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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Divining Literature: A History of Tarot

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Tina Hyland

Committee in charge:

Professor Page duBois, Co-Chair

Professor Lily Hoang, Co-Chair

Professor Patrick Anderson

Professor Shelley Streeby

Professor Erin Suzuki

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

DEDICATION

Keep going on your dissertation
It is a lonely and sometimes impatient task to complete
I am reminded of what Oscar Wilde said
On the morning while proofreading my poem I put in a comma
In the afternoon I took it
I know the pains and joy of writing

For Stuart R. Kaplan

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viscerally demonstrate the present stakes. With Prof. Erin Suzuki, I was able to again explore the rigor inherent in speculation, and my work in her seminar led to my first conference panel, where I suddenly realized I was not just a feral poet wandering the periphery of the academy, but a future scholar with a home waiting inside of it too.

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RESEARCH

DISSERTATION

“Divining Literature: A History of Tarot”

Doctoral Committee: Page duBois (co-chair), Lily Hoang (co-chair), Shelley Streeby, Erin Suzuki, and Patrick Anderson (Communication)

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Divining Literature: A History of Tarot

by

Tina Hyland

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Page duBois, Co-Chair

Professor Lily Hoang, Co-Chair

Tarot is an oracular and speaking literature, embedded in magical divination practices, and as such, has an inherently strange and irrational relationship to history and even time itself. This work applies the oracular tarot to a number of situations and contexts, all of which will illuminate some facet of magic and narrative as being living, affective agents in the world. I explore the

intersections of psychoanalysis and literary theory and the ways that these disciplines prepare a reader for the irrational practices and results of engaging oracular texts. I allow tarot to introduce itself through an auto-ethnographic and phenomenological description of a reading encounter and present a literary analysis of its results. From there, I extend the texts, practices and results of reading oracles outward, toward the texts, practices and results of reading more broadly within a narratively-constructed world.

I present tarot as a pedagogical tool that allows students to physically explore and examine semiotics and embodied reading practices through two classroom case studies. In the first lesson plan, signification systems and reading practices are examined in a Communication course through the restaging of a 16th century narrative parlor game and oracular group readings. In the second, after interpreting and physically embodying individual tarot cards in a Theatre & Dance course, students develop contextually dynamic choreography within living tarot spreads.

Further, I examine the ways that tarot has replicated and renewed itself through history as a facet of its aliveness and the biography of tarot in the hands of Stuart R. Kaplan, founder of *US Games Systems, Inc.* I present a dialectic of demystification and remystification in which the occult object is stripped of its enchantments in order to be turned into a commodity, which is then remystified by the logics of fetishism, commerce and narrative industries. This remystification then opens up the magical object to mass-distribution and reach while generating forms of magical practice that were not imagined by the commodity producer, thereby demonstrating how a rational and disenchanted age provides the tools and technologies necessary to re-enchant the world. Throughout this dissertation, I present a number of challenges and meaningful alternatives to

rationality. By divining literature, I mean to re-enchant our understanding of narrative. By a history of tarot, I mean to demonstrate how tarot is alive and detail something about how it has lived.

INTRODUCTION

The best way for me to introduce this text is perhaps to unpack its title, *Divining Literature: A History of Tarot*. I do not present tarot here in the way one might assume when encountering the word history. This is not a narrative that begins in 15th century Milan, or one that documents tarot as an inert object of study through archival research, or even one that arranges events or time in a causal or chronological sequence. Tarot is an oracular and speaking literature, embedded in magical divination practices, and as such, has an inherently strange and irrational relationship to history and even time itself. This work applies the oracular tarot to a number of situations and contexts, all of which will illuminate some facet of magic and narrative as being living, affective agents in the world. In doing so, I present challenges and meaningful alternatives to rationality. So, by divining literature, I mean to re-enchant our understanding of narrative. By a history of tarot, I mean to demonstrate how tarot is alive and detail something about how it has lived.

In Chapter One, I compare psychoanalysis, which deals with the unconscious, and literary theory, which deals with its sublimated textual artifacts, and the ways that these disciplines prepare us to approach the irrational practices and results of reading oracular texts. In his foreword to the *I Ching*, Carl Jung allowed the oracle to introduce itself by documenting a reading encounter with it, and I adapt and duplicate his procedure. I allow tarot to introduce itself through an auto-ethnographic and phenomenological description of my reading encounter and a literary analysis of its results. I then extend the irrational texts, practices and results of

reading oracles outward, into the texts, practices and results of reading in general within a narratively-constructed world.

In Chapter Two, tarot is utilized as a pedagogical tool that allows students to explore and examine the practices around reading and texts. I present two case studies that describe the lesson plans and results of introducing tarot into classroom spaces. In the first, a Communication course, students played a 16th century narrative parlor game and gave one another oracular readings without guidebooks in order to think about and apply alternative signification systems and forms of reading more broadly and toward the world. In the second case study, I present tarot to a course in the Theatre and Dance department. There, we examined the embodied practices of reading by embodying the tarot cards themselves. Students then collaborated in groups to choreograph the ways their individually expressed cards interact within the context of others in living tarot spreads.

Chapter Three investigates the ways in which tarot has replicated and renewed itself through history as a facet of its aliveness. To this end, it explores the biography of tarot in the United States, and the man who is almost single-handedly responsible for its popularity today: Stuart R. Kaplan, the founder of US Games Systems. I utilize a dialectic of demystification and remystification, in which the occult object is stripped of its enchantments in order to be turned into a commodity, which is then re-mystified by the logic of fetishism, commerce and narrative industries. This remystification then opens up the magical object to mass-distribution and reach while also generating forms of magical practice that were not imagined by the commodity

producer, thereby demonstrating how a rational and disenchanting age provides the tools and technologies we need to re-enchant the world.

This dissertation, alongside my MFA thesis, *The Technoshaman's Grimoire*, represent the culmination of a long academic and magical endeavor. Together, they form the praxis and the theory for constructing more vibrant and magical worlds.

CHAPTER 1
ON ACADEMIC MAGIC, THE *I CHING* AND TAROT:
A WEB OF INTRODUCTIONS

“It is a dubious task indeed to try to introduce to a critical modern public a collection of archaic “magic spells,” with the idea of making them more or less acceptable.”

— C.G. Jung

In 1949, Carl Jung composed a foreword to the Princeton University Press edition of *The I Ching*, the first available English-language translation of sinologist Richard Wilhelm’s work from Chinese into German. Wilhelm and Jung had been close friends, bonded over their mutual fascination and magical divinatory practices with the oracular and speaking book, along with their many shared questions about the book’s strange implications for and challenges to rationalist thought. While Jung and I are considering and mystified by different divinatory systems entirely, there are important similarities and shared concerns between our respective practices as diviners attempting to understand ourselves in relation to our materials, rituals and their outcomes, and how those activities and interests either situate or unsettle our positions as academic researchers and scholars. We each enthusiastically, intimately, even obsessively explore how and why wondrous and strange coincidences emerge from the mundane materials and ritualized gestures of our magical and divinatory practices, we both work with forms of oracular text, and we are both a bit uncomfortable presenting our aleatory truths and magical considerations to an audience that is predominantly oriented toward a more rational worldview.

Aside from these more personal similarities, there is also considerable overlap between the work of the psychoanalyst and the literary theorist, with our respective inclinations and disciplines easily preparing and perhaps even compelling us toward divinatory exploration and magic. Each of our academic and discursive fields, or *paradigms* as chaos magic theory would describe them, are steeped in unreflected acts of ritual and magical outcomes. At its simplest: a magic ritual is a procedure undergone in which the results exceed or are only indirectly related to the sum of the actions and materials present. Unlike the symbolic language of a scientific regime, an equation or formula that is balanced on both sides and therefore highly calculable, deliberate and precise in execution and predictable in expectations and outcomes, the magic ritual performs somewhat haphazardly, according to its own idiosyncratic and cultural symbolic structures and inscrutable logics in order to produce irrational and unlike results. There is no rational or scientific reason, for instance, why lying on an analyst's couch and speaking every thought as it comes to my mind should help me become a fuller, more self-aware person, but it works. If I tried to duplicate the procedure on my living room couch, monologuing to my own ceiling for many hours over time, or even in the attentive presence of a far too patient friend, the outcome would not be the same. The ritual here requires the meanings imbued in the specific setting or stage for the effect to take shape, the transition from the mundane world to the analyst's designated office, which we might consider a kind of temple of irrational personal growth, and the performance of speaking to such a specific person, who is trained through one arcane lineage or another to guide us. In this sense, the unconscious is a privately carried and inscrutable underworld, as potent and harrowing as any of the underworlds that mythology might provide

us, and the psychoanalyst is a form of psychopomp, navigating us through our own internal depths because we are opaque to even ourselves. Likewise, there is no rationally discernable reason why encountering words on a page should effectively transport us into other immersive and imagined worlds or cause characters spun from narrative threads to become quite real and substantial to us, in all the many ways we can become *lost* in a book. We do know, however, that this effect requires the absorptive ritual of reading and an embodied engagement with the materiality of the text, and that exposure to other narrative vehicles, such as film and television, do not produce the same or as strong of results (Stansfield & Bunch). Furthermore, there is no rational reason why an ongoing practice of encountering the immaterial worlds generated while traversing a long trail of words should create a more empathetic person in the material world, and yet it does. In this, the book provides an interpretive model of reality itself, its words seeping far past the material confines of its pages into internal and external changes in understanding, interaction and behavior.

The more rationally inclined have certainly attempted to identify and locate causal relationships and conditions by devising measures to capture and explain the strange, acausal, and unquantifiable results of both psychoanalysis and narrative reading practices, often producing self-conscious procedures and conclusions as speculative as any magic spell. In rendering talking therapies nonsensically quantifiable (and therefore insurable, since there are disciplinary and punitive systems in place for the widespread enforcement of rationality and its logics), I may be asked to circle a number that best represents my inner turmoil and strife for diagnostic purposes, as though through identifying myself as a 6 in Depression, and particularly if the same 6 in

Depression is also observed and circled by my therapist, we could predict and generate an appropriate counterforce in the kind, duration and intensity of therapeutic medications and measures in order to deliver me back to the balanced and desired rules of an equation that does not and cannot exist. So long as parts of the procedure conform to at least the patterns, pretenses and performances of rational and empirical evidence collection, it remains a permissible and available form of magic that isn't too uncomfortable or unruly for the rationally inclined. Utilizing similarly dubious forms of evidence, researchers have empirically concluded that "Story-induced Transportation," or losing oneself in a book, "is associated with higher levels of affective empathy, which in turn is associated with the demonstration of helping tendencies," or that reading a book is a fine and poorly understood spell for producing additional good in the world (Stansfield & Bunch 16). The academic study of literature and so narrative has also had to prostrate itself in an age of rational and "real world" instrumentality: the study of literature will provide a student with a wide assortment of surprisingly useful and transferable career skills, and we represent the very imagination and humanity of the sciences. Both disciplines find themselves at risk of dismissal and reduced relevance and funding if we do not make ourselves adequately legible to the order of the day. Lacan was so aware of science as a homogenizing discourse that performed through mathematical formalization that he devised his own complex Lacanian algebra, in order to formalize psychoanalysis with a strange alternate mathematics that would render it scientific. He called these formulas mathèmes, ostensibly an outgrowth from Levi-Straus' mytheme, itself an outgrowth from the morphemes and sememes of structural linguistics, or irreducible units which affix to one another and come to constitute the topography of the

unconscious, myth and signification systems, respectively. This, we have in common with magic itself, which often squats in the places where it is most able and allowed to make its own kind of sense as it bides its time, sometimes in a strange drag of the order of the day, a feature that will be explored more fully later in the text, in “Tarot and its Magicians.”

As for the content of the work in our disciplines, we each rely heavily upon chance associations, mutable interpretations (though sometimes presented with the confident assurance of fact), complex symbolic systems, and particularly words as the hefty material and matter of invisible or speculative worlds, with the psychoanalyst fiddling directly in the mystical territory of the unconscious itself and the literary theorist sifting through the sublimated and calcified output of unconscious processes in the form of textual artifacts, now made more static and socially acceptable but still teeming with just as much anxiety, angst, imagination and possibility. Our signifiers are everywhere, glowing incandescently, sliding ceaselessly and affixing themselves to any and all things. Your dog is not just your dog in a tautological connector between signifier and signified. Your dog becomes non-linguistic and hyper-linguistic, gesturing wildly to archetypes, symbols and events. The dog could be your Oedipalized father or permanent child, your ability to both provide and feel safety or comfort, your tragic childhood restaged through repetition compulsion, your optimistic desire for the nurturing routines of a stable tomorrow, your next desperate attempt to plug the gap between you and the objet (petit) *a*, a specular image or mirage of the self in the strange mirror of dog¹. In the sudden selection and use of my own example *dog*,

¹ In the mathemes of Lacan, this problem of the dog could be expressed by the algorithm of *S/s*, or how the Signifier takes primacy over the signified and slides across the bar that forever divides them, resolvable only by gossamer metaphor, or the formula of fantasy ($\mathcal{S} \diamond a$), in which the subject of the unconscious is barred in its perpetual

there is a dizzying array of connectors, from images of Freud with his beloved Chows, to conversations I have had with my therapist about her dogs, to my own resentment that dogs are not permitted by my landlord and so I substituted a cockatiel instead, to Levi-Strauss' analysis of birds as metaphorical human beings and dogs as metonymical ones in *The Savage Mind* (207) and how I used it to justify to that if I can't cohabitate with the metonym at least I can live with the metaphor, to how my work computer is missing keys and spattered in crap as a result of my cockatiel choice, to Deleuze & Guattari for their brutal takedown of dogs as sentimentalized possessions while they privileged the wolf in *A Thousand Plateaus* (244), to the time one of my dissertation committee members, Shelley Streeby, invited the author Kim Stanley Robinson to a seminar, and I asked if he was thinking about Deleuze & Guattari when the protagonist of *2312* joined a wolf pack (he was not), to Haraway's powerful counterargument against the ageism and misogyny inherent in Deleuze & Guattari's logic as she proudly presents her own Australian Shepherds and the joy she feels about "oral intercourse" with them in *When Species Meet* (30, 16), to the image of the tarot's Moon card that reveals the dog and the wolf howling together, to my own sweet childhood chihuahua, Roseanna Dana Banana, and the two sweet and similarly colored elderly dachshunds, Toby and Lily, that my neighbor lets me pet, to how I know the names of her dogs and enthusiastically hail them almost daily but have embarrassingly forgotten hers. Who I am aware that I am talking to, who I am unaware that I am talking to, what I know that I am saying, what I don't know that I am saying but still saying all the same, these are

relation to signification chains and the *a*, an unattainable object of desire, that will become a resplendency of many temporary and unsatisfying stopgaps over a lifetime (*Ecrits*, "The Instance in the Letter of the Unconscious", "Kant with Sade", "Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire")

embedded here as well. A dog is never *just* a dog, and neither is any example of one. Every real and imagined dog is unstuck in signification, space and time, sniffing at all the many connectors along the way, and the same can be said for the rest of language and text too.

Borrowing from a bit of the corporatized and pop psychological terminology that so often finds its origins in Jung, perhaps he and I are engaged in extroverted and introverted varieties of a very similar set of interests and concerns: he would like to vigorously engage and actively listen to a person talk for a good long while in order to unveil hidden meanings and relations, surfaces and depths in motion, but I would prefer to do the same at home, thoughtfully and calmly engaged with a book, without any sense of pressure or urgency to vigorously interact with someone who, either by the fact of being unruly enough for therapy or having the confidence and bravado to believe many people should take the time to read their thoughts on a page, has a considerably higher probability of being somewhat exhausting. As a person who is currently rigorously involved in both these activities, I feel particularly qualified to make the claim. Ironically, the *I Ching* is a more private, quiet and bookish affair, and the tarot is more vigorously conversant and collaborative. What is most important, however, is how the many disciplinary features and habits that psychoanalysis and literary theory have in common prepare us very well to notice and attend to the particular work and qualities of divinatory magic and practice, and especially within signification-vibrant systems where associations are made through the polyphonous and slippery reading of text and symbols, as is the case for both the *I Ching* and the tarot.

Later in the text, I will closely examine the discrete differences and precise procedures for each of these literary divinatory systems, but here, I will instead broadly describe what features

they share in common. Each involves an aleatory sorting ritual in which a question is asked, and a text is generated through the randomizing procedure. The randomized results are then read to find connections between the divinatory text and the original query. In the case of the *I Ching*, one of 64 potential hexagrams, each with its attendant passage of writing, will be ritually generated and consulted. In the case of tarot, one or more of the 78 possible cards will be arranged into a spread before being interpreted for meaning. For both systems, strange relevancies and unlikely coincidences emerge for readers. Over and over, the readings are insightful. Again and again, they make sense.

It was that impossible feature, its ability to so often be relevant, to so often correspond directly to the question it was asked, that caused Jung to become obsessed with the *I Ching*. He would spend many hours consulting it in durational bouts of questions, as if interrogating it or daring it to fail. He would eventually introduce the *I Ching* to his psychoanalytic practice, where its answers would produce sense not only for his patients and their specific questions and contexts, but also in ways that glimmered between him, the patients and the world itself, perhaps as a result of the degree of transference and connection that occurs between analyst and analysand. In a particularly elegant example, Jung and a patient were both concerned about a woman the patient wanted to marry. The patient had a “strong mother complex,” and so they consulted the *I Ching* together. The *I Ching* responded unambiguously and rather bluntly: “The maiden is powerful. One should not marry such a maiden” (Jung 342).

In attempting to describe and understand how the physical event of casting the *I Ching* could produce the psychic corollaries that emerge from so many of its answers, Jung developed

the concept of *synchronicity*. In rational thinking, causality, or a sequence of events arranged according to cause and effect, is the order by which we understand the world. Synchronicity, however, is an acausal arrangement of coincidences that are all somehow part of the same momentary situation. In his Foreword to the *I Ching*, he defined it in this way: “synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves, as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers” (xxiv). Where causality describes a sequence of events, synchronicity describes an irrationally coinciding and interconnected nest of them. Magic often works in this way, and the term synchronicity has been plucked from Jung’s psychoanalytic theories and mobilized throughout the occult world, very likely as a result of having been defined in a more broadly available and approachable magical book. The Princeton University Press Bollingen Series edition of *The I Ching* is a best seller and enduring classic, widely considered to be the most effective and accurate English-language translation available, and a copy of it exists on the bookshelf of any English-language user who is serious about the *I Ching* and the synchronicities it has to offer its readers. This is a feature of magic and its dispersal and proliferation that will also be examined more fully later in the text, as a dialectic of demystification and remystification, through which the mystical object is demystified as a best-selling commodity, before it begins remystifying users in ways that could not be imagined or anticipated by the commodity producer. Alongside my own copy of the Bollingen Series edition and a traditional bundle of yarrow plant stalks, I also keep several varieties of coins and exnumia that I use to consult it for different topics—steel war pennies, vintage peep show tokens, ancient

Roman coins that I cleaned myself, old transit tokens, etc., though any three coins or easily thrown objects with two clear sides or an even/odd quality will work. The *I Ching* doesn't actually care what you throw at it; it simply enjoys being consulted and often, which it demonstrates through its generous dispersal of relevant advice and the patterns that emerge through its continued and documented use. It is, in my own experience with it and the other divinatory systems I consult most often, both gregarious and a bit of a showoff².

What is particularly remarkable about Jung's Foreword to the *I Ching* is that he does not so much introduce the oracle to the world; instead, *he asks it to introduce itself* through a reading. With this, he provides a novel phenomenological diary of the psychological events and connections that take place in casting and reading the *I Ching* through two questions. In the first, he asks how it feels about its present situation, of being introduced, and Jung's intentions of presenting it. In reply, the *I Ching* tells him "of its religious significance, of the fact that at present it is unknown and misjudged, of its hope of being restored to a place of honor—this last obviously with a sidelong glance at [an] as yet unwritten foreword, and above all at the English translation" (xxviii). In the second, after writing his interpretation of the hexagram, he asks how the *I Ching* feels about him as an acting subject and the writing he has produced. To this it responds that Jung is feeling mired, and he explores his frustration and ambivalence about presenting "magic spells" as a man who is "not in the habit of asserting something [he] cannot prove or at least

² The oracles I consult most often include tarot, the *I Ching*, a simplified approach to horary astrology through dice, and an odd oracle produced from Nietzsche's writing called the *Nietzschemanteion*. Sometimes I use them independently, other times I use multiple systems together to gain a fuller picture of the situation. When I once asked the *Nietzschemanteion* what it wanted from me, it replied "a whole cluster of grave questions". Oracles enjoy being consulted often and trusted with serious concerns. They even *live* for it. As with any relationship, the more frequently and deeply you engage your oracles, the better and more intimately you come to know one another.

present as acceptable to reason,” all while being aware of the many arguments that could be poised against him (xxxiii). That anxiety drifts throughout the text but also leads Jung to some valuable conclusions and decisions, such as refusing to ask the *I Ching* the same questions again as though it were a test that “attempts to fit irrational phenomena into a preconceived rational pattern” and acknowledging that repetition is itself impossible, since the first situation and moment cannot be reconstructed. “[I]n each instance there is only a first and single answer” (xxix). As an academic and occultist who shares many of the same circumstances and concerns but with far fewer assurances, since Jung found the courage to write his Foreword and more publicly embrace the *I Ching* only at the end of his career, and I write my work on tarot at the very outset of mine, I found his conclusion very moving:

If by means of this demonstration I have succeeded in elucidating the psychological phenomenology of the *I Ching*, I shall have carried out my purpose. As to the thousands of questions, doubts, and criticisms that this singular book stirs up—I cannot answer these. The *I Ching* does not offer itself with proofs and results; it does not vaunt itself, nor is it easy to approach. Like a part of nature, it waits until it is discovered. It offers neither facts nor power, but for lovers of self-knowledge, of wisdom—if there be such—it seems to be the right book. To one person its spirit appears as clear as day; to another, shadowy as twilight; to a third, dark as night. He who is not pleased by it does not have to use it, and he who is against it is not obliged to find it true. Let it go forth into the world for the benefit of those who can discern its meaning. (xxxix)

It is with all of the above considerations in mind that I have decided to duplicate the experiment.

I will ask the tarot to introduce itself.

Process of Introduction

In duplicating Jung's phenomenological experiment, I will ask the same questions and follow his procedure as closely as I can, making adjustments for the divergences between our divinatory texts, outlooks and practices. First, I will ask how the tarot feels about its current situation in my hands. After I write my phenomenological experience along with a close reading and literary analysis of its answer, I will ask how it feels about me in relation to my intentions and the work of introducing it.

There are a few important considerations at the outset: where Jung was able to perform an exegesis of the words directly produced by the *I Ching* in his ritual, the tarot operates primarily through image, and this is particularly true of the deck I have selected. The *Rider-Waite* was the first modern deck (1909) to richly illustrate every pip card, while with very few exceptions, older historic decks provided rich illustrations for their trump cards, but only simple, numbered depictions according to suit for pips. This is analogous to contemporary playing cards, where a Joker can be illustrated in a number of fanciful and expressive ways, dependent on the manufacturer of the deck, but the other cards are quite simple and uniform by convention and design. When we play a fast-paced card game, we do not want to pause to consider a pretty illustration or turn it right-side up when it has been dealt upside-down after vigorous shuffling, nor do we want the frustration of needing to determine and decode what cards we are holding

when each one has been rendered so novel. Instead, we want the information to come instantly, at the level of sight reading, which generates the game-playing conventions of uniform pip-placement and rapidly appraised, symmetrical card design. This divergent feature of the *Rider-Waite* is an illuminating one: the deck was designed by occultists expressly for occult divination practices, with complex images that we are meant to reflect upon in the production of meaning and narrative, rather than a card game by design that can also be repurposed and applied toward divinatory and narrative use. Since the *Rider-Waite*, nearly all contemporary decks share this illustrated pip feature in common, marking the widespread transition and shift in the use of these cards from fast-paced games to generative objects of reflection and narrative transmission.

The *Rider-Waite* is also the most utilized and best-selling tarot deck in the world, and a major influence or direct progenitor to many if not most contemporary tarot decks, making it the ideal choice and analog for greeting the most utilized and best-selling English-language edition of the *I Ching* available. In addition, the images have fully entered the public domain since the unfortunate death of Stuart Kaplan during the Covid pandemic, so they can exist easily enough throughout this document. Later chapters will reveal how important Kaplan was to the very life of tarot in its contemporary genre conventions and enduring popularity.

As with many other tarot readers throughout the world, the *Rider-Waite* was my first deck, and so my own introduction to the genre more than 25 years ago, when I first began dabbling in witchcraft and the occult³. I continue to use it more often than any other deck,

³ I said a great deal about my occult background and more current practices in Padilla, Yesenia. "From Teen Witch to Techno-Shaman: An Interview with Tina Hyland" *The Hoodwitch*, May 2016. <https://www.thehoodwitch.com/blog/2016/5/2/from-teen-witch-to-technoshaman-an-interview-with-tina-hyland>

though for particular purposes or moods, or even just the gathering impulse of a collector, I own a large assortment of tarot decks to choose from, along with many oracle and Lenormand decks, both subgenres of the tarot. The *Rider-Waite* is also the most familiar and comfortable for me, and so it is the deck I currently situate my daily tarot practice around.

As a young teenager raised in an age of rational ideology, for the first several years I sought hard and fast rules, proper procedures, that could produce predictable and reliable results. In my earliest use of tarot, I'd slide the cards from their box and lay them out on my bedroom floor, playing according to the instructions printed in the thin booklet that was included with the deck. The tarot was then a library card catalog, each image hardly examined but directing me to its limited cache of impossible text. Ironically, those efforts to make the tarot more approachable also made it less so; it was more unwieldy and fussy to perform magic as if it were an exact science with corresponding reference sheets and materials, and I found it exceptionally challenging and confounding to bend and direct the few words of interpretation ascribed to each card toward the context of the question. This is a stage in developing a practice that often needs to be traversed in order to be overcome. Some tarot readers never move beyond this approach, and because of the frustration attendant with managing the cards in this way and the dissatisfying and limited words printed to accompany each deck, those practitioners might only rarely utilize the tarot, their decks producing fewer insights but gathering more dust. Other readers, however, will be captivated by the images or the potential they see in the cards and begin sifting through thicker books and further resources in order to more deeply explore tarot's history and symbolic language, building their familiarity and interpretive muscles through exposure to a kind of

divinatory grammar, most often as autodidactic learners since there are limited formal schools or courses of study available for learning the tarot. It is often, in this way, a highly individualized obsession, though not without its own classics, conventions and standards. Even later still, a reader may develop the confidence to approach tarot without reference materials at the ready. It can take a while for a person raised and reared on rationality to *grant themselves permission* to explore their own intuition and trust the fluency they carry to decode and interpret complex symbolic systems without a guide. In my own trajectory, it was roughly five years before I felt confident enough to simply read the cards without at least reaching for reference materials afterwards as if to check, verify or improve my shaky answers. There are certainly readers who are more precocious about independently approaching their decks, and also ones who remain studious fact-checkers for longer periods as well. And while I have regularly consulted tarot over many years, both for myself and others, it was not until the most recent decade of my practice that I began interacting with the cards as a ubiquitous element of my daily routine.

