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MAGIC + SPELL = ?

What we believe in is a reflection of social processes; so is what we consider rational or irrational. Believing in the unqualified ability of economics and technology to solve all problems is linked to rational systems having been mythologized and exaggerated. In turn, what is irrational, such as high-risk speculation or herd behavior¹ in financial markets, is denied. Believing in technology and optimization results in philosophies such as trans-humanism, which are aimed not only at joining human beings and technology, but also at adapting human beings to algorithmic systems through quantification. But parallel to the mythologizing of rational systems, there has been a boom in fantasy novels, science fiction, stories about monsters, vampires and ghosts. In an increasingly complex world, characters who represent the mysterious seem to be thriving. The irrational and the rational run parallel to one another and they intersect, with the relationship between the two constantly under discussion, a discussion being modified by the minute.

REASON AS LIBERATION AND POWER

During the Enlightenment (1650–1800), reason as a universal source of judgment was the means of emancipation, the key to becoming free of absolutist regimes and the Christian-Catholic system of rule. Reason, education and the development of science formed the basis of technical, cultural and political progress; this basis justified the concept of free citizens independently determining their own lives. Reason was the instrument for emancipating oneself from prevailing powers. Just as human beings replaced God as the center of the universe during the Renaissance (15th and 16th centuries), during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the absolutist model of

power as a God-given right was unseated. Reason, science and the idea of universalism formed the foundation for a better, self-determined life. But the modernity based on these ideas has also resulted in oppressive regimes being established in the name of progress. The failure of the principles of the Enlightenment under the Nazi regime was examined by the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno) in the work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). According to the authors, the once mythical attitude toward the world was made rational by attempts to control nature, but the Enlightenment itself returns to the realm of myth if it emerges in the form of supremacy (instrumental reason). Instead of freeing us from dependency or the constraints of nature, reason has been instrumentalized as a means of power by forcing us to adapt to economics and technology. It no longer has to do with rational acts of the individual, but with manipulation in the name of rationality, or how new myths arise.

Mythologizing economic and technical progress has been used – and will continue to be used – to legitimize, among other things, violence and financial gain. Post-humanist research based on post-colonial and gender minority theories is being undertaken to discover the consequences of cultures of dominance in their various forms of oppression and exploitation, of Znt, as well as of standardization. What is criticized above all are the opposing pairs nature/culture, subject/object, human/animal, human/technology, etc., which are seen as polarizing and thus as classifying and circumscribing the «other.»

HYBRID BEINGS

In contrast, advocates of speculative realism assume that a reality exists without reference to human thought – a «being» that is simply

so, without cause (Quentin Meillassoux). Here, reality is not dependent on human thought, consciousness or discourse; people are no longer the focal point, but are actors in one of many possible realities. Objects, animals and technology are given at least the opportunity, if not the agency of efficacy. This is also related to ideas close to animism. For example, in Rosi Braidotti's concept of post-humanism, the word *zoe* (meaning, in ancient Greek, life in a vegetative sense) plays a decisive role. Braidotti understands this as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life. Here, *zoe* refers to the capability and tendency of living matter to form new assemblages by combining with other living systems, even with non-anthropocentric elements. Braidotti ties this to her concept of «nomadic subjectivity,» which has to do with a non-unified subjectivity and its relationality. In post-humanism, contrastive pairs such as human and animal are annulled; as a means for eliminating the «other,» equality is claimed for all living beings and their potential joined forms.»²

The hybrid beings currently popping up everywhere in film and literature reflect this disapproval of the concept of the «other.» Cyborgs internalize the other in the form of technology, connecting humans and technology and making technology their own. Featured in this year's Oscar-winning film *The Shape of Water*, a love story set in the Cold War, is a hybrid creature – half fish, half man. The healing/psychic creature from the Amazon is being held in a military lab, maltreated as a research object, with both superpowers wanting to use or kill it for their own purposes. Due to being its being defined as «other,» the hybrid being is degraded to an object of exploitation that can be killed at any time – the creature's only value is its possible strategic role. The hero of the Japanese anime series *GeGeGe*

no Kitarō also advocates abolishing the dichotomy between the human world and that of spirits. Himself half human and half spirit, he fights for the joining or reconciliation of people and ghosts. If the irrational and the rational become equal, possibilities arise for non-hierarchical relations or new value systems. This sounds good at first, but it also contains the potential problem of the two no longer being distinguishable from one another, or of one pretending to be the other.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

