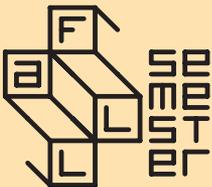
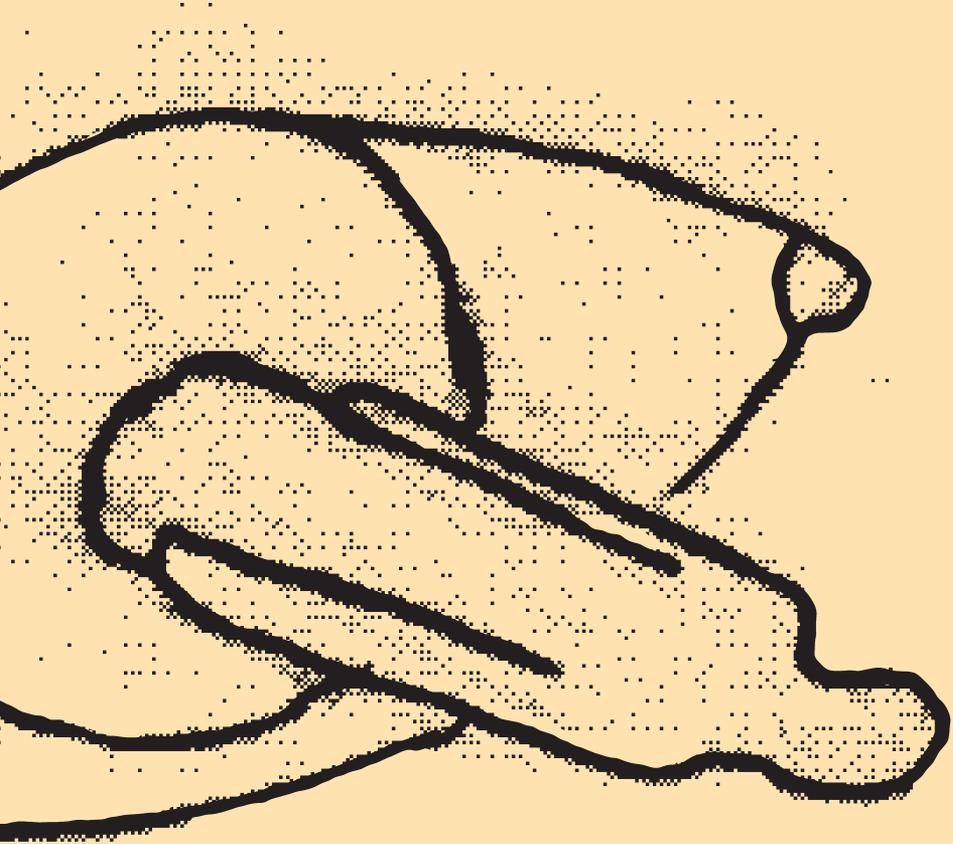


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Magick, Capital, Identity
Embodied Ritual and
Technologies of the
Resistant Self



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Magick, Capital, Identity— Embodied Ritual and Technologies of the Resistant Self

“Magick is a culture.”¹ So writes Alan Chapman in his **Advanced Magick for Beginners**. What follows is an effort to take such a claim seriously, and to imagine what the political affordances of magick might be, and what kinds of things those magicians already among us might be doing.

The contemporary practice of magick (of the Western esoteric tradition) may be, we will argue, a creative technology of the self. It can work to counter the mandates of the reigning biopolitical regime, of capital’s investment in identity and identity politics, even as some of magick’s instantiations mirror certain instrumental tendencies of capital. The embodied practices of Western magick may be able to not only literally and creatively remake the self (in practice and concept) in ways that could prove liberatory, but also serve as a useful epistemological framework to read the mechanisms of capitalist productions of identity.

We, along with many practicing magicians, want to resuscitate the affordances of positive destruction and of creative, ethical refusal. Magick lends itself to such a project. Magickal practices can seek to imagine and create new forms (social, political, technological, epistemological) of organizing the world.

