

ESOLIT 3: ESOTERICISM, LITERATURE AND COUNTERCULTURE

16-17 April 2026

University of Copenhagen, Centre for the Study of Theosophy and Esotericism,
Karen Blixens Plads, South Campus, Room 4A-1-60



ESOLIT

“Esotericism, Literature and Counterculture” is the third annual conference of the Network for the Study of Esotericism and Literature (ESOLIT). It is sponsored by the Centre for the Study of Theosophy and Esotericism (CCSTE) and the research project entitled “Twisting the Fabric of Space: On the Art and Politics of the Hidden” (University of Copenhagen).

The scientific committee is chaired by Prof. Tim Rudbøg (University of Copenhagen), Prof. Nemanja Radulović (University of Belgrade), Dr Tom Fischer (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes) and Dr Aaron French (University of Copenhagen).

Program - 16 April 2026

08:30 Welcome

08:50 Opening

Session 1. *The Counterculture*

Chair: Tim Rudbøg

09.00 Kasper OPSTRUP, “Between Esoteric Surrealism and Moroccan Magic: Brion Gysin’s Occult Aesthetics and the Counterculture”

09.25 William REDWOOD, “William S. Burroughs: Anthropology of an Enigma”

09.50 Gregg HARMSTON, “The Case of CCRU and the Second Burroughs: Esoteric Counterculture, Mythos and Magical Writing”

10.15 Salma FELLAHI, “The Hippie Survival Manual: When Cultivating One’s Psychic Garden is a Magical Act”

Coffee break **10.40-11.00.**

Session 2. *Comparative Approaches*

Chair: Tom Fischer

11.00. Piero LATINO, “‘Siamo tutti in pericolo’ and ‘è inutile che io parli’: The Unheard Voice of Literature in the Epoch of Counterculture”

11.25. Mozhdeh SAMETI, “Diegesis and Counterculture: Formal Uses of Esotericism in 1960s-1970s Theatre”

11.50 Aaron FRENCH, “Entanglements of Occultism and Modernism in Weird Fiction”

Lunch **12.15.**

Keynote.

13.15 Birgit MENZEL, “Literature, Esotericism, and Counterculture in Late and Post-Soviet Russia”

Session 3. *Counterculture and its Roots*

Chair: Nemanja Radulović

14.15 Gísli MAGNÚSSON, “From Lebensreform to Counterculture: The Esoteric Foundations and 1960s Reception of Hermann Hesse”

14.40 Ivana RYŠKA VAJDOVÁ, “Jung between Esotericism and Literature: The Formation of Twentieth Century Countercultural Spirituality”

15.05 Moritz MAURER, “Glass Towers and Earth Temples: Esotericism, Sexuality, and Countercultural Literary Strategies in Wilhelmine Germany”

Coffee break **15.30.-15.55.**

Session 4. Counterculture as a Global Phenomenon

Chair: Aaron French

15.55 Tiina MAHLAMÄKI, “Esotericism and the Turku Underground Movement”

16.20 Nemanja RADULOVIĆ, “Esoteric Sources of Serbian and Yugoslav 1970s Countercultural Poetry: Counterculture in Communism”

16.45 Tim RUDBØG, “*A Bewitched Life*: Fiction and Occult Practice”

17.10 Nicole BAUER, “Demonizing the Occult: Contemporary Catholic Exorcism Literature and the Ambivalent Production of Esotericism”

Announcements

17.30 Book presentation: Hårrald TOKSVÆRD will read excerpts from his novel *God Will Know His Own* (2026).

18.00 Reception

Program - 17 April 2026

Session 5. Receptions and Legacies of Counterculture (I)

Chair: Kasper Opstrup

09.00 Véronique CAMPION-VINCENT, “Vincent Ravalec, A Counterculture French Author”

09.25 Yijia FENG, “Fiction as Esoteric Technology: Lovecraft, Counterculture, and the Production of Modern Esotericism”

09.50 Dovydas SKAROLSKIS, “Occult Narration and Fractured Knowledge: *Disco Elysium* as Esoteric Countercultural Literature of Soviet Postcolonialism”

10.15 Andrej KAPCAR, “Flesh Rewritten: Esoteric Posthumanism and Countercultural Body Politics in *All Tomorrows* and *Warhammer 40.000*”

Coffee break **10.40-11.00.**

Session 6. Counterculture: Other Places, Other Times

Chair: Olivia Cejvan

11.00 Tom FISCHER, “A ‘Jules Verne of the Occult’: Gilbert Augustin-Thierry and his *Récits de l’Occulte*”

11.25 Knut GRAW, “H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* and the Question of Precession”

11.50 Conner HABIB, “The Hidden Spirit in Horror: Horror Writers on the Esoteric in Their Own Words”

Lunch **12.15.-13.15.**

Session 7. Receptions and Legacies of Counterculture (II)

Chair: Ethan Doyle White

13.15 Adas DIRŽYS, “Counterculture or Counternature? Occult Ontologies in Contemporary Weird Fiction”

13.40 Tancredi MARRONE, “Time Travel, Consciousness, and Conspiracy Theories in Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles*”

14.05 Gintautas MAŽEIKIS, “Literature and the Dark Enlightenment?”

14.30 Idan EDUT, “The Case of the Jewish-Indian Tribe: The Adoption of an Esoteric Identity as a Countercultural Practice”

Coffee break **14.55.-15.15.**

Session 8. New Readings through Countercultural Lenses

Chair: Tiina Mahlamäki

15.15 Alexandra NAGEL, “Maria Penkala: Oscillating between Literature, Esotericism, and Counterculture”

15.40 Jonathan CAHANA-BLUM, “‘Hosea was a Prophet of the Lord; but I speak not for the Lord, I speak for Gomer the Whore’: Susan Taubes’s Poetry as a Sacrament in a Jewish Gnostic Cult”

