

# Occulture: a Material Cartography of Contemporary Spirituality and the Arts

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## Abstract

Occulture describes the growing presence of esotericism, occultism, magic, and spirituality in media, popular culture, and contemporary arts as part of the spiritual revolution in Western contemporary societies. The empirical study of occulture has been carried out through two main theoretical frameworks. In sociology and media studies, scholars have described the mediatization and commodification of esotericism, while in religious studies, scholars have examined artists as spiritual seekers. This article argues that these perspectives are pieces of a larger mosaic. It proposes applying a material cartography of occulture, capable of showing the relationships among different actors (artists, artworks, and audiences) – which can embody both secular and religious values. This article proposes a navigational cartography based on five key tensions: 1) secular art vs. sacred art; 2) lowbrow art vs. highbrow art; 3) metaphysical ontology vs. performative ontology; 4) author's intention vs. audience's reception; and 5) spiritual seekers vs. religious dwellers.

## Keywords

occulture – esotericism – contemporary art – popular culture – spirituality

## 1 Introduction

“Occulture” is a crasis between “occult” and “culture” and identifies the confluence of esotericism, occultism, mysticism, the New Age, and alternative spiritualities, with popular culture and contemporary arts. This term was first used by Genesis P-Orridge (1950–2020) in the occult and artistic scenes and translated into academia by Christopher Partridge, who employed it to describe an epochal change: the normalization in contemporary Western societies, through culture and art, of esotericism, which lost its secret, hidden, elitist, and absolute dimensions to become ordinary (Partridge 2014). This shift was part of the “spiritual revolution” understood as the diffusion of pragmatic, self centered, and syncretic religious practices to the detriment of institutional religions (Woodhead et al. 2005; Houtman et al. 2007). According to Partridge, occulture is an agent of the re-enchantment of modernity. Other scholars used different categories – such as the cultic milieu – to describe a similar process of normalization and mainstreamization of cultic beliefs that should be distinguished from religious orthodoxies (Campbell 2024).

Art, in both highbrow and lowbrow forms, has played a major role in the normalization of alternative spirituality. On the other hand, it remains a chicken-or-egg question whether art has driven this change or merely expressed it. Once we acknowledge this epochal change – the spiritual revolution and the normalization of esotericism in mainstream culture (Partridge 2014) – we have to understand how to empirically study occulture, describing what are the actors, tensions, and forces at stake.

The empirical study of occulture has been done through two main theoretical approaches. In sociology and in media studies, the commodification and mediatization theories described the representation – banalization – of esoteric symbols and narratives in art and popular culture as part of the secularization process, separating this representation from religious and political dimensions (Possamai 2002; Hjarvard 2012). While, in religious studies, Nina Kokkinen and others, developed the idea of occulture as analytical tool describing how some artists could be understood as “spiritual seekers”, “religioning” art and creating their own religious and artistic experience (Kokkinen 2013; Ferentinou 2013; Bauduin 2013). Kokkinen suggested that these artists embodied New Age and esoteric discourses (Sutcliffe 2003; von Stuckrad 2008).

In this article, I argue that these theoretical models only partially describe occultural phenomena. They are pieces of a larger mosaic that has not yet been described. In order to grasp the complexity of occulture, I suggest considering it as a field – a symbolic space, composed of different and contradictory phenomena. I call for a material and materialistic reading of occulture, making it

possible to comprehend the interplay between secular and religious phenomena, between highbrow and lowbrow cultures, and among different actors (artists, audiences), and objects (artworks). This article aims to contribute to this growing field of occulture by offering a comprehensive overview: a big picture. Of course, the map is not the territory (Smith 2014), therefore, I do not aim to offer the final theory on occulture. On the opposite, my aim is to bridge different perspectives (mediatization and mediation) and different actors (artists, audiences, and artworks).

Some of the data I will use to justify my arguments come from secondary literature. In other cases, I will use firsthand data from different research projects I have been working on over the years, tackling the relationship between art and spirituality. I will start by describing the limitations of the scientific literature, in particular mediatization and commodification theories. Then, I will explain why and how the material religion approach could be useful in describing occulture.

I will delineate my cartography of occulture on what at first glance looks like contradictory phenomena but are in fact tensions which should be considered as a continuum. I identified the following tensions:

- 1) Secular art for entertainment (mediatization) vs. sacred art (mediation).
- 2) Highbrow arts vs. lowbrow arts.
- 3) Performative ontology (fiction) vs. metaphysical ontology (religious reality).
- 4) Occulture from the author's perspective (intention) vs. occulture from the audience perspective (perception).
- 5) Artist in a self-religion (subjectivity) vs. artist in a religious tradition (collective).

## 2 Mediatization, Commodification, and Banalization of Esotericism

The main definition of occulture is the normalization of esotericism and occultism in popular culture and contemporary art. Occulture became “a reservoir that is constantly feeding and being fed by popular culture” (Partridge 2005: 66). This implies the idea of the commodification of esotericism, another good to consume in late capitalism.