There are a number of reasons, in any critique of capitalist productions of identity and the self, to look to magick. Western esotericism has remained countercultural, and if not ‘occult’ in the sense it perhaps once was, its wide collection of rituals, texts and epistemological structures persist their resistance to legibility, and make magicians difficult to identify,

and leaves magick itself without a coherent identity. Magick also remains counter-cultural in the sense that it is largely ignored by popular discourse (even discourse on religion or mysticism). This allows us a number of possible exploits. Our critical project is its own kind of magickal act.

For the purposes of this short essay, we will be focusing on what is known as ‘chaos magick,’ rather than any number of other traditions, though these may also prove fruitful fodder for critique in the future. Although chaos magick exists primarily at the fringes of culture, it has in places had a broader cultural influence through the work of artists, writers, and musicians. For example: Genesis P-Orridge (of the bands Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV) founded an organization dedicated to magickal and artistic experimentation called the Temple Ov Psychic Youth. Comics writer Grant Morrison popularized chaos magick primarily through his series, **The Invisibles**, whose central plot follows a group of anarchist sorcerers conspiring to fight nefarious forces of control and domination. The writer William Burroughs (who P-Orridge describes as a “magickal mentor”²) became involved with chaos magick late in life as a member of the chaos magickal order known as the Illuminates of Thanateros.³

The origin of chaos magick as a distinct esoteric tradition can be traced to the 1978 publication of **Liber Null** by the English occultist Peter Carroll.⁴ In **Liber Null**, Carroll proposed a paradigm of esoteric practice that did not require practitioners to use any one particular set of symbols or rituals, or to adopt any specific belief systems (supernatural or otherwise). Chaos magick adopted the skeptical, empirical approach to magick previously advocated by occultist Aleister Crowley, but went a step further by attempting to strip away obfuscating jargon, complicated symbolism, and specific metaphysical assumptions. By distilling magick to a set of simple, adaptable core principles and practices, chaos magick effectively lowered the barrier of entry to magickal practice, insisting that anyone could do magick. Chaos magick also eliminated the requirement that magicians must «believe» in any supernatural explanation for how magick works. Psychological and purely materialistic models are given equal footing with supernatural explanations, although

practitioners are cautioned against dogmatically adhering to any belief system, and encouraged to entertain multiple, possibly conflicting models simultaneously. As Carroll writes,

It is a mistake to consider any belief more liberated than another. It is the possibility of change which is important. Every new form of liberation is destined to eventually become another form of enslavement for most of its adherents. [...] The solution is to become omnivorous. Someone who can think, believe, or do any of a half dozen different things is more free and liberated than someone confined to only one activity.⁵

Chaos magicians often utilize altered states of consciousness (called ‘gnosis’ in the discourse of Carroll and later writers) in conjunction with ritual and symbolic manipulation. Such states include sexual excitation, exhaustion, absorptive trance induced by meditation, hallucinatory states produced through drug use, sensory deprivation, and others. Gnosis is proposed as a means of disrupting the filtering and censoring mechanisms of the conscious, rational mind, allowing ritual and symbol to act directly on the precognitive and unconscious level.

Chaos magick is deeply invested in embodiment. And its investment, while flexible, always returns to a rootedness in the singular, experiential phenomena that can be produced by and through the body. It also ties both magickal potential and liberatory capacity to the body:

There is a thing more trustworthy than all the sages, and which contains more wisdom than a great library. Your own body. It asks only for food, warmth, sex and transcendence. Transcendence, the urge to become one with something greater, is variously satisfied in love, humanitarian works, or in the artistic, scientific, or magical quests of truth. To satisfy these simple needs is liberation indeed.⁶

The body, in this discourse, thus becomes a site of multiple potentialities. While it may be the site of care for the self, it is utilized as a way to destabilize imposed notions of care in favor of processual critiques of ‘self’ and ‘identity’ that can be accessed through physical experience. Gnosis works in part because these states of extreme experience derail the capacity of the practitioner to attach herself to a narrative of a stable ‘I.’

And while embodiment, and the utilization of the body as its own liberatory technology are central to chaos magick, it insists the body can serve as a link to (and sometimes a weapon against) the symbolic and to the broader conceptual terrains of ‘self’ and ‘identity.’ Chaos magick, following the work from Crowley, through Carrol and beyond, is highly resistant to the notion of any kind of static or intrinsic ‘identity.’ This may seem counterintuitive to laymen readers given the repetition in a number of texts of the concept ‘true will.’

