

Book Review: Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005. ISBN-13: 978-0817314668 (hardcover). 260 Pages. \$49.75.

Reviewed by Samantha Yanelli¹

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Beginning by highlighting the groundbreaking social theorists, Deleuze and Guattari and their complex theoretical framing in the initial passages, Joshua Gunn argues that the construct of society, and the historical use of language and the way in which we describe it, are ways that knowledge connects to occult practices. The arguments and research by Professor Gunn follow the tendrils of language construction to modern occult practices through contemporary academic narratives. Gunn's research dives deep into the theological framework of historical and modern occultism and its links to academic knowledge and the discursive similarities between the two. Gunn argues that contemporary discourse is but a mirror of occult discourses that share its discrimination, "among groups or kinds of people with strange and difficult language; and...it's strange or difficult language is designed to better apprehend or understand something that is, at base, incommunicable" (Gunn, p. xxiv) Following Gunn's argument that "the occult should be understood as the study of secrets" (Gunn, p. xxii), he chronologically covers the history of the occult and its history of secrecy, comparing it to the similarities of religious discourse. These similarities are expanded upon through close examination of strictly theological text and strictly occult text and finally where the two convene in the critique of the film *The Ninth Gate* as the book's pinnacle that introduces the academic portion of contemporary occult secrecy.

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Gunn begins this journey through text as one would approach the performance of an occult ritual or ceremony. He begins with an extravagant academic passage that sets apart those that have access to the shibboleth of such language and can unlock the meaning behind the rhetorical structures and those who cannot. After setting apart those who can comprehend such rhetoric and those who will be lost, he embarks on its history. Chapter one covers the texts and work of occult author Magus Eliphas Lévi and uses his work as the seminal definition of what is the occult. He divides his work on the occult into two parts, “The larger, overarching category, the occultic, refers to a theological form that underlies a larger reservoir of texts, images, symbols, myths, and so on” (Gunn p.7). Gunn argues that Eliphas Lévi’s work is seen as “the original expression of the occultic was the occult, the smaller category” (Gunn, p.7) of two parts. He defines, even more specifically, the occult through its rhetorical discursive constructions, that, “characterize[s] the occult as a historically contextualized discourse inclusive of a story of its origin” (Gunn p.7) and “characterized as a genre, an expression of form, which has a particular pattern that is repeated in multiple occult texts (not the whole, but the bulk)” (Gunn p.8). His close analysis of the language of the occult is what leads to chapter two and the poetic structure of the occult.

In chapter two, Gunn analyzes the rhetoric of occult presenter at ECKANKAR’s astral projection seminar and the works of James Joyce and describes the concept of the ineffable. His analysis links occult secrecy and poetic structure using the same methods of repetitive word use and “the use or creation of strange vocabularies” (Gunn, p.38). The use of such word choice by religious, occultists and poets alike share the “common belief [which] is premised on the idea that language cannot characterize ultimate reality precisely because language is human, and humans are imperfect” (Gunn, p.38) and it is the ineffability of such discourse that Gunn builds upon. He states that discourse assumes the persona of poetic structure, where occult discourses deploy such figurative language as allusion. Occult discourses reflect important philosophers as well, such Plato and Derrida, reflecting the language and forms of the spoken or written word. These rhetorical nuances are expressed at the clearest point of constructed language. He argues that the figurative speak being used is “advanced as being the closest to the divine or pure language” (Gunn, p.42) and “understand[s] language as fluid and rhetoric as an epistemic, reality-creating phenomenon” (Gunn, p.51). This is the foundation of Gunn’s argument that the elevated language and the use of rhetoric in both the occult and academic discourse call upon the same construction. The language of the occult aims its divine understanding and the language of

academia towards a point “designed to demonstrate formally the primary object of scrutiny... designed to discriminate among those who can read it and those who cannot” (Gunn, p. xix). In the following chapters he blends these similarities together as “esoteric language and complex argumentation helped to imbue ... with authority” (Gunn, p.68), identifying how the elevated esoteric language resonates in occult and academic discourses.