16.05 Pénélope SZULKA, “The Church turned Prison and the Prison turned Church: Redemptive Inversions in Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* and Christopher Fry’s *The Sleep of Prisoners*”

Closing

Book of Abstracts

Keynote Speaker: **Prof. Birgit Menzel** (Centre for Advanced Studies, Erlangen)

“Literature, Esotericism, and Counterculture in Late and Post-Soviet Russia”

Literature and esotericism have much in common. Both express human imagination through language and both tend to transcend the rational mind. Historically, they are connected by their close ties to religion, as well as their origins in folk myths and beliefs. Christian religion has shaped much of Western literature, in Russia, it even directly originated from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, while esotericism has been driven into counterculture as rejected knowledge. Since the early twentieth century, with the emergence of literary studies as a science, literature has been defined as “language in aesthetic function” (Jakobson). Counterculture, especially in socialist countries, ruled by a secular ideology, became a space for both esotericism and nonconformist literature.

Within the relatively new academic field of esoteric studies, the interest in literature and the arts has occurred even more recently. Publications have been offered mostly by scholars from disciplines other than literary studies, while an even smaller number of specialized studies can be found scattered across various philological disciplines.

In my talk, I will first offer some definitions and general thoughts on the uses of esotericism in literature. What do they have in common? And how are they yet distinct from each other? I will discuss the epistemic value of studying both as interrelated fields, the current state of research, and methodological approaches.

The impact of esotericism on literature and the arts in Russia, i.e. the Russian and Soviet empires and their post-Soviet territories, is much more extensive and profound than we have known to date. It is an understudied topic, and its study against various – linguistic, disciplinary, epistemological and political – boundaries has only begun within the past decades.

I will make an attempt to introduce and sketch this vast field. As a literary scholar and Slavist, I will focus on the three topics in the context of Russian culture. Since the defining era for esotericism in Russia was the turn of the twentieth century, the so-called “Silver Age”, when Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Hermeticism and gnostic Christianity became dominant features of culture, I will give a brief overview of these roots with literary examples, focusing on key trends, continuing lines and genres which have shaped the specific relations between literature, esotericism and counterculture from the first decades under Soviet rule until the post-Soviet 1990s.

This will be followed by a more detailed presentation of several examples of occult underground prose and poetry, as well as officially published texts, ranging from the 1960s to the 1990s. I conclude by offering some elements of an “esoteric poetics” and some theses about what current esoteric studies could learn from the study of literature and culture in Russia.

BAUER Nicole (University of Graz)

“Demonizing the Occult: Contemporary Catholic Exorcism Literature and the Ambivalent Production of Esotericism”

Recent decades have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of popular Catholic exorcism literature, ranging from autobiographical accounts of exorcists to narrative reports of demonic possession and spiritual warfare. While these texts explicitly position themselves against “the occult”, New Age practices, and esoteric spiritualities, they simultaneously mobilize epistemic structures commonly associated with esotericism: claims to hidden knowledge, hierarchies of invisible beings, charismatic authority, and access to transcendent forces.

This paper argues that contemporary Catholic exorcism literature constitutes a distinct form of religious counterculture. Not in opposition to ecclesial authority, but as a challenge to secular, psychological, and medical regimes of interpretation that seek to explain possession in non-religious terms. By demonizing the occult, these narratives paradoxically reproduce and stabilize esoteric modes of knowledge within a Catholic framework.

Drawing on discourse theoretical perspectives, the paper analyses how esotericism is negotiated as both boundary marker and epistemic resource. In doing so, it proposes to rethink “counterculture” not merely as aesthetic or political rebellion, but as the production of alternative regimes of religious knowledge within contemporary Christian contexts.

CAHANA-BLUM Jonathan (Independent Scholar)

“‘Hosea was a Prophet of the Lord; But I speak not for the Lord, I speak for Gomer the Whore’: Susan Taubes’s Poetry as a Sacrament in a Jewish Gnostic Cult”

Due to recently published archival material, it came to light that Susan (1928-1969) and Jacob (1923-1987) Taubes were engaged in creating a Jewish Gnostic cultic community in 1950s New York and Jerusalem. This cultic community was bounded by certain rituals which were meant to affect a revulsion within Judaism and trigger its transformation into an inclusive world religion. The Taubes were trying to reenact and combine two historical processes: the Pauline reform, which made Judaism a universal religion, and the Sabbatean and Frankist revolutions, which thoroughly changed Judaism and prepared it for modernity. Their own cult, so they hoped, would affect a new incarnation of Judaism as a worldwide religion that would answer the contemporary historical situation.

Susan Taubes’s yet unpublished poem, *Gomer and Hosea*, served as the sacrament of the cult. Jacob and Susan, as founders of the cult, were believed to be a reincarnation of the biblical prophet Hosea and the notorious prostitute Gomer. Jacob/Hosea represented the patriarchal God of Israel, embodying the tradition that must be renegotiated, while Susan/Gomer was there fecundate it, and through her “whoredom” makes Judaism a world religion. This remarkable poem, narrated from the abjected woman perspective, spelled out the group’s theology and practice, and as such serves as a veritable example for the use of literature in countercultural esotericism.

This paper will thus detail this interesting interplay between imaginative poetry, cult practice, and religious concepts, and investigate in which ways these amalgamated into esoteric knowledge that informed an intriguing and ambitious – if ultimately short lived – religious sect.

CAMPION-VINCENT Véronique (Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris)

“Vincent Ravalec, A Counterculture French Author”

Addressing the suggested theme “How Esoteric Themes and Practices Influenced the Poetic Strategies of Counterculture Authors?“, the paper will present, discuss and comment on the treatment of esoteric themes and practices in some of Vincent Ravalec’s novels; I shall focus on *Nostalgie de la magie noire* (1997), *Bonbon désespéré* (2016), and the trilogy *Sainte Croix les Vaches* (2018-2020).