Developed initially by Crowley, the ‘true will’ is a slippery term (intentionally so in chaos magick), but more or less describes the will of the magician stripped of external conditioning. Each practitioner would, in this thinking, have his or her own true will, though in no way does this correspond to any static condition, identity, or ‘destiny.’ Much of magickal practice is aimed at the discovery of the practitioner’s true will. The use of gnosis and ritual, along with practices designed to critique and dismantle imposed or conditioned identities, are understood as technologies that can aid the magician in this pursuit.

True will is posed as a direct counter to ‘identity’ in any of its contemporary forms. Much of the quotidian work of magick across the Western esoteric traditions, in fact, involves intensive self-interrogation and analysis, with practices and rituals that are designed to reveal the extent to which personal “identity” (personality traits, preferences, habits, interests, etc.) are the result of external or chance forces, and that most if not all of one’s behavior and decision making are strongly influenced, if not controlled, by such phenomena. Examples of such practices include selecting arbitrary, inconsequential habits to add or remove from daily activity (e.g., crossing one’s legs, taking a specific route to work), altering patterns of speech (e.g., eliminating first person pronouns from one’s vocabulary for a week), eating food or engaging in sexual practices that fall outside of one’s preferences, or adopting a belief system (e.g., monotheism, atheism, polytheism) for a single day at random, based on the roll of a die. The goal of these and related practices is to dismantle the magician’s sense of a static, conditioned identity, in favor of constructing a more flexible, liberated, and powerful relationship to the self and the world.

Carroll writes: “The most powerful minds cling to the fewest fixed principles. The only clear view is from atop the mountain of your dead selves.”⁷

In addition to disrupting existing patterns of behavior, and revealing their essentially involuntary, and thus plastic nature, magickal practices are used to selectively (and often temporarily) imprint the magician with specific desired personality traits and abilities. Magickal invocation is one set of practices that is often employed for this purpose. Invocation involves selecting a deity, spirit, or fictional character associated with a specific set of desired personality traits, and using ritual (often aided by gnosis), devotional practices, and selective behavioral modifications to “invoke” the selected entity into the persona and psyche of the magician. Some plausible examples: preparing for a competition or conflict by invoking Mars (with a ritual ceremony that incorporates Martial symbols, colors, music, and so on), increasing compassion by invoking the Virgin Mary (by praying the rosary, preparing an altar, abstaining from sex, and dressing modestly), increasing attractiveness or preparing for a romantic encounter by invoking Pan or Babalon. Note that fictional pop culture figures (super heroes, James Bond) are also often the subject of invocation practices.⁸ These invocations contrast with traditional religious approaches. In chaos magick, the practitioner assumes the form and persona of the chosen deity as a means of achieving a desired outcome, rather than petitioning said deity for assistance.

These embodied practices themselves are thus inherently and insistently critical of the identities (and identity politics) on which capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal manifestation, depends. They also demonstrate an awareness that such external forces hold very powerful sway. That is to say, the magickal practitioner is asked to remain perpetually critical of the structures at work in shaping identity, not ignore such structures.

So-called “Banishing Rituals” of various types provide one concrete example of a magickal practice designed to (among other things) purge the magician’s psyche of unwanted external agencies and forces, protect against further intrusions, and prepare for other ritual work or meditation. In **Liber Null**, Carroll

outlines a basic template for the construction of a banishing ritual: the magician first draws and intensely visualizes a barrier around herself using the forefinger or some magickal implement (e.g., a dagger, wand or ring), which is reinforced by drawing and visualizing magickal symbols (typically geometric forms such as pentagrams or hexagrams) at different points around the barrier, and/or intoning sacred names or words of power⁹.