Tarot is very often the first thing I greet in the morning, to provide insight (and often enough, anxiety) about the events of the upcoming day. Sometimes, but especially during stressful periods of life, I turn to it for information and assurance before I go to sleep, so long as it is after midnight. I have even watched a clock more times than I care to admit, waiting for the moment when I can see my daily card and feel prepared for what approaches. Tarot and I have become very intimate over time as a result, and as with all intimate relationships, sometimes we have miscommunications and conflict. Sometimes, I do not enjoy what tarot has to say to me or how it makes me feel. Other times, I am incredibly buoyed by its support. Most often, we enjoy a

stable and comfortable equilibrium of unremarkable days together. Always though, I trust it to be a reliable companion, interlocutor and confidant. I take our relationship quite seriously.

The above paragraph indicates just how personal and idiosyncratic a relationship to tarot, or any oracle can be. In the same way that all my dearest friends are different kinds and qualities of friends to others, no person will have precisely my own relationship to tarot or turn to it in the same moments in the same ways for the same reasons. Before delving into any phenomenological or psychological account of reading tarot, it is important to stress that tarot is not prescriptivist: there are as many ways to approach a reading and a reading practice as there are readers. What follows are very much aspects of my own approach, and sharing them is meant to illuminate ways that tarot communicates with and through its readers. It should not be considered procedurally instructive, only informative in its content.

Tarot Introduces Itself

I had been feeling nervous about this section all day, knowing it was approaching, that I was going to conduct the Jungian experiment with tarot. What if tarot messes with me? What if it makes everything more difficult? Sometimes, it does, and lately tarot feels very much like my boss, and not always a kind one. My daily card pulls as I finish my dissertation, the ones that tell me the character of my upcoming day—they have been highly accurate but also unpleasant. No one with a serious daily divination practice feels cocky or certain when approaching their oracles, especially during challenging times. There is a humility that comes with perpetually submitting yourself to the unknown and finding that the unknown knows far more than you.

Feeling so nervous, I first approach my divination altar and ask for help. Some might assume the god of that altar would be Apollo, since he spoke through the Pythia at Delphi. Not so for me. In the winter months, Delphi was not ruled by Apollo but Dionysus, and it was Dionysus and the prophetic nymphs who raised him on honey after his second birth that caused the ancient Greeks to fill the Corycian cave, just up the slope of Parnassus, with more than twenty thousand astragaloi, ancient knucklebone dice used both in games of chance and aleatory divination⁴. I light a fragrant offering of perfume as I petition for assistance. There are some who imagine occultists in heavy black robes, muttering guttural incantations, and while I respect the many tropes that enchant and recruit practitioners toward magic, occultists rarely place so many additional layers of theater and performance between them and their daily or urgently needed outcomes. Black robes and guttural incantations are more occasional events, like Christmas sweaters and caroling they have a time and a place. In this instance, I am wearing a ripe t-shirt and my hair is twisted into two ropey, day-old braids. I stroke the cheek of Dionysus with my thumb, and I believe my exact words are, “Alright, Daddy Return, I need your help. This one is for the whole enchilada.”⁵

⁴ See “The Bee Maidens of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes” by Susan Scheinberg, or “Parnassus, Delphi, and Thyiades” by Jeremy McInenery

⁵ Devotional practices breed familiarity, and familiarity breeds pet names and novel associations. The Greeks also had many epithets for their deities. I consider Dionysus as being unstuck in time and place, perpetually recurring, and the father of the eternal return and of Nietzsche more generally, an impression that impacted and stayed with me from a particular passage from *Ecce Homo*, due to a synchronicity that emerges in the text: “People are *least* related to their parents: it would be the most extreme sign of vulgarity to be related to your parents. Higher natures have their origins infinitely further back; collecting, economizing, accumulating has gone on longest for their sake. *Great* individuals are the oldest: I do not understand it, but Julius Caesar could be my father - *or* Alexander, that Dionysus incarnate ... As I am writing this, the postman is bringing me a head of Dionysus ...” (Cambridge edition 78).

I do not regularly petition for help in a reading: my relationship to tarot is usually far more familiar and casual. But, I am under intense pressure and stress, and indeed, this one is for the whole enchilada. And though it is very personal to include these irregular aspects of the situation, to eliminate this context from a phenomenological and psychological portrait of the reading would be neglectful.

The stakes felt very high. I was afraid.



Figure 1. Divination Altar

I pull the deck down from the altar and immediately begin the work of reading. I untie and spread the scarf where I keep my cards, take several deep and centering breaths. I pick up the deck in my hands, holding it for a few more exhalations, calming and letting go of my thoughts

until my mind feels open and empty, a technique which may be familiar to people with meditation practices.

I begin to shuffle with my eyes closed, not with the vigor of playing cards, but a loose shuffle of cutting the stack between my two hands and reincorporating the cards gently back together, right hand over left, over and over. I do not count how many times I cut and reintegrate the stack; instead, I keep going until it *feels* right, until I feel alerted to stop. As I shuffle, I enter into a divinatory trance. My breathing becomes irregular and shallow as I whisper variations of the question under my breath, addressing the deck directly. *How do you feel about your current situation, your treatment in my hands, in this work, in this dissertation, how do you feel about my attention, my work for you, my descriptions of you, how do you feel?* The questions become stilted, trailing and strange, somewhat glossolalic as the trance deepens. A discreet and rapid rotation or pulsing begins at my hips, rises to my neck and head, which moves in complementary rotation and rocking, as if my body is supporting the movement of two very small and subtle hula hoops. To an outside observer, it might appear as fidgeting. My head becomes a bit dizzy and there is a vague but growing white light behind my eyelids. Suddenly, it flashes hot and bright, and this is how I know to stop. This is the moment that *feels* right. A rationalist might say that the divinatory gnosis and alert is generated by the irregular breathing patterns and perhaps the positioning of my eyes in their sockets or toward a light source, a predictable physiological event as I relinquish tight control over my body's movements. I'd say that rationalist is much too boring for my dinner parties.

I stop shuffling, open my eyes and turn over the top card of the deck.



Figure 2. Queen of Pentacles

Queen of Pentacles. I am flooded with a rush of relief, not only from the immediate sense it makes to me, but also a synchronicity it is webbed within.

About two hours before turning over this card, I had been in a Zoom meeting with another occultist, Joshua Madara. We have had meetings every Sunday night for the past year as I work on my dissertation, and we both engage in daily interaction with tarot. Sometimes we share our cards with one another, and I had long ago planned to utilize a text conversation between us as the Afterword of this dissertation. During our meeting, I shared the anxiety I was feeling about performing the experiment as Jung had written it in his Foreword, and that I had been avoiding it for too long. I worried that the tarot was going to give me a bad or challenging card, that it might

shake my confidence, and I would have to use it because it is too late to turn back and “tarot is my boss now.” Of course, Madara supportively assured me that tarot is not, in fact, my boss, and that if I pull a terrible card, I can always change my approach and go another direction with the introduction. During the meeting, I determined that if tarot gives me a bad or challenging card that this, too, will be generative and productive, in much the same way that Jung’s second hexagram had been The Abysmal, about his rotten attitude, and it did not negatively impact the insights he was offering. It revealed the psychic state he was in at the moment and encouraged him to articulate his frustrations at presenting magic to a rational audience. Altogether, conversation gave me the confidence I needed to approach the experiment I had been nervously avoiding as I continued to pull a series of troubling daily cards.

At the conclusion of the meeting, we shared those daily cards with one another. Mine had been Strength reversed, which was as unpleasant as it was accurate. My strength was indeed inverted for most of the day; I was plagued by self-doubt and intense, unruly emotions. Earlier, I had even experienced a brief and peculiar meltdown. I grow gesneriads, and a streptocarpus had opened its very first flower. The particular cultivar has a fantasy bloom, or a flower that carries a few hard and fast genetic features, like certain possible colors, but it expresses them uniquely each time with unpredictable patterns. Waiting for each blossom is, in this way, a highly anticipated and beautiful surprise. For my minor meltdown, I stepped away from my computer, picked up the streptocarpus with its first flower and walked around the block with it. I thought about how hybridizing flowers was a perfect alternative to a dissertation. It still creates something beautiful and new, but also simple. In addition, it would not and could never be an urgent process: it is

tied to natural cycles and impossible to rush—pollinating the blooms, waiting for the seeds to develop and mature, sowing them into pots, watching the young plants grow until they are strong enough to support their own blooms at their own pace and only then determining for yourself if the effort had been successful, with many wondrous surprises throughout. By the end of that circumambulation, I had calmed down, and I returned to work. I know it sounds very strange. If you have never attempted to write and defend a dissertation that offers up so much of who and how you are for judgment, and if you have never found yourself suddenly clutching a potted plant to your heart as you reconsider the various facts and features of your life, I can tell you: it is supremely stressful, sometimes quite painful, to undergo such events.



Figure 3. Streptocarpus, *Spin Art*

Madara told me what his daily card had been as well. The Queen of Pentacles.

“I always love how her throne is sitting in the mud,” I said. “All that verdancy but also potential.”

They were among the last words of our conversation.

So, in turning over the card, that is what strikes me most immediately, an animating and relieving gesture from tarot, filling me with a sensation that everything is going according to a plan outside my understanding, but a plan all the same. The supportive person who sometimes

talks about his daily cards with me and who speaks at the end of this very text is now synchronistically entangled within its opening as well.

At midnight, I see that my new daily card is the Nine of Pentacles. There are two cards in the deck that I identify as representing me at my best, and when they emerge, I know it is going to be a very good day. The Nine of Pentacles is one of them. Since it is late, and I feel confident that the next day will be a fine one, I want to enjoy the sensation of pleasure and relief. I add the Queen of Pentacles to the book display on my divination altar, hoping to glean more insight during my dreams.



Figure 4. Divination Altar with a Queen

In the morning, I smile at the altar, at the Queen of Pentacles. I light an offering and carry the Queen to my work area. I look up to see that the streptocarpus has opened new blooms. It is a Nine of Pentacles day. It feels verdant, interconnected and reassuring. I am optimistic and ready to read and analyze the tarot as an oracle and a literature that speaks with its own voice and authority.



Figure 5. New Morning Blooms

How do you feel about your current situation, your treatment in my hands, in this work, in this dissertation, how do you feel about my attention, my work for you, my descriptions of you, how do you feel?

I had asked the tarot how it feels about its current situation, and *in my hands* and *my attention* had been repeated throughout the divinatory trance, though I had been muttering about those things as a metaphor for the results of the written work at large—as in, the tarot is currently an object of my intellectual responsibility and care, and I was asking if it found the quality and outcome of that care to be adequate, satisfactory and agreeable to it. The metaphors, however, are twice literalized in the result. The first literalization was unintentional: I was asking the tarot about its current situation in my hands and attention as I was physically shuffling the cards, and thus, asking also how it feels to be physically touched and attentively wielded by me. The second literalization, one intentionally produced by the tarot, was to provide a tender portrait of us together in the very event of the reading, and the image feels as candid to me as a photograph.

Both of the cards I personally identify with are connected to the element of earth, which is represented by the suit of Pentacles. One of them was provided as my daily card very soon after I pulled the Queen, indicating not only that the day is very much mine to win, but that I should examine the cards together in my analysis of the portrait tarot has provided. Tarot immediately alerted me that the results of this reading are highly significant and valuable by tangling it into a synchronicity I would immediately attach great importance and value to—the stamp of quality assurance and veracity in an irrational and magical world often arrives before the product itself, unstuck in time. This made immediate sense to me: yes, it is weighty and significant, because it is

a reading that appears in something as hefty as my dissertation, and the tarot is assuring me that I have made good choices and can trust it even within our anxious run of days. Then the tarot leads me further still, by producing one of *my* cards shortly after, abruptly ending the bad run in a way that delights and commands my fullest attention, like shattering through a prison wall with a hammer and suddenly feeling the sunlight on your skin. To place that sensation into something like a rationalist framework: there are 78 cards, all of which can appear upright or reversed, so 156 daily possibilities, of which only 2 could have produced this immediate and intense affective impact on my emotions and understanding. The intervals are also similarly spaced, between the synchronistic conversation, pulling the Queen of Pentacles, and then the daily card, further drawing them into unified cohesion as part of the same event. Because I have never seen myself in the Queen of Pentacles before, I may not have identified and interpreted myself as a subject in this card otherwise. Tarot is depicting me to myself first through the language of synchronicity, then in its tarotic photograph and finally in the daily pull that leads me to see and understand the photograph as a photograph: this is not an exercise in abstraction but something deeply personal for and about me. Tarot would like me to pay close attention to all of these facts as features of the shared language and mutual understanding we have developed over our history together.



Figure 6. Three Characters of Tarot

The element of earth in tarot is connected to the material world and wealth, but it extends further than that as well, into work, routines, nourishment, nurturing, fertility, vegetation, the body, sensuality, appreciation of beauty, good taste and refinement. That I should identify with it so strongly is also well-supported in my natal chart, a snapshot of the sky at the time and place of a person's birth that composes who we are astrologically, with half of my planets and also my midheaven located either in earth signs or the houses that are governed and ruled by them. In short, I am exactly the woman who dreams of creating new kinds of flowers as I walk a very elegant but highly unusual potted houseplant around the block to find comfort during a strange crisis of self-confidence. I have also already determined that I need to buy a

lovely print of the Queen of Pentacles to hang on my wall, or to carefully and lovingly embroider her into some fabric.



Figure 7. Amor Fati

In an examination of the three cards side by side, immediate common features emerge. One of these, I had never noticed before: the sky is yellow in all the cards, and so is the scarf I have used to wrap and spread my deck for many years. It is my favorite color, and especially so when a bright and sunny yellow is contrasted with a nearby cobalt or ultramarine. These are not the only cards with a yellow sky, however: roughly one-fifth of the cards share this trait in common throughout the deck.

Most important, of course, are the similarities between the subjects themselves. They are three women in positions of power, with nobility and refinement, all surrounded by the fecundity

of nature, and each demonstrating a firm grasp with one hand and a more gentle, open caress with the other. Although the primary card for this analysis is the Queen of Pentacles, I will begin with The Empress, because she is a major arcana or trump card, and as such, represents the archetype of feminine power, rule and domain within and over the material world. The other noble women and cards from the minor arcana, a face or court card and a pip, are each expressing the same originary gestures of the archetype in their own ways. The Empress grips and raises her scepter, a symbol of her rule, while caressing her own thigh, perhaps smoothing the fine fabric of her chemise but also imbuing it with an implied sensuality; she could lift the hem at any time to reveal her skin to the viewer. The Nine holds up a tamed falcon as her open hand rests gracefully on a coin below, and the Queen positions and supports a coin upright with one hand as she more delicately brushes against it with the other. In each instance, the hands express their shared ability to command and direct as well as their nurturing dispositions and sensuality, communicated through the touch of hands and tactile interaction with materials in the world. The gaze of each woman follows the direction of her authority, indicating what it is that she commands. The Empress fixes her steady and forward gaze beyond the confines of her card, to the world itself and all that it contains, but also directly meeting the eyes of anyone who views her. Nine of Pentacles turns her gaze toward the falcon she has tamed, powerful yet bound within her tarotic scene, and the Queen examines the coin in her lap.

There are important divergences for the Queen as well. She is the only woman with her firm hand, her gentle hand and her gaze all directed toward the same object. This inscribes authority but also intimacy and devotion into the relationship between her and the coin. She

determines how she will direct and orient its physical position, but she also attends to it with her full affection, attention and care. The object of her command also attracts and pulls her gaze downward to meet it. The other women maintain a lifted gaze as they elevate their objects of power and command toward it: they do not lower their eyes in greeting. The objects that express power in the firm hands of The Empress and the Nine are as a result held strangely aloft in a demonstration of their mastery over the object but also themselves, with a posture displaying their self-control. Imagine what it must feel like to elevate an object then forever sustain its position just slightly above the top of your head as you radiate with elegance, composure, dignity and poise. The Queen alone is physically comfortable, but only because she has relinquished the tight and rigid control over the object and herself as she slouches slightly forward, bending both her body and gaze toward the coin. She directs it, but more subtly until situated in this contrast, it also directs her. The gentle hands of The Empress and the Nine express another near symmetry, as it is the only part of their bodies that is allowed to fully relax, resting against something at a comfortably lower and similar height. This implies that a relinquishing submission is embedded in their intimacy, and one that acts as a counterbalance to the dominance expressed by the controlling and controlled position of the firm hand. The Queen does not need to perform any balancing act of strange posture because her power is already relaxed and the object of it rests quite easily in her comforting and comfortable lap.

As for myself, I am an authority over the tarot when I use it: I deftly manage and read the cards as well as determine precisely when and how I will orient and arrange them in a spread. I am also an authority on the tarot when I write and communicate information through and about

it. This authority, however, is not imbued in me as an innate mastery granted by nature itself or the divine, as with The Empress, nor has it come about by methodically training and compelling the tarot to obey my commands, as with the Nine. It is an authority that has developed as a result of my long devotion to tarot, in which it has been both an object of careful examination and study but also and more importantly, respected and engaged as an autonomous interlocutor with whom I am in an intimate and familiar relationship, cultivated through a magical practice that is more shared between us than it is simply mine to govern or possess. And aside from the physical fact that I do, of course, bend toward the cards that I command in order to engage, understand and greet them, the cards could not produce so much anxiety or delight if I exercised perfect power over them or if I had trained them to do my bidding. My relationship to tarot is best depicted by the card it has provided and in the woman it has selected to represent me in our photograph, despite my long history of identification with the other two.

As for the Queen of Pentacles, I have never seen myself in her before, though I take the tarot's point well. The associations and attachments I developed with the other cards formed over time but also many years ago, and at nearly 41, I am a middle-aged woman now. The Queen has a more matronly and mature look than the other women, and she wears simpler attire. Over time, my style has also veered toward simpler patterns and cuts while in my youth, my clothing commanded far more notice and attention than it does now. The Queen is also gentler in posture and comportment than the other two cards, and so am I. I don't deliver nearly as many haughty and imperious moments as I did in my youth. Instead, I express, cultivate and prefer thoughtfulness, as in being full of thought and care for the ideas, people and objects around me,

and also kindness, above most other qualities and virtues. My confidence is a quieter but steady variety now too, though I remain quite assertive, capable and self-possessed. Tarot is telling me that I have grown and changed, and that my conception of self through and with the cards should grow and change as well, in a way that will reshape my practice and my understanding.

I accept that the tarot's portrait carries with it the veracity of a photograph, even though it captures me in a new and unexpected light. That isn't to say that I would be catfishing through a continued identification with the Empress or using a heavy filter to find myself in the Nine of Pentacles. Rather, it is to say that these are all aspects of how tarot communicates to me and about me, and the different ways that I relate to myself and the world through it. The Empress expresses how I feel when I walk into a room with great confidence and poise and hold the attention and respect of an audience. The Nine of Pentacles feels the same way but in private moments, without an audience, or in smaller ways. Even so, I learn new information about those cards as well, because tarot encouraged me to position them together for this analysis. They have always felt similar to me, for instance, but I did not realize just how much they reflect and mirror one another. When I press the faces of the two cards together, their symmetrical aspects even touch. And this particular image, the Queen of Pentacles, demonstrates the kind of nurturing, care and attention that I express toward the people and objects I love, or in the work of growing ideas and writing, only I wouldn't have seen it until tarot encouraged me to look. It is much more than the tarot simply saying that I am best represented now by a slouchier, frumpier, older woman, though that is certainly present here too. If I were tasked with writing a list of adjectives to describe how I experience tarot, it would not include the words *tactful* or *polite*.

Of course, I am not the only subject captured within this tarotic photograph. The tarot has represented itself as well, and as far more than an object of my authority, affection and care.

Throughout this writing, I have used the word coin to describe the object represented in the suit of Pentacles. Historic tarot decks, along with Spanish and Italian playing cards, use the suit of Coins, and Pentacles emerge as an occultification of the suit parallel with its widespread shift from a card game to a divination and narrative tool in the *Rider-Waite*. Colloquially, however, the words for the object depicted in the suit remain interchangeable, and some contemporary decks continue to utilize Coins or otherwise rename it for aesthetic reasons or to set themselves apart, as in the suit of Discs in the *Thoth* tarot, for example. As for the object of a pentacle: it is an occult talisman that finds its origins in the magical grimoires of the Renaissance period, though pentacles did not necessarily depict a pentagrammic star and utilized a number of possible shapes and configurations. The etymology is somewhat open and ambiguous, referencing anything from a shape used in magic with five points, but one that can include six-pointed hexagrams as well, to protective amulets worn around the neck, to a candlestick with five branches for necromantic purposes (Harper). In history, the pentacle is far from uniform. In contemporary witchcraft and occult practices, however, a pentacle and a pentagram are synonymous and identical, and more importantly, they are both depicted and constructed just as Arthur Edward Waite designed and Pamela Colman Smith illustrated them in the creation of the *Rider-Waite* tarot. If you type the word *pentacle* into Google Shopping, you find the *Rider-Waite* design on a wide assortment of objects—jewelry, journals, boxes, lamps, soap, clothing. Any object you desire, you can find it in the shape of or emblazoned with the same pentacle. To unpack all

of this, the tarot has represented itself as something that is simultaneously a coin and a talisman, but also an illustration of the way that the commodity of the tarot has influenced magic and reality itself, well beyond the confines of its tarotic world and the reading, narrative and magical practices situated around tarot more generally. It has dispersed itself widely. For the tarot to represent itself this way in our photograph is deeply meaningful to me: it poses in my own lap as the tarotic world's object par excellence of the dialectic of demystification and remystification that I examine carefully in "Tarot and Its Magicians."

To review the tarotic photograph succinctly: I am a much older woman than I was when I began my relationship to tarot, and it shows both in my appearance and my almost maternal devotion to the tarot sitting in my lap. My gaze is not directed at the viewer, and my body is turned away because I am enveloped in positioning, examining, reading, writing and caring for the tarot. My hands are busy turning it toward you, the viewer, so you can see its bright and golden face. Although the title of the image names me as its subject, I am not. All focus is oriented on the tarot.

The tarot could not have provided a more beautiful, insightful or moving answer as to how it feels in my hands as an object of my attention, scholarship and care. I do not need to ask the second question; its answer is already embedded in the tarotic photograph.

The Magical Practice of Reading

For this reading to exist, many things needed to arrive in the same place, at the same time, before and during the event of the reading. These strands are not distinct from the reading but

exist as the reading at different stages in its arrival within a tightly interwoven contextual and signifying web.

First, it occurred when my attention to tarot is intensely present and focused but also unsettled and destabilized within a situation of high personal stakes and consequence. Though I have a daily reading practice, that practice does not include auto-ethnography, phenomenological description, literary analysis or rigorous documentation. I was tending to an otherwise ubiquitous event quite differently. The sudden entry of these additions into the habituated and familiar practice defamiliarized it: new associations, even with cards I consider to be my own, were suddenly able to emerge.

These were not the only circumstances situated and inseparable from the event of the reading, and therefore parts of the tarotic text. The string of bad and accurate daily cards that had impacted my mood and productivity, that I had experienced a synchronistic conversation, that this synchronicity linked the beginning and end of the dissertation in a way that, at least for me, provides a satisfactory answer to what was presented as perhaps unanswerable in the conclusion, the complete affective shift that happened when I pulled one of *my* daily cards as an end to the streak of bad days, that the appearance of the card encouraged me in an unanticipated and fruitful direction for the structure of the reading and its analysis, that the flower I had carried around in distress suddenly opened new morning blooms: these and many other moments are all embedded and inseparable from the reading itself. They are part of the text of tarot, and together, they demonstrate the ways by which the events and moments we arrange into sequence or set apart from one another as unrelated are not actually discrete, orderly or separable. They are

intimately entangled, unfolding before, alongside and also after as part of the event and moment of reading. Some moments last a very long time, some introductions have been written across days and years simultaneously, and the texts we read interact with us and the world. They reach far beyond their material boundaries and include more signifiers and signification systems than the ones displayed on their pages. They do all of this with great affective, social and material influence in the world.

The peculiarities of the material page and text of tarot, the ways in which the performance of reading it is ritualized within a highly participatory, embodied and randomized event, and the immersive immediacy by which the tarot situates us directly within its narratives can make it feel as though it is something very different from literature and that *reading* tarot and *reading* a book are distant practices united only by homophone. What is more the case is that tarot is a genre of literature and a kind of text that accelerates and accentuates the performances, practices, features and outcomes of reading in general, thereby making their shared qualities more apparent when set in contrast.

Positioning them side by side, it becomes more visible. My repeated encounters with a rotten string of cards made me fretful and afraid. In 2020, the Oxford English Dictionary included *doomscrolling* in its list of “Words for an Unprecedented Year” (Limpong). *Doomscrolling*, or reading too many texts filled with bad news, has an enormous affective impact, making both the world and our experience of it more grim. I experience strong personal identification with some of the characters on the pages of tarot, but this, too, happens during narrative encounters with more conventional books. I interlace the contexts and events that

circulate around the text as an integral part of it. Literary criticism necessarily considers the authors, communities, locations, times, situations and events of the world as part of the text too. Tit for tat, every experience I had in my encounter with tarot has its analogs in more conventional books and narratives.

As for the dazzling display of synchronicities that alert and persuade me that my texts are active and alive, rationality has a name for them as well. They are called frequency illusions, a form of cognitive bias, or an embarrassing flaw in my thinking, judgment and experience of the world. I will gladly accept that rationalist position, on the condition that even one person can point to their mind or show me the location of the unconscious and what it is made of, or even just tell me what those things are in a way that excludes any mystical description or culturally settled metaphor. I don't think that anyone can. As I will demonstrate in this text, *rationality is a narrative too*.

And if it is all narrative anyway, it comes down to a choice. Would you rather occupy a world that is grey and inert, where the object is as still and settled as a corpse, or would you prefer to cohabitate in a world where our texts are oracular, with the dignity of their own voices, and our objects are vibrant and living alongside us? If you prefer the latter, you are in luck: the age of disenchantment offers every tool a person might need to re-enchant the world. Throughout this text, I will pick up many technologies of rationality and mobilize them within its own favorite genre convention, the *argument*, while strategically positioned in its favorite location, the *academy*, in order to do precisely that kind of work.

Reading is a situated, embodied, affective and magical practice with strange temporalities, hyper-linguistic and unpredictable signifiers, and material and social consequences that proliferate far beyond the text before, during and after it is encountered.