Among the prominent topics that run through these writings are the end of the world and its renewal through the hero’s quasi divine agentivity and his knowledge of Black Magic; the supernatural revitalization of barren areas; or the access to sacred realms and messianic callings. The practices presented mix old style sorcery and New Age energy, in a folkloric approach. The themes of counterculture are also present: the 2018-2020 trilogy, for example, involves characters from deserted rural areas isolated within their country but also characters from political life: the ambitious young female politician or professionals high up in power – even the president’s wife – whose empty “bullshit” discourses are heavily ridiculed.

Beyond these literary considerations, this presentation will also be an opportunity to briefly outline the trajectory of Ravalec (b. 1962), who has notably co-authored successful books on psychedelics in 2004, 2008 and 2018.

DIRŽYS Adas (Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, Vilnius)

“Counterculture or Counternature? Occult Ontologies in Contemporary Weird Fiction”

Weird fiction ontologies have long been permeated by occult architectonics. While weird fiction sometimes transitions into occult fiction, and occult fiction into weird fiction, this transformation is usually grounded in an epistemic condition of belief – namely, whether a supernatural element is included in the work of fiction. However, the situation in weird fiction is less straightforward, as it most commonly challenges clearly defined epistemological preconditions by attempting to destabilize our inherent knowledge of reality.

A particular grey zone can be identified in contemporary weird fiction (Matt Cardin, Reggie Oliver, Adam Nevill, etc.), where authors’ intentions in writing fiction do not necessarily align with a simplistic framework that prioritizes a specific secular belief.

From these cases, it can be inferred that weird fiction may possess a more pronounced “counternature” character, exemplified by a counternarrativity of ontological dispositions. In this presentation, I will argue that a positive analytical valence can be achieved through the

introduction of a comparative framework between weird and occult ontologies – a strategy that has the potential to expand cultural analyses within genre studies.

EDUT Idan (University of Haifa)

“The Case of the Jewish-Indian Tribe: The Adoption of an Esoteric Identity as a Countercultural Practice”

In the final decades of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of individuals and groups in Europe and elsewhere seeking to adopt the imagined persona of the “Native-American” expanded significantly. Increasing numbers of people are embracing a fantasized primitivism, recognizing it either as an alternative to modernity or as an act of rebellion against it. In Israel, this phenomenon assumed a distinctive form through the emergence of the “Jewish-Indian” tribe – people who adopt a lifestyle inspired by Native-American cultures.

This cultural adoption (regarded as esoteric in Israel) enables a deliberate bypassing of local political issues and questions of indigeneity, in favour of a romanticized, globally oriented alternative. Key sources of inspiration for this countercultural phenomenon include the works of Karl May (1842-1912) and Ernest Thompson Seton’s (1860-1946) *The Red Book, or How to Play Indian* (1904), as well as similar texts that fostered an esoteric, romanticized images and a model for alternative ways of life and resistance.

This talk aims to examine how “American indigeneity” is positioned within the Israeli countercultural space and to facilitate broader questions, such as how “low” literature and esoteric practices enable the creation of local counterculture, the dynamics of inter-religious encounter, cultural importation, and so on.

FELLAHI Salma (University Chouaib Doukkali, El Jadida)

“The Hippie Survival Manual: When Cultivating One’s Psychic Garden is a Magical Act”

Our contribution proposes to study music and the use of psychotropic substances within the hippie counterculture as sophisticated literary and esoteric tools. We argue that song lyrics and narratives of drug experiences are not mere testimonies of entertainment, but function as “travel manuals” for the mind. These writings effectively rehabilitate ancient forms of knowledge discarded by modernity, such as shamanism, mystical ecstasy, and ritual trance.

Musical creation and the ritual use of substances assert themselves as a « poetic strategy » of rupture. In this era, literature no longer merely described reality; it became a manual for altering consciousness. We will analyse how iconic figures like Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970), Janis Joplin (1943-1970), Jim Morrison (1943-1971) and Grace Slick (b. 1939) transformed sensory experience into an esoteric and political initiation against the material world. Furthermore, the influence of Jerry Garcia (1942-1995) and Syd Barrett (1946-2006) illustrates how the poetic deconstruction of perception acts as a “magical device”.

Adopting a psychoanalytic and sociopoetic approach, this research explores the mechanisms of the unconscious and the capacity of the counterculture to transform psychic experience into a tool for rejecting the industrial model. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how altered states serve as essential means for the reconfiguration of knowledge.

FENG Yijia (Fudan University, Shanghai)

“Fiction as Esoteric Technology: Lovecraft, Counterculture, and the Production of Modern Esotericism”

This paper examines how Howard P. Lovecraft’s (1890-1937) Cthulhu Mythos became a generative engine for a new form of esoteric thought within the countercultural occult networks of the 1960s and 1970s. Focusing on the reception and transformation of Lovecraft’s fiction in the work of Kenneth Grant (1924-2011) and the Typhonian tradition, as well as its resonances in Anton LaVey’s (1930-1997) Church of Satan, Dagon-oriented occult groups, and Peter J. Carroll’s (b. 1953) chaos magic, the paper argues that Lovecraft’s fictional cosmology was reconfigured into an operational magical system rather than merely a symbolic or literary influence.

In these contexts, elements such as the *Necronomicon* and the Great Old Ones functioned not as allegorical figures but as technical interfaces for altered states of consciousness, ritual experimentation, and the production of esoteric knowledge. Crucially, the fictional status of these constructs was not regarded as a weakness; on the contrary, it enabled a decisive break with lineage-based models of esoteric authority and transmission. Lovecraftian occultism thus exemplifies a countercultural mechanism of esoteric generation in which practice emerges “in reverse” from fictional literature rather than from claims to ancient tradition.