Gunn continues to build this foundation of the esoteric, elevated language and rhetoric over the following chapters where he dives into histories of individuals who are famed for their use of such difficult writing. Lévi, Blavatsky and Crowley write in such a fashion of secrecy that their notoriety rides on opaque language, crafted in such a fashion “to reassure believers and, presumably, to move them in a Platonic fashion toward glimpses of ultimate reality” (Gunn, p. 76). These authors are the occultic parallel of knowledge as an academic scholarly author is in their own aspects. It is this parallel of structure that links these scholarly academic texts to the occult. The Academic hierarchy of knowledge has led scholars to be where we “are currently mired in a genius-virtuoso, superstar model of intellectual authority that has emerged in the wake of “Truth” and the abandonment of absolutes” (Gunn, p. 117). The links back to occultic discourse and the hierarchy of knowing and secrecy by the model that Gunn has crafted, aligns with academic discourse and the scholar’s search for understanding and meaning. Gunn argues that the scholar or audience is to believe the author as a credible holder of knowledge and that the “charismatic, rhetorical strategies used by occultists to establish authority disclose a dialectic of control, or a movement between the autonomy and dependency of a believer, that always threatens to undermine the legitimacy of authority” (Gunn, p.118). He further states that a figure of authority is “the concept as it is often discussed in ordinary terms: authority refers to the ability or power of an individual to do something, or the power of an individual to request or demand something of others” (Gunn, p. 120). For Gunn, academic authors are in a place of authority as they have audiences and influence over such audiences based on their publishing record and publishers. If the academic author is in such a place of authority, Gunn has crafted a strong argument for the links between occult knowing, discourse and belief, and how these connect to academic scholarship and its search for understanding and enlightenment.

Gunn continues in the final chapters to build on his evidence for his argument of authority and how its wielded. The decline in occultism has given way to the rise of academic pursuits despite a rich body of occult

literature. This is cloaked in more detail on Crowley and The Church of Satan and the aspects of occult decline as well as a working analysis of Crowley's work following his own work as a guide. He leads this analysis and Crowley's insistence of publicizing the secrecy to one of the major points of occult decline. He also goes into detail the events regarding the 1980's satanic panic and the role that the Satanic Church and its leader, Anton LaVey, played in that and how that also propelled the decline in occultism. Gunn then shifts direction on to how the occult "focus[es] instead on the ways in which anxiety about social hierarchy and mystery (alternately read, about class) is embedded in rhetorical encounters" (Gunn, p.209) and how this hierarchy and secrecy is mirrored in academic discourse as occultism is influenced by modernity. Following the decline of occult study and the rise in academic pursuits "occultism has moved from modernity toward postmodernity" (Gunn, p.209) and is now intertwined in the scholarly critique of postmodernism. He gives a thrilling example of this crossing over in an analysis of the occult film *The Ninth Gate* which follows the hunt of a complete copy of an occult tome. As the main character pieces together multiple copies into one *true* copy the hunt becomes ritualistic and repetitive and "if one describes rhetoric as the movement between repetitions (form), collectively the copies are a model of suasion" (Gunn, p.215) where these rituals are in form models of rhetoric. Gunn elaborates on *The Ninth Gate* as example and evidence for his claims in much more detail of social forms and intertextuality.

Gunn concludes his work by returning to his inspiration of Kenneth Burke and the Marxist view of hierarchy, its grand pursuit of knowledge, and uncovering of secrets as the aspects of knowing. He leaves his work as a moment of inception where he has crafted a moment of intertwined occult and academic text. The terms and theories of scholars such as Derrida, Burke, Deleuze and Guattari are easily identifiable in this work and yet the contagious way in which Gunn writes his occult and academic secrets for his audience he embodies the practice of Crowley, putting on display his knowledge hidden in plain sight using his rhetoric and persuasion. Gunn delivers a credible argument that the occult and academic world do indeed cross paths and overlap. The evidence he provides are entertaining and exciting to engage with. With his fascination and deep knowledge of occult personalities and works, and his obvious scholarly knowledge, Gunn has crafted a compelling argument as evidence that the two do indeed coexist within similar spaces. This text could prove to be a turning point, as the critique of capitalism propels society further into what lies beyond postmodernism. The finding that Gunn has documented will be a great blueprint for future academic work and the

understanding that it is very much embedded within the humanities' fascination with the unknown and the hierarchy that finds itself at the top, able to craft such secrets.