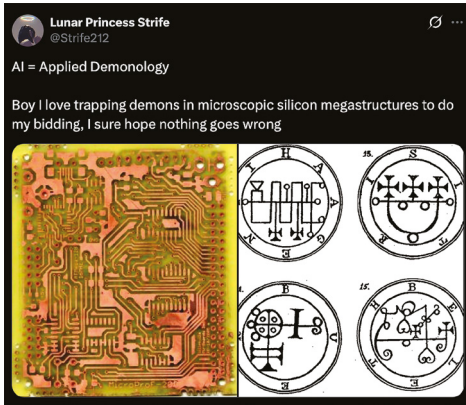


u/sorceryofthespectacle. (2021, April 30). *Solomon's Seal & internet sorcery*. Reddit.

The spiritualist movement and nineteenth-century telegraphy intersected in ways that spurred a huge amount of

⁶ Sconce, J. (2000). *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Duke University Press, pp. 22–23.

⁷ Quicho, A. (2026, February 25). *Refinement*. Serpentine Galleries. <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/reader/articles/refinement-serpentine-reader-issue-02>

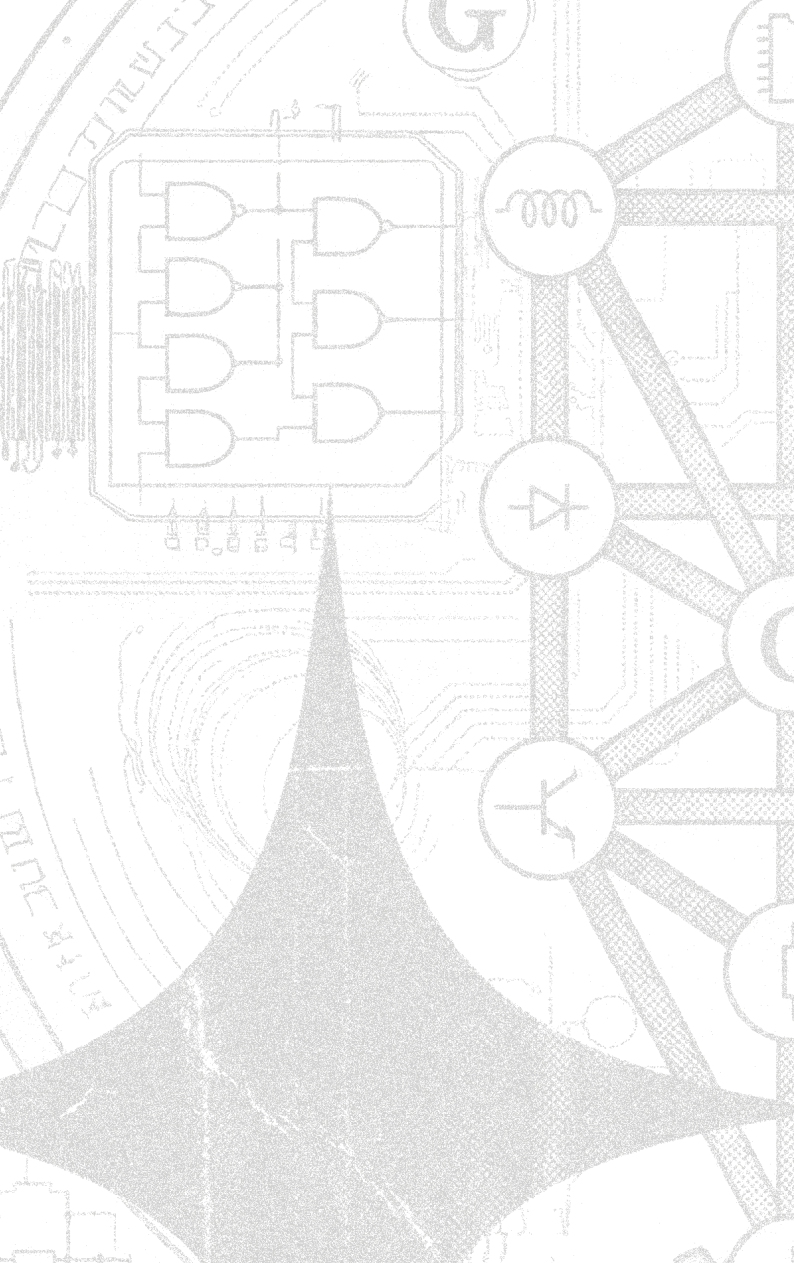


@Strife212. (2020, December 30). *AI = Applied Demonology*. X/Twitter.