By situating this process within broader debates on counterculture and rejected knowledge, the paper proposes a reconceptualization of modern esotericism as a narrative-driven technology of world-making, in which imagination itself becomes a central ritual and epistemic tool.

FISCHER Tom (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris)

“A ‘Jules Verne of the Occult’: Gilbert Augustin-Thierry and his *Récits de l’Occulte*”

Nephew of the historian Augustin Thierry (1795-1856), Gilbert Augustin-Thierry (1840-1915) is largely forgotten today. A journalist and novelist, he nevertheless enjoyed relative success at the end of the nineteenth century. Initially the author of several historical novels, he began a series entitled “*Récits de l’Occulte*” (“Tales of the Occult”) at the turn of the 1880s: these include *Marfa ou Le Palimpseste* (1887), *La Tresse blonde* (1889), *La Bien-Aimée* (1892), *Le Masque* (1894) and *Le Stigmate* (1898).

Influenced by his reading of Neoplatonic and Hindu texts, but also by the contemporary occultist movement, Gilbert Augustin-Thierry wished to explore the fringes of the fantastic. He incorporated spiritualist theories or hypnotic phenomena into the plot of his stories, while seeking to probe the destinies of the human soul. Above all, however, he attempted to impose a

counter-model to the positivist literature and philosophy that dominated at the time: “Naturalism has had its day”, he declares in his preface to *La Bien-Aimée*, a preface he himself describes as a “profession of literary faith”.

This paper therefore aims to examine this (unsuccessful) attempt to suggest new esoteric themes in the literary field, which sought to break fundamentally with the Naturalism and Symbolism of the time. In addition to Gilbert Augustin-Thierry’s texts themselves, particular attention will be paid to the reception of his work, both through press articles and the exhumation of his private and unpublished correspondence.

GRAW Knut (Centre for Advanced Studies, Erlangen)

“H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* and the Question of Precession”

The iconography and narrative universe of popular culture since the countercultural movements of the 1960s to the present cannot be thought of without the idea of the existence of extraterrestrial lifeforms and interstellar travel, often symbolically epitomized in the idea of the existence of the connecting objects of unidentified flying objects (UFOs). Researchers have pointed out that UFO – now mostly referred to as UAP – related phenomena such as their sightings and abduction experiences were historically preceded by representations and narratives of extraterrestrial vessels and life-forms in a literature that became known as science fiction, a situation referred to in the respective secondary literature as the problem of precession.

Looking into the reception and history of the text that arguably gave rise or at least served as an important fulcrum to the very idea of UFOs – H. G. Well’s famous 1898 short novel *The War of the Worlds*, I will argue in this paper that in Wells’ case, literature was not only possibly influenced by esoteric sources such as spiritism and theosophy but gave itself rise to one of the most persistent manifestations of a seemingly esoteric set of ideas – the existence of and interaction with extraterrestrial life forms.

Diving into Wells’s sources and inspirations, I will further argue that his novel was not only countercultural *avant la lettre* but also formed a concrete, albeit often forgotten, political intervention.

HABIB Conner (Independent Scholar)

"The Hidden Spirit in Horror: Horror Writers on the Esoteric in Their Own Words"

Horror's connection to the occult and the supernatural is obvious: paranormal events, spells cast, beings summoned, and dark shadows from other corridors of reality. But the creative inspirations for horror and the practice of creating it are often regarded as mere aesthetic or genre conventions; at best a form of *Sturm und Drang*, where aim and origin are heightened, individualized emotional states. Using the conversations with horror creators on my podcast (Against Everyone with Conner Habib) as my primary source material, we find the spirit hiding in horror writers' inspirations. Assembling voices of contemporary horror and dark fiction writers, including Brian Evenson, Paul Tremblay, Kelly Link, Sara Gran, Ramsey Campbell, Matt Cardin, Nathan Ballingrud, and others, we will explore complex creative considerations

and practices that overlap Western and other esotericisms. We will also look at intersections between the horror genre itself and occultism, finding new threads of inquiry that are at once conceptual and spiritual, providing new perspectives on horror as a genre, and the depth of its creators' capacities.

HARMSTON Gregg (University of Amsterdam)

“The Case of CCRU and the Second Burroughs: Esoteric Counterculture, Mythos and Magical Writing”

This paper pertains to the links between the noted countercultural figure William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) and the mythos and writing techniques of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU). The novel research presented stems from my 2025 MA thesis and utilises textual analysis of the CCRU literature to elucidate the understudied aspects of their esoteric and occult work, as well as the second semi-fictional Burroughs that exists in their mythos.

I will begin the paper by introducing the real Burroughs in terms of the ways in which his countercultural activity was influenced by, and involved, various esoteric or occult elements. This more esoterically leaning Burroughs is the one referenced, operationalised and expanded into the second Burroughs by the writers of the CCRU. For this group of academics and occultists, based in the UK in the late 1990s, Burroughs was not only a key theoretical influence and reference point but was developed into a central figure in their theory-fictional mythos. Here the second version of Burroughs is a powerful magical figure of sorts, a countercultural revolutionary using writing as occult technology to create or alter realities as part of a covert war over the workings of time and reality itself.

This magical writing used by the second Burroughs figure and the mythos where he resides and uses it are both accomplished using the CCRU concept of “Hyperstition”, a “fiction that makes itself real”. This will be discussed in terms of other forms of writing magic before describing the stages of hyperstitional writing as a magical operation. I will conclude by discussing how these techniques and theories place CCRU writing as countercultural, partly due to the presence and nature of the second Burroughs, as well as discussing how CCRU’s occult writing situates them as a contemporary link in the lineage of esotericism.

