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## **MAGIC IN THE AIR: MEMES, ESOTERICA, AND THE INTERNET**

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### **Introduction**

Leading up to, during, and immediately following the 2016 US election of Donald Trump, there was buzz about magic on the internet. From the meme magic of the cult of Kek to liberal witches performing binding spells, magic seemed to emerge out of thin air. However, while technology and the occult may seem like strange bedfellows, they have a cozier historical relationship than we often acknowledge. For instance, it has been well-documented that there was a synergetic relationship between telegraphy and spiritualism (Sconce, 2000) and we can consider ciphers used to construct grimoires as an antecedent to modern techno-cryptography (Reeds, 1998). In what follows, I historicize internet magic specifically situating “meme magic” within the broader context of both digital and occult histories. Just as spiritualist séances articulated hopes and anxieties of mass communication, meme magic speaks to contemporary concerns and desires about the spread of propaganda.

### **The Magic Wars of 2016**

The events of the magic meme war relating to the 2016 election cycle, generally begins with the appropriation of Pepe the Frog as a troll mascot. The image of Pepe was originally created in 2010 as an apolitical character in a web comic. In 2016 4chan and 8chan began using the image in racist, antisemitic, and trollish ways (Asprem, 2020). Simultaneously, Pepe became associated with “kek” – an inversion of “lol” gleaned from the game *World of Warcraft*. (In *WoW* players choose to be either on alliance or horde teams and the garbling of in-game text between factions transforms “lol” into “kek.”) As the term continued to be used, it became associated with meme magic, and many 4channers discovered that “Kek” is the name of the Egyptian god of chaos (Tuters, 2019). These things coalesced into a broader discourse about the viability of meme magic, with the goal of using the spreadability of content online to enact changes upon reality. Broadly we can see both Kek and social media-based magic as a method of understanding and controlling technologies and information flow that is otherwise ineffable.

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## Historicizing Meme Magic

It is easy to approach magic online as a new phenomenon, however, the use of digital memes and social media as esoteric tools is neither new nor extraordinary. The occult world has been an unseen but pivotal part of the internet since some of its earliest iterations: via the technopagan movement of the 1990s and early 2000s (Davis, 1998/2015), via attempts to turn virtual reality into an astral plane (Crow, 2014), via the semi-spiritual tech iconoclasm of *MONDO 2000* and *High Frontiers/Reality Hackers* (Davis, 1998/2015), or via the offhand esotericism first seen in the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and later within the 'WELL network (Davis, 2019). Psychedelic advocate Timothy Leary referred to the internet as a “new spiritual state” to strive towards (Leary 2008, p. 22).

Technopaganism of the 1990s and early 2000s became a mode of re-purposing technologies to embody an esotericism that de-prioritized belief and religious practice, and emphasized the fluidity of presence and the precarity of reality. Many early discussions of virtual reality and the internet were built out of the psychedelic desires to manifest a “universality of consciousness” that transcended the physical realm (Dery, 1997). One 1986 guide on magical practices by the Lincoln Order Of Neuromancers advocates using emerging technologies as a mode of Techno-Shamanism for scrying and other purposes (SKaRaB et al, 1986). Meme magic was embedded in occult ASCII art from the mid-1990s in text files, and texts such as the “Necromemicon.” By the mid-1990s, groups such as (Z) Cluster, Nutmeg, and TIAMAT created a tapestry of technologically savvy magicians, all sharing a variety of methods. And so, years before the idea of memes (let alone meme magic) had become broadly popularized, Kirk Packwood’s book, *Memetic Magic* (2004) suggests that a magician can use images online to manipulate the “fabric of reality” (pp. 7). In other words, while we might regard meme magic as a new phenomenon it emerged in tandem with the internet.

Yet, Technopaganism was largely built off of pre-digital 20<sup>th</sup> century occult practices. For instance, meme magic necessarily references 20<sup>th</sup> century occult artist Austin Osman Spare who innovated an individualistic form of sigil magic. Per Spare, sigils are built out of abstractions from words or ideas and spread broadly to function subconsciously (Spare, 1913). Later, Spare’s practices were reworked into systems such as Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs’ “cut-up method” of magic (Burroughs, 1982) and through the proliferation of Chaos Magick in the 1970s and 80s (Carroll, 1987). While Chaos Magick is now often attributed to right-wing forms of esotericism (particularly in light of Kek) this trajectory demonstrates that the practices themselves began in apolitical ways and have echoed the shifts of information flows over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

## Rethinking Memes (Magically)

As we continue to grasp the cultural resonance of memes and the digital culture in our broader contemporary moment, it is worth considering the relationship between memes, the internet, and occult practices. Occultists latched on to Dawkins’ terminology long before the broader public did, building off the idea that “magic is the science and art of causing change to occur to conformality with will” (Carroll, 1987 pp. 7) and that the internal awareness, circulation, and mutation inherent to contemporary memes (Shifman, 2014) has a kind of result that believers interpret as inherently magical. The

magic wars of the late 2010s was a moment of (re)evolution when esoteric beliefs transferred into broader practices, representing the anxieties and desires about the spread of information and the ineffability of our emerging technologies.

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