The reason there are so many characters and stories representing mysterious things is to provide fictitious patterns for explaining the inexplicable. Fairy tales, sagas, legends, myths, etc. are examples of how fictive narratives or imaginative figures offer explanations, meaning, identity, community, etc. Through the repetition of narratives, individuals/ heroes/stars or natural phenomena are embellished, collective events are fictionalized, crimes are covered up, narratives of power and ideologies are formed, etc. In addition to the myths and legends rooted in the past, there are myths of the present (the American Dream, conspiracy theories, fake news, etc.) and those of the future (science fiction).

But how do myths and logical reason relate to each other and what does this have to do with belief systems? How are the cards defining this relationship currently being reshuffled?

Through their narratives, myths create fictional knowledge, in contrast to scientific explanations that must be replicable. Mythical narratives are based on intangible collective memories that change over time. They are composed of a mix of tradition, depictions in movies or other media, collective and individual experiences. Legends can glorify or unmask, they offer rumors, false reports and propaganda, they are biased. How-

ever, narratives based on fiction can also create social communities. One form of contemporary legend building, if you will, is fake news, which circulates in the echo chambers of social media channels, where narrative and user profiles are not only produced and reproduced, but also become legendary (in the sense of urban legends). Fiction and pretending are no longer perceived as such, but are considered real or true. When manipulation is internalized as a form of reporting, it disappears as such in the consciousness. In this way, ghosts of the past are reactivated, ghosts that are hard to get rid of.

Legends and myths can spread opinions for or against something (resentment/prejudice). They can create identities, increase fear or hope, or have a disciplinary effect. Especially origin and lineage narratives, or legends about the founding of nation states are attributed meaning that has only to do with identity politics. Among other things, myths transform wars or calamities into stories of victory; real or fictional persons are stylized as heroes or allies, as are sometimes gods, spirits or forces of nature. Real events can be part of myths, or myths can refer to real events that have been mythologized. In particular, systems of authority are often legitimized by the supernatural or the divine.

HAUNTED RELIGION: SPIRITS AND THE SPIRITUAL

Ghosts are the attempt to give form to what is not understood, as for example the *yōkai*, supernatural monsters in Japanese folklore. More complex explanations of systems or meanings are embedded in mythical narratives or legends. But how does the spirit world relate to religion? Religions are populated by multitudes of supernatural figures and forces, from the Holy Spirit to angels, demons, saints, etc. Religions adopted

figures and stories from the worlds of gods and spirits of earlier or other belief systems, or declared them enemies. Those who did not conform to the Christian faith were punished with death, evidenced by the Inquisition, the burning of witches, the persecution of Protestants, etc. Anything that did not fit in was seen as a threat to the system of power and punished as magic or blasphemy. Religions are institutionally organized faith structures that prescribe rules and are hierarchical, that discipline societies, define value systems and establish communities through rituals. A religion becomes powerful the moment someone believes in it and consequently modifies their behavior or subordinates their own agency to it. Especially monotheistic religions are based on established dogmas in which the influence of other religions, natural mythologies or local rites was not only disavowed, it was often actively damned.

It is different in Japan, where various Buddhist teachings and institutions are characteristically combined with native deities and spirits (*kami*). A 19th-century Meiji-era law ordered the separation of *Kami* and Buddhas, creating categories of deities and spirits. It was a system that could not prevail, however, and it was repealed after World War II. The diverse deities and spirits are not perceived as contradictory; Buddhism and Shintoism permeate and complement each other. It is not delimitation and exclusiveness that are in the foreground of religion, but regional gods, forces of nature or even divinized ancestors.