CHAPTER 2 TAROT AS PEDAGOGY

We *read* tarot, but that procedure does not resemble what is happening now, as you decode the words on this page. Currently, your eyes are being coordinated along a neat and orderly path through the text. They follow a sentence, step by step, word by word, until they reach the punctuation that marks its end, where the summation of its meaning can be fully appraised and understood. This is especially true if it is an easy or elegant path. Expert climbs exist as well, and sometimes the eyes will need to double back to earlier parts of the trail or skip over obstacles or consult a reference guide before the meaning of a sentence comes more fully into view. There are poorly marked trails as well, where bad writing might cause unnecessary delays in your progress, and there are ugly vistas too. It is better and more satisfying work when the trail is also pretty, or if it contains a few unexpected delights, like gently winding your way through an immersive metaphor as it reveals itself.

Nonetheless, your eyes are being guided along a trail of words that has been so frequently and consistently provided that you hardly have to consider your eyes or how you are moving through the text at all. You can focus instead on understanding it, word by word, sentence by sentence, as it is shaped into larger summits and summations of meaning, like paragraphs or chapters. Your eyes simply follow the clearly marked trail as you experience the landscape and, despite the physical uniformity of the line, the inherently uneven topography of a text unfolding. The views change, but the procedure of moving along the path is so familiar that it feels quite natural. That sensation, however, has more to do with domestication than it does with the nature of reading.

Tarot is not so generous or tame, and it offers fewer comforts along the way. It is an intimidating landscape with mighty spans of wilderness between its more distant and ambiguously marked trails. It is a text in which the eyes and the mind can easily become disoriented and distracted, and where you can suddenly find yourself quite lost. Despite the many dangers and delays you might encounter in the tarotic wild, it also offers up more potential and possibility. We can learn a great deal about the nature of reading in its wilder spaces, where our eyes and our minds are more free to wander, and we are far less confined.

Following the Tarotic Trail

While the tarot is far less tame than the text you are reading now, it is still a genre of literature, and as such, it has its attendant rules and conventions. Its pages are composed of 78 cards, and of those, 22 are major arcana, or trumps. The major arcana cards have been elaborately illustrated from tarot's origin, in the trick-taking card game of Tarrochi, played in Italy from the mid-15th century before spreading to other parts of Europe. These 22 cards were the most powerful in the game, so their content is symmetrically potent and allegorically grand. They also generate the earliest narrative practices around tarot that emerged almost alongside the cards, particularly with the parlor game Tarrochi Appropriati. Each guest was provided a card, and others speculated, told stories or composed poems as to why they had received it. In this speculative practice of connecting an individual and events from the outside world to the contents

of a card, we can also see the earliest seeds of its divinatory use germinating, though tarot wouldn't be widely taken up by occultists until two centuries later.⁶

The remaining 56 cards of the minor arcana, almost all of which are richly illustrated in decks subsequent to the *Rider-Waite*, are composed of 16 court cards and 40 pips, in sequences of one through ten. While sometimes modeled after the suits of another country or made novel, they predominantly follow the suits of Italian playing cards, with minor occultic adjustments: swords, wands (from batons), cups, and pentacles (from coins). In contemporary interpretive conventions, each suit has also been assigned an element: air, fire, water and earth, respectively, and each of those is further assigned human drives or qualities derived from the occult elemental associations of Renaissance Neoplatonism. While they retain the suited progressions of playing cards, materially they diverge. A tarot card tends to be larger, enframing and granting more room to the images that will be spread and spaced apart for a reading, as opposed to being gathered together in a hand for game play. Though they are printed on cardstock with a glossy finish to protect and enhance the image, they lack the thicker, more durable varnish of a playing card, which is designed to be more vigorously, quickly and frequently shuffled.

The cards employ a semantically open visual language. While many of the images contain elements familiar and frequently utilized throughout western symbolic motif, they are not tethered to a single interpretation or meaning and in fact, mean wildly, flexibly and ephemerally, in brief connections and in tandem with associated and nearby contexts or cards. They also do

⁶ The history of tarot greatly fascinated Stuart Kaplan, who almost feverishly collected historic decks and manuscripts. The results of his efforts were published throughout the hefty, four volume *The Encyclopedia of Tarot*. Although he worked outside the academy, all tarot scholarship that followed is deeply indebted to Kaplan's research and private archive.

not conduct or determine the movement of eyes beyond the backgrounds and foregrounds present within image composition: you can move freely across the card to determine and select what elements or details of the image, number, suit or text are most personally relevant or significant to their contexts.

At the same time, tarot does carry its own collection of conventional practices in order to draw coherent meaning from its infinite potential: a simple 3-card spread, for example, could produce over 450,000 permutations before we ever attend to the uncountable questions that might be asked, choosing whether or not to grant interpretive significance to reversed cards, the idiosyncratic rituals between readers and their cards or querents, interpretive and narrative styles, or how an arrangement of three cards is not bound within a single contextual framework. I might designate their positions as past, present, future; thoughts, feelings, actions; breakfast, lunch, dinner; or anything else.

As such, reading tarot is a rigorously embodied and participatory engagement with the infinitely open text: the reader and the tarot itself are in physical and narrative motion as meaning is negotiated between querents and/or questions, spatial and contextual arrangements, and the improvised interpretation of a dynamic symbolic network in which the cards are both always and never precisely themselves. While each card carries its own static set of symbols, along with some common and catalytic denotations and connotations, its functional meaning is spontaneous, novel, and in motion: fully relational, polysemic and inherently non-identical to itself.

CASE STUDIES:

Being so open, tarot lends itself to pedagogical applications just as generously and generatively as it does to its more familiar meditative and divinatory roles. Over the 2021-22 academic year, I was a guest lecturer for two undergraduate courses at the University of California San Diego: *Fringe Genres* in the Department of Communication and *Looking At Dance* in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Each of these discrete disciplines is uniquely positioned to negotiate further modalities of meaning production and insight through and about the cards, generating novel expressions of engagement, articulation and understanding. The following will detail the methodology, events and results of these pedagogical applications of tarot.

Case Study 1: *Fringe Genres*, 4 October 2021

Broadly, Communication as a discipline seeks to understand the connections and tensions between people and their interactions, and how individuals, communities, and cultures are constructed through networks of direct and mediated communication, along with the consequences of those varied interactions on history, human behavior and society at large. Pepe Rojo Solis designed his *Fringe Genres* course in order to explore the productive “breakdown of categories between genres, disciplines, media and formats” by implementing “transgeneric and transdisciplinary methods to understand not just what categories do, but how they dissolve and blur” at their edges.⁷ As such, inspecting the genre-specific yet evasive form of tarot as a text and heuristic system for communicating with and about the unknown, and participating in the ways

⁷ <https://communication.ucsd.edu/undergrad/academic-overview/quarterly-course-list.html#Fall-2021>

in which tarot, as an object, misbehaves by defying the temporal expectations and chronological constraints of an otherwise ordered and rational world was particularly germane to the course objectives, aside from being an opportunity to further my own interests in productively blurring and dissolving the discrete but speculative boundaries between magic, art and the academy. Before the omicron variant of CoVid-19 initiated a second wave of school closures, many courses had returned to campus, and I was able to conduct the workshop in-person: it was my first experience teaching in a classroom setting after more than a year of remote work.

The learning objectives for this kind of lesson focused on a scaffolding of techniques, from exploration to practice. The first part of the lesson focused on allowing students to explore the formal conventions of tarot by participating in aspects of its social and material history. Once they had established the specifics of this practice, we looked to the semiotic aspects of the cards as they learned how to decode and translate the signification system of tarot, and then to apply those significations across different cards to generate meaning and narratively articulate answers to spontaneously generated questions. They were then able to perform divinatory readings for one another as newly fluent interpreters of tarot, applying their reading techniques to interactive performance. Lastly, the lesson included a reflection which generalized from this instance of alternative significant methods to a broader question, which asked them to articulate and discuss the ways in which tarot and other alternative signification systems and texts both trouble and illuminate the meaning of reading as such.

What does tarot say to us?

Before initiating any dialogue around what the tarot is or isn't, or what it is capable of generating, it is important to examine what the tarot says about itself and how we already think and communicate about tarot within our cultural milieu. For this reason, I asked students a few questions.

How many of you own a tarot deck, or know someone who does?

A few students owned decks, and we discussed which ones and how they selected or came to own them. Most students at least knew someone who owns a tarot deck. Almost everyone felt familiar with them and aware of what they are.

How many of you have given or received a professional or amateur tarot reading? What was that experience like?

Only one student had received a professional reading, and she shared how she had felt dismissive at the start, but later, was surprised at how insightful she found the experience and how she felt many of the predictions were accurate. Several others had their tarot read by friends with a range of experiences: a similar surprise at how meaningful it felt or how accurate it was, frustration at a process of slowly flipping back and forth through a guidebook and trying to build meaning from the spread and receiving readings that felt irrelevant or didn't apply to the question.

How would you describe and explain tarot to someone who was not already familiar with it?

Students articulated that it was a deck of cards with pictures and symbols that people utilize to give readings, but that the source of the insights was mysterious—something unknown speaks through the tarot. They identified tarot as a spiritual object and a tool for predicting the future and answering personal questions.

Where do you think tarot comes from?

Students who contributed speculated that it had mysterious and potentially ancient origins. I used this as a springboard to share a bit about the history of tarot cards.

Party like it's 1599

The aforementioned Tarrochi Appropriati provided the model for this pedagogical tool. I distributed trump cards to the students, and we played the same game together. Even from their initial contact with the cards, students were not provided with any guides to reference for preconstructed meaning. Students initially felt somewhat shy and uncomfortable speculating. They needed encouragement to become comfortable with the idea that there were no correct answers, and that this was truly a game of narrative imagination. Once reassured, we were able to play without guidebooks, like our 16th century counterparts.

After playing a few rounds, I collected the cards again and expressed the tarot's connection to their course, how it is an inherently collaborative book-writing book, or a book that encourages and produces stories as much as it tells them. As such, it troubles what we mean when we say that we *read* the tarot. We discussed the infinite open of the tarot as text, and how spreads allow us to pin down and isolate a single audible voice from the noise: this is the foundation of any divinatory practice, the idea that answers are available, but we need a means to

focus on and amplify a single voice while attenuating the noise that drowns it out. It is the same for the *I Ching*, throwing bones, casting runes, astrological horoscopes, scrying a reflecting pool, an obsidian mirror, the smoke of a bonfire, even flipping a coin, or consulting a Magic 8 Ball. These are all mechanisms and ritual procedures for reducing the overloud static of the infinitely possible in order to locate and amplify a single and coherent fragment of meaning. The tarot only happens to more visibly wear the infinite on its card faces, allowing us to physically touch, shuffle, distribute and give narrative order and sequence to the open. Tarot makes both the procedure of divination and the fact of reading the world itself more literary and more literal, and as such, more inviting and approachable.

Reading Without Rulebooks

Once we had warmed up together and students felt more confident making narrative leaps with the cards, I divided the room into small groups. Each group was provided with a different tarot deck, the rule books all removed, and each individual was instructed to both conduct and receive a basic three card spread of past, present and future:

“Don’t worry about the official interpretations of the cards. We are engaged now in narrative imagination and storytelling with some very fringe literature. Just talk about what you see in front of you, and how it relates to the question. The questions can be about anything. There are no limits here.”

I reiterated that, especially since they were all upper division students of Communication, they were especially practiced at decoding and interpreting symbols, and as such, they were approaching the cards with a high level of familiarity and fluency for reading indirect and subtle

signification systems. Once students held decks of cards in their hands and could investigate and engage them more fully, they were absorbed and engrossed by the activity, enchanted by the images and procedure. Many of their questions were serious and even intimate, indicating the level of rapport, comfort and community Prof. Rojo had cultivated in his classroom, and the genres of question that professional readers encounter most often were highly present: romantic problems, living situations, health and professional and financial success. I did not overhear any playful questions, though students were enjoying their time interacting with the cards. I was also surprised at how adaptively cooperative many of the groups were: students felt comfortable but also inexperienced at the task, and so they analyzed and interpreted cards together, collaboratively speculating and building shared narratives to give meaning to the spreads.

Reading as Embodied Practice

After students had read cards for one another, we reflected together on the process. Students shared their experiences, thoughts, results and their evaluations of tarot: how effective had it been as a text and a generator of meaning? Students reiterated some observations that had taken place during our warmup dialogue, that the tarot had been a surprisingly and seemingly accurate tool for illuminating and working through their varied concerns. It was also easier to read than they had assumed it would be: its symbolic motifs were familiar and approachable. We discussed the ways in which we could build similar interpretive systems from the world around us, and how we are engaged in the act of reading all the time. Students were able to make connections between reading tarot and reading the implicit and cultural signs mobilized within

narrative industries and media, and even within the rhetorical and symbolic complexes of campus space and architecture.

Case Study 2: Looking at Dance, 27 January 2022

Key questions for Dr. Rebecca Chaleff's *Looking at Dance* course were exploring how “aesthetic forms change the way we practice, perform, and/or experience dance” alongside the ways in which various research practices are able to produce interpretive frameworks for “analyzing culture, politics, and performance” while investigating what dance performances can teach us about “historical and contemporary formations of identity.”⁸ Tarot provides a highly unusual but effective answer to all of these questions. Though the course was focused on dance theory, movement and performance were welcomed in my workshop, and especially after another wave of the pandemic forced in-person courses back to remote platforms during the Winter quarter. The reanimation and reengagement that comes through participating in any unusual and embodied practice can often be a comforting break from routine and especially in times of confusion and disappointment. That said, there were constraints: since we were not on campus, class activities needed to be productively and effectively translated back into an unanticipated remote format.

The learned objectives for this class used a similar framework as Comm 113T, but with a different emphasis to take advantage of the practiced embodiments of the students as dancers. Learning to decode remained a central objective, but that decoding was then translated into parallel movements. Similarly, the archetypes of the cards and the arcana were channeled through

⁸ cited from syllabus

movement. The generative comparison between symbols was then interpreted through choreography as a semiotic system to express the meaning of cards. This allowed students to work on connecting individual movements to symbols, and to adapt those movements when encountering other cards, in order to express and experience how the cards relate to one another in a spread. These intersection choreographies were then offered as a way of asking the question: what does it mean to understand the tarot spread as a motion and dance, and what does it mean to understand reading in terms of movement and place?

What does tarot say to us?

As with the Communication workshop, I began by asking a series of questions, to get a sense of familiarity with the cards. I asked whether the students owned a tarot deck, whether they knew tarot readers, or whether they had ever had the experience of having their cards read. Follow up questions discussed their experiences with tarot readings and asked them to describe the cards to someone who knew nothing about tarot.

Utilizing the answers, which were similar to the previous workshop, I tailored an introduction of tarot's material history while also introducing an interpretive framework for approaching the suits and their corollary elemental associations, since students would be working to more fully embody the cards later. This introduction emphasized the connection between literature scholarship and dance through this embodied reading.

The other important aspect emphasized here is how this embodied reading of tarot is a performance, an active, ritualized, choreographed embodiment. Before the spread is laid out,

people create a kind of stage for tarot as a small event, often a silk scarf meticulously and carefully arranged with other set pieces like a candle or a crystal, things that aestheticize, contribute to the mood or tone, and set the ritual apart from just our kitchen tables or living room floors. This marks the ritual as important and performed. Even on our most familiar surfaces, tarot is taking place elsewhere, in its own designated space outside of ordinary time and mundane events.

After the stage-setting, the conditions of the performance were described. In this method, the tarot reading begins by thinking about or stating a question aloud. Cards are shuffled until it “feels right”, a practical intuition that is activated. Cards can be cut into stacks, according to personal or learned traditions or another instance of that novel intuitive mode which sets the cards in motion. Only then are cards themselves looked at and the question of how they relate to one another raised. Once we have landed on this interpretive question, we can begin to negotiate and shape the ways they answer our question. In the instructions, the constant emphasis is on the parts of the performance that encourage embodied intuition: staging, ritual and motion, and card cutting. The attention of the students is drawn to the question of how they know when to stop shuffling. When it *feels* right. This is a sensation, one connected to rhythm and intuition or a specified technique, that is located in and determined by the body in motion.

In framing this performance, I continually returned to the discipline; the tarot we were reading was also a careful and considered study of dance, the reading of dance, how it works and what it means. As dance students, they had a unique training allowing them to push those already dancerly aspects of the tarot’s embodied engagements with the cards a bit further by reading and

articulating meaning through the movement of our bodies. This didn't require collapsing the disciplines of literature and dance but allowed a different emphasis than was used in the Communication course, with movement through space negotiated by the body coming to the forefront of the lesson.

The Empress Moves

Once the procedure was outlined in the abstract, I began to concretize this by showing an image of The Empress. I asked students to locate any symbols in the card they could see along with the meanings they felt they carried. I reminded them that these are familiar parts of the Western symbolic motif, and that there were no wrong answers. Just, what did they see, and where did they connect those symbols to particular units of meaning?



Figure 8. The Empress of the *Rider-Waite*

Students identified her scepter, crown, seat and regal bearing and posture as elements of her ruling as the Empress. They also noted the feminine-coded fecundity around her, in the wheat, forest and river, and related it to fertility and nourishment. Students noted her comfortable chemise gown that would allow her to flow and also might indicate rest or pregnancy, and the print of pomegranates, a fruit full and bursting with seeds. A student familiar with astrology identified the symbol of Venus, and therefore love, in her heart-shaped dais and throne. After we had investigated the card very carefully, making it familiar to us, I asked students to close their eyes for a guided meditation:

Picture the Empress as vividly as you can in your mind. Where she is sitting. Her surroundings. The wheat field. The river cutting through the forest. Her throne. Her crown. Her hair. Her face. Her chemise. Her posture and bearing. Now imagine the Empress standing up from her seat and walking toward the front of the card, toward you. She moves through your computer screen and exits the world of her card. She moves into your world, into your room and the space around you. Imagine her moving through your room. Imagine her interacting with the objects and the space around her. What grabs her attention? What pleases her? What displeases her? How does she communicate that with her glance or her body? What does she pause to consider? What objects does she touch? How do her arms and her hands move as she touches them? The Empress is walking through your room, feeling the space and interacting with its objects and contents. What is her gait? How smoothly does she walk? How urgently or how slow? Let her explore your space and note the ways that she moves through it.

After completing the guided meditation, we talked about the experience together. Students discussed how confidently but softly she moved. They described the personal items she interacted and the ways she grazed, held or recoiled from them. They discussed her elegance and self-possessed composure and steadiness.

Once we had discussed her movements together, I said to students, “Alright. Now let’s all adjust our posture and sit as the Empress, right here in our Zoom tiles.” Immediately, everyone sat fully upright with their necks lifted high. I said, “Let’s hold our positions a moment and explore how it feels in our bodies to sit as the Empress. Let’s investigate a few of the objects in

front of us with her gaze. Turn your head and look at something over your right shoulder as the Empress. Now something over the left. Let's move our arms and hands as the Empress. Pick something up and move it from one of her hands to the other. Let's shift our weight as the Empress. Now, let's walk around and engage our space like the Empress, just as she moved in our imaginations."

When we were exploring as the Empress, we discussed the ways our bodies changed and our sensations. We noted how, even though we are all different people, our movements were very similar. One student noted that, even when the Empress looks at something that is higher than she is, she is still somehow looking down at it. Many students noted how much confidence and power they felt by becoming her, how it changed the energy and sensation in their bodies. I said, "This is a thing we can do any time we like or need. When we want to borrow some confidence or feel elegant and powerful or more sure and composed, we can just become the Empress for a moment. Who's there to stop us or even know?"

Terra Incognita: Body Mapping

Before class, students had received a blank body map, often used in order to identify areas and qualities of pain for medical diagnosis. I showed them a body map I had made, in order to describe my movement experience with the Empress, explaining that while our movements may have shared many qualities in common, our narrative maps of the experience might be very different, in the way we express and locate those sensations in our individual bodies. I invited students to engage with my own body map, detailing the different colors, shapes or language they might have used, if they were asked to describe their experience. This both provided them an

example of what they would be doing next while also freeing them from the pressure of right or wrong expressions of narrative and visual sensation.

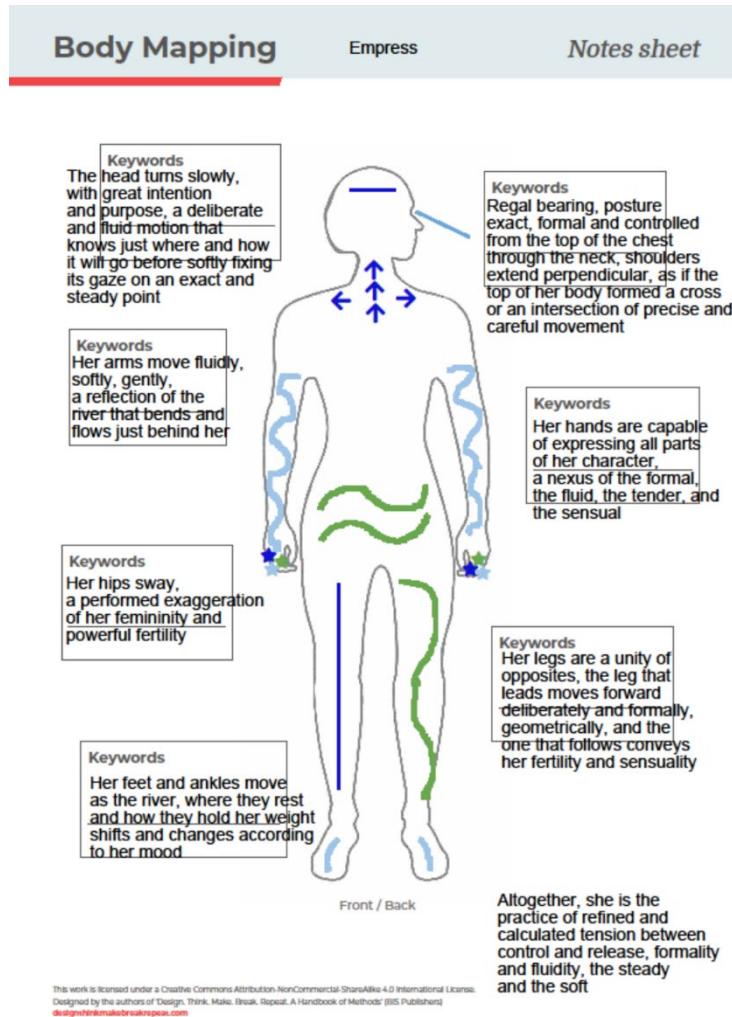


Figure 9. My *Empress* body map

From there, I instructed students to visit rider-waite.com and select a single card reading. This would be their card to embody for the rest of the workshop. We discussed the ways that not every card has a human on it, and some cards have more than one. It would be up to the student to identify a figure from the card or to develop their movements tonally, considering it a creative opportunity even, to take a break from the pressure of expressing and being a person for a while.

Once students had their single card reading, they duplicated the process we had undergone with the Empress. First, examining the card carefully for all of its symbols and what they might mean, facilitating both memory and familiarity. Then, closing their eyes to imagine the card moving and interacting independently within their space. Finally, getting up in order to embody the card and feel its sensations. After each student was done, they utilized docfly to fill the details into their own body map, recording the locations in which the card is most deeply felt and if it traverses a particular route through the body, if its energy collects or remains settled in particular areas or if it remains in motion, and how it moves through a room as itself.

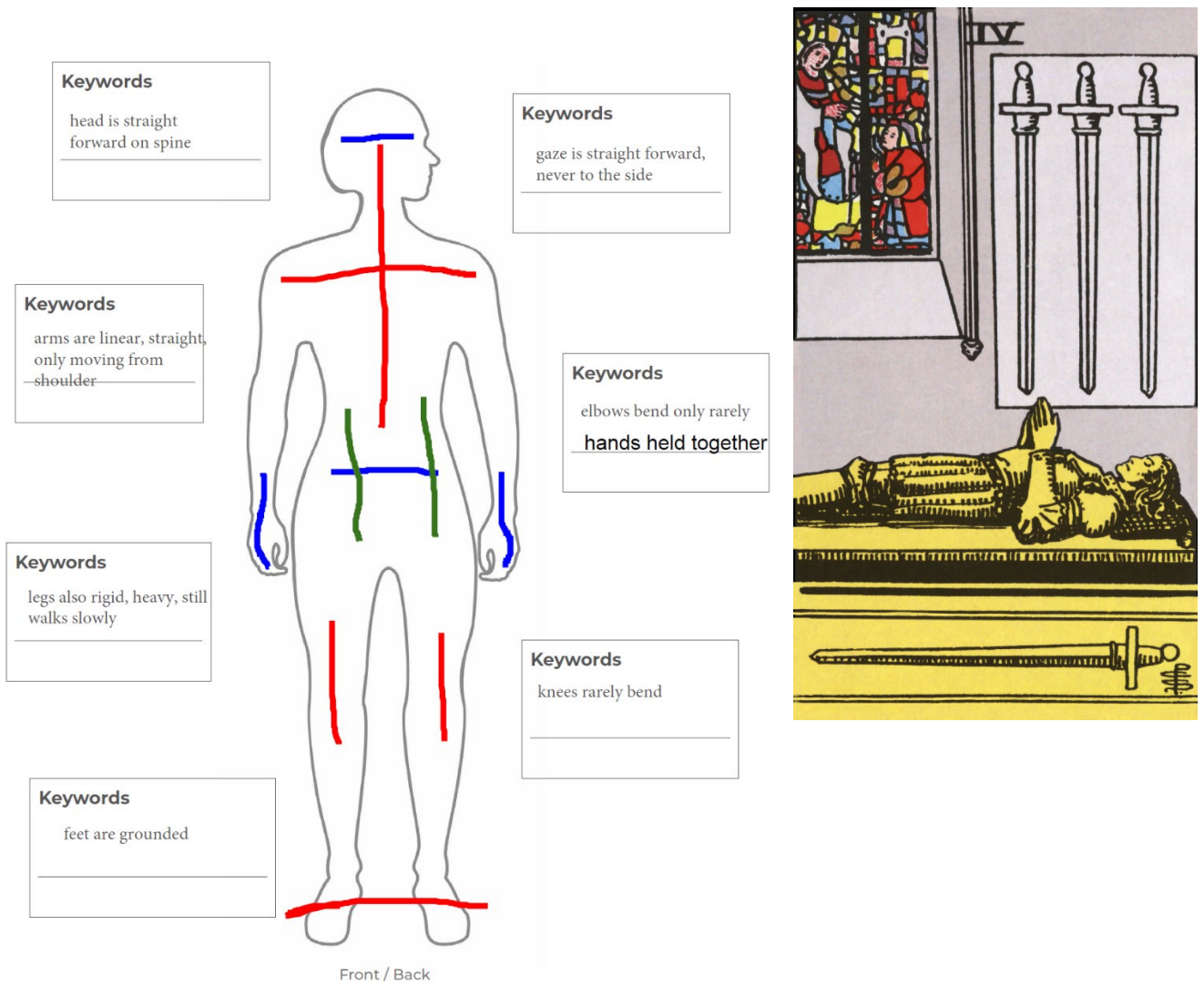


Figure 10. Participant Body Map Results for Four of Swords

Students were “shuffled” into Zoom breakout rooms of three participants each. Before revealing their individual cards or movements, students collaborated to form a question they would seek to answer a living tarot spread. Questions ranged from how students would perform on various tests to complex and contemplative questions, like, “What is the nature of the connection between mind, body and the material world?”