KAPCAR Andrej (Masaryk University, Brno)

“Flesh Rewritten: Esoteric Posthumanism and Countercultural Body Politics in *All Tomorrows* and *Warhammer 40.000*”

This paper examines speculative narrative worlds as forms of countercultural esoteric literature through an analysis of posthuman embodiment in *All Tomorrows* (2006) by Cevdet M. Kösemen (b. 1984) and the transmedia lore of *Warhammer 40.000*. Both narratives reject Enlightenment humanism and progressive transhumanist imaginaries, instead presenting the human body as a mutable, symbolically charged site of ritual, punishment, and transcendence.

In *All Tomorrows*, humanity's forced evolutionary transformations under the alien Qu evoke gnostic and demiurgic cosmologies, framing corporeal modification as cosmic retribution rather than scientific advancement. Similarly, *Warhammer 40.000* constructs a ritualized anthropology of the body, where augmentation, but also mutilation, are embedded within liturgical, theurgic, and transgressive frameworks – from the sacramental machine cult of the Imperium and the lost techno-gnosis of the Dark Age of Technology to the excess-driven corporeal experimentation of the Dark Eldar.

By reading these speculative narratives as countercultural mythopoeia, this paper argues that they function as contemporary esoteric counter-literature: re-shaping posthumanism with new moral, cosmological, and ritual meaning while reacting to modern narratives of progress and bodily optimization. In doing so, these texts illustrate how speculative fiction continues to serve as a space for the circulation and reimagination of esoteric anthropologies in contemporary counterculture.

LATINO Piero (Sorbonne Université, Paris/University of Pisa)

“‘Siamo tutti in pericolo’ and ‘è inutile che io parli’: The Unheard Voice of Literature in the Epoch of Counterculture”

“Siamo tutti in pericolo” (“We are all in danger”), these are the words pronounced by the Italian writer and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) in his last interview on 1st November 1975, in which he spoke about a sinister and occult Power that would have influenced the fate of Europe and the world during the years of tension between the 1960s and 1970s. The day after, Pasolini would have been killed. Pasolini personally met and interviewed in 1967 another cardinal figure of the last century, namely the American poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972), who some years before addressed the Italian journalists and affirmed: “è inutile che io parli” (“it is useless that I speak”). By saying so, Pound refused to speak of himself and of what he knew about a political system that he called “usura”.

Like Pasolini and Pound, other writers of the twentieth century – such as Orwell, Huxley and Ionesco, or academics who were also writers such as Eliade, Culianu and Zolla – denounced (also with prophetic tones) the hidden and occult action of the political Power in the history of humanity, particularly in the history of the twentieth century. In all this authors, the esoteric dimension is of paramount importance, though this aspect has not been explored by the critics. Their literary works allow us to better understand the relationships between literature, politics and esotericism, and one of the most interesting aspects which comes out from this relationship is the discourse of counterculture spread especially between the 1960s and 1970s.

Through their literary works, the abovementioned authors portray and prophesy a society steeped in counterculture (whose meaning is polysemous), a counterculture linked to politics, promoted by the Power and imbued with an esoteric dimension. This paper aims to show this unexplored dimension in authors such as Huxley, Orwell, Pound, Pasolini, Ionesco, Culianu, Eliade and Zolla.

MAGNÚSSON Gísli (University of Iceland, Reykjavik)

“From *Lebensreform* to Counterculture: The Esoteric Foundations and 1960s Reception of Hermann Hesse”

This paper investigates the reception of Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) as a countercultural author in the 1960s and 1970s by tracing the esoteric and spiritual foundations of his work back to the *Lebensreform* movement of the early twentieth century. Drawing on close readings of *Demian* (1919), *Steppenwolf* (1927), and *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), the paper argues that Hesse’s countercultural afterlife rests on a coherent spiritual epistemology shaped by neomysticism, gnosticism, Jungian psychology, and a critique of modern dualism.

The paper shows how central motifs in Hesse’s work – initiation, non-dual consciousness, spiritual self-transformation, and resistance to bourgeois normalization – emerge from *Lebensreform* contexts such as Monte Verità and early twentieth century life-reform culture. These same motifs reappeared, with striking continuity, in the 1960s counterculture, where Hesse was read not primarily as a literary modernist but as a guide to spiritual awakening and experiential knowledge.

Rather than interpreting this reception as a naïve misreading, the paper proposes to understand it as a historical resonance between two moments of spiritual dissent. The 1960s reception thus reactivated a suppressed esoteric dimension of Hesse’s work, challenging postwar literary criticism’s marginalization of spirituality and highlighting esotericism as a persistent countercultural force in modern literature.

MAHLAMÄKI Tiina (University of Turku)

“Esotericism and the Turku Underground Movement”

In my presentation, I examine the Turku Underground, a poetry and arts movement active in the 1960s and 1970s whose members became influential figures in Finnish cultural life, including poets Jarkko Laine (1947-2006) and Markku Into (1945-2018), artist Harro Koskinen (b. 1945), and musicians M. A. Numminen (b. 1940) and Rauli “Badding” Somerjoki (1947-1987).

While the movement’s contributions to literature, visual art, and music are relatively well known, its esoteric and occult dimensions – embodied most visibly in the figure of Crowleyan magician and Kabbalist Reima Saarinen (1950-2003) – have barely received any scholarly attention.

My paper explores these lesser-known aspects by analysing the esoteric themes and symbolism, published in the poetry by the Turku Underground activists in their zines *Aamurusko* (“Morning Glow”), *Koivu ja Tähti* (“Birch and Star”), and *Väinön kannel* (“Kantele of Väinö”). Through this material, I aim to shed light on how esoteric and occult ideas circulated within and around this Finnish countercultural movement.