The connecting element is the belief that the deities can grant benefits (*riyaku*) in this or the next life. They are responsible for protection, healing, comfort, etc., but they also instill fear, or reflect anxieties or burdens. Fears can represent the conviction of one's own powerlessness and at the same time, reflect belief in the omnipotence

of the gods. On the other hand, people want to be afraid, as any lover of horror films knows. Fear is an expression of vulnerability, it can be read as a symptom of uncertainty or insecurity. To what extent is any action marked by faith (in whatever) or by certainty and knowledge? And to what extent is it marked by sacrifice or denial? The irrational involves that which cannot be calculated or controlled, in both a positive and negative sense. One tries to be in rational control of as much as possible, with all the positive and negative results.

WHEN MAGIC TAKES SHAPE

The expression «magic formula» or «magic spell» reflects the symbolic link between the rational and the irrational. A formula in the scientific realm is an abbreviation for a mathematical, physical or chemical relationship or rule. Formulas thus represent the transformation of a relationship into an expression in a symbolic language that is precisely systematized. If a formula is understood as a performative act, such as by an experimental physicist, this theoretical notation is translated into actions; the act and the formula become one, the formula is performed. By means of formulas, that which has been given symbolic names becomes calculable and can be used and thus manipulated. In contrast, irrationality stands for unpredictability. Magic therefore designates supernatural results, magical manipulation that is not subject to the laws of nature; it represents those things that cannot be explained.

By writing the magic word «abracadabra» in a geometric triangular form (*Schwindschema*³), speech is turned into a spell that conjures up the irrational. The individual letters of «abracadabra» are written in a special arrangement in which the number of letters is decreased in each line, thus forming a triangle that offers protection from

adversity or disease. By chanting the spell, illness should disappear, just as a word disappears after it has been uttered, or as the letters in the «abracadabra» become fewer towards the bottom. The performative character is thus in the foreground. By chanting the spell, its power is summoned so the healing process can begin.⁴ The word is a formula for the magic coupled with the act of speaking.

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Translation from the original German:
Cynthia Peck

1 The expression "animal spirits" is used to describe irrational elements in economic and financial affairs, such as unreflected instincts, emotions and herd behavior, which can lead to fluctuations in financial markets. John Maynard Keynes recognized already in 1936 that both speculation and animal spirits carry potential risks and can cause instability. He coined the expression in his book *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*.

2 Cf. Rosi Braidotti, *Posthumanismus: Leben jenseits des Menschen*, 2014, Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag.

3 *Schwindschema*: a pattern for arranging words in which a word is first written out completely, and then the same word continues to be written under the previous line, but each time without the final letter, until only one letter is left.

4 The origin and meaning of the word *abracadabra* is not clear. "Perhaps the word goes back to 'Abra ka-Dabra in Aramaic, which means 'it vanishes like the word'. Also 'Abda ka-Dabra ('it perishes, as does the word') is a possibility. By making a certain word 'vibrate', it was believed, for example, that pain could be relieved." Karl Erich Grözinger: *Jüdisches Denken. Theologie – Philosophie – Mystik. Vol 2: Von der mittelalterlichen Kabbala zum Hasidismus*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005, p. 322.

FAITH, MOUNTAINS AND «PROGRAMMED STONES»

«FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS.» (THE BIBLE)

«THERE IS INDEED THE INEXPRESSIBLE.
THIS *SHOWS* ITSELF; IT IS THE MYSTICAL..»
(WITTGENSTEIN)

We could not get up in the morning and go through the day without faith: faith that we can get our work done, can make ourselves somehow understood to the people around us, will receive help and overcome difficulties, that everyone will follow the traffic laws ... that our world will function, despite the fact that the TV, radio and newspapers are constantly reporting disaster. (Maybe we just ignore them because we're stuck in our own «social media bubble» where we find only what we want to believe – right down to fake news.)