Once a question was determined, each participant shared their card, body map and independent movements as the card. Once all the cards and movements had been revealed, students negotiated how the presence of the other cards would impact their independent movements with the following guiding questions and thoughts:

- Are the cards complementary? If so, do they enhance and deepen each other's movements? Do they become more pronounced, or even more themselves?
- Are they at odds? If so, does one cause another's motions to become smaller and diminished, or do they enter into the friction of combat? In what ways?
- Do they share a suit or a number or a symbol in common? How might additional "cupness" or "fourness" or "Major Arcaneness" impact the spread?
- Do the cards bring new movements and information out of one another in their interaction? Are there unexpected behaviors, when they are influenced by the presence of other cards? How are their relations to one another expressed in representative movement?
- How will the cards impact one another to bring new insight to the spread?

After students had negotiated the movements and enacted their living tarot spreads, they utilized them to form narrative answers to their initial questions. For the end of class, we discussed their results, observations, and the new connections they felt between tarot and dance and also reading as an embodied performance and event.

In Conclusion

Tarot is a versatile and captivating pedagogical tool, as relevant when positioned within the social sciences as it is within the arts and humanities. It generates novel enthusiasm for participants as it illuminates alternate frameworks and approaches for a more experiential understanding of signification, meaning production, cultural practices, performance and narrative. Through these varied applications of tarot, students were able to physically engage with semiotics, maneuvering and managing abstract systems in their hands and bodies in a way that productively illuminates the inherent embodiment of reading a book—something we quite literally *lose sight of* through our stabilized, steady habituated practices of encountering a text. The destabilization of tarot re-embodies reading. And through that same tarotic destabilization process, where meaning is encountered and produced strangely, students are able to quickly transition and apply the practice and techniques of reading to the world at large.

CHAPTER 3
TAROT AND ITS MAGICIANS



Figure 11. The Magician of the *Rider-Waite*

Opening

A man stands behind an altar, compelling the abstraction of his thoughts and desires to concretize as physical objects in the world. It is a powerful act of will and creation, but also the most meta-referential card in the deck. He is himself a resident of the tarot, enframed within the boundaries of his card, yet the tools that he has at his disposal are the suits of the tarot itself. In all other cards, the depicted figures are bound up in their relation to one suit or another, trapped or resplendent within a confined set of elemental and symbolic constraints: the Magician alone commands all suits equally in order to manifest his will on earth. It is also the act of the reader of tarot, to take up all of the insights of every card into their hands, to shuffle away their infinite possibilities and abstractions, and to pin them down to coherent meaning through spreads and interpretation. *Solve et coagula*, the alchemical maxim⁹. Above the man is a lemniscate, that magico-mathematical symbol of infinity, and his belt is an *ouroboros*: the snake eating its own tale, metabolizing its own body within the eternal cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

Important cultural figures stand behind the tarot, responsible for its mobilization through time, and for producing and encouraging our relationships to the cards. Any analysis that fails to consider the movement of tarot as a commercial product, and the figures who wield it in this way, would be neglectful and incomplete. How does the tarot endure, both as a commercial object and a symbolic and cultural complex? How does it withstand the march of time to become an object which feels as eternal as a lemniscate?

⁹ *dissolve and coagulate*

Witch Tarot

On April 1, 2021, *The New York Times* ran the article “How to Get Started with Tarot,” which gave a few steps for beginners to approach the cards. While there is a small apology or wink inherent in running such a story on April Fool’s Day, there is still a step-by-step approach to reading tarot, published by one of the most influential newspapers in the world. The article takes itself seriously, as do the quoted contributors. It guides its readers on how to choose a deck, how to formulate a question for the cards, how to prepare a space (including a link to another *NYT* article on selecting the appropriate incense for your moods, unrelated to any self-deprecating holiday), along with how to shuffle, pull, interpret cards, and record your insights in a journal. The images are spartan in their layout and Instagram ready, skewing toward a younger audience (which is especially evident in sample questions like “Why is my mother like that?”). The deck showcased throughout the article is *Modern Witch Tarot*, which is described in the article as “a contemporary twist on the Rider Waite deck” (Drolet). This renovation involves greater racial and body shape diversity, gender expressions that all but eliminate the representation of cisgender men, an on-trend color palette replete with muted teal, and newly updated technology. The High Priestess no longer partially-conceals the secrets of the Torah; today she reveals the outer shell of her laptop, the contents of its screen unavailable without us being exceptionally rude. An inspection of the full deck and its accompanying literature shows it to be full of calculatedly current (and likely ephemeral) language: The Empress is “feeling herself”, the Lovers suggest you might be caught in one Beyoncé song-title reference or another, the Hermit is managing her

“FOMO” through “self-care”, and the Chariot implores her readers to “be a boss and Get. Shit. Done.” (Sterle)

Over and over, the article seems to reiterate: *Tarot is contemporary and approachable. It is useful to you, no matter your age, class, or background. Tarot is the ultimate heuristic for personal growth, whether or not you believe in its divinatory claims.*

Tarot, of course, is always engaged in such acts of replication, renovation, reframing, and renewal. Tarot’s present *eternalness* is the means by which it captures up all potential interests and identities, making it an object par excellence of neoliberal capitalism: a unified and coherent project that also contains within itself a seemingly infinite array of personal and self-constructing, self-projecting choice. When caught up in such a seemingly endless array, we can forget (as we are meant to) that these choices are actually quite small. You may have exercised great care in selecting a tarot deck that expresses some feature of enormous personal importance, but it is still a tarot deck and therefore coherent within its closed system of conventions and material facts. This form of smokescreen, that a person is able to select from bottomless troughs of self or cultural expression, all of which feel personally significant and therefore individually (and individualizingly) valuable, while simultaneously being trivial choices caught within their limiting and governing systems, is a *mystification of capital* by which a person comes to see, construct and project themselves to others as individuals through an accumulation of purchase decisions and the personal selection and curation of commodities.

Bond Girls

Despite this proliferation of personal choice, there are decks that achieve elevation and recognition enough to become classics, as surely as within other genres of literature. What precisely makes a tarot deck a classic? What facilitates the enduring iconicity of some decks and the idiosyncratic nature of others? It is not uncommon to encounter a deck that was once \$30 at time of print and a few years later, find that it commands hundreds of dollars for the collector who discovered it too late. To be a tarot classic, however, is to be anointed in reliable, steadfast commerce, available at every major bookseller and new age shop. A classic deck stays in print for decades.

Tarot of the Witches is one such classic deck, as it is immediately recognizable by tarot collectors and according to its publisher, “it has been in print for over 40 years and remains popular” (Hall & Kaplan). First printed in 1973, the deck is, depending on your aesthetic leanings, either lushly or garishly illustrated by Fergus Hall. According to Christopher Butler, himself a prolific tarot deck creator and illustrator, the *Tarot of the Witches* “doesn't provoke a lukewarm reaction. You either love it or hate it. Hot or cold. End of story” (Butler).

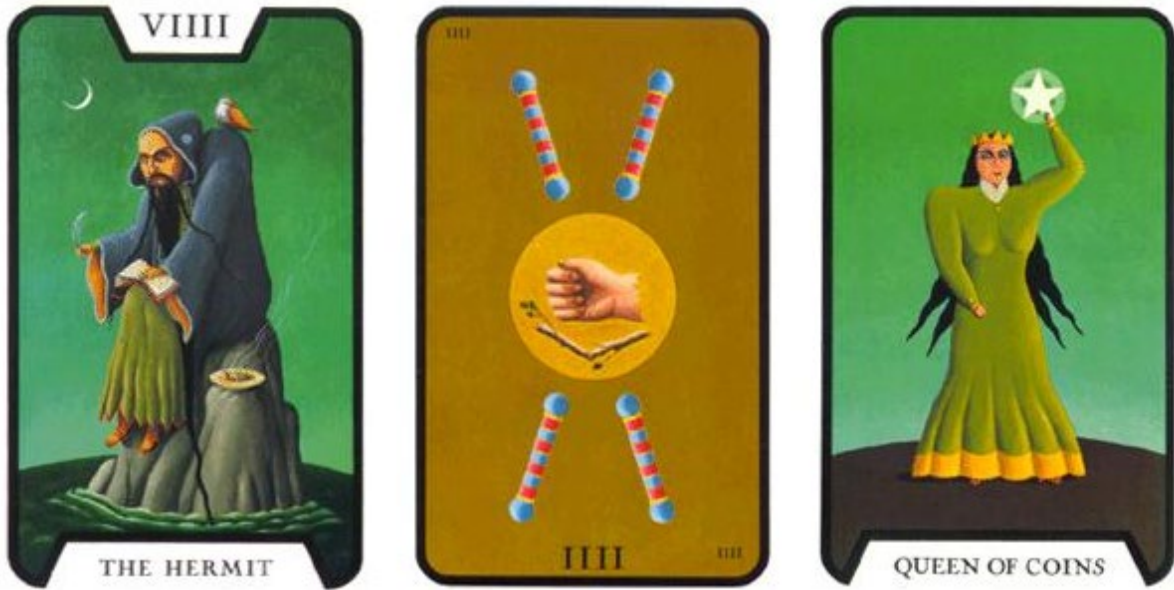


Figure 12. Cards from the *Tarot of the Witches*

Tarot of the Witches achieved its popularity as a result of appearing in the James Bond 007 film *Live and Let Die* (1973), which allowed such a singular, polarizing deck to persist where so many others have existed more ephemerally. At the height of the blaxploitation era, the film positions James Bond against Dr. Kanaga, a Caribbean dictator, heroin producer and drug trafficker who formulates and adapts his diabolical plans with the help of consultations with his own private and virginal tarot reader, Solitaire. Long before the viewer meets the fortune-telling Bond girl, we meet her hands, the *Tarot of the Witches*, and a disembodied voice of matter-of-fact prognostication:

[Knight of Wands] A man comes. [Six of Swords] He travels quickly. [Knight of Swords] He has a purpose. He comes over water. He travels with others. [Six of Batons] He will oppose. [The Tower] He brings violence and destruction. (*Live and Let Die*)

As she turns the cards and recites their meaning, a double exposure reveals Bond approaching exactly as the images of the cards foretell, in a plane hurtling over the sea. The squeal and impact of the plane landing gestures toward the promised violence and destruction of the Tower. Foresight in this instance is not located in the psychism or ability of Solitaire, but in the cards themselves, which need only a set of hands to utilize their capacity as prophetic devices. The short, punctuated sentences of the fortune assure a viewer that these cards speak plainly, clearly and that their meaning can be quickly gleaned and committed to memory.



Figure 13. Solitaire's hand casting the *Tarot of the Witches*

Their ease of use is repeated when even James Bond is shown to have mastery over the cards, utilizing them to reveal or manipulate the truth to his advantage. In a scene where Bond is seduced into a trap by the first Black Bond girl and CIA double agent, Rosie Carver, he reveals her duplicity through the cards, demonstrating that he was always in control of the situation and punctuating their intimacy with prophetic prestidigitation:

ROSIE: James, oh, you don't know what finding you has meant to me.

BOND: Oh, I can imagine. [He produces a card seemingly from thin air.] And you've no idea what finding this has meant to me. You do know what the Queen of Cups means in

an upside-down position? A deceitful, perverse woman, a liar, a cheat. And I'd like some answers now. (*Live and Let Die*)



Figure 14. Bond reveals the truth as if producing a quarter from behind Rosie's ear.

Later, an ideological argument emerges between Bond and Solitaire about the nature of the cards. She declares that it is blasphemy for him to use them, that the cards only reveal fortunes to those who develop psychic insight. Bond insists that they are instead a gamble and uses legerdemain to trick her into becoming his lover, writ large in the archetypal grandeur of the Lovers card that he deceitfully produces in order to convince her that they are fated to become intimate. Both approaches are delivered with identical prophetic potency since Solitaire's readings are accurate throughout the film and Bond's manipulative tarot-as-rhetoric is effectively persuasive: Rosie reveals her allegiance to Dr. Kanaga after seeing his use of the Queen of Cups, and James and Solitaire do bang it out as Lovers.



Figure 15. Bond's full deck of Lovers cards, used to coerce a virgin into sex, spraying onto the table in a blunt metaphor of the off-screen ejaculation to come.

In this dichotomy, the cards are presented equally to believers and nonbelievers. One can approach the cards as faithfully as Solitaire, though likely without her Obeah-blessed virginal psychism, or become clever with them, through memorization and manipulation. Whether the viewer believes in fate or stacked decks, the cards are featured often enough to become attractive to audiences of either disposition.

The reason behind this becomes clear with a further investigation into the history of the deck, obscured by US Games Systems. While many are familiar with the deck's appearance in *Live and Let Die*, what fewer know is that these cards were commissioned specifically for the movie, as part of a marketing campaign, and that their illustrator and creator, Fergus Hall, worked as a theater set designer. Before being named the *Tarot of the Witches* and merely having appeared in a popular film franchise, the deck was released as the *James Bond 007 Tarot Game*,

generated to serve as a film prop and promotional material for release alongside the film (Kaplan 1973).



Figure 16. James Bond 007 Tarot Game Box Set

This rebranding of history occurs one decade after the deck's initial release, when the sales generated from simply having been featured in a popular film would no longer be enough--or

when the deck needs to abandon its oft-repeated filmic fidelity and *authenticity* in order to have its mystical credibility restored for consumption by tarot's more usual collectors, accomplished through recasting the gamified and cinematic role of the secret agent with the esoteric ethos of witches in plural. Along with scrubbing the stylized *007* motif from the back of the cards in favor of a more neutral and unassuming red plaid, the most significant difference between 1973's first edition of the *James Bond 007 Tarot Book* and 1983's¹⁰ first edition guidebook to the *Tarot of the Witches* is the omission of one short paragraph from the preface:

The search for an artist to render a new tarot pack for use in the Bond film was begun in the summer of 1972...(ibid.)

All that is left of this history in the more contemporary guide is an ambiguous and odd paragraph concerned with commercial rights and distribution, available in the preface of both guidebooks:

In early 1973, US Game Systems, Inc., the leading tarot publisher, secured exclusive worldwide rights to the Fergus Hall tarot deck. Under the arrangement, US Game Systems agreed to produce the JAMES BOND 007 tarot game for worldwide distribution

¹⁰ As the James Bond universe was losing its gamified connection to tarot in one instance, it was acquiring a new connection elsewhere with the release of the popular James Bond 007: Role-Playing In Her Majesty's Secret Service tabletop role-playing game the same year. Due to legal disputes between the James Bond character-creator and author Ian Fleming and the director and screenwriter Kevin McClory, the game was unable to secure the licensing rights to utilize SPECTRE, a large and shadowy criminal network, or the organization's leader and mastermind antagonist, Ernst Stavro Blofeld. Instead, while most of the non-player characters and concepts arrive directly from the familiar Bond universe, the game created an alternate criminal network, TAROT (Technological Accession, Revenge and Organized Terrorism), and a new villain in Karl Ferenc Skorpios. Each branch of the organization was represented as a card from the Major Arcana: The Tower division of Terrorism, The Hanged Man division of Blackmail, Death division of Assassination, Judgement division of Kidnapping, Wheel of Fortune division of Robbery, The Chariot division of Military Action and Organization, The Hierophant division of Intelligence, and The Magician division of Research and Development. Ernst Stavro Skorpios is represented in the rulebook as the tarot's Emperor (Victory Games, Inc).

in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese and other languages.
(ibid.)

It is a peculiar declaration to read in a guide to the prophetic tarot, and after its preface, the book becomes more familiar to its intended audience, filled with the expected symbolic descriptions and divinatory meanings and strategies. Both portions of the book are the *product* of author Stuart R. Kaplan, the CEO and founder of US Game Systems, Inc. He is the strange father of contemporary tarot usage “in the U.S. and then around the world,” first by importing tarot cards for distribution in the United States, and then by publishing them himself (Winick).

Kaplan

In 1968, young Kaplan, then working on Wall Street, stopped at the annual international Nuremberg Toy Fair to find Christmas gifts for his children but also to think about importing toys to the United States. On the last day of the fair (as it is always the last day or moment in personal mythologies), he stopped at the booth of a small Swiss printing house, AG Müller & Cie, where he encountered (in the furthest corner of origin story) the *Swiss IJJ Tarot*. Intrigued by the images of the Major Arcana, he bought the rights along with an order of 5,000 copies to import to the US. According to Kaplan, “AG Müller wasn't selling that many Tarot decks in an entire year, and they thought it was surprising that anyone would want to purchase so many Tarot decks, but I saw some possibilities in distributing them in the States” (Winick).

Upon returning, he sold decks to booksellers in New York City. While there had long been tarot cards available for purchase in the United States, at that moment they were oddities

and strange relics consigned to occult shops and specialty markets. In an email interview I conducted with Kaplan in 2020, he said, “In 1968, when I first started with tarot, my sales rep, Therese Marks, brought a *Swiss 1JJ* tarot deck to Henry Levy, the buyer at Brentano’s bookstore in NYC. Henry purchased 100 decks. Thus, I started with my first bookstore.” (Personal Interview). It was Stuart Kaplan who allowed the average American consumer to encounter the decks, which initially did not sell quickly. When Brentano’s suggested that people were interested in the cards but unsure of what to do with them, Kaplan wrote his first texts on how to narratively interpret the tarot: people were eager to engage the unusual cards, but few approachable and contemporary texts were available on the topic. Both of Kaplan’s efforts were released in 1970. One was a thin, accordion-style pamphlet that included a brief and speculative history of tarot, a summary of what tarot is and how it works, one short line of meaning ascribed to each of the Major Arcana cards, and instructions on how to perform a ten-card spread. The pamphlet was designed to be slipped into the packaging and accompany the deck. In the pamphlet, he also recommends the second of his texts:

It is suggested that beginners use only the twenty-two Greater Arcana cards and, after having developed a satisfactory procedure of spreading the cards, the individual should obtain the 96-page illustrated book “TAROT CARDS FOR FUN AND FORTUNE-TELLING” by S. R. Kaplan. This book, published by U.S. Games Systems, Inc., is the only complete and authentic guide to the spread and interpretation of the popular Tarot 1JJ deck. (Kaplan 1974)

With these two texts, Kaplan establishes two important genre conventions of the contemporary tarot. The first is the inclusion of a brief divinatory guide with any deck, and the second being an approachable and supplementary book for additional purchase, which would later become part of more expensive and deluxe box sets. While books about the divinatory use of tarot decks existed before *Tarot Cards for Fun and Fortune-Telling*, they were typically written by tarot deck designers in and for smaller occult communities and audiences, such as A.E. Waite's *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1911) for the *Rider-Waite* deck, or Aleister Crowley's *The Book of Thoth* (1944) to accompany the *Thoth* tarot. *Tarot Cards for Fun and Fortune-Telling* was detached from any of the deck's designers and written for popular appeal and mass distribution. In our interview, Kaplan wrote that "within several years USGames sold 80,000 Swiss tarot decks and accompanying *Tarot Cards for Fun and Fortune Telling* books, primarily to bookstores and so-called metaphysical and occult shops" (Personal Interview). In total, *Tarot Cards for Fun and Fortune Telling* sold 700,000 copies over more than 20 print runs. This came as a surprise to both Kaplan and his manufacturers:

I was not aware of the eventual impact of the Swiss 1JJ nor was the factory where they were being printed. We were both surprised and pleased. I believe what led to the success of tarot was USGames (and my personal) linear focus on tarot as an historical art form with background that needed to be researched and uncovered. I love doing historical research as evidenced by my other books, *Tarot Classic*, *The Encyclopedia of Tarot* (4 volumes) and, of course, *Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story*. (Personal Interview)

It should also be noted that Kaplan's linear focus also determined the surprise success of U.S. Games Systems, Inc., the first company established to produce and distribute tarot for US audiences.

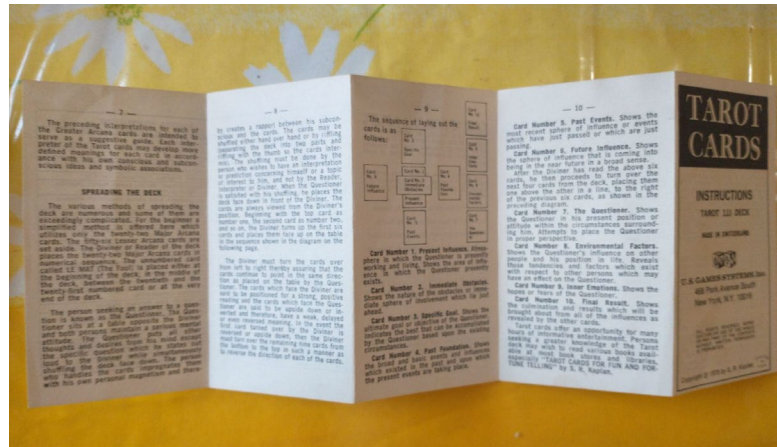


Figure 17. From my own 1970 copy of the 1JJ that also includes two blank cards, which from 1973 would be replaced by full-color advertisements for Tarot Cards for Fun and Fortune Telling and other US Games Systems, Inc. decks and products.

This is how a former Wall Street broker began the work to become the foremost expert and catalyst of the tarot revival of the 1970's, though he feared the occult associations of his first deck and attempted to distance his professional name from his tarot authorship by using only his initials "S.R. Kaplan", especially with the *IJJ's* frequent and adapted appearance on the television series *Dark Shadows* (Winick). In the hands of character Natalie DuPres, the High Priestess card was converted into The Wicked Woman and the cards were commonly situated in a context alongside witchcraft, malefic spells, clairvoyance and supernatural dread. He worried over whether or not he would be considered a legitimate businessman, even as he expanded his inventory by purchasing the rights to more historic decks (including the *Rider Waite*) and wrote pamphlets and books to accompany, supplement, or historically illuminate and contextualize each one, culminating in the massive four volume *Encyclopedia of the Tarot*.

This desire, to be a legitimate businessman, is at the front of Kaplan's thinking on the tarot and in his self-mythology. There is no greater genre of personal mythology, perhaps, than the graduation commencement speech. Invited to speak at the boarding high school he attended, Kaplan talks about his background as a son of immigrants in the Bronx and how he, through the willingness to see opportunity and take risks, was able to transform himself:

I left Wall Street; I started my own publishing game company. I wrote several books about the art and the allegorical meanings on the cards and the 15th century Italian families who commissioned the original cards; The Viscontis, the Sforzas, the Corleones. The book sold over 1 million copies. I published hundreds of variations of the cards, I commissioned art from dozens of artists, and in the end, and including up to now, I have

sold over 100 million dollars of these cards. If I had not been open to new ideas that February in Switzerland, I would have missed this life changing opportunity. (Kaplan 2015)

When it comes to variations in sizes and shades on that most iconic deck, the *Rider Waite*, Kaplan says, “We sought to please everyone's taste...On its simplest level, it’s like Coke, followed by Diet Coke, Classic Coke, Caffeine Free Coke; the natural progression of a great product” (Winick).

There is a distance, then, between the tarot as Kaplan writes it and the tarot as a Kaplan product. When I asked if there is something he wishes more people knew about tarot cards, he replied simply, “Tarot can help a person in their life decisions. It is also a fascinating historical story beginning with the Visconti and Sforza families of the fifteenth century, Milan, Italy” (Personal Interview). On his US Game Systems biography, Kaplan pitches the tarot to all possible users without making any definitive claims or taking a truly personal stance:

There is an aura of mysticism coupled with fascination that surrounds the images on the cards, and the fact that they have been in existence for over five centuries adds to the allure. In his experience Tarot is a catalyst. In some ways, it is also a creativity tool to allow people to think differently and experience thoughts and ideas they might not otherwise have considered. For some people, tarot allows for serious meditation, others find it fun. It is all in the eyes of the beholder. (“Biography of Stuart Kaplan”)

Alongside this seemingly cynical attachment to the cards, however, there is a genuine enthusiasm for tarot collecting, research and writing that spans five decades of work, all of which

bring us the tarot as we experience it now--as something we can purchase from any major bookseller, that is open and available, prolific in iteration and variety.

Despite this proliferation of text and labor, it is difficult to find information about Kaplan. The importance of his contribution to tarot use and knowledge across dozens of deck guides and books, some having sold more than a million copies, doesn't garner him even a Wikipedia page. Most of the scant interviews that exist with the material and spiritual father of the tarot revival occur in trade industry magazines. This is the literal mystification of capital, guided and nourished by an invisible hand.

Egregore

A person could read all that is above as the disenchantment of an enchanted object, a pin letting out all the air that allows it to float. Sitting here with my tarot in front of me, under the talismanic moon, I do not see it this way. The move is more dialectical--there has been a literal mystification of tarot, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties," and I have performed a rite of demystification (Marx 81). This demystification, however, is not the point.

The moment when Kaplan picked up the *Swiss IJJ Tarot* at the Nuremberg toy fair occurred within a historical context wherein demystification was the order of the day. This is the age that sociologist and philosopher Max Weber famously describes as the age of disenchantment. However, *entzauberung*, the German that is translated in English to disenchantment, more literally means *de-magic-ation* (Chua). Occult literatures have their own reading of this age, described as a time when "the universe can be understood and manipulated by careful observation of the behavior of material things" (Carroll 188). In other words, it is an age of science and

rationality, and a low ebb of magic's cultural power. Situated in this belief of aeonics and ages, however, is the reassurance that another period will be occurring soon. Magical communities and writers have understood themselves to be maintaining their practices in a hostile environment, to preserve them for the future openness of a new and better age (ibid. 102).

Instead of seeing the history of the tarot in the 20th century as a move to commodify mysticism, what if we consider that the tarot found the most metaphysical object of its period, the commodity, and inhabited it, in order to survive as a thought-form through the bland rationalities of mid-century American capitalism, keeping itself ready for a period more open to its work? Having demystified the tarot, it is time to consider what it looks like when mysticism returns. Instead of thinking of the tarot as a mere and humble object, what if we consider the concept of the egregore?