MARRONE Tancredi (Masaryk University, Brno)

“Time Travel, Consciousness, and Conspiracy Theories in Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles*”

The fascination with conspiracy theories and counterculture cannot be underestimated, especially when combined with elements from esotericism, otherwise interpreted as the paranormal. Cases such as MK Ultra, the Stargate Project, and the Artichoke Project, besides their documentation, hold a grip on the minds not only of the original counterculture but also on its successive generations. Tales of mysterious powers that are controlled by the government, secret agents meant to cover up the unspeakable truth. Movements of the absurd, such as Discordianism, have emerged, drawing inspiration from the Kennedy assassination. Aliens are controlling Earth and forming alliances with world powers, particularly royalty.

In his seminal work, Grant Morrison (b. 1960) explores this and much more, drawing on his childhood and his interests in comics and magic, and distilling all his knowledge into his graphic novel, *The Invisibles* (1994-2000). Countercultural images and Imaginarium appear on almost every page and inspire and fuel the characters’ narratives.

I will explore the narrative of time travel, or, as will be seen, dimensional travel, where consciousness, counterculture, and conspiracy theories converge.

MAURER Moritz (University of Vienna)

“Glass Towers and Earth Temples: Esotericism, Sexuality, and Countercultural Literary Strategies in Wilhelmine Germany”

The image of German society under the Second Empire is often that of a garrison state. Yet the new nation’s major cities also fostered a bohemian milieu that deliberately rejected the dominant political, moral, and epistemic norms of Wilhelmine culture. Two particularly influential countercultural scenes were the Berlin network centred around localities such as the famous pub *Zum Schwarzen Ferkel*, and the *Kosmikerkreis* (“Cosmic Circle”) based in the Munich suburb of Schwabing.

From Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), founder of anthroposophy, who attended the drinking sessions of the bohemian *literati* in Berlin, to Ludwig Klages (1872-1956), leading figure of the *Kosmiker* and father of modern graphology, a broad spectrum of literary and esoteric positions was present in both cities.

In this talk, I will contrast Alfred Schuler (1865-1923) – the Schwabing-based apostle of blood mysticism – with Paul Scheerbart (1863-1915), lyricist and utopian writer from Berlin, whose work articulated a cosmic alternative religiosity. This comparison will shed light on the interplay between esotericism and countercultural literature, and complicate prevailing narratives of German modernity and its further developments in the twentieth century.

MAŽEIKIS Gintautas (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas)

“Literature and the Dark Enlightenment?”

In what ways does the Dark Enlightenment manifest itself in fiction and non-fiction literature, and what new social realities does it give rise to? The concept of the Dark Enlightenment emerged from the fields of philosophy, politics, literary analysis, and film studies. It was explored by Nick Land (b. 1962) and Curtis Yarvin (b. 1973, writing as Mencius Moldbug). It is also associated with accelerationism, a term coined by Mark Fisher (1968-2017) and Aris Komporozos-Athanasίου.

Yarvin’s blog essays are examples of narrative, satirical or speculative political rhetoric. Popular topics include cyberpunk (William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, 1984), weird horror (H. P. Lovecraft’s stories), dystopian modernism (J. G. Ballard’s novels) and speculative paranoia (Philip K. Dick’s books). I would also include new weird fiction, as represented by Jeff VanderMeer (1968-2003), as it relates to the main idea of the presentation, which is to critique the binarism of the Enlightenment (light and dark) and present an alternative concept taken from new weird fiction and speculative paranoia: yellow-shining, blue-shining and black-shining. In Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014-2024), the concept of “the Shining” is metaphorically linked to “the Brightness”: a transformative – and frequently malevolent – biological force in Area X that alters organisms and socio-biological realities.

How do these new social realities emerge and evolve? Why is the continuous search for new transcendental social realities through literature and art important?

NAGEL Alexandra (Independent Scholar)

“Maria Penkala: Oscillating between Literature, Esotericism, and Counterculture”

In 1972 Maria Penkala (née Goldberg, Kyiv, 1905-Amsterdam, 1997) published a book about reincarnation by the just established “ideological” (“esoteric”) Dutch publishing house Ankh-Hermes. Six years later, Penkala’s study of the “last Atlanteans” followed. Penkala, however, was a porcelain expert. In addition to highly praised handbooks for ceramic collectors, she wrote romanticized stories.

The two exceptions are *Festival der Schimmen: een Fantasmagorie* (1967, reprint in 1976; *Festival of Shadows: A Phantasmagoria*) and its sequel *De gekooide Papagaai* (1976; *The Caged Parrot*), in which a parrot features as Hitler reincarnated. All Penkala’s novels were published by mainstream publishers, not Ankh-Hermes. This small company developed into a thriving New Age business, by 1993 having 1200 titles in its fund.

What may have led Penkala to write *The Caged Parrot* is the fact that she was Jewish. Together with her husband, the cartographer Eduard Penkala (Zagreb, 1902-Amsterdam, 1988), she fled in 1938 from Berlin to Amsterdam. Both were spared the camps. Was Maria’s dive into esoteric subjects (reincarnation, Atlantis), and her portrayal of Hitler, perhaps a way to digest the Nazi-years? If so, how “esoteric”, or “countercultural” is this novel, as it was not published by Ankh-Hermes?

OPSTRUP Kasper (University of Copenhagen)

“Between Esoteric Surrealism and Moroccan Magic: Brion Gysin’s Occult Aesthetics and the Counterculture”

This paper examines how a fusion of esoteric surrealism and Moroccan folk magic shaped the literary practice of the artist and writer Brion Gysin (1916-1986). While Gysin is often discussed primarily in relation to his collaborations with William S. Burroughs (1914-1997), I argue that his engagement with non-Western esoteric traditions – particularly ritual aesthetics and magical epistemologies encountered in Morocco – is central to understanding both his collaborative and solo work.