Faith is an existential act. It is a daily investment in our life and its constructions of meaning. This starts with a certain amount of self-confidence, in addition to hope and belief in the world. Saying yes gives us energy to keep going. Our everyday hustle and bustle is brightened by spiritual moments: Suddenly seeing Fuji-san or some exuberant cherry blossoms, hearing a lovely voice or admiring the beauty of a mathematical equation.... This has nothing to do with religion. Religion only becomes part of the picture when we link our faith to religious contents and add the dimension of practices: prayers, rituals, religious festivals. In our open, pluralistic societies, however, already about a quarter of the population is putting together «patchwork religions»: Christian customs, yoga, Bach flower extracts, Ayurveda ... anything that is good for me is ok. A role is played in this by genuine interest in foreign beliefs, by lifestyle

trends and the rejection of a strict corset of beliefs, as well as other things. From a cultural evolutionary point of view, this is nothing new. – There is a boom in «life wellness fairs,» which offer products for therapy and self-healing: Reiki, Ayurvedic hand diagnostics, energy models based on «healing stones» and «programmed crystals» that supposedly regenerate spaces and people... One might laugh at the cloudy-esoteric language of energeticists, but let's take a look at ourselves: rings on our fingers, charm bracelets, neck amulets made of stones, an omamori in the pocket... And we believe in their power because they are charged with an emotional value. There are magic numbers; the evil omen of Friday the 13th; the football oracle (Paul the Octopus); card reading; elaborate astrological horoscopes; communication with the dead; crossing your fingers: good luck! There is more – funny, harmless, but of course also much that can be abused.

Superstition, nothing but superstition, one says disparagingly. In fact, this is a defensive term, because when saying someone is superstitious, people always think of others whose rituals are alien to them. (I thought Voodoo is just a weird cult, but it's a recognized religion with 60 million followers.) At the same time, magical thinking, which in ancient times was important for our survival in the wild, has been preserved in our everyday lives and in religion. Japanese women who want to get married visit the Izumo Taisha shrine, Christians visit pilgrimage sites, sprinkle themselves with holy water and place the skull of a saint on their heads to be cured of headaches. 60% of all Germans believe in the existence of angels....

Famous ethnologists such as James Frazer or Claude Levi-Strauss concluded from their research that magic can be equated with religion, that both are cultural techniques. Magical think-

ing seeks signs, it sees analogies and correlations and recognizes causality in them (stilling the flow of red blood with red plants; after an injury with a knife, not taking care of the wound but hiding the «evil» knife ... principles of causality). – Statesmen in ancient Rome tried to read the future by studying the flight of birds and acted accordingly. – Magic is a pre-form of knowledge; it is not based on deception. It is always presumed that there is a meaning: everything has been made for us; we just have to discover it and receive its power. The belief in higher powers is of evolutionary psychological importance. It is a kind of preventive technique in the sense of «evil cannot harm me.»

If we catch ourselves in our everyday lives doing some «magical thinking,» then we may say that irrationality can be used rationally. I conjure up happiness – completely in the sense of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Even firm atheists like Daniel Dennett, an American philosopher, admit that religious faith is irrational but useful for life: for communities, for their social equilibrium, their stability. As an evolutionary system, the (religious) spiritual has been an engine for achievements in civilization such democracy, autonomy, free press, science. But that is something we are supposed to forget nowadays, everything is done by our brain with its trillions of mini-robots, which are more or less well networked... Our brain is responsible for everything: pain, emotions, consciousness, «free will»...

First and last things: Who are we? What is meaning? Why is there life and not nothing? Is there life after death? Religious reasoning and religious mediation are forms of attempting to tell the truth about our existence and its coming to an end (or

not). Indeed, the greatest challenge for human beings is death. I believe that among the truths about our existence, there are some that can only be said in religious language. Which truths? No one can determine which one, since expressing religious experiences is even a linguistic problem. Such statements quickly sound banal. Maybe by stuttering they can sound true.

Belief is knowledge that cannot be proved. We also cannot prove that God does not exist...

Buddhism, as a kind of philosophy of life without God, doesn't have this problem. A religion of experience promising inner and external peace, it offers a way beyond words and thoughts – yoga and meditation for example – with the goal of finding internal tranquility. By offering liberation from our over-strained ego, it has even become a global urban phenomenon, an attractive «fashionable religion»...

Unfortunately, there is no room here for the «Spaghetti Monster» worshiped in «noodle services» by «Pastafarians.» Or would someone like to become a member of that satirical religion?

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Translation from the original German:
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