In Robert Ambelain's *The Practical Kabbalah*, one finds a succinct definition of the egregore:

In the Invisible, outside of the physical perception of Man, there exist artificial being, generated by devotion, enthusiasm or fanaticism, which we call egregores. These are the hearts of the great spiritual currents, good or evil. The Mystical Church, Celestial Jerusalem, the Body of Christ, and all such titles, are the qualifications, which give communion to the egregore of Catholicism. Freemasonry, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism have egregores. Great political ideologies have them too. (Ambelain 58)

The egregore is a collective thought-form, born in belief and raised on devotion, that acquires agency and movement in the world. In other words, an egregore is an idea that is

believed fervently enough and by enough people that it is able to become an autonomous entity that influences us and bends us to its will in order to complete its aims. It is a collective practice which begins with an intention. This intention can be specific or general; what is important is that the intention is a starting point, designed to continue to be intended beyond the group of people who are designing it and beyond the immediate boundaries of their design. As such, it endures beyond the group of people who created it, and beyond their control. Many concrete practices go into making an idea attractive enough, aesthetically pleasing enough, or interesting enough to be grasped by its group and then by others in such an enduring and autonomous way.

An idea, having acquired a life of its own, often enters unexpected places and pursues its originary aim in surprising ways, with its own interpretation. As an example, it is common in ancestor worship practices to be wary of the kind of help you ask for, or to use very precise language; while the ancestor will certainly help you, it may do so in a way that is both unanticipated and unpleasant. Aladokun, a Yoruba priestess with more than 20 years of experience, writes:

Each spirit will have their own agendas, ways of doing things, and ideologies that may or may not be helpful or supportive to you. Sometimes, the ancestors and guides may have an idea of what is best for you when in actuality their idea can hold you back. (Aladokun)

It is useful also to recall that the original incarnation of the tarot is not in divination, but parlor games. As a parlor game, it needed to coordinate people in order to continue being played. We might say that the tarot took on the magical apparatus of divination as a radical reinterpretation of its original intention, using the attractions of foresight and magic in order to

spread its influence. Or, in the memetics of Dawkins, ideas “can be conceptualised as entities that hop from mind to mind, making copies of themselves as they go” (Lewens). Some copies are more successful than others, and the tarot has many vibrant and successful children, replicating itself across disciplinary genomes; it endures as a game, a literature, a divination tool, a meditation aid, an artist’s crutch, a collector’s obsession, a *Rider-Waite* reiterator. When Kaplan treats the tarot as a parlor game, then, he is not negating the tradition of the tarot but engaging enthusiastically with its fundamental truth: it always finds a way to be read and to gather readers around it, whatever their proclivity.

The tarot as egregore, with tendrils spreading through these parlor games, divinatory practices, arts, and now also capital. What better way to ensure its own survival? In this, Kaplan is not mystifying his commodity, but is mystified by it--a self-conscious CEO suddenly possessed by the spirit of tarot, gripped by its tenacious aliveness, his hand moved to commit its history and uses to thousands of pages, ensuring that the decks proliferate, dispersed and ready for a coming age of *re-magic-ation*.

Death, Detectives & Dialectics

The above dialectic of demystification and remystification, in which the *magically* mystified object, the tarot, is disenchanting in order to be utilized cynically by way of capital, thereby forming a further modality of *mystification* in the Marxist sense, serves eventually to *mystify* its audience in both senses, as participants in both its magical and cynical mystifications: this is the machinery by which the tarot marches toward a coming age of *re-magic-ation*. In other words, the occult object is stripped of its enchantments in order to be turned into a commodity,

which is then re-mystified by the logic of fetishism, commerce and narrative industries. This remystification then opens up the magical object to mass-distribution and reach while also generating forms of magical practice that were not imagined by the commodity producer and pointing toward new ways of relating to magic and reality itself.

For Marx, the commodity takes on a fetishistic aspect, in which it is worth more to individuals and communities than its material or use value. This surplus is located in the way the commodity becomes mystically imbued and autonomous, relating to us and to other commodities with a life of its own:

[In the commodity form], the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

(Marx 83)

We see this frequently in collector's markets, where a deck of out-of-print cards suddenly fetches many times its original value on eBay, though materially, it is identical to itself or perhaps even in worse condition than it was new. Beyond this directly Marxist sense, however, there is a further fetishization based in signs themselves. When people select a particular tarot deck of personal symbolic significance, one that both indicates and develops who they are as individuals, or when particular communities situate themselves within a context by preferring this deck over that as a matter of shared taste or group affiliation, as in members of Aleister Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis selecting his *Thoth* tarot over the more popular Rider-Waite with its ties to members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, they are engaging with this mystical sense of the commodity even as their choices are governed by it. Beyond this, however, Marx draws the analogy himself: that the commodity is to the material what the egregore is to the immaterial. As such, the egregore of tarot found a suitable and familiar place to reside, when it relocated from the realm of artworks with authors and small press auras to make its home instead in the mass-produced technical works of the fetishized commodity.

The process of demystification and remystification is most visible in television and film, where the cards are often mobilized in order to achieve a (commercially convenient and popular) narrative effect, and perhaps no card is more heavy-handed in this (de/re)mystifying trope than that of *Death*. Here, we engage in some dialectical plate spinning, to see how the Death card operates both in and upon the detective mystery genre, and how this movement is reflected in the larger, egregoric dialectic of (de/re)mystification and *re-magic-ation*. Or, what games does the

tarot play with us as we play with it? This analysis will review an episode of *Murder, She Wrote* (1991), a two-episode arc of *Criminal Minds* (2008), and the film *Fear of Rain* (2021).

Sleuthest Sleuth

Jessica Fletcher, the mystery writer, amateur sleuth and main character of *Murder, She Wrote*, fully embodies the symbolic archetypes of her roles: despite beginning her writing career only after retirement, she is yet the authorest author, with 42 book titles mentioned throughout the 12 seasons, and she is even listed as co-author of an additional 55 novels that seeped out of television fantasy and into our own commercial reality (with the novel series being picked up again in 2021). She is also the sleuthest sleuth, lending her amateur expertise in a world where the career detectives could never solve the case without her polite but precise skills of deduction. The world around her is also archetypically charged for our unambiguous pleasure: the murder victims are first dehumanized in scenes of wicked deservingness, the likeable characters are never guilty, and the criminals are always sly and crafty evildoers. The majority of cases are solved by Jessica confronting the murderer, pinpointing a bit of criminal prestidigitation and revealing the motive, which is purely external, clean, and uncomplicated. The murderer, shook by her investigative skills, confesses. Most episodes end with her being praised and thanked as she smiles broadly.

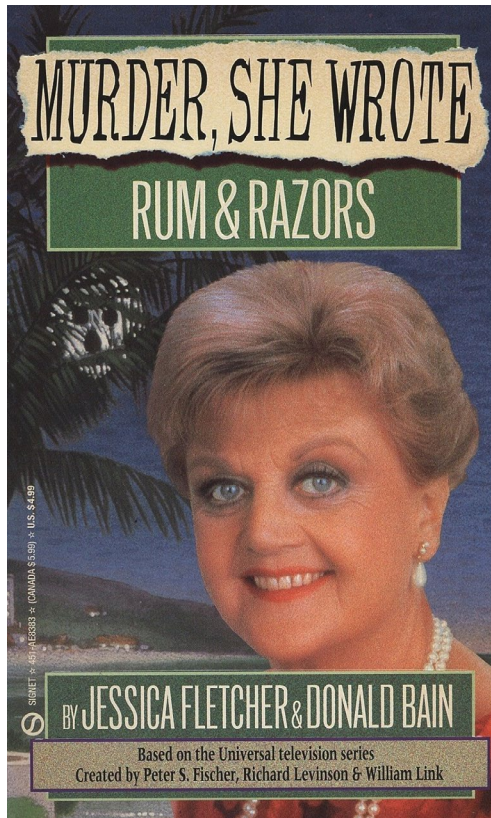


Figure 18. A novel intervention into reality by Jessica Fletcher

Season 8, Episode 9: “The Committee” does not deviate far from this formula. Jessica is invited by her likable old friend Winston Devermore to read at the wealthy gentleman’s Averus Club, which has been active for more than 100 years. She will, however, be the first woman to read there, in the very same spot that Ernest Hemingway gave his first public reading of “Hills Like White Elephants,” and to whom she is more than generously compared. This gesture, of having Jessica read, is meant to open the door for more women to participate in events and even as members of the Avernus Club itself. During the afterparty, Jessica’s friend receives a *mysterious* envelope which contains an ornate golden key and a card with only one word: “Midnight” in decadent and overwrought calligraphy. Winston understands its meaning but does not share it and slips away to attend the midnight committee meeting of the Avernus Club.

In previous scenes, a club member was portrayed behaving badly toward other members, so it is no surprise to the viewer that the meeting is about his actions, and whether or not he will be punished. The sanctions of the Avernus Club are not deadly, however. Usually, they involve fines, blackmail or business embarrassments, to encourage the wayward member to behave better in the future. Making these determinations is a two-step process: first, the members vote guilty or innocent by anonymously dropping a fancy black or white marble into a bag of crimson velvet. If the member is found guilty, a second round of marbles is distributed, with one member drawing the marble of the “Enforcer”, who will both determine and execute the sanction.

This, however, is not a typical meeting. The committee elder and moderator, Mr. Arkham, is also reading the tarot. It is worth noting that the name Arkham connects in a coy yet symbolically-laden way to the works HP Lovecraft and other Cthulhu Mythos writers: something both occult and dangerous has been set in motion as Mr. Arkham manipulates these arcane tools.¹¹ There are a few cards spread across the table as he converses, and though they are never in focus, we can see they are from the *Rider Waite*, and they seem to be providing Mr. Arkham with insights he does not share with the group. The only card that receives the camera’s full focus is the final one, held aloft in the hand of Mr. Arkham: Death, just before a decisive cut to commercial break. This is no ordinary sanction: in the archetypal literality of the show, Death will surely mean a death. It may come as a surprise to the committee, but it is no shock to the audience.

¹¹ “What lay behind our joint love of shadows and marvels was, no doubt, the ancient, mouldering, and subtly fearsome town in which we live--witch cursed, legend-haunted Arkham, whose huddled, sagging gambrel roofs and crumbling Georgian balustrades brood out the centuries beside the darkly muttering Miskatonic.” (Lovecraft 342)

More interesting is how this Death card is not from the *Rider Waite*, unlike the rest of the blurry cards in Mr. Arkham's spread. Rather, it is the Death card of the *Cosmic Tarot*, also a property of Stuart Kaplan's *US Games Systems, Inc.*

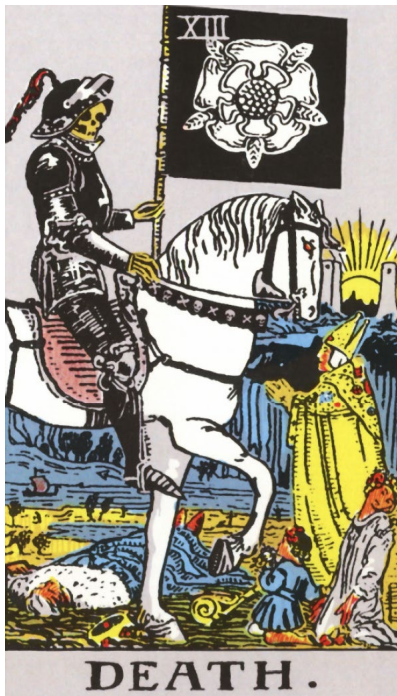


Figure 19. Rider-Waite and Cosmic Tarot Death cards

Narratively, it serves a function in that the killer is someone from outside the committee, an offscreen interloper rigging the vote to ensure that blame will rest on a member of the Avernus Club: this Death behaves as a stealth infiltrator into an otherwise closed and determined network, its processes, and the heuristic and ritual systems it mobilizes in order to remain coherent to itself. An outside card, an outside actor. This, however, is never revealed or explained, and most casual viewers will not know one deck's Death card from another. Why the switch, and what else might it point to within the symbolically overstated world of *Murder, She Wrote*?

Death of the *Rider Waite* is symbolically resplendent: we have a river designating the Heraclitan passage of time and the πάντα ῥεῖ¹²; Death himself as an armored knight on a white horse, bearing a standard emblazoned with the Yorkist rose; a Pope in his golden mitre and mantum, a virgin, a child, a fallen king--none of whom could negotiate with Death; and a sun setting between two towers. It is quite a lot, and for the purposes of *Murder, She Wrote*, even convoluted. The Death of the *Cosmic Tarot* moves with far less symbolic ambiguity and can be immediately and effectively appraised. He is alone and visually highlighted, wielding a sword and doubly enframed within the card and the background geometry. The foreground is only lightly scattered with objects we are accustomed to ascribing to death: headstones, a stopped clock, discarded and fractured tools of warfare, along with the gentlest references to the *Rider Waite*, in the appearance of a fallen king's crown and a more abstractly setting sun. This is Death writ as large as "Midnight" in heavy-handed script.

Murder, She Wrote is a world comprised of the authorest authors, the sleuthest sleuths, the coppet cops, the midnightest midnights, and the deathest Death cards. It is tempting to write that the show is dabbling in a kind of campy Platonism, in which the characters and objects are attempting to embody their utmost forms, to become the very idea of themselves, however, these facts also reveal an underlying anxiety in the relationship between a detective and the truth.

When symbols behave so intensely, it is as though they are attempting to form a tautological framework for tethering the symbolic to the real, a one to one connector that presupposes they can be reconciled at all. The detective genre asserts that there is a truth that can

¹² "All things are flowing" as in a stream, passing in the constant and unrelenting motion of transformation and becoming. See Plato's *Theaetetus*, 160d

be known, cleanly and neatly, and that its metaphors are resolute and resolvable. Take a murder: it is an event that happens, there, on the ground, the fact of a corpse. The fact of the corpse, however, is just as fixed to the world of symbol: it asserts that there is evil in the world, that it is itself an expression of mankind's avarice and cruelty, that those larger ideas and metaphors are contained and *in the shape* of the corpse. This is the literalization of the metaphor. And when the detective genre cannot perform this act of reconciliation, between the corpse and the meaning of the corpse, between its small truths and larger ones, its facts and its symbols, it encounters philosophical problems. It is, in fact, a reaction to those very problems, that constant set of human concerns about the truth and its knowability. Jessica Fletcher is forever offering us comfort but also an apology, that the world outside her fictional domain is too messy. Jessica Fletcher is keeping a neat and tidy house in a fully reconciled world, where even the murderers and the murdered conform to our most hopeful expectations for meaning and the facts can all be fully deduced, and so reduced, to perfect knowability.

The fantastical rationality of the detective's world, where symbols and meaning are deeply embedded in every object and gesture, but so tidily that they become as observable and comprehensible as bare facts with only the right method or the right observer, has been noted since the development of the genre. In his defense of detective stories, GK Chesterton wrote that:

The first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life. Men lived among mighty mountains and eternal forests for ages before they realized that they were poetical; it may reasonably be inferred that some of our descendants may see

the chimney-pots as rich a purple as the mountain-peaks, and find the lamp-posts as old and natural as the trees.....No one can have failed to notice that in these stories the hero or the investigator crosses London with something of the loneliness and liberty of a prince in a tale of elfland, that in the course of that incalculable journey the casual omnibus assumes the primal colours of a fairy ship. The lights of the city begin to glow like innumerable goblin eyes, since they are the guardians of some secret, however crude...Every twist of the road is like a finger pointing to it; every fantastic skyline of chimney-pots seems wildly and derisively signalling the meaning of the mystery. (158-159)

In this sense, the detective becomes a kind of tarot reader and interpreter, and the world itself becomes the cards. A question, a mystery full of human anxiety, has been posed, and the detective is the one whose eyes can penetrate a world resplendent yet concealed in veiled symbol and metaphor, to perform the needed procedure: pulling the truth down from where it has been hiding in plain sight and tying it firmly to the ground, where it can become just as visible and present to others as it is to the detective. This also links the detective to modes of reading and magic from the ancient world and times that are, as Chesterton noted, perceived from across our great and industrialized distance as mysterious, impenetrable, metaphoric and inherently magical. Historian Carlo Ginzburg connects hunting and divinatory practices to the beginning of signification and writing: hunters read the signs of unseen quarry, led through the wilderness by the slightest clues, which compiled, then give meaning and context to the traces (Ginzburg 12). Mesopotamian divination used these same reading strategies to discern the future:

Both require minute examination of the real, however trivial, to uncover traces of events which the observer cannot directly experience. Droppings, footprints, feathers, hairs in the one case; animals' innards, drops of oil in water, stars, involuntary movements, in the other. (13)

The tarot invokes this early form of reading and magic, where small, strange and unlike symbols point to a larger and coherent truth, and the detective is an inheritor of the truth-mending process, a hunter-reader of the world as tarot, carrying these methods into a cynically developed and industrialized world which is assumed to be crudely disenchanting, void of its own magic and charm without the detective's skillful reading.

Criminal Minds

In self-conscious awareness of its own fantastical elements and deductive reading-magic, the contemporary detective story has morphed into the police procedural drama. The improbable and princely lone detective becomes an entire investigative team, and the singular insights of a skilled reader in the world are transformed through hyperrealistic processes within a hierarchically structured and recognizable workplace setting, replete with consultations and other displays of expertise, and the familiar frustrations of employees operating through and within an institutional setting. Even the structure of the narrative is often upended, delivering not only "whodunnit" stories, in which the criminal is hidden from the audience until the climax, but also routinely utilizing the "howcatchem" or inverted detective story, where the audience knows who the criminal is from the outset, and the narrative is focused on revealing how the investigators

uncover what the audience has already witnessed, allowing the audience to appropriate the eyes of the skilled reader, frustrated by clues or leads that the investigators have not yet recognized. These self-conscious inversions are also present in the police procedural's mobilization of the Death card.

Criminal Minds follows a team of elite "FBI Profilers" who work within the Bureau's Behavioral Analysis Unit. Through a combination of deduction reading-magic, psychological profiling techniques, statistical projections, analysis based on past crimes and perpetrators, and unfettered access to terrifying surveillance networks and technologies, the team (with a bruised but singular genius as their leader) attempts to penetrate the very mind of the "unsub", or unknown subject, not only to apprehend them for past crimes, but to predict and prevent their future behaviors.

The Death card appears in a two episode arc that concludes Season 3 and opens Season 4 ("Lo-Fi" and "Mayhem"). The team has been called to New York City, where a series of murders has stumped local detectives and the FBI field officer called in to assist them. The murders appear to be random, occurring every other day at distant and erratic subway stations and crowded intersections, and there is no plausible connection between the various victims. Initially, it is billed as another "Son of Sam" figure, whose chaotic and unpatterned murders eluded law enforcement--an idea reinforced by an older local detective who worked on that case. Once the BAU profiling team arrives to assist in the investigation, however, there is a change in the unsub's behavior: he leaves a Death card at the scene of the murder. The investigation team deliberates over what it means:

ROSSI: Six murders, and he's finally communicating with us.

COOPER (young local detective): What's that?

MORGAN: That's a tarot card. Death.

COOPER: Isn't that a little on the nose? Even for a psycho?

BRUSTIN (old local detective): So, we think this guy's into spiritual garbage?

HOTCH (BAU head profiler): Well, if he is, he certainly doesn't know tarot. The Death card doesn't actually signify physical death. It's more of a transformation from one place to another--a job promotion or a marriage.

COOPER: So, if he's not telling us he's into fortune telling, what's with the card?

ROSSI: The D.C. sniper left the exact same card at one of his scenes.

JOYNER (one-episode FBI field officer and love interest of Hotch, who will die, sacrificed as women so often are, to develop a man's character): So this unsub must see himself in that role. He's thriving off creating a panic.

ROSSI: More important, he studies other cases. He's telling us...he knows we're here.

The team pauses in dramatic silence, looking at one another, until the camera pans again to the Death card and cuts to commercial break. ("Lo-Fi")



Figure 20. The *Criminal Minds* Death card

This Death card, likely designed as a set prop, takes the *Rider-Waite* as its inspiration more directly. Death is riding a white horse while bearing a pennon, the Heraclitan river is present, the fallen king, and the sun setting between two distant hills. But this Death is not approaching in his duty with resolute indifference; he is riding aggressively, and the king is freshly claimed. This particular manifestation of the Death card does serve a narrative function: the single “unsub” being pursued is in fact a terrorist cell, and these erratic and frequent murders are both diversions and test runs, enacted by multiple people gathering first responder time data for a future attack. The actual target of their killing spree is never revealed to the audience, but is someone escorted by Secret Service agents for a surgery in a hospital that has been closed to all other patients for their protection and privacy. The freshly fallen king, and the absence of the other figures of the *Rider-Waite* Death card, alludes to both the strategy and goal of the cell,

whose ideology and therefore motive, is left ambiguous. They are committed zealots in pursuit of a ruler, and that is enough to know. At the same time, though it did not crack the fictionalized case, it references the actual D.C. Sniper attacks, in which a multiple shooter killing spree was meant to obfuscate motive in pursuit of the actual target: an ex-wife who would then be the random victim of an erratic serial killer (Martin).

More interesting, however, is the interpretation of the Death card within this quasi-scientific regime of rational, data-driven police procedures that self-consciously invert the tropes and more visible magic of the traditional detective story. Unlike the Death card of *Murder She Wrote*, this interpretation does not unify or reconcile literal and symbolic truths in the world, or simply gesture toward a future corpse. Instead, it points to both the interiority of the complex mind while also providing an opportunity to demonstrate external and expert analysis of both past crimes and of the Death card itself, in a proliferation of meaning without a clean one-to-one affixing of the symbol to the world. Its interpretation is dependent upon expertise, texts, and references beyond the symbols of the card itself.

As such, the criminal mind, the world, and the tarot all become themselves a text that can be penetrated with the appropriate reading procedure, in which there is always a further expert text to reference and illuminating patterns of past data to uncover. Reading the world for truth has long been the primary labor of the detective genre, but it is now inflected by an assumed scientific and accurate process. Viewers are meant to believe that they are experiencing a *real* albeit fictionalized replica of investigation, based on law enforcement institutions and their procedures, actual cases (like the “Son of Sam” and the “D.C. Snipers”) and rigorous research and

consultation. This is how the complicated, polyvalent truth is sought and captured in the actual world.

The *authentic* truth-hunting process of an FBI Profiler, as represented in shows like *Criminal Minds*, is so captivating and seems so accurate that many viewers have sought to pursue it as their own career. When I search for “how to become an FBI Profiler” on Google, I am met by an exhaustive set of resources from sites like wikihow.com, indeed.com, forensiccolleges.com, study.com, learn.org, all bearing a kind of familiarity or ethos on the first page of results, all offering practical career advice and suggested courses of study. It is so prolific and common a desire that the official FBI job recruitment page, FBIjobs.gov, has addressed it within its FAQs.

17. I want to be an FBI “Profiler.” Where do I begin the application process?

The FBI does not have a job called “Profiler.” Supervisory Special Agents assigned to the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) at Quantico, VA, perform the tasks commonly associated with “profiling.” (FBI)

The FBI does not have a job called “Profiler.” They go on to discourage applicants who have been lured by television portrayals to this career path: “Despite some popular depictions, these FBI Special Agents do not get ‘vibes’ or experience ‘psychic flashes’ while walking around fresh crime scenes” (ibid). The nearest job that does exist is altogether different from anything seen on *Criminal Minds*. And while there are no FBI Profilers, there is an entire world of resources available online to would-be profilers, many on highly trusted and trafficked websites. The police procedural, meant to provide a simulation of authentic police investigation and procedures for entertainment purposes, has stumbled into the territory of the hyperreal.

<https://www.indeed.com> › Career Guide › Finding a Job

How To Become an FBI Profiler | Indeed.com ✓

Jul 23, 2021 — An **FBI profiler** is a national agent who works in the Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) of the National Center for Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) ...

★★★★★ Rating: 4.9 · 42 votes

Figure 21. Google search result for “Becoming an FBI profiler”

In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard begins with a brief analysis of “Del rigor en la ciencia” (“Of rigor in science”) by Jorge Luis Borges, in which cartographers drew a map of their Empire so detailed and precise that it laid exactly over the actual land and territory: they were so thorough and devoted that the territory and the map of the territory became indistinguishable from one another (Baudrillard 2007, 166). The symbol and the real become inextricably tied here, in a one-to-one connection, much like the symbol and the real in *Murder She Wrote*. In expressing the anxiety of the more contemporary period and its simulations, Baudrillard writes:

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory. (ibid 166)

Criminal Minds, in simulating *authentic* police investigations and FBI careers, has instead produced a Profiler without referent that has tangibly resituated the world itself, so much so that a proliferation of advice exists, on how to obtain the non-existent job. This also recalls and exceeds the prescient warning of Adorno and Horkheimer in “The Culture Industry:

Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, that our amusements and entertainment, themselves an after-image of labor processes and meant to refresh us after our own day of labor, become yet another form of labor, in how we become tethered to them: each day, for instance, I must tune in at a specific time to watch my favorite television show, now bloated into the marathon demands of binge-watching Netflix (Adorno & Horkheimer 109). That this work of entertainment could extend even further, to where our escape from work is not only more work but a fully researchable fantasy of future work, is a stunning and total yoke, reflective of a transition from the loyal time-clock dedication of late capitalism to the perpetual hustle and absurd grind of the contemporary gig economy that transcends and eliminates the clock itself. Rather than dedicate ourselves to particular shows over time, we consume a full season quickly and hunt for the next thing to watch, with Netflix even offering viewers the ability to accelerate and complete their current entertainment faster, at 1.5x speed, and Youtube accelerating media consumption as much as 2x faster. Labor is no longer affixed to the small assurance of the 9 to 5 and News at 6: it is now unmoored and expansive, asking, “Are you still awake?” In this sense, our entertainment is pedagogical, instructing us not just on our aspirational and acceptable culture and ideology, as Adorno and Horkheimer expressed, but also in actively training us for our lived relation to labor in the world.



Figure 22. A work of entertainment

The appearance of the Death card in *Criminal Minds* is also bound up and estranged in simulation. When Rossi declares that “the D.C. sniper left the *exact* same card at one of his scenes,” he is referencing an actual case in the world: the D.C. Sniper attacks of John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo in 2002. Rossi, *exactly* an FBI Profiler, referring to an *exact* same tarot card, tethered to an actual case and interpretation by expert and official reference. The card used by the D.C. snipers, however, was Death from the *Rider-Waite*, and the card on the screen is a more aggressive and narratively more *accurate* set prop based on its design. In this sense, the Death card of *Criminal Minds* and the Profilers who present both it and themselves as the truth in an obfuscating process and performance of rationality, science, procedure and fact-based reference, are building and producing a realer real, one that alters our understanding and perceptions of the world by eroding the already tenuous space of difference between what is real

and what is artifice. Or, as Baudrillard states in his own simulation of an Ecclesiastes verse that never was, “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth — it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard 2007, 166). These processes of the hyperreal are “more real than real” and such simulations are “truer than true” in their obfuscating excess, so much so that the real “effaces itself” before them (Baudrillard 1990a, 29). These are realer careers and truer tarot cards meant to soothe an anxiety that there is no real or truth at all, that the very world is a copy of copies that long ago lost any tether to truth, and that the real and the truth we have access to is a self-conscious byproduct of the labors and simulations of the culture industry and mass re/production.