Focusing on Gysin’s development of automatic and aleatory techniques, the paper situates these practices as aligned with esoteric modes of knowledge production, comparable to divination, ritual recombination, and trance writing. Particular attention is given to Gysin’s novel *The Process* (1969), read as an occult narrative structured by ritual logic and non-linear temporality, attempting to transform reading and writing into participatory, initiatory processes.

Lastly, the paper traces the impact of Gysin’s literary innovations in later countercultural formations like Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, where his fusion of magic, art, and linguistic experimentation informed new models of cultural resistance and spiritual praxis. By foregrounding literary form and esoteric engagements, the paper repositions Gysin as a key figure in both countercultural aesthetics and the occult strand of literary modernism.

RADULOVIĆ Nemanja (University of Belgrade)

“Esoteric Sources of Serbian and Yugoslav 1970s Countercultural Poetry: Counterculture in Communism”

The Serbian literary and visual art scene of the 1970s witnessed the emergence of new movements defined by literary and art criticism as neo-avant-garde. Primarily, this involved a constellation of various groups in Novi Sad, with similar developments occurring in Slovenia. These groups possessed a strong countercultural aspect and can be defined as counterculture. Their themes, sources, and public presentations closely corresponded to the Western counterculture of the period and were directly inspired by it. What remains under-researched is how these countercultural movements tapped into esotericism.

References to Rudolf Steiner, Aleister Crowley, ritual magic, the Aquarian Age, Paganism, and Hinduism are readily identifiable, and the authors themselves openly acknowledged sources such as Kabbalah and Tarot. The peak of this tendency was the creation of communes: one in Slovenia, inspired by a visit to Findhorn, and another in Serbia. Participants of the former moved toward the New Age, while those in the latter attracted many interested in “spirituality”; the leader of the Serbian commune produced a body of poetry about communal life and nature.

Poets from Novi Sad clashed with the authorities, and some were even imprisoned. This phenomenon can be seen as an example of the globalisation of Western counterculture, which

can be explained in the context of Yugoslavia's relative political and cultural openness to Western influences. At the same time, there were specific traits: being countercultural meant opposing the official Communist ideology and/or creating alternative, parallel spaces immune to the state's ideological discourse.

REDWOOD William (Independent Scholar)

“William S. Burroughs: Anthropology of an Enigma”

William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) is generally accepted as a major player of the 1950s and 1960s countercultures, yet he was – and still is – viewed by many as problematic, even as a pariah. Moreover, whether produced alone or in collaboration, and whether it be realist, experimental modern or postmodern, no part of his complex corpus of work is an “easy fit” for a critic to conceptualise. Burroughs is fêted by Chaos Magick (part of its claim to be counterculturally “cutting edge”) but his shamanism gives him a wider appeal within alternative spiritual circles, while his literary and artistic work provide separate points of entry into the arts, albeit in an avant-garde sense.

Burroughs therefore speaks from (and to) significantly different sections of the esoteric counterculture. It will, moreover, be suggested that Burroughs can be seen as synecdochally representative of general tendencies within and throughout the broader counterculture, and its relations with the mainstream; he thus constitutes a useful “litmus” figure on which to focus. This paper approaches Burroughs as the anthropologist he was – in both real and metaphorical sense – and examines his biography, his writing, and his later turn to visual art; we zoom in on the man, the magick, and the myth.

Burroughs' aesthetic and esoteric contributions will be shown to be indubitable, but also elusive, with his diverse œuvre still defying full understanding, or full acceptance in any canon, countercultural or otherwise. This, we will suggest, is a feature rather than a bug. The aporetic nature of Burroughs' work and existence ensures, paradoxically, his countercultural and esoteric traction; it is precisely through uncertainty, ambiguity and instability that he makes impact. Burroughs was, in his uncannily anthropological way, a biographical microcosm of the esoteric macrocosm. To know Burroughs is to know esotericism, yet will we ever truly know either?

RUDBØG, Tim (University of Copenhagen)

“*A Bewitched Life*: Fiction and Occult Practice”

This paper examines the interrelationship between nineteenth-century occultism and occulture, focusing on Helena P. Blavatsky's *Nightmare Tales* (1892), particularly the shortstory ‘A Bewitched Life’. The argument is that occult fiction functioned not merely as imaginative entertainment but also as a vital extension of practical occultism, designed to transmit esoteric experiences through narrative form. Drawing on Christopher Partridge's concept of ‘occulture’, Tanya Luhrmann's notion of the ‘paracosm’, and Arthur Versluis's theory of initiatory reading, the paper situates Blavatsky's work within a broader framework in which reading becomes an experiential act and the book a technology for an imaginative initiation into the occult worldview. By analysing the structural and thematic parallels between ‘A Bewitched’ Life and Blavatsky's non-fictional writings, including her Esoteric Instructions, this paper demonstrates

how her fiction enacts the key theosophical principles of moral purification, self-knowledge, and spiritual transformation. The argument highlights that occult fiction, as a literary and pedagogical form, provides an accessible means for readers to engage affectively and experientially with esoteric ideas beyond the ritual and institutional settings of organised occultism. In doing so, the paper reframes Blavatsky's literary production as an essential component of 'lived occultism' and a precursor to modern occultural practices. The conclusion is that nineteenth-century occult fiction represents an important medium through which the imaginative and initiatory dimensions of esotericism are articulated, practiced and sustained.

