

FULL CIRCLE: THE POP CULTURAL ORBIT OF THEOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

From the distant vantage point of the twenty-first century, the tenets and values of the Theosophical Society may seem obscure. However, many of the theories and visual elements attached to the Society have resurfaced over the course of the twentieth century – and again in the present period – through pop culture, to the point where they now seem familiar. *A Modern Panarion* presents the work of six artists which – directly or indirectly – bears some of the hallmarks or indentations of theosophical thought, despite none of the participating artists bearing any affiliation to the group. What this text aims to demonstrate, is that the impact of late-nineteenth century occultist groups is perhaps best felt through the filter of pop culture.

The only work included in *A Modern Panarion* by a non-living artist is **Derek Jarman's** film piece *A Journey to Avebury*. A warm collage of saturated images in rusty hues of orange, ochre, brown and sulfuric yellows, *A Journey to Avebury* is a psychedelic subversion of the English pastoral tradition. Shot on Jarman's signature medium of Super 8, it's comprised of a series of still frames of the megalith and surrounding environs. Both occultism and landscape are central to Jarman's work: an ongoing preoccupation with the Elizabethan magician James Dee, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy places him as the inheritor of a very English tradition of magic(k). Yet his warm, luminescent survey of Avebury shows as much attention to the surrounding environs and English countryside as the mystical stone circles themselves. It was described by *Artforum's* Stephanie Bailey as a "postmodern John Constable". Jarman's career is bookended with landscape work: starting with this piece, produced within his first year of filmmaking, and ending with the fantastical and meditative grounds he manicured around his Dungeness home following his diagnosis with HIV in 1986. Jarman's landscapes are never just landscapes. They are inextricable from both the political and the personal. Rather than trying to piece together some vibrant, mystical past. Jarman sees the megalith of Avebury in the present, through the colourful lens of Neo-Romantic psychedelia, not through the backward-looking gaze of the Theosophical Society, who once attempted to unearth the perceived hidden truths of such sites. Madame H. P. Blavatsky, one of the society's founders, claimed in *The Secret Doctrine* that sites such as Avebury proved that Egyptian civilisation influenced that of Britain.

Garrett Phelan displays a similar engagement with prehistoric sites in his work, also from a slightly disjointed post-New Age standpoint. Phelan has long been an avid visitor of such sites of interest, and in 1986, was one of a lucky few to enter the chamber

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of Newgrange during the Winter Solstice, an event he cites as a formative for his artistic career. Phelan also cites the popular 1976 children's television series *Children of the Stones* as a departure point for his work in *A Modern Panarion*, taken from a new body of work titled *A Voodoo Free Phenomenon*. Quite typical of its era's awakened interest in prehistoric Britain and pagan sites, *Children of the Stones* posits a by-now familiar popular folklore around its fictional stone circle, filmed in Avebury five years after Jarman's *Journey*. A young boy and his scientist father move to the town of Milbury, built in the midst of a megalithic circle, and when strange happenings begin to take place, a struggle emerges between the rational, scientific approach of the boy's father and the more intuitive, mystical understandings of his psychic son and the librarian Margaret, who is shown studying ley lines. Even in this children's television show, ideas of electromagnetic energy, ley lines and psychic energy are all raised – and they are juxtaposed with the notion of some ancient secret or conspiracy, guarded by the townspeople. This idea of an ancient truth accessible to only an elite and psychically attuned few perhaps appealed to the late nineteenth century Theosophists as much as it did 1970s television audiences. Although many attempts were made to recruit new followers (and the fact that it was not a religion, but a synthesis of many traditions and scientific ideas, made this easier), Blavatsky's society was an inherently esoteric one, relying as it did on guarded knowledge: some of this knowledge was even accessible only to herself, as she communicates with her Tibetan masters via "astral post office". She also claimed to be the only person bestowed with the ability to read ancient texts like the Book of Dyzan. To a large extent, Blavatsky's Theosophical Society fits our contemporary fascination with secret societies and esoteric knowledge (though how credible all her psychic claims, is of course, contestable).

2

To return to Garrett Phelan's account of the Newgrange Solstice, he recalls "there was no polyphonic choral vibe" – a reference to the shrieking voice-based theme music of *Children of the Stones*, described by comedian Stewart Lee as "the most inappropriate theme music ever used for a children's series". Phelan's inclusion of a voice-based work inspired by the series in *A Modern Panarion* draws upon the pop cultural representation of megalithic sites perhaps more than the sites themselves – or at least the discrepancies between these two things.

What is interesting about Phelan's sound work in Gallery 8 (Part I of *A Modern Panarion*) though, is that it is not played aloud within the gallery. Instead, Phelan continues his ongoing preoccupation with radio waves to present a piece that can be tuned in to by visitors. Radio appeals to Phelan not just because it represents a means of mass communication, though this is certainly an aspect. Phelan's real fascination lies within the physical properties of the radio waves – the forces it generates. Even a visitor to this exhibition who does not tune into Phelan's supplied frequency (**97 FM**) to hear the sound piece experiences the work, albeit unknowingly: the physical properties of the waves are present, and travelling through the gallery space at all times. They are not noticeable. They are not visible. But they are there.