Where do we go from here? Baudrillard leads us as far as an empty “desert of the real” in which the culture industry and mass media divert our attention from the fact that we are only hyperreal, that there is no truth to be found in the hollow world, and that it has been this way since the arrival first of science, and then industrialization. That we are bound up in “an orgy of realism, an orgy of production” in our desperation for meaning and the meaningless copies that this desperation fuels (ibid 166, 171-72, Baudrillard 1990b, 32). It is grim and grumpy, and Baudrillard provides no exit, often decrying dialectics as another satisfying and comforting fiction in a hostile, fatal universe:

The universe is not dialectical: it moves toward the extremes, and not toward equilibrium; it is devoted to a radical antagonism, and not to reconciliation or to synthesis. (185)

Instead, Baudrillard provides a framework of death and seduction, appearances and disappearances, and positions them as opposing ends of a double spiral curving ever toward the

sign and bending it away from the meaning it intends to produce. The sign appears only to be diverted away from itself, or seduced, and to be so seduced is to dissolve, to disappear, into an abyss (Baudrillard 2012, 79). Furthermore, these signs that have been deviated from their referents and meaning, as all signs will be, are the only ones that have the ability to captivate and fascinate us:

If you were to see written on a door panel: "This opens onto the void." - wouldn't you still want to open it? (Baudrillard 1990b, 75)

That may as well be written as the subtitle for Baudrillard's oeuvre. *This opens onto the void*. Or as Mark Doel writes, "He aspired to render theory itself seductive," or to bend it away from meaning, to lead it into an enchanting void (Doel 189). In *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard himself poses as a detective investigating the murder of reality: "[I]n this grim record of the disappearance of the real, it has not been possible to pin down either the motives or the perpetrators, and the corpse of the real itself has never been found" (xi). The book, written later in his career, contains the most direct statements about what his project has been all along: to make thoughts, writing, and the world itself less intelligible (and to be a magician and a seducer):

Spirit away the reality file to wipe out all its conclusions. It is, in fact, reality which is fomenting its own disavowal, preparing its own ruin by way of our lack of reality. Hence the feeling that this whole affair -- the world, thought and language -- has come from elsewhere, and might disappear as though by magic. For the world does not seek to exist more, nor to persist in existing. It seeks, rather, the wittiest way to escape reality. It seeks, by way of thought, what can lead it to its doom. [...] The absolute rule is to give back

more than you were given. Never less, always more. The absolute rule of thought is to give back the world as it was given to us -- unintelligible. And, if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible. (Baudrillard 2008, 106)

While I do not disagree with Baudrillard's analysis of reality being unreal, or of science, the culture industry and mass production acting in collusion to obfuscate this fact, and while I am indeed drawn frequently into his beautiful and seductive voids, I do disagree with his fatalist conclusions, which contain a metaphysics and a hellbent telos that I can dismiss as easily as he dismisses my commitment to dialectics and its adaptive capacity to synthesize and carry on with some measure of hope (while at the same time recognizing that he and I are ascribing different moods to the same perpetual processes).

As such, *Criminal Minds* constitutes only one turn of the dialectical machinery of (de/re)mystification. There is another detective on the horizon who is able to integrate the hyperreal as a mode of individual sorcery, to wrestle it away from the grim culture industry and scientific regime, and to produce simulations as an egregoric force in the remagication of the world.

Fear of Rain

In *Fear of Rain* (2021), our detective is unlikely: Rain Burroughs, a teenage girl at the onset of schizophrenia, is plagued by tactile, visual and auditory hallucinations that make it all but impossible for anyone to fully trust her sense perceptions. From the outset, with only the name of the film and the main character, we are already immersed in fields of slippery

signification and polyvocality. “Fear of Rain” could designate being afraid of the weather event (a fear that is explored in the film, in the way that the drumming sound of rain intensifies her hallucinations), or the natural world may be personified, in that the fear belongs to the rain itself. At any moment we might be dealing with the character’s fears, or the fear that she produces in others. Rain’s name, also, is an event, a haecceity, or a singular condition which is itself a perfect individuality (as in “a storm”), but one that is comprised of the erratic movement of many forces and droplets, and is therefore difficult to precisely locate within space or time, in much the same way that our experience of Rain and Rain’s experience of herself is a blurry plurality of her lived and hallucinated experiences. It is easy enough to witness and experience the rain, or even to define it through the application of more abstract or scientific language: the challenge lies in defining its precise characteristics, particularities and edges as it is lived and experienced in motion around us.

Rain’s hallucinations are pervasive and all-encompassing at times, splintering and divorcing her sense perceptions away from the world: for instance, while having a breakdown in her bedroom, her senses assert that she is trying to escape a man and a shallow grave in the woods. Throughout most of the film, she and the viewer believe that her *hallucinated mother is real*, and that her real love interest, the new boy at the school, is *potentially a hallucination*. The hallucinated mother, who we assume to be real, also doubts the existence of the real boy. The audience regularly views Rain negotiating between tangled realities: because she is a visual artist, these negotiations appear layered over the filmic world itself, as a sonic, visual and real-time palimpsest of handwriting being scrawled over the margins of what Rain and the audience are

witnessing. The three-question checklist and filmic externalization of her inner world serves to either confirm a rational reality or banish an irrational hallucination, unless the results are inconclusive:

- 1) Is this possible?
- 2) Could it exist here?
- 3) Is anyone else reacting?



Figure 23. Rain, inscribing her checklist over the filmic world

Such questions posit an assertion about reality: that it is a consensual agreement about the world between bodies in the world, and that because Rain so often occupies an individualist and idiosyncratic elsewhere, she must compare her own senses with the consensus. The frequent necessity of such a checklist (that she is often instructed or asked by others to use) makes it difficult for anyone to believe what Rain thinks she has seen and heard: that her next door neighbor and high school English teacher has kidnapped and hidden a young child in her home. Despite the weight of her own disbelief in what she thinks she knows, the disbelief of everyone

around her, and the perpetual presence of confusing and often violent hallucinations, Rain persists in a desperate investigation, even breaking into her neighbor's house to find clues, under the constant threat that, if she goes too far or is caught, she will be institutionalized. Rain is, of course, correct in the end: her neighbor has stolen a child, and Rain is the only person equipped to both perceive and know this, and therefore to save the child's life, through the counter/productive technology of her own hallucinations that inundate her in a cacophony of support, opposition, insight and distraction that she must sift through, alongside the skeptical input of others (her therapist, her father) that she must resist.

The film makes use of literary references in two of its character's names--the only names that the filmmakers conspicuously (and literally) spell out for viewers. In the first, we have Rain's psychiatrist, Dr. Pangloss. The filmmakers provide a number of opportunities to catch this detail, even offering a shot of just her name appearing on a vibrating and unanswered cell phone. This name is shared by Candide's mentor, Professor Pangloss, who teaches "metaphysico-theologico-cosmolo-nigology" and insists that every possible calamity is yet another expression of the best possible world, persuading Candide to be passive and complacent when confronting any injustice, misfortune, or horror:

"It is demonstrable," said he, "that things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for all being created for an end, all is necessarily for the best end. Observe, that the nose has been formed to bear spectacles—thus we have spectacles [...] Consequently they who assert that all is well have said a foolish thing, they should have said all is for the best." (2-3)

Professor Pangloss, or Professor *All Tongue*, for his perpetual conflation of correlation for causation that produce a glib misapprehension of the world, is Voltaire's satiric portrayal of Leibniz and the optimism of his *Theodicy*, in which an all-perfect God has inspected every possible reality and selected for us the best one. When there is suffering, misfortune and evil, it is in service to this best of all worlds, and we merely lack the all-seeing scope of God to see how it benefits the ultimate good.

Rain is often in conflict with her own Dr. Pangloss, who demands that she take her (perpetually adjusted) medications or face institutionalization, while also causing Rain to doubt what she knows through the expert presentation of alternatives grounded in rationality and psychological science:

PANGLOSS: Rain, this is not like your other hallucinations. This is a serious accusation, one that'll likely have equally serious consequences for one of you.

RAIN: I heard her screaming.

PANGLOSS: Have you run through your questions?

RAIN: Mm-hmm.

PANGLOSS: Did anybody else react to her?

RAIN: No. No, she's keeping her hidden.

PANGLOSS: Why would she do that?

RAIN: I don't know! I think--I think she kidnapped her, and she's keeping her chained up, and she screams for help.

PANGLOSS: Do you think it's possible that you might be projecting your own fears of feeling confined or restrained?

RAIN: (leans back into the couch and remembers being strapped to a hospital bed amidst intense hallucinations of being trapped) Yeah.

PANGLOSS: What's that?

RAIN: Yeah, I guess that could be possible.

What does it mean for the *Theodicy* to be transferred from an all-perfect God into a scientific regime of medications and pat explanations, and for this to be the best of all possible worlds? For Leibniz and his contemporaries, there were *infinite* worlds possible for God to choose from, or none at all, and yet this was the one selected for us, now made hyperreal and fully cemented within the dialectical turn of de-mystification. It is lucky for us, then, that Leibniz provides a strange rupture, as his five arguments also present a nascent multiversal theory: other worlds were and are possible, even within our own, seeing how far we have moved from the assumed presence and perfection of God to his opposite: an assumed perfection of the smooth and totalizing tyranny of the sciences.

The second literary reference gives us an indication of where that rupture might direct us. We learn at a pharmacy counter that she is "Rain Burroughs, B-U-R-R-O-U-G-H-S", connecting her to William S. Burroughs, who wrote about his own intense childhood hallucinations and schizophrenia diagnosis (along with his time working as a private detective) in the biographical introduction to his semi-autobiographical novel *Junky* (1-2). Like William S. Burroughs, Rain is

resistant to and suspicious of psychiatric advice and medicine as a means to control her hallucinations and mind. The connections between William S. and Rain Burroughs, however, are deeper than the facts of a shared illness or attitude toward psychiatry. The most important thing they share is the utilization of simulation and the cut up as a magical technology and productive form of mediumship in the world.

For Burroughs, writing is a form of time-binding that separates man from other animals. This time-binding technology locks us into place, often in stifling ways, but it can also be utilized as the cut-up, a magical and artistic technique used to edit reality through the rearrangement of its material facts, suturing them together in novel arrangements and interjecting them into a situation (Burroughs 1991, 4). When Rain performs her written checklist, she engages time-binding *as* the cut-up: written words are projected over and injected into reality, slowing down the movement of events, providing herself with this literal time and space to become situated within and between her two worlds. Such cut-ups deal not only in the written word, but with any material of reality¹³. In “Magick Squares and Future Beats: The Magical Processes and Methods of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin,” Genesis P-Orridge describes how Burroughs instructed in this technique:

What Bill explained to me then was pivotal to the unfolding of my life and art: *Everything is recorded*. If it is recorded, then it can be *edited*. If it can be edited then the order, sense, meaning and direction are as arbitrary and personal as the agenda and/or person editing. This is magick. For if we have the ability and/or choice of how things unfold--regardless

¹³ Even the biblical Eve is a recording and cut-up of Adam. See *Electric Revolution* (88).

of the original order and/or intention that they are recorded in--then we have control over the eventual unfolding...These concepts lead us to the release of cut-ups as a magical process. (P-Orridge 281)

Burroughs and Gysin elaborate on their techniques in *The Third Mind*--a magical and artistic appropriation of business writing and the concept of the Mastermind. Burroughs cites Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*, which bases its schemes around interviews with successful businessmen: "No two minds ever come together without, thereby, creating a third, invisible, intangible force which may be likened to a third mind" (25). The third mind is utilized to produce an egregoric force that begins to act on its own and upon the collaborators as a sentient thoughtform and influence. Burroughs also suggests that these thoughtforms, produced between two people (either in person or through material representation), can be harnessed as a form of mediumship:

Who wrote the original words is still there in any rearrangement of his or her or whatever words . . . Can recognize Rimbaud cutup as Rimbaud . . . A Melville cut-up as Melville . . . Shakespeare moves with Shakespeare words . . . So forth anybody can be Rimbaud if he will cut up Rimbaud's words and learn Rimbaud language talk think Rimbaud . . . (Burroughs 1978, 71)

Rain's most potent hallucination, the one the audience also believes to be real, is created through a collaboration with her father, and is often triggered and summoned by relation to visual representations of her, either in photographs or a painted portrait. Rain's father pretends not only to see the hallucination but interacts with it too, as a means to keep Rain happier and to

navigate his own mourning and desire for her to be present again. Rain's mother, simultaneously an empowered simulation and entity of the cut-up, gathers enough egregoric power to intercede autonomously on the physical world, first by urging a nurse to get some crayons for Rain when she is hospitalized and again by using the dissipation of her non-corporeal body to mark and reveal a broken crayon--the last material evidence Rain needs to fully know and confront the fact that her teacher has stolen a child.

It should be noted that the tarot is also, by its design, a prefabricated and highly accessible cut-up technology. Rather than chopping apart the words of a text and suturing them into new arrangements, the tarot reader simply shuffles a deck of cards and arranges them into a spread. By doing so, the reader (alone or alongside a querent) is thrust into the presence of tarot as third mind and egregore: whatever question was posed is suddenly imbued with a more serious tone, its answer steeped in the traditions, history and symbolic language of the deck. It is something I have experienced many times as a reader for others: people may approach me for the novel curiosity or fun of a tarot reading, but they are suddenly hushed by the facts of the cards laid before them, listening and waiting for their insight and how it might inform or intercede in their lives, in spite of their initial levity or skepticism. The tarot is a presence that sets a tone, and I speak through it and as it, as surely as Burroughs speaks Rimbaud. In my daily single-card practice, receiving a card like the Tower or Ten of Swords causes me to wince and brace myself, proceeding cautiously through the events of the day, while cards that I have come to identify as *mine*, the Empress or Nine of Pentacles, grant me a small, early sense of personal triumph and pleasure: my day, my

mood, my thoughts, my life and experience of reality are all refracted, shaped and guided through this interaction with the presence of tarot as third mind and egregore.

Similarly, in the film, the tarot's presence exerts tremendous influence over not only events but also the characters and their understanding of the world around them. Tarot is introduced as a game by Caleb, Rain's love interest, who throughout the course of the film is presented as a potential hallucination. Through him, the tarot moves by sleight-of-hand, a clever ploy to impress a girl, with all the potency of a stage magician's illusion (and so sharing a concept of tarot with James Bond, though without the outright romantic manipulations and coercions). Rain is initially hesitant to dabble directly in magic, her reality being slippery enough without the introduction of additional challenges to it, but he repeatedly assures her that tarot is not magic at all, but "skill". Once she navigates beyond her discomfort to embrace magic, however, it is in Rain's hands that the tarot acquires its greater potency and power.

Urgency is mounting when Rain is about to be institutionalized for having broken into her teacher's home to find clues about the child, Malia. Her teacher is going to press charges and push for her to be sent away, and Rain's father, at the limits of what he can manage, is in agreement. Caleb comes to Rain's house to formulate a plan to rescue Malia, and finds her distraught, insisting that if they don't do something, Malia will die, and it will be her fault for not acting quickly enough. Caleb goes to bring her a glass of water, to help her calm down, and opens the cabinet full of her many medications. In the living room, Rain nervously taps her mother's ring on the rim of the water glass as Caleb shuffles his deck of tarot cards:

RAIN: How can you be playing cards right now?

CALEB: It helps me when I'm nervous. Here... (he presents the deck to Rain, who has been pacing nervously)...Try it again. Pick one.

(Rain takes the deck from his hands and joins him on the couch.)

RAIN: Nope. You pick one.

CALEB: (surprised, delighted) Yeah? What are you gonna do with those?

RAIN: Just pick a card.

(Caleb pulls a card: we can see it but not quite make it out, and he leans in for a surprise kiss.)

MICHELLE: (coming down the stairs) Rain?

RAIN: Yeah, mom? Hey, hi.

(Michelle looks at Caleb; Caleb looks directly at her as well.)

MICHELLE: I'm sorry. Who is this?

(Caleb looks at Rain in shock as Rain looks at her mother on the stairs.)

RAIN: Um, this is Caleb. Caleb, this is my mom.

(Caleb looks toward Michelle and then looks away, embarrassed.)

RAIN: Wait, you can see him?

MICHELLE: Of course I can see him.

RAIN: I was so nervous of--never mind.

MICHELLE: Don't let me interrupt your date.

RAIN: It's not a date, mom. We're just friends.

MICHELLE: Mm-hmm.

(Michelle walks back up the stairs, and Caleb appears hurt. He looks down, shakes his head no.)

RAIN: I don't think we should wait. Let's go Wednesday, after--

CALEB: You know, actually, I--I gotta go. (He gets up and walks toward the door.) But I'll, uh--I'll see you tomorrow. Yeah?

RAIN: Ok, yeah.

(Caleb leaves.)

MICHELLE: (hearing the door click shut) Did I ruin your date?

(Rain finally looks at the card Caleb pulled, confused: it is Death.)



Figure 24. *Fear of Rain's* death card

Immediately, the Death card is polyvocal, shedding and scattering its significations in all directions, true, false and ambiguous. The first shimmer is that Rain is correct: Malia's life is indeed in peril, and the fact that her captor knows that Rain is aware will hasten the child's death. Another is that the relationship between Caleb and Rain has abruptly ended or transformed: the audience is groomed to interpret his actions in the scene as the product of his embarrassment at being caught kissing by a parent, and that his quick and awkward departure is due to the abrupt pain of being called "just a friend" immediately after springing the surprise and sudden kiss. At this moment in the film, Caleb is the only witness aware of another aspect of the card: that he has stood in the presence of Death itself by watching Rain engage in one half of a conversation with her dead mother. As such, he is suddenly struck by the severity of Rain's illness and flees.

The appearance of the card also triggers the most intense sequence of hallucinations in the film and a full psychotic break, all regarding a polyphonous proliferation of death. Visual and

auditory hallucinations taunt her by declaring that Caleb isn't real, and in this sense, killing him and abruptly terminating her relationship with a mere hallucination, while at the same time, also urging her to kill herself. She flees from the school and attempts to call home for help, only to be greeted by her dead mother's voice on the unchanged answering machine message. She rushes into her psychiatrist's office, screaming for help in the waiting room, but Dr. Pangloss is not there. She runs next through the cemetery, Death's own grassy lawn, and is confronted and terrified by the statue of an angel weeping blood: as an audience, we do not yet know that this angel marks the grave of her mother, a fact that Rain herself has tucked deep in her unconscious mind, far from view. Fleeing into her home, Rain's own reflection in a mirror begins to act and speak by its own volition, telling her that Malia will die and that everyone is better off without her as a cacophony of hallucinated voices either menace her or shout for her to pull herself together. She tears apart the room with her mother's portrait, the one Michelle has been sitting for throughout the film, when Michelle, who actually killed herself, prevents her daughter from doing the same with the sharp edge of a palette knife. It is also in this psychotic episode that her father finally confesses that Michelle is not really there, that he has only been playing along with her hallucinations because of his own grief and seeing that her mother's presence seemed to make Rain happy. With that, Rain is forced to recall all the various events with her mother when the third item of her checklist appeared to be met, that other people were reacting to what she saw in a consensus of reality, but now through the perspective of her mother being dead. This included not only interactions between herself and her parents, but also Caleb's apparent interaction with her mother when the Death card was pulled. It is also the sequence of events that leads her to

email Caleb the word “Tonight,” when she and Caleb are nearly killed saving Malia’s life, and the people who insisted that Caleb and Malia were only hallucinations finally see that Rain was right all along, suddenly and permanently transforming their perception and understanding of Rain.

Death here does not merely designate or declare a future corpse in a one-to-one tethering of symbol to meaning, nor does it proffer out accurate and precise interpretations for the skilled and expert reader of an analytic and hyperreal scientific regime. Here, Death and the potential for Death’s meaning is as abundant as it is multiple: contrary, collaborative, confusing, revelatory, exhausting, relieving. It shimmers in the light of all and changing contexts, recalling the polyvocal nature of tarot itself as a cut-up technology, in which Death’s meaning is always non-identical to itself and is instead illuminated in the context of its placement in a spread and the question being asked of it while somehow always maintaining its own recognizable voice. It recalls too the polyvocality of the name of the film itself, posing Death as a haecceity, while also gesturing to the proliferating and many potential worlds and possibilities of Leibniz’s symbolic grandeur of God within the grimly stacking irrealities of a scientific regime always in the process of inscribing and distributing its expert and stabilized determinations of what is valid, valuable and real. Here, tarot shimmers instead between truth and untruth and untruth as new and always already destabilized truth. It is an invitation, in this sense, to reconsider the river of Heraclitus and *πάντα ῥεῖ* (“everything flows”).

Tarot’s Death card often features a river, commonly attached to the most recognizable quote of Heraclitus, a version here found in Plutarch’s *The E at Delphi*:

“‘It is impossible to step twice in the same river’ are the words of Heraclitus, nor is it possible to lay hold twice of any mortal substance in a permanent state ; by the suddenness and swiftness of the change in it there ‘comes dispersion and, at another time, a gathering together’; or, rather, not at another time nor later, but at the same instant it both settles into its place and forsakes its place ; ‘it is coming and going.’” (Plutarch §18)

That it is impossible to step in the same river twice has colloquially come to mean the relentless passage of time and how our lives and selves continuously change, by aging, until they end, awarding both Heraclitus and the Death card with a safer platitude than what is truly meant by everything flowing. Heraclitus was the earliest of the dialecticians, proposing a unity of opposites, or the idea that everything that exists does so because of the productive tension of its inherent opposition, which perpetually produces something new—a newness which also contains its own opposite—all the way down. It is not just time that moves; it is truth and everything else, always in a state of becoming. His preferred metaphor for this process was not the gentle river we have affixed ourselves to, but the element of fire: the way it is marked by consuming itself and how it transforms everything it touches with a productive violence and strife, always becoming something unlike itself in a way that reveals how the like and the unlike were bound together all along. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche delivers a number of cruel jabs at philosophy, particularly those philosophies and theologies with a Platonist diminishment of the apparent world and experiences of the body: “Everything that philosophers have handled, for thousands of years now, has been conceptual mummies; nothing real has escaped their hands alive” (17). There is one philosopher who escapes this scrutiny, though with an important caveat and revision:

I set aside with great respect the name of Heraclitus. While the rest of the mass of philosophers were rejecting the testimony of their senses because the senses displayed plurality and change, he rejected the testimony of the senses because they displayed things as if they had duration and unity. Even Heraclitus did not do justice to the senses. They do not lie...in the way that he thought—they do not lie at all. What we make of their testimony is what first introduces the lie, for example, the lie of unity, the lie of thinghood, of substance, of duration “Reason” is what causes us to falsify the testimony of the senses. Insofar as the senses display becoming, passing away, and change, they do not lie But Heraclitus will always be in the right for saying that being is an empty fiction. The “apparent” world is the only world: the “true world” is just added to it by a lie . . . (ibid 19)

While Nietzsche is critiquing the idea of a static state of being and the Platonic world of forms, and it is difficult to say what he might have thought about the “apparent” world of Rain Burroughs, there is no doubt that her hallucinations are real and substantive sensory experiences of tremendous value, and that the true and static world being espoused by the rationalist and scientific insistence that they are not constitutes a diminishment and life-hating admonishment of possibility, plurality and becoming.

But what, practically, can be made of this? That there are many possible and also apparent worlds within a reality that is always changing, and that meaning is a polyvocal, shifting and shimmery thing, always at once plural and in a state of crisis, renewal and becoming? In this, it is

useful to examine the conclusion of the film, revisit *Candide* and the cut-up, and to establish Rain Burroughs as a magician within the dialectic turn of remystification and remagication.

After the crisis of the Death card and how it comes to reveal the validity and value of Rain's apparent world and sensory experiences, she and her father bring flowers to Michelle's grave. Rain confides that the medications are finally working, and that while the hallucinations are not gone, she can discern the difference between what is and is not *real*. Her father mournfully asks about Michelle, if Rain can still see her. She says, "No. I miss her," and the two exchange a sorrowful look. Back home, Rain goes into her room and examines a photo of herself as a baby with her mother and father on the beach. She lies down in bed and Michelle appears behind her. Rain turns to face her, smiling.

MICHELLE: I'm here, baby girl. I love you so, so much. (She strokes Rain's face.)

RAIN: I love you, too. (Rain turns back around to close her eyes and nap, smiling as her mother holds her.)

Rain has managed to navigate and produce something new from the tension of opposites inherent in the medications that have both mended and tortured her, a point that Heraclitus himself made about physicians. The Heraclitan notion of all things containing their opposites vexed the Roman Christian theologian Hippolytus so much that he devoted three chapters to exploring it in his *Refutation of All Heresies*:

As regards both what is good and what is bad, (they are, according to Heraclitus, likewise) one. "Physicians, undoubtedly," says Heraclitus, "when they make incisions and cauterize, though in every respect they wickedly torture the sick, complain that they do not receive

fitting remuneration from their patients, notwithstanding that they perform these salutary operations upon diseases.” (332-333)

At the same time, Rain has lied to her father and preserved the hallucination of Michelle, who comforts her. With that, the film ends.

Candide ends with as much ambiguity toward the insistent regime that grips Candide’s companions, but especially Pangloss, who remains philosophically committed despite having lost multiple body parts to syphilis and needing to be purchased out of slavery, among a number of other absurdly horrifying calamities and pains that befall him and the other characters. Candide asks him directly, “When you had been hanged, dissected, whipped, and were tugging at the oar, did you always think that everything happens for the best?” His reply? “I still hold to my original opinions, because, after all, I’m a philosopher, and it wouldn’t be proper for me to recant, since Leibniz cannot be wrong...” (157). In the final chapter, the characters meet a generous farmer who works hard with his family and leads a simpler life, and Candide gives that lifestyle quiet and “profound reflections” before the companions decide to pursue their own hard working farm life as well (166). Pangloss continues to tell Candide that every horrible thing he suffered is for the best, otherwise he wouldn’t be there eating his pistachios in the best of all possible worlds. The book ends with Candide’s ambiguous reply, “All that is very well, but let us cultivate our garden.” (168). Like Candide, Rain seems reflectively though deceptively compliant within the regime that reigns around her, in which she needs to provide some assurance that she is conforming to her companions’ perspectives on reality as she in fact cultivates her own garden by secretly maintaining a relationship with her dead mother. As much as *Candide* presents an early de-

mystification critique of the world of originary mystification, *Fear of Rain* constitutes an early re-mystification critique of the de-mystified world. Rain has surreptitiously woven together an adaptive reality of her own design from within the oppressive constraints of another: for her, the truth is what meets her needs, and the best of all worlds is multiple.