Secondly, it entails the idea of the mediatization of religion, which has been described as “the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity assume media form” (Hjarvard 2012: 13). Religion in contemporary societies is transformed and shaped by mass media (films, comics, novels, videogames, etc.). According to Hjarvard, the process of mediatization implies a process of secularization, in the sense that it involves the decline of

institutional religions and their authorities, which lose ground to other institutions, such as media institutions. In the case of religion and popular culture, the mediatization process is even more profound. Religion provides a “continuous backdrop imagery” that is decontextualized from its metaphysical meaning, becoming nothing less than a “banal religion” which “should not be taken seriously” (Hjarvard 2012: 35).

Banal religion is a bricolage of decontextualized elements from a variety of sources, including institutionalized religious texts, iconography and liturgy, brought into new contexts and serving purposes other than those of religious institutions. (Hjarvard 2012: 36)

The process of mediatization and banalization of esotericism has been described in other words by Adam Possamai (2002), who outlined how esotericism in contemporary societies is no longer secret or reserved to an educated elite, but has become another commodity to consume: “a ‘McDonaldised Occult culture’” (Possamai 2002: 48). Possamai draws on Baudrillard’s theories of hyper-reality, which describe how mass media and images contributed to de-materializing society. Esotericism in popular culture is dematerialized and detached from its social, political, and religious contexts, leading consumers to a “blasé attitude and a feeling of disenchantment” (Possamai 2002: 52).

Mediatization, commodification, and banalization of religion and esotericism are well-described phenomena that we will tackle in this article, but they are limited and do not consider other phenomena, thereby downplaying the heterogeneity and complexity of occulture. Artworks (both highbrow and lowbrow) have been instruments for experiencing and expressing religion for centuries. For example, the importance of novels, music, and poetry has been well documented in popular religion since the Renaissance (Bakhtin 2009; Ginzburg 2013), and it is even more evident in modern religious phenomena, such as the Thelemic religion of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who sanctified some artists as “gnostic saints” and infused his rituals with a dramaturgic element (Lingan 2014).

### 3 Mediation of Occulture: a Material Reading

For decades, popular religion has been considered by historians as an inferior subject compared to institutional religions based on texts (for a critique Ginzburg 2013). This was also true in the field of sociology of religion, where (new) popular spiritualities have been considered irrelevant, insignificant,

and temporary (Bruce 2002; Voas et al. 2007). This bias, *mutatis mutandis*, can also be seen in the study of popular culture in contemporary societies, often depicted as a form of false consciousness of capitalism (for a critique Eco 2000). The supposed superficiality, banality, and irrelevance of new spiritualities have been questioned by several scholars (Aupers et al. 2006; Redden 2011). This article contributes to taking popular culture and new spiritualities seriously, showing their religious, political, and social relevance.

The mediatization/commodification model is incomplete because it does not tackle “the most thorny questions about how media and mediation constitute inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religious signifying practices” (Stolow 2005: 125). For this reason, we have to turn toward the material approach, which rejects technological determinism – the idea that technologies act autonomously – and emphasizes instead that media acquire religious meaning through social negotiation. Meyer (2012; 2020; 2010), Morgan (2009; 2016; 2011), Kean (2008), and others reframed media not merely as technological tools but as social mediators that connect humans and divine forces.

The material approach questioned the assumption that beliefs are the core substance of every religious phenomenon, what Birgit Meyer called the “mentalistic” or “Protestant” bias (Meyer 2012), highlighting both its text-centric and ethnocentric dimensions. Similarly, other scholars challenged the categories of “beliefs” and “disbeliefs,” describing them as “dead categories” that govern our thinking but are not heuristically useful (Aupers et al. 2015: 201). In this text/belief-centric framework, outward manifestation, such as material objects (artworks in our case), are derived and ancillary manifestations, and not genuine instruments, of the religious experience. In the material approach framework, forms (artworks in our case) are not vehicles but rather “generator[s] of meaning” (Meyer 2012: 12). The mediation approach outlined by Meyer focuses on media (objects, practices, materiality, meanings) as instruments of connecting with the transcendence in everyday life (2010; 2012; 2020).

Another important dimension highlighted by the material approach is the embodiment of religion. The body is both the instrument and the medium of religion. It is trained through repetitive practices – prayer, posture, ritual eating, or fasting – that integrate sensation, discipline, and emotion (Morgan 2009). In a similar manner, Meyer describes “sensational forms” as a patterned way of living religious experience through the senses. This is a cultural form that structures access to the transcendental – for example, Pentecostal worship, Catholic liturgy, or Islamic recitation. Sensational forms combine bodily techniques, sensory regimes, and aesthetic codes that allow devotees to experience transcendence (Meyer 2010). The bodily, sensational and material forms of the

transcendence (they how) are completed by “semiotic ideologies” (Keane 2007) which situate and legitimize the religious experience in traditions, organizing the material world (the why).