RYŠKA VAJDOVÁ Ivana (University of Vienna)

“Jung between Esotericism and Literature: The Formation of Twentieth Century Countercultural Spirituality”

This paper proposes to reconsider the figure of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) not as an esoteric thinker, a position from which he is often interpreted, but rather as an author whose literary style stimulated the imagination on which countercultural spirituality is grounded. Although Jung engaged intensively with alchemy, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, astrology, and the I Ching, his relationship to these traditions was neither confessional nor initiatory. Jung did not seek to restore these esoteric currents as metaphysical or religious systems. His method is closer to hermeneutics than to revivalism. At the same time, the way he extracted esoteric motifs from their historical and cultural contexts and subsequently employed them as illustrations of his theory of the unconscious anticipated the mythopoetic discourse of modern subjectivity.

With the publication of the *Red Book* (1913-1930) and the *Black Books* (1913-1932), this dimension became even more pronounced. Here Jung does not appear as an occult practitioner, but rather as a literary architect of an imaginary world in which alchemical and Gnostic motifs become dramatizations of inner transformation, psychic conflicts, and metaphors of individuation. By detaching esoteric symbols from their dogmatic frameworks and translating them into psychological language, he rendered them transferable, experiential, and culturally adaptable. This literary-psychological translation enabled Jung to become a key intellectual precursor of the New Age movement.

The paper argues that Jung occupies a liminal position between esotericism and literature, and that precisely this threshold position explains his crucial role in shaping twentieth century countercultural spirituality.

SAMETI Mozhdeh (University of Szeged)

“Diegesis and Counterculture: Formal Uses of Esotericism in 1960s-1970s Theatre”

This paper explores the relationship between esotericism and literary counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s through a comparative analysis of postwar French and Iranian literature and theatre. Rather than treating esotericism as a coherent system of beliefs, the paper approaches it as a form of “rejected knowledge” whose marginal status enabled aesthetic and political dissent. In both contexts, esoteric motifs and non-rational modes of knowing function less as doctrinal content than as counter-discursive resources opposing dominant ideological and artistic models.

Focusing on dramatic and narrative works produced after World War II in France and after the 1953 Coup d'état in Iran, the paper examines the works of Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Abbas Nalbandian (b. 1947) as representative case studies. It argues that the countercultural function of esotericism operates primarily at the level of form. Techniques such as diegetic narration, anti-mimetic dramaturgy, ritualized language, and self-reflexive monologue challenge realist representation and Enlightenment notions of rationality and transparency.

By juxtaposing Beckett's French avant-garde theatre with Nalbandian's experimental Iranian drama of the 1960s and 1970s, the paper highlights parallel strategies of estrangement and withdrawal from mimetic representation. Also, it ultimately suggests that literary counterculture transforms esotericism into a formal and critical practice, redefining its role within modern literature.

SKAROLSKIS Dovydas (Vilnius University)

“Occult Narration and Fractured Knowledge: *Disco Elysium* as Esoteric Countercultural Literature of Soviet Postcolonialism”

This paper reads the famous Estonian RPG game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) as a work of contemporary literature that deploys esotericism as both a thematic reservoir and a narrative principle. Rather than approaching the text as a digital artifact, the paper treats it as a formally experimental literary work whose poetics are structured by fragmented subjectivity, polyphonic narration, and competing regimes of knowledge.

At the level of form, *Disco Elysium* replaces a unified narrative voice with a chorus of internalized perspectives (skills, impulses, memories) that speak in conflicting registers. This narrative fragmentation resonates with esoteric epistemologies in which knowledge is partial, initiatory, and mediated rather than transparent or universal. Concepts such as the Pale, cryptozoology, spirit communication, and metaphysical intuition function as narrative operators that destabilize positivist and rationalist models of meaning, situating the text within what has been described as “rejected knowledge”. Philosophically, the novel stages a confrontation between Enlightenment rationality, political teleology, and epistemic collapse. Its esoteric motifs intersect with post-Soviet disillusionment and countercultural critique, producing a vision of history and subjectivity marked by failure, repetition, and melancholia rather than progress or revelation.

Esotericism here does not promise hidden truth, but offers an alternative literary logic for articulating uncertainty, exhaustion, and resistance to ideological closure. By combining literary theory, philosophy, and the study of Western esotericism, this paper argues that *Disco Elysium* exemplifies a contemporary form of countercultural literature in which esoteric imaginaries serve as narrative strategies for rethinking knowledge, selfhood, and historical meaning in late modernity.

SZULKA Pénélope (Sorbonne Université, Paris)

“The Church Turned Prison and the Prison Turned Church: Redemptive Inversions in Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* and Christopher Fry’s *The Sleep of Prisoners*”

Reading Sarah Kane’s (1971-1999) *Cleansed* (1998) merely as an indictment of institutional violence overlooks its probing of sacred questions: questions that drive the play toward a failed transcendence, in which the idealized body cannot withstand revelation. Kane writes from a crisis already spent and *Cleansed* exemplifies the emergence of a post-Christian spirituality rooted irreducibly in the body.

Both Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* and Christopher Fry’s (1907-2005) *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951) transform institutional spaces into arenas of spiritual testing: Fry’s church during wartime fosters generative revelation through confinement, while Kane’s clinical space subjects the sacred to the same radical reduction endured by her characters: bodies stripped to essential vulnerability. One of the soldiers’ assertions that “each man is the world” constitutes what Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) calls a *hierophany*, revealing the human figure as microcosm. Kane, conversely, depicts the sacred violently intruding upon the mundane, with religious language contaminating scenes of violence. Neither play allows the sacred and profane to occupy separate spheres; both insist on their collision.

Therefore, what remains of the sacred when ritual, spatial, and symbolic forms endure after the collapse of redemptive promise? I argue that Kane articulates a counter-cultural, post-theological esotericism in which sacred structures persist as oppressive frameworks emptied of salvific content.