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A Review of: "Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century."

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Book Review

Charles Howard, Editor

Gunn, Joshua, *MODERN OCCULT RHETORIC: MASS MEDIA AND THE DRAMA OF SECRECY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005, pp. 260, 49.75 hard cover.

Professor Joshua Gunn has provided us with a clearly written, well researched, and theoretically rich text on occult rhetoric. Near the end of the book Professor Gunn reviews the two main purposes of the study: first, “the conjuring of a grammar of secrecy and magic applicable to any relevant discourse (e.g., dense scholarly prose)” and second, “a rhetoric of the occultic” (p. 209). *Occultic* is Professor Gunn’s “cool, new term” (p. xxii) for “a brand of contemporary discourse that retains a number of elements of the occult tradition . . . first, occultic discourse discriminates among groups or kinds of people with strange and difficult language; and second, its strange or difficult language is designed to better apprehend or understand something that is, at base, incommunicable” (p. xxiv). In both its stated endeavors this book succeeds quite well.

Modern Occult Rhetoric begins with an overview of the general history of occultism from about the medieval period to the modern period. With this as backdrop Gunn develops an occult poetics, laying out some of the generic features of occult discourse, differentiating it from some types of religious discourse, while connecting occult discourse to a few specific religious discourses and some academic discourses within the humanities. The book then turns to more specific and detailed studies; first an examination of the late-nineteenth-century occultists, H. P. Blavatsky, and second a very handy sound-byte that summarizes an antinomy that Gunn finds both in most occult texts and in many theorists in the humanities: “The Truth is ineffable, but let me tell you about it anyway” (p. 71). Chapters 4 and 5 turn to early-twentieth-century occultist Aleister Crowley’s *The Book of the Law* and his interpretive techniques as key parts of his rhetorical strategy and authority. Embedded in these chapters is a nuanced critique of close textual analysis and intrinsic criticism.

Chapters 6 and 7 document the decline of occultism in general as the ambiguities and ironies were fetishized by popular culture and became symbols unhinged and capable of running far afield from the communities of elite insiders that had used them as a specialized argot. There are some controversial if not downright

contentious claims in Chapter 7, which deals in large part with Anton LaVey's Church of Satan and *Satanic Bible* during the 1960s and 1970s. Gunn provides compelling documentation of the metaphoric qualities, irony, and allegory in LaVey's book and contrasts these with the popular images and media responses grounded in a more literal understanding of the book and church. Nonetheless, there should have been at least a few more pages about the other folks who made this well-documented and overwhelmingly common literal interpretive error and simultaneously sought to embrace the teachings as they had interpreted them, with disastrous results. As it stands, the chapter leans a tad toward the apologetic.

In Chapter 7 Roman Polanski's film *The Ninth Gate* provides an excellent foundation upon which Professor Gunn builds a more specific and detailed connection between the occultic discourses found in occultism and the occultic discourses found in academia: "Just as the occultist seems to replicate the external hierarchy of class within a secret order, so, too, the academic carves out spaces of belonging in terms of a disciplinary argot and other rhetorics of inclusion and exclusion" (p. 219). This is not, however, an admonition that we ought to give up all our tendencies toward esoteric language in academe. Instead, in Chapter 9, Gunn not only defends esoteric language through a rhetorical strategy of argument-by-proxy but explicitly allies himself with such defenses. Rather than an Orwellian revocation of esoteric language, Professor Gunn admonishes us to remember "those whom we exclude or discipline with our words *in here, in the academy*" (p. 234, emphasis in original) and, also, to be aware that our occultic rhetoric "can be sadistic" (p. 235).

In addition, Gunn has included interludes that appear between the chapters with discussions of his personal encounters with the New Age, the occult, and with academic occultics. These narratives, field research, and commentaries become intricate parts of the overall argument and add a richness and depth to this book rarely found in academic studies in any field.

This book is rightly called a Burkean enterprise. Readers will recognize the invocation of a Burkean lexicon consistently throughout the book that makes it an especially comfortable piece of scholarship to read. Professor Gunn frequently chooses to deviate from Burke around certain theoretical and critical apparatuses, preferring the analytics of Jacques Lacan at a number of key moments. Regardless of whether one has studied these theorists, the book is not only quite accessible but makes a consistent and Herculean effort to provide the neophyte with the needed rites of initiation (after the first couple of pages of the introduction). It reflects the breadth of knowledge, insight, critical ability, and intellectual dexterity of Burke's own works.

However, it also shares some of the difficulties and indulgences of Burke's work. Gunn will sometimes leap over theoretical skyscrapers with a single bound or run through major philosophical and theoretical figures faster than a speeding bullet. That is perfectly appropriate for his task but may sometimes require a reader simply to accept the moves with a shrug, which may irk some more personally invested in the intricate workings of those particular thinkers. Yet these are not primarily attempts to engage in the exegetical and critical arguments about these figures' works.

Instead, they are tactical deployments that mobilize a text or thinker for the advancement of a broader argument that can be sufficiently served regardless of the “loyalty” of the interpretation. If there is a criticism to be levelled here against *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, one must apply it equally to most of Burke’s books.

Undoubtedly, *Modern Occult Rhetoric* will be invaluable and very engaging to anyone interested in the history of occult practices and figures. Professor Gunn’s own fascination with his subjects is contagious enough to infect any reader and the accessibility and richness of the text make it a highly pleasurable read. That pleasure is further enhanced by the occultic function of the book itself, as it initiates the reader into occult realms, teaching the vocabulary, epistemology, and hermeneutics of the occult so that by the end we are all on the inside, part of the select ones. Yet, it would be a significant mistake to believe that *Modern Occult Rhetoric* is a book only about or even primarily about occultism, just as one would be mistaken to think that *A Rhetoric of Religion* is a book simply about religion. Rather, *Modern Occult Rhetoric* is a serious study of the rhetorical capacities of esoteric language, equally applicable to the circulation of the abstruse in academic, scientific, New Age, and occult discourses (including book reviews). As such, this volume makes a significant contribution to our understandings of occultism, provides a moving exhortation about our academic practices and, most importantly, provides a rich vocabulary and body of theory for any future study that might examine the use of esoteric language in any context.

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