The material reading (mediation) does not exclude the materialistic reading (mediatization, commodification, secularization, and banalization) which are part of “the matrix or network of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places, and communities” (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). It will allow us to focus on the “relational structure” (Pels 2008) among artists, audiences, spirits, and objects by considering the lives of objects, how they are perceived and understood, and even how they can become actants (Latour 2007), producing and living religion (Morgan 2009). Therefore, mediation and mediatization are not in contradiction, on the opposite, they are part of the same process.

The text-centric and mentalistic bias is also present (and perhaps especially so) in the study of esotericism, which has for decades been dominated by historians of ideas. Esotericism has been understood mainly through intellectual (Faivre 1997), historiographic (Hanegraaff 2012), and discursive (von Stuckrad 2010) approaches. Having said that, more recently other methodologies emerged, such as the ethnographic approach (Luhmann 1991; Magliocco 2010; Granholm 2011; Granholm 2014; Crockford 2018; Parmigiani 2024), the semiotic approach (Engler et al. 2023; Roukema 2024), and the material approach here discussed (Franchetto 2020; Forshaw 2018; Otto 2023). This article is a contribution to this emerging new perspective on esotericism, occultism, and alternative spiritualities.

In this article, I will show how the material approach is crucial in the study of occulture because it shows how occultural artworks can function as instruments for the mediation of transcendence and generators of meaning, and not only meant for secular entertainment. Artistic practices and performances can be “sensational forms” to live the transcendence.

Furthermore, the material approach offers a better analytical tool than occulture *à la* Kokkinen (2013) because it considers not only artists as “spiritual seekers,” but it allows to grasp other religious discourses, as well as the interplay between secular and esoteric actors, and among artists, artworks, and audiences. It is precisely this ambiguity and porosity between mediatization and mediation that lies at the heart of occulture, as with other seemingly contradictory phenomena.

Occulture may be of interest to scholars working with the material approach in religious studies, beyond the field of esoteric studies, because it represents a distinctive case. Unlike other case studies where media are primarily used by relatively homogeneous religious groups (e.g., cinema for Pentecostal Christians),

occulture is produced, lived, and consumed by vastly different publics – both secular and religious. If in this article I will describe the sensational forms in artistic practices as conceptualized by Meyer, it seems that there is a corresponding lack of “semiotic ideologies,” which typically situate sensational forms within traditions and organize the material world. Occultural artworks are less situated, which allows them to float in the symbolic sphere, thereby enabling a variety of interpretations. Finally, another peculiarity of occulture is the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality, where the distinction between what is considered ontologically real and what is regarded as mere performance loses its significance (Otto et al. 2021; Piraino 2023).

#### 4 A Cartography of Occulture

I am not employing the term “occulture field” because it would automatically relate to the Bourdieusian understanding of a field (Bourdieu 1989), which is geographically, socially, historically, and culturally limited to specific actors negotiating in specific spaces, whereas occultural phenomena are transversal, a sort of supra-field touching different fields of popular culture, highbrow culture, and religious movements. Therefore, I will use the term symbolic space and “cartography,” because it effectively represents the idea of approximation: the map is not the reality, but it is useful to navigate shapeshifting, contradictory, and heterogeneous phenomena, such as occulture.

The case studies considered in this article are deliberately heterogeneous regarding the medium (painting, performances, music, cinema, comics, literature) and positionality (highbrow and lowbrow). This heterogeneity is intended because it demonstrates how phenomena perceived as very different and distant – such as contemporary art in a museum and comics – share the common tensions that constitute our cartography. Crucially, this wide scope illustrates that these seemingly disparate artistic performances and artworks are united by their ability to function as “sensational forms” – whether used by artists and audiences. Or on the opposite side, they can be produced and consumed as “entertainment products.” Examining this range allows us to map the shared underlying dynamics of occulture across its full material spectrum.

This proposed cartography is fundamentally rooted in the material and social conditions of the 20th and 21st centuries. Specifically, the five tensions proposed here are direct manifestations of two simultaneous shifts in contemporary societies: the “spiritual revolution”, which privileges subjective experience over institutional dogma and institutions (Woodhead et al. 2005), and the

mediatization and digitalization of religion, which has reshaped religious phenomena, including esotericism, disseminating its symbols into new spheres with new media. This cartography does not aim to propose an alternative genealogy of the occulture (already discussed by Partridge 2005; 2014), but to offer an empirical toolkit, a *vademecum*, on how to empirically study it. My hope, however, is to offer a navigational tool that can aid orientation and support further research beyond these cultural, geographical, and chronological frames.

#### 4.1 *Secular Art for Entertainment (Mediatization) vs. Esoteric Art (Mediation)*

One of the most renowned esoteric novels translated in several languages is *The Magician* by Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) (2007[1908]). The main character is Oliver Haddo, a shady and dark alchemist who physically and psychologically took advantage of a young girl and conducted monstrous experiments on human life. The novel inspired a film with the same title (1926) directed by one of the most famous filmmakers of that time: Rex Ingram (1892–1950). Oliver Haddo was the unflattering caricature of the British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who harshly criticized Maugham, accusing him of plagiarism (Kaczynski 2010).

Somerset Maugham does not have any religious or esoteric intention, at least in this novel. The novel is a secular product, detaching esoteric narratives and symbols from their meanings. In this context, esotericism is a narrative device useful for transmitting mystery, suspense, drama, tension, and fear. This novel is a good example of mediatization of esotericism. Having said that, it does not represent a “banal religion” that should not be taken seriously, as Hjarvard would argue; in fact, Maugham’s novel influenced the perception of occultism, Crowley, later used the pseudonym of Oliver Haddo to sign some of his publications (Haddo 1909) and even tried to stop the screening of the film in 1926 (Kaczynski 2010). Finally, this novel influenced how esotericism and occultism were perceived by demonizing them, transforming heterodox religious practices into monstrous and devilish behavior.

There are dozens of examples of mediatization of occulture, especially regarding witchcraft and paganism, which do not realistically portray esoteric practices or doctrines, but do portray prodigious positive or terrifying characters (Foltz 2005). The most famous example is *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling (1965–), who described herself as Christian and a non-believer in witchcraft (Kirk 2003). Magic in this case is part of the artworks, but it is not part of the intent of the author. Having said that, *Harry Potter* impacted the religious sphere, influencing how neopagans are perceived (Hjelm 2006) and eliciting a response from some fundamentalist Christians, who burned these books



because of their “demoniac influences” (Yang 2022). This proves that the mediation of esotericism does not imply a banal or evanescent phenomenon.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, we can find the idea of a sacred and esoteric art capable of deeply influencing humankind. There are dozens of examples of contemporary artists who have been influenced by esoteric movements, such as Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) by Georges Ivanovič Gurdjieff (1866–1949); Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) by Theosophy; Joséphin Péladan (1858–1919) by Martinism; Xul Solar (1887–1963) by Aleister Crowley and Rudolph Steiner (Pasi 2010; Bauduin 2019). But it is not only a matter of intellectual influence. For many artists art became a transformative, alchemical, and redemptive practice that could lead to transcendence (Kokkinen et al. 2021; 2013; 2021). Some artists did not consider themselves the real authors of their work, but rather as vehicles of a transcendent dimension – as described by Marco Pasi (2015) through the notion of “alienated agency”. Other artists even had a messianic understanding of their art as a possible instrument for shaping reality and saving humankind. For example, Alex Grey (1953–), one of the most important psychedelic artists (Davis 2024), argued that the mission of art concerns the soul of the artist, but also that “artists can advance, deepen, and potentially transform the consciousness of their community” (Grey 2017: 8).

It is well known that the surrealist Spanish painter Remedios Varo (1908–1963) was interested in, and practiced, various esoteric currents. In her artwork, we can find several references to the esoteric theories of Gurdjieff and Pyotr Uspensky (1978–1947), such as the role of the Moon in draining energy from the Earth or the theory of music as the basis of cosmology (Varo 2018; Madrid 2017; Haskell et al. 2023). On the other hand, Varo did not only represent esotericism in her artwork, but her very artistic practice can be understood as a sensational form to experience transcendence. For example, Varo used to charge crystals with moonlight, then place them on her easel, and subsequently use them to scratch and mark her paintings (Haskell et al. 2023). Furthermore, she performed incantations when mixing oils on her palette (Haskell et al. 2023). In Mexico, Varo attended painting workshops led by Christopher Fremantle (1906–1978). Fremantle, a disciple of Gurdjieff, taught a method involving a profound, prolonged, and meditative observation of objects that created a “living image” impressed upon the viewer’s sensibility. This process produced an “altered frame of consciousness [that] can change one’s perception of nature and object, generating insights that could be translated into art” (Haskell et al. 2023: 25).

Another case where painting and transcendent experiences intersect is when Varo referred to the production of a gravity-free pearl, which she claimed

resulted from a miraculous combination of a cat's meowing, a note played on the piano, and a man passing by. She described the result as: "a minuscule, brilliant particle, a kind of pearl that went out the window like an arrow, rose into space and rapidly disappeared from view" (Varo 2018: 29). This magical pearl, which miraculously emerged from the artistic materials on her desk, subsequently became part of her figurative representations. Another relevant case involves the "domestic experiments" described in a letter Varo sent to the pagan revivalist Gerald Gardner (1884–1964). In the letter, Varo narrated how she was able to carry out magical operations by rearranging objects in her house, thereby provoking or preventing social events (Madrid 2017). This uncanny power Varo claimed was symbolized in several artworks, including *Harmony* (1956). According to the Spanish painter, rearranging the material objects in her house and within her artworks was a ritual capable of reshaping reality.

Another fitting example of the artistic practice as a sensational form can be found in the artistic movement known as Viennese Actionism. According to a recent study by Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir (2024), Actionists such as Hermann Nitsch (1938–2022), Günter Brus (1938–2024), Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940–1969), and Otto Muehl (1925–2013) should not be considered only as nihilistic, secular, and subversive artists. They, in fact, employed esoteric narratives and symbols to challenge and unsettle the Viennese bourgeois status quo. Their art was transgressive in both content and style, using the body as the main material, instrument, and subject of their work. The extreme performances of some of these artists, covered in blood, feces, and paints, expressed catharsis and revolution, but also the experience of transcendence (Guðmundsdóttir 2024).

In this section, I showed the two extreme poles of an ongoing tension in occulture: on one hand, a secular art meant for entertainment that does not embody any religious or esoteric values; on the other, an esoteric art, instrumental for spiritual quests, social change, and even capable of bending reality. In between these poles, there could be other occulture phenomena that are nuanced, where the religious and the secular overlap. Finally, despite their differences, these distinct phenomena (mediatization and mediation) share the same symbolic space, influencing each other. Maugham's and Rowling's secular artworks have impacted religious movements.

A good example of a gray area between mediatization and mediation is the collaboration for the movie *Lucifer Rising* (1972) between the occultist movie director Kenneth Anger (1927–2023), one of the most important Thelemite artists, and the rockstar Mick Jagger (1943–). Mick Jagger refused to play the main character of Lucifer in the movie, seemingly due to a divergence of "occultural

views.” Kenneth Anger considered his art as a way of embodying esoteric rituals and doctrines – a sensational form –, while Jagger did not share the same esoteric commitment. Jagger was cultivating the image of the seductive, debauched, and decadent bohemian and playing around with the idea of the devil. He was probably scared by Kenneth Anger’s seriousness about invoking (the Thelemic) Lucifer. Finally, Jagger’s devil was inspired more by Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940) and Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) and less by Crowley (Bebergal 2014; Bowden 2019; Doyle White 2016).

#### 4.2 *Highbrow Arts vs. Lowbrow Arts*

The first definition of occulture by Partridge emphasized popular culture, starting from the 1960s onward. Magic, esotericism, and spirituality became ubiquitous in novels, comics, video games, and TV series. A few well-known examples include *Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code* (2003), *J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter* (1997), *Alan Moore’s From Hell* (1989), and *Ubisoft’s Assassin’s Creed* (2007).

Later, Nina Kokkinen suggested that the category of occulture should not be limited to contemporary popular culture but was also perfectly applicable to modern art in the 20th century (2013). Kokkinen and other scholars have shown how several world-famous artists have been deeply influenced by esotericism and occultism (Bauduin 2013; Ferentinou 2013; Ferguson 2021). The influence of esotericism on highbrow art remains relevant today, as demonstrated by the recent 59th Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams*, which was dedicated to surrealism, occultism, and eco-spiritualities.

Lowbrow art is generally defined by its mass production, circulation, and format accessibility (e.g. the cheap paperback comic book). On the opposite, highbrow art is defined by its uniqueness, physical scale (large canvas, installations), venues (gallery, museum), and material value (rarity, expensive materials). Highbrow and lowbrow are unstable abstractions, and countless examples fall into a grey area between the two. For example, some comics have been transformed into highbrow art – graphic novels (Lesage 2015) – with major exhibitions in prestigious museums (e.g., Hugo Pratt at the Pompidou in 2024). My point is not to distinguish once and for all between highbrow and lowbrow but to highlight the transversality of occulture (as later acknowledged by Partridge (2013)), which has likely contributed to its normalization in mainstream culture.

It is important to notice that while the mediatization of esotericism has been mainly described in popular culture (e.g., videogames, comics, movies), it can also be described in contemporary art. A good example is the Bahamian conceptual artist Tavares Strachan (1979–), who in his *Encyclopedia of Invisibility* (2018) used an alchemical and esoteric language as a metaphor to describe the

forgotten history of marginalized people and ideas. These histories are, in turn, brought back to visibility through his alchemical art (Rouvalis 2018). In this case, the esoteric metaphor does not seem to relate to a spiritual quest.

In lowbrow/popular culture we can find not only the mediatization of esotericism, as described by Possamai (2002), but also its mediation. As in the case of the world-famous comics authors Alan Moore (1953–) and Grant Morrison (1960–), who consider that art can influence reality, bringing positive values in materialist, individualistic, and disillusioned societies (Morrison 2011; Berlatsky 2011). In the case of Grant Morrison, the mediation process is even more concrete. According to him, the comic medium can be transformed into a magical sigil, capable of shaping reality. Morrison describes events that happened to his comics characters, but then materialized in his “real life” and on his body. Comics, for Morrison, became a gateway to reality to manifest his desires and fears. For example, he met the woman who drew and suffered the illness that his paper doppelganger experienced (Morrison 2011). In this frame, comics are both a mass media product sold to thousand readers and a sensational form for his creator.

Morrison's thin distinction between fiction and reality draws on the heterogeneous doctrines of chaos magic (Cusack 2011), which embodies the motto: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.” Chaos magic questioned every (religious) doctrine, suggesting that reality and its rules can be shaped by the will of every practitioner, who selects the most useful and pragmatic esoteric tool to create their own reality (Urban 2006).

But the relevance of occulture is not only in the religious sphere. Occultural artworks have also had political meanings. For example, the comic author, freemason, and esotericist Hugo Pratt (1927–1995) was one of the first European pop cultural artists to challenge the supposed Western moral and cultural superiority over non-Western cultures. Pratt depicted subaltern characters, giving them a voice, and thus a subjectivity, a key element of post-colonialism (Bhabha 2012). The most important example is Cush, a Black Muslim rebel who partakes in some battles with the main protagonist Corto Maltese (Pratt 1972). Cush is deeply religious and committed to his revolutionary cause, which contrasts with Corto's eternal wandering. Having said that, Cush is not just Corto Maltese's sparring partner, but a resolute co-protagonist. Cush had significant success in Africa, where he represented one of the first positive Black characters in comics. Hence, Pratt was invited to liberated Angola as an honored guest by the president Agostinho Neto, where he gave drawing classes in 1978 (Piraino 2023). These examples challenge the idea of occulture in low-brow arts as an irrelevant, private, and secular entertainment product.

### 4.3 *Metaphysical Ontology (Reality) vs. Performative Ontology (Fiction)*

Grant Morrison's magical comics make it possible to tackle the second tension in occulture, which concerns ontology. For some esoteric artists, the world, symbols, visions, and dreams they narrate are an expression of a metaphysical reality. According to these artists, they depict a religious reality – an ontology – which exists beyond their representations. The representations/artworks may change but the metaphysical reality remains. For example, Hilma af Klint communicated with the High Masters, interdimensional beings capable of transmitting a superior knowledge that she translated in her artworks (Bashkoff 2018; Pasi 2021).

While this “traditional” ontology has been the main framework for religious artists in contemporary societies, another understanding of ontology is present in the occultural symbolic space, one focused on storytelling, playfulness, and performativity that questions the same idea of a single truth and reality (Cusack 2016; Davis 2019; Otto et al. 2021; Piraino 2023). I call this “performative ontology.”

Alan Moore's spiritual experience is particularly relevant in this context. During psychedelic rituals, he was contacted by the Roman deity Glycon, a snake god with a wig, who became his metaphysical guide. Glycon, literally “the sweet one,” was worshipped by a second-century religious movement founded by Alexander of Abonoteichus. What we know of it comes from Lucian's condemnation, describing this movement as a fraud designed to steal money from gullible people (Millidge 2011). Despite this unflattering legacy, Moore was not discouraged from following Glycon; on the contrary, he regarded these allegations as proving his point: spirituality is not a matter of authenticity, but of performance.

To me, I think that's perfect. If I'm gonna have a god, I prefer it to be a complete hoax, because I'm not likely to start believing that a glove puppet created the universe or anything dangerous like that. To me, the idea of the god is the god. It doesn't matter what form it takes ... Glyconism ... there's only me and I'm not looking for members. (Moore in Parkin, 2013, 276, 300)

Moore is not looking for a religious identity, community, or coherent doctrine, but instead for a truthful religious experience. According to him, Glycon could very well be a hoax, but the archetype of the snake cannot; in fact, it is “a symbol that runs through almost every magical system, every religion” (Moore in Parkin, 2013, 276). The performative ontology does not imply a secularized

understanding of reality. Moore believes there is another ontological dimension, which cannot be reduced to our material world; rather, the metaphysical reality is the collective imagination, shaped by our language and experience and performed by human beings. Similarly, performative ontology can be seen in the psychedelic culture or high weirdness of Robert Anton Wilson (1932–2007), Terence McKenna (1946–2000), Philip K. Dick (1928–1982), and Timothy Leary (1920–1996), who did not simply experience altered states of consciousness, but directed, programmed, and played with them (Davis 2019).

The tension between metaphysical ontology and performative ontology portrays different ways of conceptualizing and experiencing esotericism in contemporary societies. As well described by von Stuckrad (2010), for some esotericism is an absolute knowledge, transmitted from generation to generation, and reserved for an elite, which often implies hierarchical, aristocratic, and exclusive methods; see for example Guénonian-Traditionalism (Sedgwick 2004; Piraino 2019, 2024). Others, especially in neo-paganism, Thelema, and chaos magic, stress playfulness, creativity, and individual freedom, inviting each practitioner to reinvent and validate their own tradition (Luhmann 1991; Cusack 2011; Cusack 2016). These different etic conceptualizations of esotericism, which describe emic understandings, have influenced artistic production. Some artists will display their art as an absolute and solemn practice, while others will exhibit an unsettled and unsettling knowledge, narrating their doubts, questions, and even failures.

Finally, the performative ontology most probably favors the engagement of the audience, which is less interested in religious lectures and more interested in adventurous explorations filled with doubts, drama, and twists. The serious-playfulness in occulture also allows non-believers to experiment with worldviews and subjectivities (Schaap et al. 2017; Aupers et al. 2015). This leads to the next tension regarding the relationship between author and audience.