Again, actual belief in a supernatural mechanism of action is unnecessary in this context: the performance of the ritual reinforces a commitment to resisting external control, and a desire to create an 'outside space' for experimenting with the construction of new identities, symbols and forms. Both the invocation and banishing rituals advocated by practitioners of and writers on chaos magick bespeak a conscious resistance to the imposition of any of the trappings of identity. They acknowledge the immense (even magickal) force of the symbolic milieu in which the magician does her work, while positioning the magician as the figure who may utilize, refuse, rearrange or rewrite that symbolic regime with their very bodies, within the spaces they inhabit. Where neoliberal capitalism proposes notions of 'health' and 'success,' and relies on the production of a static self who may aim for these goals, primarily through consumption practices, chaos magick understands such notions as perpetually fluid and plastic. And, of course, such practices are universally available. Anyone, anywhere may perform these acts.

While some readers might be tempted to see chaos magick as an ideological leveler that would put any number of social groups in the same category, and in so doing elide very legitimate claims of disenfranchisement and alienation, the insistence on the awareness of external forces (including social hierarchy, economy, geography, and family) resists such an interpretation. And while there is no question that the traditions from which chaos magick draws have no shortage of disastrous sexist, racist, ableist and imperialist ideological structures, anyone may practice magick. And each practitioner is invited to engage in a critical view of both their own identity, and the forces that produced it (again, including their particular social and political milieu). Where neoliberalism suggests that identity

should be celebrated (multiculturalism), consumed (Urban Outfitters) and performed (Facebook), chaos magick suggests it be critiqued and dismantled—for the purposes of building a self far more fluid and resistant to the pressures of cultural control.

There is also a kind of radical ambivalence in chaos magick's approach to moral or ethical judgement. Any structure which posits a social or personal 'good' is to be viewed with suspicion, in part because of the collective refusal of hierarchy more broadly in the texts and practices of magicians, and in part because such structures rely on notions of static identity, for the citizen, the country, the consumer. The chaos magician balks at clear division of 'good' or 'bad' because those concepts themselves are unstable, manipulable. The rational, ethical, patriotic consumer: such a figure could be invoked (if the magician were running for a political office, let's say), but she would, once elected, cast it off.

One of the most fascinating phenomena in chaos magick, and other forms of Western esotericism, is the strong link which is made between materiality and the symbolic, and the ways magickal practices are utilized to affect the material world. Perhaps the most striking example of this is sigil magick:

The method of sigilisation consists of writing out a desire, omitting repeated letters then arranging the remainder into an arbitrary, abstract glyph. The magician then enters a state of great excitement or calm, by such methods as hyperventilation, meditation, flagellation or other pain inducing practices, dancing or entheogenic consumption; but the most popular method (for obvious reasons) is sex. At the peak of the altered state (this would be orgasm in the case of sex) the sigil is visualised or looked at, and then forgotten about. Sometime after the act, the desire will manifest in the form of a synchronicity; so if your desire is 'I will get laid', you might find yourself hounded by a rotund monster at a party, who manages to corner you in the bathroom as your friends suddenly disappear.¹⁰

The playful tone taken by Chapman here should give some indication of the ways in which chaos magicians tend, in general, to take a critical stance to their own practice. They can be distinctly aware of the potentially absurd or comical nature of the rituals in which they engage. But that playfulness is itself

a kind of resistant approach to symbolic regimes more broadly, and the location of the resistant practice in the experience of the body solidifies the position of the magician as active social critic. What can we call the sigil practice if not a striking, material instantiation of the force of symbolic work? Contemporary capital is, among many things, a symbolic regime whose material consequences are global. The practitioner hoping to bring about change in her favor uses the sigil, and in so doing, makes clear that symbols have world-changing force. There is a way in which the chaos magician, in fact, utilizes the same tools as capital. The difference, of course, is that the chaos magician uses symbol manipulation to work against any imposed symbolic logic, or the identities which such logics may seek to produce. Instead of passively inhabiting the symbolic universe produced by, say, Disney, Coca-Cola, or the Catholic Church, the chaos magician constructs her own.

As we have insisted, magickal practices, both in the tradition of chaos magick and in most Western esoteric sects, are distinctly aware of the power of symbolic systems. It is not surprising that Fredrich Engels' understanding of ideology as "false consciousness"¹¹ has echoes in the magickal understanding of 'identity'. Louis Althusser's more fully elaborated theory of ideology, in which he famously argued that it "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," and that ideology, indeed, "has a material existence" seems equally suited to describe the function of 'identity' in the discourse of chaos magick.¹² This is more than an accidental parallel, and it points to the ways that chaos magick might prove liberatory: its aim is critique and change, its creative refusal is of the static and the imposed, even as it understands the material force of ideological structures.

Identity is not immaterial: structural and state violence enacted in its name should make this clear enough. But identity does present itself as an ideological structure: it claims static and essential traits that are said to compose a 'self,' and in so doing hides the malleability of those traits. It protects a status quo from the radical consequence of a malleable self: a malleable social world. The ideological construction of identity requires that the self be performed through consumption, work and

social presentation, and just as it presents the self as static, it requires a kind of acrobatic flexibility on the part of all of us. Chaos magicians would mark this contradiction rather than hide it. Magick, as it turns out, might be the culture we want.

Practitioners of chaos magick are asked to unpack and remake the self, and to do so as a perpetual practice. Theirs is a work of process, not product. Any resistance to the reigning ideology of the day, as Deleuze and Guattari (among many, many others) tell us, will have to be processual.¹³ For the chaos magician, there is only process. Her body, her self, the structures of her social and political worlds, are necessarily and productively unstable, changeable. And the world, which is her milieu, is equally plastic.

- 1** Alan Chapman, *Advanced Magick for Beginners*, London: Aeon Books, 2008, pg. 18.
- 2** V. Vale (editor), William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Throbbing Gristle, San Francisco, California: V/Search Publications, 1982, pg. 70.
- 3** Douglas Grant, *Magick and Photography in Ashé: Journal of Experimental Spirituality*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2003.
- 4** Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null and Psychonaut*, York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1987.
- 5** Carroll, pg. 45.
- 6** Carroll, pg. 48.
- 7** Carroll, pg. 48
- 8** See Grant Morrison, “Pop Magic!” in *The Book of Lies: The Disinformation Guide to Magick and the Occult*, ed. Richard Metzger, New York: The Disinformation Company Ltd., 2003, pp. 16-25.
- 9** Carroll, pg. 19
- 10** Chapman, pg. 29
- 11** See Fredrich Engels letter to Franz Mehring, dated July 14, 1893. Available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm.
- (Accessed 15, September, 2016).
- 12** Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Trans. Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- 13** This is apparent in many of their collaborative texts, but perhaps the most notable is: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

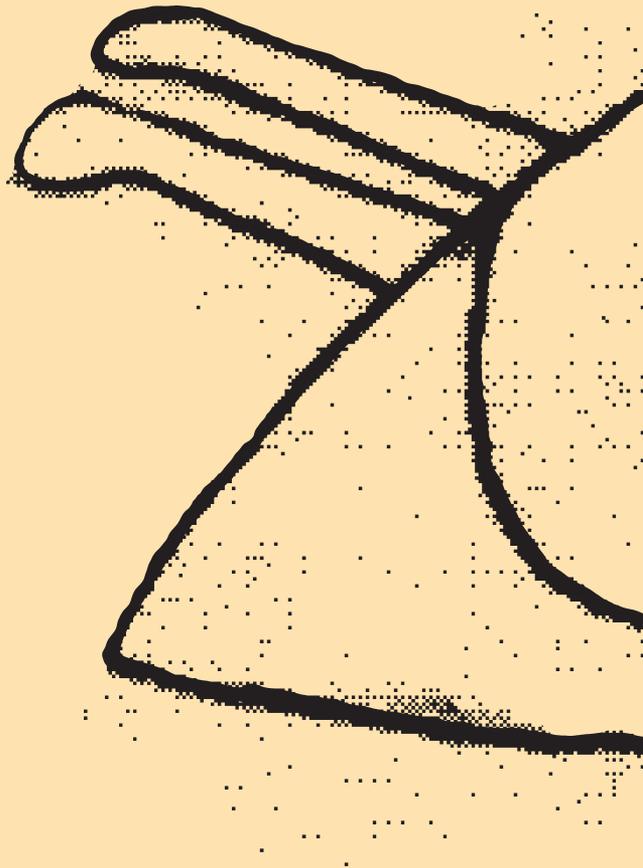
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