In a series of drawings presented in Gallery 10 Phelan shows radio waves connecting stones and transmitters. The lines drawn

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between the objects, not dissimilar to Margaret's diagram of ley lines in *Children of the Stones*, hint towards a higher spiritual power of these lines of communication. There is a hovering idea that perhaps these electromagnetic fields and force-fields may have an intelligence themselves. Not that Phelan is a proponent of any such belief or doctrine ("My work comes from me. I am the philosophy"), rather, his probing artworks raise questions of what it means to live in a rational society based on empirical research, in which anti-scientific or alternative approaches are ridiculed.

Invisible forces, quantum mechanics and mathematics are all underlying currents in the work of **Bea McMahon**. Trained in maths and physics before becoming an artist, McMahon does not see the two as entirely distinct. McMahon's visual structures in *A Modern Panarion* are a series of drawings created while on a residency in Milan, arriving fully formed as visions before being almost cathartically reproduced in pencil. *The Self-Pleasuring Series* is a result of - in McMahon's own rather tongue-in-cheek terms - "masturbation, mathematics and a monkish existence".

The hermetic existence and visionary experiences McMahon describes here has something of a romantic notion about it. It conjures up rather overblown images of early Christian mystics receiving blessed visitations in austere Cistercian cells - thrashing and writhing Teresa in Ecstasy types, images of God flashing against the stone walls. I'm sure the reality was far less grandiose, but the link to the Christian mystical tradition is not a tenuous one: McMahon's colourful visionary drawings tap into a tradition perhaps best exemplified by William Blake - that most charismatic of Christian mystic visionaries - and the plethora of artists over whom he exerted his influence, from George "Æ" Russell to Aldous Huxley and his *The Doors of Perception*.

McMahon's drawings also visually evoke some of the diagrams distributed by members of the Theosophical Society. In Annie Besant's 1901 book *Thought Forms*, a number of illustrated diagrams attempt to depict moods and states of being. Moods and feelings are ascribed to colours, ranging from the general (the mossy green hue of "Adaptability") to the specific (the inky tone of midnight blue of "Religious Feeling Tinged with Fear"), while abstract drawings attempt to visually map everything from "Vague Pure Affection" to "Greed For Drink". There are also some rather beautiful and colourful attempts to map music: the compositions of Mendellsohn, Gounod and Wagner come rising out of the churches in which they're performed in burgeoning clouds of colour, shape and graphic forms.

The synesthesiac urge to catalogue and colour code the spectrum of human emotion is an interesting quirk of the Theosophical Society, and its influence on the emergence of modernism is now well documented. Sixten Ringbom's 1970 study *The Sounding Cosmos* argued the influence on theosophy and occultism on the early abstract paintings of Kandinsky, while Malevich, Mondrian et al have also been found to have displayed an interest in the ideas of the Theosophical Society. The visual impact of Besant's diagrams - alongside the studies and artworks of other influential theosophists like Rudolf Steiner - can surely be said to have had a direct impact on the emergence of abstract art, and were an integral aspect of the onset of modernism.

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When I asked if she was familiar with such drawings, McMahan replied that although she had never seen *Thought Forms* specifically, she was familiar with this type of visual representation from a young age: “My mother was a yoga teacher and used to read auras from when I was about six or so. I was raised with principles closer to theosophy than Christianity to a certain extent.” McMahan also experiences elements of synesthesia herself, attributing flavours to numbers. The vague familiarity of these images, without having actually seen them, hints towards their enduring influence and absorption into contemporary visual culture: the aesthetics of New Ageism and yoga that McMahan was exposed to as a child have not moved on much from these colourful diagrams.

Other works in *Thought Forms* look like a precursor to 1960s op art: black and white tiled patterns creating optical trickery that would have no doubt appealed to persons of an occultist bent. A similar op art aesthetic is borrowed by **Gunilla Klingberg**, whose installation on the walls of Gallery 8 entitled *Lunar Cycle* take on a visually disorientating effect. The small orbular forms she repeats across the walls are not just circles but lunar cycles, mechanically reproduced onto a wallpaper-like vinyl which wraps the room. Klingberg’s interest in both lunar occurrences and mechanical reproduction are ongoing. Of the former, she says, “The moon is a powerful mythological symbol. Throughout history it has been used as a symbol by multiple fields – throughout the history of art, in spirituality, religions and science. It is also democratic, visible to everyone”. This notion of the moon as a democratic symbol is a compelling one, not least because Klingberg’s work and materials directly engage with ideas of democratic media. Often toying with the iconography of marketing and branding, creating logo-like symbols for spiritual ideas, Klingberg explores mass communication and the distribution of information.

Klingberg also calls into question just how democratic the moon really is. In a previous work, *Cosmic Matter*, she explores the planned colonisation of the moon by NASA’s Global Exploration Strategy. Printed tape stretched across scaffolding depicted lunar cycles akin to those included in *A Modern Panarion*, but interspersed with copyright logos and dreamcatchers. Klingberg refers directly to the colonisation and resources of the moon: “a UN treaty from the late 1960s says that no nation could claim the ownership of any celestial body – but that they belong to all. Despite this, private enterprises have since gotten the right to extract Helium 3 on the moon as a new energy source,” she explains. Rhythm and repetition accumulate to induce a spiritual heightened state akin to that created by mantra, sacred chanting and ritual in Klingberg’s work. “The multiple white dot-lines create a kind of wave pattern, an optical effect which emphasises the rhythm of the lunar orbit,” she explains of the piece. In the context of this show it forms an all-encompassing envelope around the works contained within the spaces, a kind of lunar ouroboros with no start or end point, just a perpetually continuing cosmic cycle.

In **Richard Proffitt**’s piece *Cosmic Drift: Elevations of a Fried Mystic*, a manually constructed tape loop induces the repetition of a line from Pink Floyd’s *Chapter 24*, taken from the 1967 album *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. The chapter 24 in question is from the ancient Chinese text I-Ching, and the lyrics largely centre around

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the cosmic significance of the number seven (“A movement is accomplished in six stages, and the seventh brings return,” Syd Barrett muses in the opening lines). Seven is also of utmost importance to the Theosophical Society, with Madame Blavatsky outlining the seven stages of man, the seven rays or colours (each with an ascribed “mahatma” or leader). Taken in isolation and looped endlessly, the Pink Floyd sample in Proffitt’s work becomes an autonomous sound piece, circling and building like a mantra to great psychedelic effect. The piece is presented alongside Proffitt’s sculptural installation: a nebulae of detritus, found objects and totemic symbols which are assembled by the artist to create shrine-like structures. Drawing upon the aesthetic of sixties counter-culture, shamanic rites and New Ageism, Proffitt’s work looks storied and historied, with the components of his work sourced from discrepant locations, from the flea market to the gutter. There is something undeniably mystical about the works, at once evoking dream-catchers and far-flung ritual, yet the materials they are comprised of are often mundane. Proffitt raises questions about the spiritual aura of objects, examining the mystique we attach to the exotic, the primitive and the ceremonial, linking them back to Phelan’s musings upon contemporary representations of prehistoric monuments. Proffitt’s work does forge connections to shamanism, earth-based religion and theosophical values, but for him this is almost always viewed through the lens of sixties and seventies pop culture, in particular music.

The infiltration of nineteenth century occultist values or visual paraphernalia into the contemporary psyche is clearly a recurrent theme in the works included in *A Modern Panarion*. It’s clearly stated that the exhibition’s remit is not to show work from members of, or even directly related to, the Theosophical Society, but to explore similar ideas to those raised by the Victorian think-tank. However one series of works included in the show does directly engage with the historical movement, and its activities in Dublin: a series of C-type photographic prints by **Dorje de Burgh** depicting some murals uncovered on the walls of 3 Ely Place, Dublin – the one-time headquarters of the Irish branch of the Theosophical Society.

Thought to have been painted by George “Æ” Russell in the mid 1890s, the revealed segment of the mural shows various mysterious figures including what appears to be a mythical serpent and several entities, on varying scale, distributed across the heavens. Its muted palette and soft shapes make it difficult to distinguish, let alone ascribe meaning or narrative to, but it has been suggested that these murals relate directly to ideas expressed in Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*. Hidden behind wallpaper for a number of decades, the murals were only recently re-discovered, and even now remain only partially revealed. These glimpses into the cultural life of Dublin’s Theosophical Society are rare, and the murals serve as a rather anomalous reminder of the Society’s faded presence in Dublin. Perhaps the fact that they are coming to light now has some parallels to the ideas which inspired them: the cosmic cycle having come back full circle, having taken in a delightful orbit of modernist painting, New Age philosophy, sci-fi television, mass media and 1960s counter-culture en route. Like prehistoric monuments before them, the drawings provide only a fragment of knowledge about the fascinating circumstances in which they were created – but this element of mysterious perhaps only serves to heighten their bewitching pull.

This text is an abridged version of an essay by Rosa Abbott that will be included in a publication produced in conjunction with this exhibition. This publication, which will also feature essays by Pádraic E. Moore and Logan Sisley, will be launched at a closing event on 4th September.

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Dublin City Gallery
The Hugh Lane
Charlemont House
Parnell Square North
Dublin 1 Ireland
t +353 1 222 5564
e info.hughlane@
dublincity.ie
www.hughlane.ie