#### 4.4 *Occulture From the Author's Perspective (Intention) vs. Occulture from the Audience's Perspective (Reception)*

Authors possess limited control over the meaning of their artworks. Artworks infused with religious meaning can be read secularly and vice versa. In this section, we will address this tension between how occulture is produced by the author and experienced by the audience. Unfortunately, the study of the reception of contemporary religious art is an unexplored field, with only a few publications (Aupers et al. 2015; Schaap et al. 2017).

It is most probable that the esoteric comics of Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, also conceived as religious instruments to shape and influence

reality, will be read with secular lenses by the majority of readers, unaware of all the kabbalistic symbols and focused on fist fights, sexy female heroes, and plot twists. While these authors sold thousands of copies, we do not know how many readers grasped the occult origins and if they did, how they were perceived. Some might enjoy the occult symbols as a folkloristic and entertaining device, while others might consider these authors as a sort of religious authority. For example, in an ongoing research project I am conducting on the *Ordo Templis Orientis* in the United States (an esoteric movement inspired by Crowley's ideas), several disciples described Moore and Morrison as important inspirations for their esoteric quests. One even suggested that Moore is recommended reading if one wants to know more about the contemporary uses of Kabbalah. This is in line with what has been suggested by Robert Wuthnow, who described artists as "spiritual leaders of our times" (2001: 266).

Artworks without any religious meaning can evoke religious experiences for the audience. The anecdote told by the British artist Roger Dean (1944–) is illuminating. Dean is the author of many iconic album covers of the progressive rock band *Yes*. These images depict surrealist and suspended landscapes, which transmit a sense of eeriness and mystery. One day, one of his fans told Dean that his artworks changed his life: "I have gleaned so many amazing, mystical secrets from looking at your covers. Can you tell me sort of what you mean by it?" When Dean explained there was no mystical meaning, but just good-looking images, the fan, disappointed, replied, "Well, what do *you* know? You're just the artist!" (Dean in Bebergal 2014: 192). In this case, the fan is suggesting that mystical or esoteric meanings transcend the author, who is just a channel of a superior dimension. Similar cases can be seen in fiction-based religions, where secular artworks produced new religious communities (Davidsen 2013).

In the context of videogames and neopagan spiritualities, Stef Aupers and Julian Schaap showed how videogamers who consider themselves nonreligious and disillusioned enjoy, play, and create their own spirituality in online video games such as *World of Warcraft*. According to these scholars, playing with spirituality should not be considered lightly and limited to the entertainment domain, as it implies sense-making, which affects "real" life. Videogames with religious themes offer places to explore religions without believing in supernatural and without too much commitment (Schaap et al. 2017).

Between secular readings of religious artworks and religious readings of secular artworks, there are different nuances. To navigate this gray and open-ended phenomenon, some scholars suggested the categories of "religious reflexivity" (Schaap et al. 2017), "textual poaching" (Jenkins 2012), and "disenchanted

enchantment" (Saler 2012), describing the unstable relationship between multiple hermeneutic layers and the interplay between content and personal experiences. These fluid categories allow us to overcome the rigid dichotomy between the religious and the secular, highlighting a continuous negotiation.

The unstable relationship between the meaning expressed by the author and its reception by the audience leads us to reconsider the role and the agency of artworks. Artworks can be considered as passive receptacles of religious influences (see the supposed influence of Buddhism in *Star Wars*, of Islam in *Dune*, of Catholicism in the *Lord of the Rings*) or social forces, such as consumerism, nationalism, or liberalism (Piraino 2025).

On the other hand, artworks also contribute to producing religious phenomena and shaping new religious movements, ideas, and practices. For example, the neo-pagan movement "Church of All Worlds" developed ritual practices from Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) (Cusack 2016). Similarly, chaos magicians draw on Lovecraft's literature (Hanegraaff 2007) and other pagan, Christian, and gnostic movements based on J.R.R. Tolkien's mythology (Davidsen 2012). Finally, new religious movements have emerged based on popular culture artworks, such as Jediism, where fans became followers, truly believing in the idea of "the force" as the vital energy connecting all beings, as in the *Star Wars*' universe (McCormick 2012; Davidsen 2011). Further to this perspective, artworks become actants producing connections, meanings, agency (Latour 2007; Piraino 2025).

#### 4.5 *Occulture as Self-Religion (Seekers) vs. Occulture in a Tradition (Dwellers)*

The main characteristic of contemporary religious phenomena, described by sociologists of religions, is the preeminence of religious individualism over collective, institutional, and dogmatic expressions of religions (Aupers et al. 2008). The centrality of the religious self has also been described in occulture, where artists have been portrayed as spiritual seekers, considering themselves the ultimate religious authorities, *de facto*, and as autonomous regarding religious fields (Kokkinen 2021; 2013).

The idea of (religious) individualism as the quintessential expression of modernity has monopolized sociology of religion, downplaying phenomena that might contradict this main narrative about contemporary religions. In this section, I will show that the idea of the self-religion is only one pole of a tension whose other pole is the artist as part of a religious tradition.

