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This special feature collects three of the presentations that we enjoyed during our online conference Deus ex Machina: Transcending Esoteric Traditions through Modern Technology, organized on 25 and 26 February 2021 by the Department for the Study of Religions, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, and RASWE – Research Association for the study of Western Esotericism. Although occurring during the unfortunate times of the pandemic, we concluded that an online conference was a solution befitting of the theme – an attempt to make the best of the situation by means of technology. The intent was to explore something that we had an interest in, which at the same time had historical and social relevance.

The practice of magic has, in fact, frequently gone hand in hand with technological development. In contrast to the idea of esoteric practices representing an underdeveloped science, the occult arts instead have developed into an independent, fascinating albeit controversial and often confusing branch of knowledge. The dichotomy of science and religion is a common misconception, one that has arisen because of a history of intellectual skirmishes between these two spheres of human practice and thought, often resulting in violent physical conflict. For the purpose of the conference we decided, therefore, to view esotericism as a system of belief that has relied on technologies or a set of skills, methods and processes dedicated to the achievement of an objective – in this case, methods, skills and procedures that allow explorers of the invisible to extend their capacities within a determined cultural expression for the purpose of exploring the metaphysical.

A magical ritual acts as an interactive means founded on certain principles and following a procedure. It intends to place the magician in contact with a subtle hidden reality that overlaps and influences ordinary reality. On the other hand, scientific exploration attempts to reproduce and chal-

lenge the gods in a promethean manner and push scientific advancement to achieve possibilities that appear transcendental. The narratives of the spheres of existence where intermediary beings act as engineers of existence with a divine creator as an immobile engine litter multiple, mystical traditions. Their development is a testament of how the ancient mystery schools spawned hidden mystical currents which further drew from other cultures, blending and overlapping with greater religious movements across history. For example, the Romans adopted the Greek and Egyptian mysteries, just as they also gathered prior knowledge from the Babylonians, and supposedly also Vedic mysteries. This transformation continued, as Christianity incorporated aspects of Jewish mysticism, and the Renaissance saw the revival of the Classic traditions reinterpreted to unsuccessfully accommodate the Vatican standards.

The development of scientific thinking in the 19th and part of the 20th centuries was applied not only to disprove the existence of an occult, invisible dimension but also to support the field of the paranormal and interpret the numinous in allegedly positivistic terms albeit with different ontological assumptions. Before this time, Magic, alchemy, and astrology were conceptualized as systems for the interaction with hidden principles or energies of the universe which an ordinary uninitiated person would not be able to conceive. This knowledge was theoretical but accompanied by a direct Gnostic cognitive form of access which was not transmissible in any communicative form. The modern era attempted to achieve this knowledge equated with mystical states of consciousness by pursuing multiple methodologies or technologies to improve this form of transmission to the point of animating elements of culture which are not traditionally associated with the spiritual.

Electronic apparatuses, synthetic materials, chemical spirituality, and digital Gnosis are making their way into spiritual systems of belief and influencing their meditative, ritual and magical techniques. Esotericism has been associated with the idea of rejected knowledge, that which is not accepted by academic institutions but whose presence has spread into all strata and expressions of humanity and has sometimes been a guiding force in the development of scientific and technological advancement. Inspiration, curiosity and enchantment are certainly things that are part of the field of esotericism. Contemporary mythologies often bring the occult and the technological together to creatively reinterpret archetypical narratives and philosophically challenging perspectives.

As is probably noticeable by now, the area of research covering the interconnections between seeking esoteric knowledge and the use of technological possibilities to obtain it, exemplified by the rapid technological progress experienced in the past century, is broad and diverse. The confe-

rence Deus ex Machina offered a platform to discuss topics related to this area in a complex, multidisciplinary scope, ranging from history, through philosophy, to cognitive studies. The title itself originates from the ancient Greek tragedies, where the characters depicting gods were lifted to the stage by a mechanical device, hence the translated expression "god from the machine". The philosopher Aristotle was the first to employ the expression as a device for resolving plot issues, a rather unfortunate and undesirable device, however, whose adaptation reflected a lack of creative prowess by the author. In Aristotle's' critique, the god from the machine descends and solves any plot holes at times when the story is unable to continue on its own due to logical fallacies. In our usage, the god from the machine is an element worthy of research.

Technology itself has, in our research focus, become the god from the machine, in a figurative sense – technology which merges with esoteric practices, not just as a more flexible medium for the transition of knowledge, but also as a direct conduit for metaphysical activities, or even the source of devotion itself. As already mentioned, the various esoteric and occult ideas are frameworks that are constantly evolving, syncretically merging with each other, often creating an amalgam of ideas rooted in the hidden mysteries of the past, but strongly adapted to the necessities of contemporary society. It is thus of no surprise that such a lively and reactive current is eagerly absorbing new possibilities of information storage, sharing and exchange. With no dogmatic restrictions regarding the prescribed form, nor a clergy resistant to the ideas of change, esoteric practices adapted quickly to modern technological trends; television, digitalization and IT, pop culture and the internet are just a few of the channels that helped spread esoteric ideas. Rituals that were previously reserved for clandestine environments far from the public eye are now being presented on streaming platforms and gradually gaining followers. Knowledge hidden in ancient grimoires is now publicly shared in digital form. Practitioners are becoming influencers through social media. But why stop there? Reflecting the rapid acceleration of technological progress, nanotechnologies and implants are slowly becoming the next reachable stage. Transhumanism, a social and philosophical movement promoting the research of human-enhancing technologies, is already gaining its momentum. With the aim of transcending the physical boundaries of humankind, it is important to think about how this will influence spiritual development.

This is the outline of the framework we were analyzing while preparing this conference. Many of these and similar questions were addressed, generating a lively discussion with experts from multiple research areas. This special feature of Religio brings you a few examples of the topics and applied methodologies that were presented.

We decided to organize the papers following an order of anti-technological ideology followed by an antinomian materialistic spirituality and, finally how the numinous is incarnated in technological aesthetics. Beginning with Marleen Thaler's paper *How Modern is Technology? The Link between Prehistoric UFOs and Modern Traditionalism* we will be immersed in the current of Traditionalism, a movement which opposed modernization and technological advancement. It moreover wished to support an ideal form of primitivism of a time long lost, where ancient civilizations comparable to Eden and other heavenly abodes were blessed by advanced alien technologies and were a testimony to spiritual elevation or even godhood. Subsequently, in Aaron French's paper *Parallel Metaphors in Theosophy and Transhumanism*, materialism inspired by mystical thinking will lead to the conceptualization of transhumanist movements and ideals that wish to abandon the human condition through the implementation of technological advancement capable of harnessing or generating consciousness, thus achieving a state which would imitate some characteristics of the numinous. Finally, as to fully embody the title of the conference, Andrej Kapcár's paper *The Aesthetics of the Machine-God: Transcendence, Salvation, or Dystopia in the Image of the Technological God-Entity* explores the manifestations of the divine and their worship, creation and conceptualization within the framework of popular culture. How is the face of God recognized in the machine?

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