An Architecture of the Soul

by Kasper Opstrup

Occulture is a term that describes a captivating blend of popular culture and the occult. It manifests itself in diverse forms such as horror films, heavy metal music or the short stories of American writer H.P. