

FIRST EDITION

OCCULTUS

the hidden and macabre in literature and film



**SNEAK
PREVIEW**

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Edited by Francis Tobienne, Jr.

FIRST EDITION

OCCULTUS

the hidden and macabre
in literature and film

*Edited by Francis Tobienne, Jr.
University of South Florida, St. Petersburg*



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*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of
heaven, but to them it has not been given...*

(Matthew 13.11)

contributors

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introduction

conceptualizing the occult

Como un ciego de manos precursoras
que apartan muros y vislumbran cielos,
lento de azoramiento voy palpando
por la noches hendidas
los versos venideros.¹

~**Jorge Luis Borges' Forjadura**

THIS BOOK IS FIRMLY POSITIONED on examining the occult as an unambiguous “reading of text” exercise. The word “text” is broadly defined here as any object, person, thing, or simulation of an object, person or thing that can be critiqued and/or analyzed. Its focus is twofold. First, it attempts to outline and define *occultus* (the occult) as that which is hidden, secret, mysterious, inexplicable, magic, alchemy, not readily illuminated and not easily ascertained or understood. Such a classification is applied to two mediums of (textual) expression: that of literature and that of film (or cinematic text). Second, the work as a whole seeks application of the occult’s presence as well as its expiry. In other words, part of this book takes on the measured challenge of disarming the occult. The pressing inquiry, then, throughout the book is: What destroys or declassifies the occult? This latter point raises an interesting theoretical paradigm between the existence of and the dissolution of *occultus* as a concept, an idea. As seen through the variegated and often striated planes of both literature and film, the occult can offer intriguing analysis on an otherwise narrowed point of view. Pressing the point further, the occult seems paradoxical—though broadly spaced—where items hidden are shown or displayed for what they are sans abstract configuration. For instance, the very practitioners of the occult though labeled dabblers in the dark or in the shadows are exposed, weighed and judged in turn. This is the rhetoric of *monstrum* (the monster). These characters, though often maligned, are defined as prodigy, marvels, and that which is on display. Taking the occult and the monster in hand, you can begin to “see” the paradox of such existences and the complexity afforded to their meaning. Where do monsters hide or find cover? The occult. How can monsters who are always on display be or remain hidden? Does the occult disclose as it hides? Clearly, such a congeries finds root in the soil of occult studies and beseeches the onlooker/gazer toward a more robust analysis.

There is more to the occult than things that go “bump” in the night. This is especially true when considering the very nature and character of the “night” as a temporal agent of secrecy through the context of literature or a given film screening. And because of the varied voices on the subject of the occult, present volume included, I felt it necessary to include nine entries to this

fascinating, ongoing discussion. They range, non-exhaustively and in no particular order, from Edward Peters' discussion of fourteenth-century political intrigue involving the ritualization of occult practice, Bill Nichols's introductory look into the nomenclature and crafting of cinema as text, William R. Newman's prescription of *occultus* in terms of aesthetic philosophy and the (un)natural order in *Malleus Maleficarum*, and Karen Jolly's take on magic and its duplications on one hand to the use of music as occult modality by Laurence Wuidar, arcane knowledge and (mis) education by Anthony Rooley and postmodern application to metafiction in Helmuth Krausser's *Melodien* by Gyorgy E. Szonyi. What this work hopes to convey is the occult as intellectual history² and its potential for (re)evaluating texts of meaning that make use of the dual mediums of literature and film. Perhaps, a word or two on how this volume came into existence.

The subject of knowledge obtained through clandestine means is not new. In fact, this has historical precedence well into the ancient world. As a trained medievalist, I am well aware of the often biased nomenclature applied to the millennia post-ancient past and pre-Renaissance period (i.e., c.500–c.1500). The teaching of such a nuanced topic as the occult and its traditions can be difficult to justify against the misnamed Petrarchan *saeculum obscurum*, but it does not preclude medievalists and cultural critics from trying. The occult as intellectual discussion is unavoidable and its expression as intellectual history, as I hope to convey, inevitable and necessary. I am grateful to the many who made this book a possibility: my students who challenged its existence in the crucible of the classroom and made it into an award-winning online course, receiving Quality Matters certification in the process, as well as the editing team (you know who you are) in its present incarnation.

Finally, it is my hope that this edited collection advances the importance of the occult beyond mere cursory reflection and avoids simple typecasting; it is a complex subject that warrants investigation and rewards the seeker. The chapters or selections maneuver critical discussion of the occult with definition and example in tow; further, there is a section that offers questions for/toward further discussion labeled: "Inquiries into *Occultus*: a Position of Secrecy, Hiddenness and Inexplicability." These

questions focus on cinematic texts and are outlined by nine headers:

- *Etymology & Medium*
- *The Ninth Gate* (R. Polanski, dir.)
- *The Name of the Rose* (J. Annaud, dir.)
- *Rosemary's Baby* (R. Polanski, dir.)
- *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, dir.) and *Dracula* (F.F. Coppola, dir.)
- *Det sjunde inseglet* ("The Seventh Seal," I. Bergman, dir.)
- *Pi: Faith in Chaos* (Darren Aronofsky, dir.)
- *What the Bleep?!* (William Arntz, et al., dir.)
- *Un Chien Andalou* (L. Buñuel, dir.) and *Destino* (Dominique Monféry, dir.).

These inquiries examine both literatures and cinematic texts that invoke the element of the occult, advancing the scope of this book. The *telos* of the work argues the paradoxical nature of the occult; at once its existence and being as well as its potential dismissal. The findings are legion and the applications equally so. Certainly, using the occult lens to decipher literature and film presents an intellectual and stimulating crossroads where a benign response is not only implausible but not of much use. Hence, and after examining this book, you will not be able to read literature or view film texts in the same manner. And for this, I do not apologize.

Notes

1. And so goes the blind poet whose plight resembles all too closely his grandmaster, John Milton (1608–1674). Here, Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) gives mellifluous “voice” to his occult existence and the betrayal of his sense of sight. Christopher Maurer translates *Forjadura* (“The Forging” from *Fervor* de Buenos Aires, 1923) as:

Like the blind man whose hands are precursors
that push aside walls and glimpse heavens
slowly, flustered, I feel
in the crack of night
the verses that are to come.

Perhaps, one’s archival life can be examined in verse rather than the customary prose we wield. The occult, like a finding aid, further supports this ... struggle.

2. See, e.g., Maurice Mandelbaum’s eloquent article in *History and Theory*, “The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy” (1965). The text argues, and I follow suit here, that a study in the history of ideas acknowledges the nature of the “ism” and “ology” of our times and applies the system of thought into its relevant components. Hence, a study of the occult as tradition alongside the historical plane, rhizomatic and non-rhizomatic, expounded rhetorically and captured must offer some semblance of that period. When we offer that literature and film are those moments of capture, then interesting and dynamic units, within context, prove worthwhile exercises.