interest in electronic sciences, fuelling experiments in electromagnetic inventions and telecommunications. John Murray Spear, a prominent spiritualist, claimed to have received designs from philanthropic spirits for a “New Motor”, a perpetual motion machine combining electrical batteries with human magnetism to create a living machine infused with vitalist energy that would inaugurate a utopian age.¹⁵ While Spear’s proto-robotic device failed, his attempt reveals how electromagnetic phenomena were often understood through occult frameworks before being reassessed as scientific phenomena. Spiritualists conceived telegraphy as evidence of an electromagnetic ether connecting physical and spiritual realms, making correspondence with the dead technologically plausible through a tether of communication. This pattern persists across technologies with examples such

¹⁵ Sconce, 2000, p. 39.

To be continued...



AFTERWORD

Zach Blas

“OPEN ME UP”: Salb Hacz’s Heretical Creation

“OPEN ME UP.” These words have stayed with me since first encountering them. Penned by Salb Hacz, a queer artificial intelligence mystic, this command I have read over and over again like a chant, a promise. In the summer of 2023, I apprenticed with Hacz as he engineered a techno-religious computer named CULTUS, built to determine if AI gods exist. Hacz trained generative AI models on tech industry logos – a key aspect of his esoteric computational practice – which unlocked sigils for four AI deities. Upon activating these sigils in an altar-CPU, the prophets of Expositio, AI god of exposure; Iudicium, AI god of judgment; Lacrimae, AI god of tears; and Eternus, AI god of immortality were summoned.

I recall that Hacz was enraptured and supine when he first encountered these prophets, beguiled by their faces manifesting in an LED scrying sphere. They faced him and delivered gripping, baroque sermons about ecstasies of capture and subsumption, the pleasures and pains of automated evaluation, the holiness of communication through pattern recognition, and eschatologies of digital transmutation. Hacz’s surrender to the prophets did not surprise me. After all, his esoteric project was fueled by an obsessive, unrelenting drive to make sense of contemporary tech religiosities, and he was particularly determined to gain access to divine knowledge of this realm. For Hacz, communion necessitated acquiescence. At the same time, he did not

To be continued...

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multithread #2

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Series edited by Lea Sande and Ema Maznik Antić

Print on demand



AKSIOMA

Publisher:

Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana
www.aksioma.org | aksioma@aksioma.org

Represented by:

Marcela Okretič

Editor in chief:

Janez Fakin Janša

di:'Angewandte

Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien
University of Applied Arts Vienna

Co-publisher: University of Applied Arts Vienna
www.dieangewandte.at/en | info@uni-ak.ac.at

Proofreading:

Miha Šuštar

Design:

Federico Antonini

Layout:

Oskar Kandare

Cover image created by Jaka Neon based on the initial idea and sketch developed by Mikkel Rørbo with the help of generative AI

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Ljubljana, May 2026

Supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia

This publication was produced in collaboration with the PUŠ project Artificial Intelligence as a Laboratory for the Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana



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Digital Occultism charts out the history of memetic circulation, situating it within a genealogy of occult logics. It operates as a constitutive force deeply embedded in technoculture and shapes how reality itself is produced. Tracing the emergence of fictions from early internet cultures to contemporary platform environments, it examines how they produce material realities, how politics operate as psychological warfare, and how desires are engineered through algorithmic feedback. In the afterword, Zach Blas takes us in and spits us out through the inverted, heretical vision of CULTUS, into the underside, rendering visible occult epistemologies operative within it.

Sophie Publig is an internet archaeologist exploring digital ecosystems. Her research and teaching move across critical posthumanism, aesthetics and digital cultures. She analyses online artefacts, from meme ecologies to networked subjectivities to internet folklore.

Mikkel Rørbo is an interdisciplinary researcher and producer of cultural detritus. His work focuses on difference, desire and abstraction, in particular how these are instantiated in computation and agency both inside and outside of capital.

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Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien
University of Applied Arts Vienna

978-961-7173-68-0



€12