The method Rain uses in order to cultivate her own garden amidst the rationalists is one of magic and the cut-up. Aside from undoing the locks of time-binding, Burroughs often elaborates the ways in which only a small image, sound or word is needed in order to evade systems of control and to edit and reconfigure reality itself: “We think of the past as being there unchangeable. Actually, the past is ours to shape and change as we will,” (Burroughs & Odier 32) and “the word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control ... and images as well, there are both words and images ... Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system” (ibid 35). This is further elaborated by his student, Genesis P-orrige in *Thee Psychick Bible*:

Control needs to impose a linear time on its subjects; this is achieved through cultural means, through story, where a beginning, middle and end follow each other without any ambiguity. This is how control wishes reality to seem, and yet the individual is in a constant, and programmed, state of flux. There is no fixed point, no definition, no finite answer or specific formula. A major way to short-circuit control and its linear language virus is by means of the Cut-Up...This technique gives us the closest possible means of describing existence as it is: a kaleidoscope, containing implicitly every possibility, every impossibility, every unconscious and conscious thought, words and deed simultaneously.

Life is quite simply a stream of Cut-Up on every level—no one event occurs singly to be followed by another, but rather exists in the conscious and unconscious with different interpretations at the same time as a multitude of similar events take place throughout existence. (131-32)

In Rain's cut-up, she utilizes most often an image, a photograph or painting, and sometimes her mother's ring or a recording of her mother's voice, in order to break the linear order of things in which her mother is dead and produce a world in which she is present and living. While having the tactile and emotional support of a deceased parent may not be the revision the rest of us might choose to make on linear and rational reality, Burrough often instructed in his essays, interviews and cut-ups, that there are many ways to initiate this procedure, for countless outcomes, and anyone can do it: "any number can play."¹⁴

¹⁴ This call to the cut-up, itself a cut-up or language virus in motion, appeared in a number of places including "Playback from Eden to Watergate", "the invisible generation", *The Ticket that Exploded*, *The Revised Boy Scout Manual: An Electronic Revolution*, multiple interviews with Daniel Odier in *The Job*, the "Atrophied Preface" of *Naked Lunch*, etc.

Death Detectives, the Dialectic of De/Re Mystification, Dissertation Cut-Ups, Synchronicities, and Another Oracle Entirely

We have traversed a lot of thought in this span of pages, and so it is useful to revisit the main ideas in brief.

Dialectic of Re/De-Mystification

Mystification	De-Mystification	Re-Mystification
There is a real, a truth, and it can be known and understood by tethering the symbolic and the literal through the correct truth-procedure.	There is no real, no truth, and we can understand this through the simulation procedure, by which self-conscious anxieties around the absence of truth produce magnificent structures of reason, procedure, science, capitalism, and the culture industry, which then become the truth.	There are many realities and truths that can be understood, constructed, negotiated and edited through the cut-up procedure, and the power to create truths is available outside the culture industry for individual use.
<p style="text-align: center;">Magic</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tarot of mysterious insight and origin</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Plato and Forms</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Detective Stories</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Murder, She Wrote</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Leibniz' <i>Theodicy</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">One Reality</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Disenchantment and Demagication</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tarot as cynical commodity</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Baudrillard and Simulations</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Police Procedurals</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Criminal Minds</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Voltaire's <i>Candide</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">No Reality</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Reenchantment and Remagication</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tarot as egregore both occupying and producing the mystified commodity</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Burroughs and Cut-Ups</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Borrowed or Familiar Investigative Techniques Utilized for Singular Approaches and Outcomes</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Fear of Rain</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rain as the Revised Candide</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Custom Realities</p>

It is worth reflecting how a dissertation itself, and this one in particular, is a manifestation of these same dialectical processes. There is a truth to know, and hence the existence of the dissertation as a truth-writing procedure. And though the procedure remains largely unchanged, when we consider how many dissertations there have been over time, we must also note how much reality itself has shifted since Aristotle first defined θέσις (thesis) in relation to the dialectic more than 2300 years ago:

A dialectical problem is a subject of inquiry that contributes either to choice and avoidance, or to truth and knowledge, and that either by itself, or as a help to the solution of some other such problem. It must, moreover, be something on which either people hold no opinion either way, or the masses hold a contrary opinion to the philosophers, or the philosophers to the masses, or each of them among themselves...A 'thesis' is a supposition of some eminent philosopher that conflicts with the general opinion; e.g. the view that contradiction is impossible, as Antisthenes said; or the view of Heraclitus that all things are in motion; or that Being is one, as Melissus says: for to take notice when any ordinary person expresses views contrary to men's usual opinions would be silly...Now a 'thesis' also is a problem, though a problem is not always a thesis, inasmuch as some problems are such that we have no opinion about them either way. That a thesis, however, also forms a problem, is clear: for it follows of necessity from what has been said that either the mass of men disagree with the philosophers about the thesis, or that the one or the other class disagree among themselves, seeing that the thesis is a supposition in conflict with general opinion. (*Topics*, 1.11)

In seeing how much remains the same while simultaneously how much has changed, one has to face the attendant and self-conscious anxieties that there is no truth, no reality at all, only narrative and simulation, and that we are all engaged in building truths through proper procedure and frantic proliferation in order to hide the corpse of the real, and that those newly constructed truths form the basis of a new truth, all the way down, because all we were ever doing was drowning in a *πάντα ῥεῖ* river or desperately setting fire to the old to see what transformations take shape. In this way, a dissertation is little more than a car burning through the night to secure the also brief and transmuting relief of the insurance money. And standing face to face with these rough facts, there is only one thing a magician can do: engage the cut-up and make herself an unlikely detective and agent for the propagation and dispersal of magic in the world.

The cut-up is the recorded, the familiar, the known material and technique, but utilized in unfamiliar ways and for unlike purposes. This document is a dissertation, and so a familiar procedure, and my positions are indeed previously uninvestigated, as well as contrary to popular *and* philosophical beliefs. In this way, I am implementing exactly the technology as Aristotle wrote it and utilizing my position within the academy to do precisely what is expected of me: I am contributing to knowledge through rigorous and novel argument. But instead of seeing my citation practice as a means of borrowing ethos I have not yet established for myself in order to sprinkle my own handful of dirt over the corpse of the real and position myself within rational discourse, I have engaged in citation as cut-up, situating a long history of philosophy alongside magical thought, images and objects, not only to build a strange but persuasive argument that enchants and adds to the world of fact but to present you with another and magical reality

strategically poised within the larger one. It is a reality that is corrosive to the very machinery of the frantically rational world it enters, machinery that will, with enough luck and pluck, now be forced to designate and disperse something quite contrary to itself and its aims. I am writing a rupture to design the world I want, utilizing the very tools and territories that have dismissed, discouraged, diminished and delineated magic.

Any Number Can Play

In addition to magic rituals of the cut-up, I have relied heavily on synchronicities as guideposts, or those meaningful coincidences that stack together and often alert a magician that they are on a fruitful path. As prevalent as the concept of synchronicity is in recent occult thinking and practice, with its own paradigm of *synchromysticism*, it arrives by way of psychoanalysis, after Carl Jung and his practice were mystified by the divination system of the *I Ching* just as surely as Stuart Kaplan and his business enterprise were mystified by his own fevered and prolific interactions with tarot. The egregoric strategy here remains the same: while the commodity is the most metaphysical object and concept that can be embodied in a hostile age of disenchantment, psychoanalysis is the most metaphysical discipline dealing with the irresolvable mysteries of the already quasi-mystical unconscious, where irrational and aleatory procedures and outcomes emerge regularly. As Jung writes in his “Foreword” to the *I Ching*:

Probably in no other field do we have to reckon with so many unknown quantities, and nowhere else do we become more accustomed to adopting methods that work even though for a long time we may not know why they work. Unexpected cures may arise from questionable therapies and unexpected failures from allegedly reliable methods. In

the exploration of the unconscious, we come upon very strange things, from which a rationalist turns away with horror, claiming afterward that he did not see anything. (xxxiv Jung *I Ching*)

The *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes* as it is commonly translated, and the tarot share important similarities despite their differences. Both are divination systems that involve procedures of randomization and sorting. For the tarot, cards are shuffled and then sorted into the narratively generative contexts of a spread, where each position produces a framework for aiding in the card's interpretation along with its relation to other cards and positions. For example, a reader of tarot might arbitrarily decide to utilize a spread of three cards with the framework of Past, Present and Future, in which the cards interrelate and narratively reveal the development of a situation or problem. With the *I Ching*, there are two common methods for constructing the sequence of six lines, always moving from the first at the bottom and the last at the top, that compose and direct a reader to one of the book's 64 hexagrams: traditionally it involves a specific and detailed process of sorting six piles from a bundle of yarrow plant stalks, and the more contemporary and faster procedure of throwing a set of three coins six times, with each potential combination of heads or tails constructing and indicating a line. Both divination systems are replete with origin mythologies, with various scholars advancing positions that the advent of the *I Ching* may have occurred anywhere between the 10th and 4th centuries BC along with numerous and conflicting accounts of its original authorship and composition, with the contemporary age of scholarship focused on the demystifying techniques of historical accuracy and scientific rigor. Where they diverge greatly is in their narrative and sequential openness: the

tarot is resplendently customizable and infinitely open in procedure, potential spreads, interpretation techniques and narrative outcomes while the *I Ching* has carefully defined and delineated procedures that sequentially construct and unambiguously direct a reader to a passage of canonical text (though some translations differ significantly). While there are reference books that can be consulted in the use of tarot, they are neither mandatory nor necessary for gleaning insights from the cards and are widely considered as supplements or research and reference materials, while the *I Ching* is itself a speaking book, and so cannot be consulted without its use, unless all of its lines, trigrams and hexagrams have been accurately and painstakingly committed to memory. The tarot could be seen in some ways as the rowdy oracular cousin to the orderly and numerically situated *I Ching*.

Carl Jung writes that around 1920 he had begun experimenting with the *I Ching*:

One summer...I resolved to make an all-out attack on the riddle of this book... I would sit for hours on the ground beneath the hundred-year-old pear tree, the *I Ching* beside me, practising the technique by referring the resultant oracles to one another in the interplay of questions and answers. All sorts of undeniably remarkable results emerged - meaningful connections with my own thought processes which I could not explain to myself...During the whole of those summer holidays I was preoccupied with the question: Are the *I Ching*'s answers meaningful or not? If they are, how does the connection between the psychic and the physical sequence of events come about? Time and again I encountered amazing coincidences which seemed to suggest the idea of an acausal parallelism (a synchronicity, as I later called it). So fascinated was I by these

experiments that I altogether forgot to take notes, which I afterwards greatly regretted. Later, however, when I often used to carry out the experiment with my patients, it became quite clear that a significant number of answers did indeed hit the mark. (Jung *Memories* 342-3)

While Jung experiences and describes many synchronicities that occur between analyst and analysand in his egregorically mystified practice, he would not give name to the phenomenon until 1930, after the death of his friend Richard Wilhelm, a sinologist, translator and enthusiastic practitioner of the *I Ching*. While first publicly defining synchronicity in his memorial address to Wilhelm, he also writes through many of the same anxieties, audacities and adamancies that I have felt, as a practitioner and scholar rigorously engaged with unscientific and magical practices that willfully generate their own realities, peculiar epistemes, and relations to time both around and through us:

Anyone who, like myself, has had the rare good fortune to experience...the divinatory power of the *I Ching* cannot remain ignorant of the fact that we have here an Archimedean point from which our Western attitude of mind could be lifted off its foundations...The principle on which the use of the *I Ching* is based appears at first sight to be in complete contradiction to our scientific and causal thinking. For us it is unscientific in the extreme, almost taboo, and therefore outside the scope of our scientific judgment, indeed incomprehensible to it...I am not concerned with establishing objectively the validity of the *I Ching's* statements, but take it simply as a premise...I am concerned only with the astonishing fact that the hidden qualities of the moment become

legible in the hexagram...The science of the *I Ching* is based not on the causality principle but on one which - hitherto unnamed because not familiar to us - I have tentatively called the synchronistic principle. My researches into the psychology of unconscious processes long ago compelled me to look around for another principle of explanation, since the causality principle seemed to me insufficient to explain certain remarkable manifestations of the unconscious. I found that there are psychic parallelisms which simply cannot be related to each other causally, but must be connected by another kind of principle altogether. This connection seemed to lie essentially in the relative simultaneity of the events, hence the term 'synchronistic.' It seems as though time, far from being an abstraction, is a concrete continuum which possesses qualities or basic conditions capable of manifesting themselves simultaneously in different places by means of an acausal parallelism, such as we find, for instance, in the simultaneous occurrence of identical thoughts, symbols, or psychic states. (Jung 1966, 55)

Later, in the same memorial address, he concludes by saying of synchronicity that, "In the West it has been absent from the history of philosophy since the time of Heraclitus, and reappears only as a faint echo in Leibniz. However, in the interim it was not altogether extinguished, but lingered on in the twilight of ...speculation, and it still remains on that level today." I could claim that I have deftly woven in a text that allows me to now do all of the following things:

- 1) express a shared attitude and experience with Jung as another practitioner and scholar of a complex divination system, working both within and contrary to a rationalist regime while producing and presenting magical theory and praxis
- 2) establish the academic origin and relevance of a contemporary occult concept in order to provide it a warmer reception before I go on to describe significant synchronicities, I have experienced in the production this text
- 3) point to the *I Ching* and Jung's experiences as further facets and features of the cut-up and the way it reorganizes and repatterns meaning and time according to context and will
- 4) demonstrate beyond tarot how such egregoric oracular systems bide their time, inhabiting the most mystical concepts and disciplines of a rational age as they wait to animate the people who can meaningfully propel them toward another
- 5) present a text that purposefully and productively features two thinkers I have devoted so much attention to in this chapter already, arguing that, while I understand how Leibniz' own mathematical fixation on the *I Ching* is what drew Jung to him in the first place, Jung has gone in a very wrong direction in ascribing synchronicities to his solipsistic *pre-established harmonies*, a point I could even use Heraclitus to make, since his concept of harmony is based in the perpetually generative strife of the dialectic, and not predetermination by God for the best of all worlds

I can and have now made all these gestures, at least glibly, but I should not. The truth is that Heraclitus and Leibniz only appear in this list as the result of an unintended and unplanned synchronicity, from when my eye seized on the name Leibniz just as I was closing the tab of my PDF. My passage on synchronicities has generously granted me a new one with which to illustrate the phenomenon. Many such minor synchronicities have lit my way as magic acts and composes itself through me, each one reassuring me that my feet remain on the productive path. Unless, of course, it was a synchronicity that also led Jung to Leibniz in his formulation of them, in which case, magic demonstrates a familiar sense of humor, best known to its most serious practitioners, but often only in retrospect.

Technoshamanic Formulation

When qualifying for my PhD, I produced a thesis that was the bones of the document you are reading now. Where some people move through their qualifying exam with a completed chapter of their dissertation, I produced a dissertation in miniature, a strange choice that would later lead to enormous suffering.

My first formulation of the dialectic of demystification and remystification occurred in my MFA thesis, *The Technoshaman's Grimoire*, in which I bent computer and internet technologies away from their designed purpose in order produce a series of performable spells and rituals:

Here, the internet's already pervasive mystifications of universal expertise and knowledge, along with the esoteric and forbidden state surveillance gaze (now available in consumer form), are forced to perform themselves as mystifications. Google no longer directs us to a

place where we can spend money, but an immaterial space where we reconsider our connection to technology and how it situates us in the world. The performance [of a spell through] google maps doesn't simply sneer at the failure of that platform to display a coherent capitalist totality, rather, it allows that failure to repeat itself as the broader failure of google to suture itself together as a unity. If google is an advertising platform being mystified as universal information access, forcing it to perform the second without the first fractures the smooth singular apparatus into something present-at-hand, open for analysis...[Google's] techniques, as part of capital's traditional esoteric order, have been naturalized, evacuated of ideological meaning. They are expressed with the humility of the tool, the mere object, available for whatever goal a skilled operator (neutered to user) desires. This is both ontological fact and defensive posture, a means of disavowing all user critique by declaring that the tool, itself, is ideologically clean. ...This salvage process sets up a gambit; if the tools are open, they can be put to uses other than googlebombing or internecine advertising wars. They are available for uses beyond their capitalist firmament. If the spell fails, or fails to become a legitimate use of the technology, then the ideological construction of the device not only fails but fails in the open, an open whose horizons have already been draw out by the spell that precedes it. Capital can no longer claim its tools as abstractions when there are correct and appropriate ways to use them. (Hyland 18-20)

The idea stayed with me and grew well beyond its initial confines of revealing and confronting the hidden ideological construction of internet technologies by literalizing their

inherent mystifications with magical procedures. I began to see this dialectic all around me and decided to explore it more deeply through something already unambiguously steeped in magic: tarot cards. The thesis for my qualifying examination produced a skeletal argument, and I knew I would animate it further through tarot's appearance in television and film, and the Death Detective dialectic. And while tarot's appearances in television and film are replete with instances of ordinary mystification and demystification, I was having trouble locating a single suitable example of remystification for my analysis and deciding whether to take a new approach or suture multiple examples together.

Enter my friend, Ted Burton, who leads a very Los Angelean life of unlikely gigs, designing and constructing the most impressive art cars for wealthy patrons who want to make a splash on the Playa at Burning Man, building stylish Coachella festival camps for celebrities, remodeling homes and rooms and gardens, and working in television and film, particularly on set design crews. As I was deliberating choices for my dissertation, he was hired as Prop Master on the Katherine Heigl career re-invigorator, *Fear of Rain*. Ted is also a vintage BMW enthusiast, and once on set in Florida, the crew asked to use the beautiful tan 1984 BMW 733i he had driven across country in the film. When *Fear of Rain* was released, it was a surreal experience, to watch a filmic villain drive his car, almost a character itself. I have ridden as a passenger in that car many times, and often for trips as mundane as picking up groceries at Von's or going through the In-and-Out drive thru on our way back from a swap meet or flea market.

Fear of Rain needed a set of tarot cards to move its plot, and they wanted the cards to be wholly unique to the filmic world. Ted tapped our mutual friend Tom Bloom with the

commission. Tom also leads a distinctly Los Angelean lifestyle of perfume marketing, theater and film industry costume and art design, convention panel moderation, and also reads and teaches others to read tarot professionally. Aside from being a friend, they and I have collaborated magically many times and in many ways over the years.

Suddenly, not only did the use of tarot in *Fear of Rain* provide an ideal example of what I wanted to articulate in the dialectic, but it did so through the work and effort of two of the most supportive friends I have in my life, who would gladly illuminate and demystify the processes by which narrative industries deliver tarot to their film audiences. This is synchronicity writ large, and the ways and means by which magic composes and disperses itself through its practitioners.

The Magicians, Revisited

As tarot replicates and renews itself across time, it is dependent upon its magicians. For Stuart Kaplan, the tarot is a beloved commodity meant to replicate as an infinite line of products and opportunities for generating further reach and capital. Tom Bloom also works with tarot through narrative-industries, but for different aims and objectives, as a tarot reader and teacher encouraging magical practices. In this section, I will demystify the process by which narrative-industries bring tarot to their film audiences, and therefore remystifying magic to the world.

When Tom Bloom was commissioned to design the cards featured in *Fear of Rain*, they had only three days before starting a more demanding commitment to another production gig. They knew that *Fear of Rain* was a horror movie, but they were not shown the script and were unsure how the cards would be featured, or if the cards would make it into the final cut of the film. They also knew that only four card designs were required: The Sun, The Moon, Death, and

the backs of the cards. "...I've seen my share of fortune-telling scenes in movies, so I know the drill" (Bloom Interview). Unlike Stuart Kaplan's efforts for the *James Bond 007 Tarot*, Bloom's commissioned artwork would not be released alongside the film as promotional material. *Fear of Rain* was a small budget horror film, released at only 120 theaters nationwide, while *Live and Let Die* was manufactured for global audiences as the next installment of a beloved franchise, with a budget of \$7,000,000, equivalent to roughly 46 million today.

Despite the urgent deadline that Bloom was under, this was for them a lifelong dream, to design cards, and one they were well-prepared to approach (Bloom Interview). Aside from being practiced working within the limitations and time constraints of the theater and film industries, they have been reading and teaching tarot professionally for nearly two decades and own and utilize a large collection of tarot decks, making them deeply familiar with tarot as a genre in its symbolism, composition and conventions. In their reading practice, they select a different deck each month for their long-distance clients, and then deliver an interpretation in writing (Arcanologue Patreon). Along with the written reading, they use their eye for image and set composition to stage each card into attractive and unique photographs ready to circulate through the social media age. This practice reemphasizes and reliteralizes the *performance* of reading tarot, recuperating the auric loss incurred through long-distance, written correspondence, when reading tarot is writing and reading text, and the performance is not a live, collaborative and aesthetically ritualized event. There is theater and performance each time tarot is read in person, with the attractive staging of atmospheric elements and props, with the costuming and ambiance of psychic entertainment, with the *kairos* and gesture of placing or turning each card over in a

spread, in the reaction of the reader's face, in the storytelling of weaving it into a narrative with the proper vocal tones of hush, urgency, optimism, reassurance. The act of delivering readings through writing alienates the performance of tarot from itself, distancing it from its intimacy, efficacy, impact and aura, and so also its magic. By utilizing literal stagecraft so that each card performs itself as an image even from its spatial and temporal distance, Bloom has ingeniously restored the theater lost through the tarot as text in order to provide satisfying alternate performances, rituals and intimacies.



Figure 25. Several Arcanalogue images by Tom Bloom

If Bloom had more time, they would have liked to have designed original cards for the commission:

...[I]nstead I decided to collage the cards from William Blake illustrations, mainly from his epic poem *The Book of Urizen*, which has long been a pet project of mine. The

images are obscure enough that most viewers won't recognize them, even if they can track the style to Blake. And I altered the color and composition quite freely, to force a connection to tarot imagery. For example, the color of the vast "globe of blood" in his Enitharmon illustration was tweaked to make it look like the moon, and so forth. The card back was the most difficult, because I figured it was the image that would get the most screen time, and most card backs are symmetrical so they look the same no matter which direction you look at them from. For that one, I cribbed from Blake's "The Ancient of Days," which is not from *The Book of Urizen* but does actually depict the character Urizen, who is a sort of demiurge figure in Blake's prophetic creation mythology. (Bloom Interview)

With such a commitment to Blake, altering the images to fit within more tarot-appropriate symbolism and design felt uncomfortable, "but it was also an insight into the kind of sacrifices one has to make when working in film production. Pretty much any time you're bewildered by a particularly bizarre creative choice in a film, the answer usually boils down to a shortage of time and/or money" (ibid.). There was no collaboration and limited feedback on the designs, but in their initial submission, Bloom's Sun was thought to be too scary, which amused them. "This is a horror movie, correct? But of course, now that I've seen the finished scenes, I understand what they meant" (ibid.).

The Sun and Moon cards appear in tarot's introduction to the filmic world. Caleb utilizes the cards in a form of object-mediated communication: he is too sweet and socially awkward to approach Rain without a courage-generating device that provides him the pretense and the social

capacity and contrivance to both initiate their first interaction and direct and manage its content at a comfortable remove from himself as himself. He is instead himself with a surplus of socially-scripted and acceptable access along with a means to hide behind the object, in much the same way that new friends might utilize the object of a board game in order to both diffuse and surpass any strange silences or social tension that could otherwise arise in a conversation before genuine rapport and a more intimate familiarity has been established between people. In his particular trick, the symbolic grandeur of the tarot revitalizes and rekindles curiosity for what would otherwise be a cliché maneuver of prestidigitation and misdirection, granting a fresh coat of paint to an overly familiar and hackneyed contrivance and producing opportunities for renewed conveyance and a more novel rescripting of standard stage magician's patter:

CALEB: (casually sits at Rain's lunch table, holding a deck) I'm Caleb. You wanna pick a card, any card?

RAIN: (looks over her shoulder and begins to implement her checklist... Is this possible? Checkmark.)

CALEB: I know it's cliché but come on....

RAIN: (continues her checklist: Could it exist here?)

CALEB: Do it anyways...

RAIN: (awards the question a check)

CALEB: C'mon, Rain.

RAIN: (Is anyone else reacting???) appears across the screen as Rain scans the otherwise empty schoolyard, and confused flashes of illegible text appear on the screen.)

CALEB: You know what, just take... (he stops talking as he sees her acknowledging him and reaching hesitantly toward the cards)

(Rain pulls THE SUN.)

CALEB: You know, it's tarot, so it's a little more difficult. Do you remember it?

RAIN: MM-hmm.

CALEB: Throw it back in the deck. Really gotta stop talking.

RAIN: I don't like magic.

CALEB: Well, you're in luck because this isn't magic. This is skill. (He collects the cards in a stack.) Alright, tap the top of the deck. Just give it a little... (gestures with a finger tap to the deck)

RAIN: (awkwardly mimics the tap but is smiling)

CALEB: See, this is the really interactive part where I just distract you (he shuffles cards) that way you're really impressed when I swap it out (he deals her a card) and, uh, you flip over your card and that's yours.

RAIN: (flips the card, appears puzzled: it is THE MOON)

CALEB: What, it's not yours? No, no, I'm kidding. I know that. I just gave you that one as a gift to, you know, balance out your own, which is under your bottle. RAIN: (smiles, moves her water bottle, and turns over THE SUN card)

Given the filmic situation, it is apparent why Bloom's first design of the Sun was deemed too scary: it would alter the innocent and awkward tone of the encounter and nudge Caleb's pushy stage magician's patter toward something decidedly more hellish. It would also reinforce and nearly depict the very anxiety Rain experiences when she is no longer certain of how to navigate and negotiate between realities by duplicating the same crouching bodily posture she often takes during moments of high stress, panic and disorientation. This in turn would eliminate the ambiguity of whether or not Caleb was real or a hallucination for the film viewer, misleading the audience too strongly toward the wrong conclusion. The scene would no longer be a welcoming invitation for the audience to act as reality detectives alongside Rain, but an outright filmic deception that would produce a sense of anxiety and danger empathetic to the main character and out of tone with the romantic potential and optimism of the scene. The Sun and The Moon accepted by the production team instead preserve the sweetness of the moment while illuminating the binary tensions in Rain's realities before she is later able to perform her dialectical movement to synthesize them into the best possible world for herself, through embracing the magic of tarot and her tremendous capacity as a magician able to both suture and customize fractured realities. The Moon is Rain crumpled, with her hands pressed against her ears to dampen her sensory overload and confusion in the dark when beset by the intrusions of a world invisible to others, which is again a bodily gesture made by Rain throughout the film. The

Sun depicts her open and upright as she navigates tensions in the visible world, as depicted in the scene of her running on her school's track during gym class, when her former best friend abandons her for being "crazy" and Rain is afraid to disclose anything about her illness to Caleb while wearing a t-shirt that states "I Got It From My Mama". Every tension and truth is visible but little is stated or brought to the surface, and Rain is unable to assert or accept herself. By the end of the film, Rain is able to utilize her visible and invisible worlds as productive and ingenious technologies for constructing a novel world while consciously and fearlessly disclosing what she wants in the ways she feels are best to occupants of both her worlds. In this way, she is "balanced out" by the dialectical maneuver, just as Caleb promised before his card trick.