These artists engage not only with their personal understanding of religion and art but also display and negotiate their religious tradition. A fitting



example is the French-Algerian Rachid Koraïchi (1947–), one of the most celebrated Muslim-Arab artists. Koraïchi, a Sufi disciple himself, represented Sufi doctrines, Islamic esotericism, and talismans in contemporary art, putting the accent on Islam. Following this perspective, aesthetic reformulations and innovations are the expression of Islamic universal truths, which take different shapes in different contexts. One of the most important of Koraïchi's outcomes is the interreligious cemetery *Le Jardin d'Afrique* (The Garden of Africa), a burial ground in southern Tunisia that commemorates unidentified bodies of migrants that washed up on a Tunisian beach. Koraïchi built a monument around the idea of a primordial garden beyond religious differences, stating the sacredness of human lives, expressed with different meanings and aesthetics (Kuehn 2023). Finally, *Le Jardin d'Afrique* denounces the forgotten tragedy of migration and its international politics (Kuehn 2023; 2022; Ditmars 2021). This contradicts the idea of a self-centered artist detached from his/her tradition and social and political challenges.

The two poles of “self-religion” and “religious tradition” should be seen as a continuum. Every artist possesses a certain degree of freedom and negotiates within his/her specific community and tradition. On the other hand, if we focus only on the individualistic dimension, we risk forgetting the social dimension of art, as every artist is part of a community.

The Sufi case is also important because overcome the idea of occulture as only a Western phenomenon. Other examples of artists who are part of an esoteric tradition can be found in Afro-Cuban Santería, where Lazaro Ros (1925–2005) and Pierre Verger (1902–1996) were not only global artists addressing a global audience, but were also part of a religious community, embodying religious meanings in their art. Or in the Bengali Bāul music which is deeply rooted in Islamic and Hindu esotericisms, but had a global diffusion thanks to artist such as Bob Dylan (Cantú 2019).

A global approach to esotericism, and occulture, is developing, showing that esotericism is a global phenomenon with actors from different cultures and religions (Cantú 2020; Asprem et al. 2020). This is important not only to enlarge our perspective by covering more case studies and geographical contexts, but also because a global reading of esotericism and occulture affects the latter's categorization. For example, the idea of normalization of occulture described by Partridge or the focus on the New Age/ spiritual seekers described by Kokkinen might not be at work in occultural cases permeated with Islam, Hinduism, and Santería, where there are different relationships between esotericism and mainstream religions, and between religions and modernities (Eisenstadt 2000).

## 5 Conclusions

Occulture – the presence of esotericism in popular culture and contemporary arts – has been described as a process of commodification, mediatization, and individualization of esotericism and occultism. In this article I showed that these theories only partially describe the shapeshifting, complex, and heterogeneous symbolic space of occulture. These theories are only small pieces of a larger mosaic. To grasp the big picture of occulture, we have to employ a material approach, considering media not only as a vehicle of religious meaning, but also as a generator of meaning, and sensational forms to experience the immediacy of the transcendence.

The material approach grasps the interplay among artists, audiences, and artworks, and between religious and secular phenomena, which produces what looks like contradictory and unstable phenomena. Artworks are floating objects: religious products can be consumed secularly, and secular products can produce religious communities and doctrines. Occulture participates in shaping and crossing the boundaries regarding religion, secularity, and different traditions.

To summarize, while occultural artworks have been used by both authors and audience as instruments for the mediation of transcendence, it should also be noted that the opposite is true. Other occultural authors and readers are not interested in the sacred dimension, choosing instead to enjoy the playful, eerie, and adventurous qualities that esotericism can evoke. Again many in between positions exist. Compared to other media uses in religious landscape, it seems that occultural artworks are lacking a “semiotic ideology” (as described by Keane and Meyer), situating and legitimizing them within a tradition. This is due to the fact that there is not a single occultural tradition or community, but several stakeholders with different religious, artistic, political, and cultural sensibilities. Occultural artworks are floating forms that can be used in very different ways. This semiotic multiplicity and instability constitute another crucial element at the heart of occulture. Finally, the occultural case is interesting because it represents another way of conceptualizing the relationship between media and religion, different from the typologies developed by Meyer, who described “disappearing media” (in which practitioners no longer notice the very existence of the media), “contested media” (in which the relevance and role of the media are debated among practitioners), and “hyper-apparent media” (in which media are not only acknowledged but sacralized) (Meyer 2010). Occultural media, as described in this article, constitute an unstable form of mediation, allowing for a plurality of uses by both readers and authors.

To navigate this complexity, I proposed a cartography based on five tensions: 1) secular art (mediatization) vs. (sacred art) mediation; 2) highbrow vs lowbrow; 3) traditional ontology vs. performative ontology; 4) artist intention vs. audience perception; and 5) the relationship between the artist and his/her religion: seekers vs. dwellers. Other tensions might exist and might improve this cartography, which is an initial theoretical attempt to overcome the dominant mediatization and commodification theories. This cartography is intended to break ground for further research, especially concerning the audience reception and occulture beyond the Western frame, which, as I have argued, have only been partially studied and might shed new light on the relationship between religion and popular culture.

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