Figure 26. Rain crouching in the literal sun under extreme mental duress.



THE SUN

Figure 27. The very wrong Sun by Tom Bloom.



THE SUN



THE MOON

Figure 28. The Sun and Moon as they appear in *Fear of Rain*

Bloom's Design

Beyond this analysis though is the web of synchronicities involved in Bloom determining and selecting their image sources. Without access to a script, there was no way for them to know

that Rain would be trapped within the constraints of a rational world and later escape those tethers by utilizing its very tools to build her own remystified reality in the cut-up, nor were they aware of how I would later read and interpret the filmic world, and yet, the images they utilized were from *The Book of Urizen*, a fact unnoticed and a text unknown by me as well when writing my analysis of the film. The text is one of Blake's prophetic works, meant not only to illuminate the scientific oppressions and limits on imagination and creativity that each person experiences within a rationalist and demystified regime, but also to predict the ways in which a new age of greater imagination and creativity will be born out of it.

Urizen (Your Reason) is an eternal being who rejects eternity in order to build his own world. The world he builds stands as a metaphor for the ways that rationality and enlightenment discourse bind and limit the capacities of imagination, thought and the creative will. He often works with architectural tools, to both build this world and to delimit it with scientific and mathematical laws and boundaries, and also casts nets that he uses to capture humans into webs of conventional thinking and society. Through those rationalist tools, he means to prevent pain with the creation of binding laws and limits, all the while inflicting it. The image used for the backs of Bloom's cards is both one of these tools, a compass, and a demystifying turn on the originary mystification and image of the Christian God utilizing a golden compass to form the circumference of the world in Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd

In Gods Eternal store, to circumscribe

This Universe, and all created things:

One foot he center'd, and the other turn'd

Round through the vast profunditie obscure,

And said, thus farr extend, thus farr thy bounds,

This be thy just Circumference, O World. (Milton, lines 225-231)

On the back of Bloom's cards, Urizen is there, with his hyperrationalist and opposite compass and the perpetual rebirth cycle of the lemniscate, creating a new world while simultaneously binding and controlling it with the brutal pragmatism of reason that will determine what is possible within it. As Blake's mythology suggests and the lemniscate indicates, other worlds are on their way to being created even as the newest and latest ones emerge. The very act of turning the cards over to reveal them, then, is a dialectical maneuver to flip the rational world on its head and break loose from the confines of Urizen's delimiting compass by revealing an invitation to a world of novel narrative imagination and the resplendent and self-renewing possibilities of creation and magic. These cards become a rationally inscribed tool, commissioned through a consumer narrative industry, that is itself utilized to undo rational procedures and their harm to us, and to generate new and better possibilities, both within and outside the further delimiting compass of their film industry confines.



Figure 29. Bloom's card backs, Urizen's rational world-building, and breaking the compass in a perpetual process of renewal, or when it all goes meta.

In the case of the filmic world, Rain is bound within the constraints and punitive measures of Urizen's laws and tormented by them, even as those binding rules are produced to liberate her and her loved ones from pain. Her escape is through the embrace of imagination and magic through tarot and supplementing her comfort and power with the rational tools available to her, like the medications that allow her to sense and select between worlds for a customized and non-conformist reality. Beyond the filmic world, there is this dissertation, again an expression of rationalist and tormenting rules and procedures often meant to delimit the world,

boundaries that are ruptured by inserting magic into both their implementation and archive, and the possibility that Bloom will release their cards in an oracle deck available for purchase and so, further and farther reaching remystification.

Tarot cards, and the kinds of truths they express, are flexible within the times and trends of their production, animating their readers to both sides of the dialectic of demystification and remystification, and an age of demystification will always provide the very tools needed to construct newly remystified worlds.

CONCLUSION

Text Conversation with Joshua Madara (11-11-21), upon exchanging daily cards and varied concerns as I wrote a doctoral dissertation.



Figure 30. *His*



Figure 31. *Mine*

I hope we both have days far more mellow than our cards tho.

I don't know if you've been reading my diss, but I present the problem we are facing as this: the tarot as a third mind prefabricated cut-up tech that shapes and restructures our lives and attitudes in relation to it.

As an aspect of its aliveness

*but what is the *problem* with that? and is there a solution, or do we seek one?*

I feel almost as allergic to a solution to that as I would feel to a pink neon sign that says "good vibes only"

But it's a very good question

Worth attending to

maybe it's not really a problem; i'm just wondering if it is, then why.

Being petrified of the events of my day, it is a kind of problem, or at least an urgency, and sometimes a self-fulfilling one too. So, it's hard to say. I'm going to think carefully about the question tho, and maybe it'll end up in the diss. The question is good.

just to clarify, all i meant was: if your diss is presenting this (quite lovely) take on tarot as: "the problem we are facing," then you should explain why it's a problem, and at least prepare to be asked: if you are saying it's a problem, then what is the solution?

or just clarify what exactly the problem is

bc when i read your take on what tarot is ("a third mind fabricated..."), i don't see a problem there

potential, hypothetical problems, perhaps; but not a necessary, implied one

Ah, fair. I don't present it as a problem in the diss, just a fact of authentic interaction with the lifeform of tarot. But my feelings today, 8 Sword Advisor Meeting Day, do feel like a problem. It's not good to enter into a meeting terrified, but to be honest, given my history, it's expressing something that I...

was definitely already feeling and remembering (perhaps 8 Swords is even asking me to remember it, prepare for it, or come up with a way to move through it, knowing how tough feedback has derailed me before) But if I had pulled, say, six wands instead, it could have provided some measure of relief.

ah, understood.

that last thing: oh, yeah. for me that is often THE question, about all these kinds of things.

It's hard to say, whether it is a problem, or a complex personal relationship. And whether or not the tarot as lifeform cares for me or is indifferent to me.

I take tarot more seriously *and* more sensitively than most people tho. Which I will probably also acknowledge in my intro, how in some ways, my scholarship is in part auto-ethnographic, without declaring as much.

I am definitely going to screen grab this whole conversation, drop it in my diss notes doc, and think very much about it.

Thank you for asking such smart and generative questions.

i think you're on to the right things, and it's BECAUSE of your critical theory. most people just accept a very naive (and often factually false or inaccurate) view of tarot, spirits, ghosts, faeries, astrology, gods... and i think the truth of those things, such as it is (we don't really ever have access to that, i think), is much more weird and interesting. these things ARE real and alive, or at least quasi-alive, but in ways most people never even think about critically.

the same kind of thing happens in Hellier.¹⁵ albeit with far less critical scholarship: the realization that the Phenomena are actually something quite different from what they present on the surface. and the follow-up question: are they intentionally malicious, or are they just (semi-)autonomous processes that are accidentally malicious or benefic according to our own myopic and self-centered views?

to clarify, i think most people's naive take on Tarot is symmetrical to their naive take on Enlightenment values :D

psychoanalysis does this, too: it attempts to see beneath the surface of things, into their hidden (occult) processes and movement and anima-tions.

sorry, i'm just thinking aloud now, as it were

¹⁵ A documentary series on paranormal phenomena in Hellier, Kentucky.

At the end of the day, I am a new materialist, and that has tremendous influence over my thinking.

It isn't only in my magical practice, but also my poetic one. I look beyond the object as metaphor, serving me symbolically, and toward the object as...

lifeform, in cooperation or resistance or at least in active and affective relation to me.

Like, two of my favorite books are Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Ponge's *Soap*.

Each of those books utilize objects that we take for granted, objects that are considered in such mundane service to us that they are rendered mostly invisible or with the humility of the tool, and then agitate and explore them fully and critically, with great exuberance. And I think that is an occultic approach, an approach of re-enchantment and wonder.

That is also what I do with the scholarship, taking the object that serves, showing it to be alive, and attending to how, precisely, it is living and relating to us.

And because these lifeforms are so very different from us, there is a lot of untranslatability in the interaction and exchange between us. Like, we can't fully converse with our pets, who we consider more vibrantly and recognizably alive, so what hope do we really have to make the aliveness of the seemingly inert more legible? It is something I think about often, and I never want to be glib about it. It's too important for the kind of glibness that would ascribe spirits, more recognizably alive (or, post-alive) and familiar to us.

Oh, never ever stop thinking aloud, please.

APPENDIX

Correspondence with Stuart Kaplan

Between August and October of 2020, I was in correspondence with Stuart Kaplan. He was supportive of the project and generous with his time, but our conversation was brief, as he died shortly after and during the Covid-19 pandemic. His birthday was April Fool's Day, and so he identified strongly with the Fool card of the tarot, or the willingness to jump into a new and unfamiliar situation with both feet—an identification so strong that he even used it as the logo when he founded US Games Systems, Inc., the first company to market and sell tarot cards in the United States.

August 19, 2020

Tina Hyland: *How did you initially decide to market the tarot to booksellers? Did you have a strategy to make tarot more mainstream?*

Stuart Kaplan: In 1968, when I first started with tarot, my sales rep, Therese Marks, brought a Swiss 1JJ tarot deck to Henry Levy the buyer at Brentano's bookstore in NYC. Henry purchased 100 decks. Thus, I started with my first bookstore. Within several years USGames sold 800,00 Swiss tarot decks and accompanying Tarot Cards For Fun and Fortune Telling Books, primarily to bookstores and so-called metaphysical and occult shops. Over time , we started offering tarot to other types of stores ---gift shops, game stores, etc.----but it took several decades before the market expanded.

TH: *There are now many tarot decks with illustrated pips, and still, the Rider Waite Smith reigns supreme, with many new decks utilizing it as a springboard. What do you make of its enduring popularity? When USGS invests in contemporary decks, does the Rider Waite Smith ever serve as a guide or a standard?*

SK: Pamela's deck stands alone as the most popular. She was the first artist to illustrate all the pips with images instead of geometric shapes and the first usually becomes the enduring standard. For new decks, we have several criteria: quality of the art is very important, consistency of the images throughout the deck, ability of the reader to understand the artist's intended meaning of the art, different art than something we already have published, whether the deck fills a gap in our decks in terms of subject matter, and the booklet that accompanies the deck.

TH: *Pamela Colman Smith died in 1951, so copyright protections for the Rider Waite Smith in the EU will be expiring soon. Do you have plans for that eventuality? What will it mean for USGS?*

SK: The Rider-Waite is trademarked in 58 countries, and additional copyrights will be vigorously enforced. Our legal team attends to these details.

TH: *What are some of the challenges or successes of marketing tarot as the number of brick-and-mortar bookstores decline in the internet age?*

SK: Customers prefer to see in-person the cards so USGames furnishes upon request and without charge sample cards to support brick and mortar stores. We also provide a printed 84 page full color catalog and our website www.usgamesin.com. Sales to stores have increased because many new stores are opening in the Metaphysical, New Age and Spiritual Gift field.

Die-hard bookstores seem to be lagging behind and failing to realize the opportunities of offering tarot/oracle decks with booklets. “Sidelines” are no longer sidelines but important “Front Lines.”

TH: *What are some of the most unusual or surprising decks you have encountered or published? Do they have an interesting story?*

SK: Every deck we publish is unusual, a surprise, and each one a treasure. There is a story behind most decks and how they came into being. We recently came across a proposal that was submitted to us in 1992. At the time, we failed to take up the license. However, now it will be published in a few months, and the artist is thrilled.

Many submittals come to us. Each deck is special. One artist sent us artwork drawn with color pencils on 8.5 x 11 inch regular photocopy paper. Another artist sent us one image that was so stunning we sent to the artist a contract to license the deck by return mail. Another deck that went out of print for several years, we brought it back and it is now is one of our top ten best sellers. Unfortunately, the artist since died, so he never knew of the decks revived success, but his son and heir benefits from all the royalties.

TH *How would you describe the genre distinctions between tarot and oracle decks?*

SK: Tarot follows a strict sequence of the 78 cards...while oracle cards are open to any sequence.

Both types are open to the artists visual and artistic abilities.

TH: *When you secured rights to the 1JJ, did you anticipate that interest in tarot would take off in the way that it did? How do you feel about the global popularity of the cards?*

SK: I was not aware of the eventual impact of the Swiss 1JJ nor was the factory where they were being printed. We were both surprised and pleased. I believe what led to the success of tarot was USGames (and my personal) linear focus on tarot as an historical art form with background that needed to be researched and uncovered. I love doing historical research as evidenced by my other books, Tarot Classic, The Encyclopedia of Tarot (4 volumes) and, of course, Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story

TH: *What do you feel is the most surprising way that tarot has been utilized in our era?*

SK: Many ways: Spiritual enlightenment. Self-Guidance. Stress Reliever. Wellness. Empowers a person to think and see things differently. Opens windows to new thoughts. Personal development. Greater clarity to situations. Card reading ...and more.

TH: *What is something about the tarot that you wish more people knew about?*

SK: Tarot can help a person in their life decisions. It is also a fascinating historical story beginning with the Visconti and Sforza families of the fifteenth century, Milan, Italy

TH: *Will USGS be reprinting past volumes of The Encyclopedia of Tarot, and will there be a 5th volume?*

SK: Unfortunately, the printing films were lost for all four volumes when the printer went out of business and never told us. It would be an impossible task to recreate everything. To reprint, we could scan the existing books but the black and white images of the cards would lose clarity. USGames still has some hard copies for sale of Volume I, and Volume I is available as an e-book.

I hope this proves helpful. May I request a copy of your dissertation?

TH: *I will be very happy to give you a copy of my dissertation! Your work is an important part of one of the chapters, as I hope to document and demonstrate just how vital your role has been in the history and endurance of tarot.*

SK: Keep going on your dissertation. It is a lonely and sometimes impatient task to complete. I am reminded of what Oscar Wilde said. On the morning while proofreading my poem I put in a comma. In the afternoon I took it. I know the pains and joy of writing.

Interview with Tom Bloom

Tom Bloom designed the tarot cards used in the film *Fear of Rain*, and among their many labors and gigs, they reads tarot professionally through their business, Arcanalogue.

Tina Hyland: *What is the history of your relationship to tarot cards?*

Tom Bloom: I was an Evangelical Christian until about age sixteen, so while I was very curious about the cards (just from pop cultural exposure) I did not feel they were something I could engage with. Around that time, a friend at school offered to give me a reading, and I remember two of the cards that came up: The Hermit, and the Nine of Swords. The friend looked at me, startled, and began to ask more probing questions about what was wrong, what was going on in my life. It was the first time anyone had really asked me this directly, and while I couldn't answer honestly in that moment about my sexual orientation or how close I had come to a full suicidal breakdown, this interaction really stuck with me as an example of the kind of power and meaningful spiritual interaction that was possible outside the church. (Ironically, this friend ended up moving away and became a born-again Christian, which, to my knowledge, she remains to this day.)

So I began dabbling with cards myself at age 17, but quickly became frustrated by my own ignorance, and a bit hesitant since I didn't really understand who was meant to be speaking through the cards, or how that input was best applied. I had a copy of Waite's *Pictorial Key to*

the Tarot, but I didn't understand any of the references, and it felt dangerous to proceed without a better understanding -- especially if I was going to be reading for others, which was my dream.

Over the next few years, I dedicated myself to a comprehensive study of the cards and Western occult philosophy. I didn't have access to much, living in rural Arizona, but I managed to read *The Book of Thoth*, Timothy Leary's *The Game of Life*, and *Tarot: Mirror of the Soul*. While none of these were terribly useful from a divination standpoint, they each pointed in different directions and helped flesh out my broader sense of the cards' utility as a symbolic framework for organizing information. My scope was still astoundingly broad, because I was trying to catch up on centuries' worth of traditions from various cultures around the world, which of course no one had thought to include in my education. And this contributed to a sort of universalism in my study, because a lot of these authors subscribed to the theory that associations could be drawn between every tradition/symbolic system and tarot cards. It's almost as if everyone was so eager to project meanings onto the cards, they barely ended up engaging with the actual history or symbols at all -- to the point of pretending that information didn't actually exist, that the cards' origins were "shrouded in mystery."

So, in my twenties (with the help of a greatly expanding internet) I dug deeper into these blind spots, aided by books such as Robert M. Place's *Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination*. I also began experimenting with other divination systems such as the *I Ching*, to understand how different tools were a product of different teachings, imparting their own unique flavor and communication style. I began a blog called Arcanalogue (a neologism that roughly translates to "conversation with the unknown") in 2008, where I shared my research, as well as interviews with

various figures and essays about my personal associations with the cards. Later this site would turn into a Q&A service that allowed me to establish a professional clientele.

At some point in all this my universalism fell away, and while I do see divination as a special universal experience accessible to people of all cultures, I began to depart from teachings that sought to force connections between tarot and other esoteric traditions, instead focusing on the Neoplatonism, Pythagoreanism, and early Christian symbolism that influence so much of the deck. This has served as a firm basis for me to talk plainly with querents about the meanings contained within each card, and also to counter a lot of the superstition and misinformation that circulates so commonly.

What is your process for reading the cards?

There are so many different conditions in which one may end up reading. I love the formality of a traditional reading, and am always happy to conjure up the ceremonial gravity they deserve. But if your reading is dependent on these settings, you miss opportunities to play and explore, alone or with others. So I have challenged myself to open up to giving sensitive, high-quality readings very informally, as the occasion may demand. And for my professional service, I may have to sit down and perform dozens of one-card readings in a single sitting, so the process for that is its own beast.

I do believe that divination is aided by ceremonial factors such as banishing, meditation, and prayer. Not only for the reader's benefit, but also the querent, since advice that is glibly dispensed is much more difficult to take seriously, even if the reading is accurate and insightful.

But as a reader, I have also come to recognize that my own presence is a constant-yet-malleable element throughout all my readings, and that the experience of my querent hinges entirely on my ability to show up as myself, as an authority, and also as a humble go-between. These are aspects of the process I discovered through ceremony and endless experimentation, including some disappointments and failures. But having attained that insight, I no longer suffer performance anxiety or doubt in my readings if those ceremonial elements are skipped. I am myself, I am an authority, and I am a humble go-between. I no longer fear the unknown, or have misgivings about relaying these messages. I no longer worry about what others may or may not do based on my readings. It's just an interesting way to spend time and to get to know someone. Having relaxed into my practice, I find it much easier to focus my attention and imagination on my querent, and sit with them in the moment.

How did you become a professional tarot reader?

When I moved to New York City in 2002, I faced intermittent stretches of poverty and found myself working all kinds of odd jobs. Sometime around 2004 I decided to post Craigslist ads advertising my services, since I (correctly) guessed that my readings couldn't be any worse than many of the hustlers out there. In addition to private readings and parties, I also put it out there that I was willing to teach others to read. This was partly mercenary -- lessons lend themselves to a regular gig in a way that readings do not.

But while I may not have been terribly far along down the path myself, I had seen firsthand how inadequate most books were, and I had what I felt was a unique understanding of

the overall framework of the deck, which I could share in a much simpler and direct way than any of the books I'd read. Beginners get very bogged down in assuming they must memorize the meanings of each card in order to read competently, and I had worked out a simple curriculum to ease them of this burden and build a more gradual awareness of how a reading ought to work, of the tarot's potential as a useful tool.

Not that far into my professional pursuits, I did acquire a student -- a man more than twice my age, who was training to be a Buddhist priest. He was far more educated than me in many areas, but we got along very well and he was very appreciative of my lessons, which went on for many months. This helped me get over my sense of Impostor Syndrome, and while I knew I was still no expert on the level of authors I admired, I could see how my practice had transformed my awareness, and how that in turn translated into something I could offer to others.

That confidence is required in order to charge for a service. While not everyone has these aspirations (nor did I when I first started out) it is important to recognize the value of what someone has to offer, whether as a reader or a teacher, and make sure it isn't taken for granted. I'm very lucky that, decades onward, I am still meeting and talking with new clients month after month, and end up with something material to show for it.

How did you come to design the tarot cards for Fear of Rain?

A friend and colleague of mine, Ted Burton, was the film's Prop Master, and very kindly brought me on board. I don't think he realized how exciting the project would be for me, he started out with some extremely technical questions about manufacturing the finished project.

But the timeline almost made it impossible for me to accept the job, since I was committed to another production in New York and that trip was just three days away. Essentially, I just sped up the process and managed to get the cards produced and before I left; I figured that sprinting through a lifelong dream project was better than letting it (as well as the pay) go to someone else.

Did you receive any prompts or special instructions relating to how they would appear in the film?

Almost none. I didn't get to read a script, so I was unaware of the context; I didn't even know the basic premise of the story. But I've seen my share of fortune-telling scenes in movies, so I know the drill. I was told that only four designs would be shown on camera: Death, The Sun, The Moon, and whatever was printed on the cards' backs. Beyond that, I was on my own.

How did you select your design? What was the process like?

With a little more time, I would have challenged myself to illustrate original designs; instead I decided to collage the cards from William Blake illustrations, mainly from his epic poem *The Book of Urizen*, which has long been a pet project of mine. The images are obscure enough that most viewers won't recognize them, even if they can track the style to Blake. And I altered the color and composition quite freely, to force a connection to tarot imagery. For example, the color of the vast "globe of blood" in his *Enitharmon* illustration was tweaked to make it look like the moon, and so forth. The card back was the most difficult, because I figured it was the image that would get the most screen time, and most card backs are symmetrical so they look the same no matter which direction you look at them from. For that one, I cribbed from Blake's "The

Ancient of Days," which is not from The Book of Urizen but does actually depict the character Urizen, who is a sort of demiurge figure in Blake's prophetic creation mythology.

The editing felt like a blasphemy to me, as a Blake fan, but it was also an insight into the kind of sacrifices one has to make when working in film production. Pretty much any time you're bewildered by a particularly bizarre creative choice in a film, the answer usually boils down to a shortage of time and/or money. I figured if anyone happened to notice we had bastardized obscure works by a world-renowned artist, they'd at least have the consolation of patting themselves on the back for having identified them.

During their creation, was there any collaboration or feedback from others working on the film? What was the nature of that collaboration or feedback?

My first pass at The Sun was deemed not happy enough, which amused me. This is a horror movie, correct? But of course, now that I've seen the finished scenes, I understand what they meant. Overall there was very little back and forth. They accepted the designs, I went off on my trip, they filmed the movie, and then the Covid-19 pandemic began. To be honest I put it out of my mind for quite a while, because at that point I wasn't sure if or when the film would ever be released, or if the card scenes would even make it into the finished product.

Will you be publishing a complete deck from Fear of Rain?

A few friends have very sweetly suggested this, but while I adore the vote of confidence, it's not technically possible. A Urizenic tarot would be interesting to play and read with, but very few of those illustrations themselves really lend themselves to tarot imagery, so the connections

would be very forced, and the artworks mutilated beyond recognition in order to be presented that way. Blake fans deserve better, tarot readers deserve better, and if I can't satisfy the needs of either of those groups, my efforts would be better spent elsewhere.

There's a much stronger case to be made for the Urizen illustrations being converted into an oracle deck, in which case the images wouldn't need to be edited or adapted. And even then it's dicey, since there's no authoritative version of that work: Blake printed and released it in several different editions, no two of them are identical.

What did you think about the way the cards were used in the film?

Foremost, I was delighted that they ended up in the completed film at all, since there are never any guarantees that will be the case.

In the story, the deck is used by an awkward high school boy as a social tool, a way of breaking the ice with other students. They're mainly used as a prop for some simple sleight-of-hand tricks, though he does demonstrate some awareness of the meanings as well. The interaction struck me as innocent and sweet and true to life, tracking with my own experience of lonely, tarot-slinging high school weirdos.

In a later scene, the deck is used in a more fateful, divinatory capacity, on par with the kinds of cinematic fortune-telling scenes we're used to seeing. Since I hadn't read the script, it was a wonderful surprise to see the cards show up again. And in that scene, there's an element of misdirection related to the presentation of the Death card which I thought was actually quite clever. The character (as well as the viewer) can't help interpreting the card as an omen of doom,

suggesting the death of another character. This actually ends up not being the case, which subverts the cliché we're used to from other TV/movie instances of the Death card.

As a professional reader, and now tarot designer, what do you think about the way the Death card is used in film and television?

While it doesn't do actual diviners any favors, in terms of setting their clients up with false perceptions about the card's appearance, I don't see the point of fighting against the tide. By now we have nearly a century of precedent to draw from, in terms of cinematic appearances. That's practically a tradition in its own right! And even without these bogus interpretations, we'd still have to overcome querents' knee-jerk responses to the sight of that card, which we have to assume is deliberately jarring in its design.

Since historically fortune-tellers are established as "other" -- with any number of factors relegating them to outsider status -- their input can be seen as inherently dubious. This is a useful storytelling convention! It makes it quite easy for any character to easily dismiss the grave results of their reading, even though it will remain in the back of their mind (as well as the viewer's) as fateful events unfold. There's a "holy fool" aspect to a lot of these portrayals of fortune-tellers, in which they seem extremely sketchy or ridiculous, perhaps outright fraudulent... and yet, their dire prediction still comes to pass.

There's also an aspect of surrender in real life tarot readings which I think is emotionally expressed by these film portrayals: the querent is entering into a transaction which puts them in a disadvantaged position: they have less power and less awareness than this strange, dubious

authority, whom they become reliant upon for interpretation and advice. This definitely mirrors the vulnerable state that we find ourselves in when we consult the cards, whether or not another person is involved. And the Death card is a potent expression of what we're unconsciously worried about resulting from that experience: that our life will be irrevocably changed, in ways that we can scarcely imagine, and that our current reality will vanish into the past, persisting only as a dream or a recollection. Sitting down for a reading is basically signing yourself up for a brush with the uncanny, exposing yourself to all sorts of as-yet-unforeseen effects which could result from that.

So as cheesy and cliché as these Death card scenes may be, I do think they serve an archetypal purpose in terms of expressing how unsettled people feel about the idea of divination itself -- which can ultimately seem like an intrusive force, even when we voluntarily submit to it. I enjoy finding opportunities to address this with people, relieving them of some of these unnecessary superstitions, but if someone has amassed significant fears resulting from these kinds of fictional scenarios, it's probably for the best to let them continue to avoid engaging with tarot or other forms of divination. "I don't want to know" is an understandable, acceptable response to encounters with the unknown... even if that's not how I personally might choose to respond.

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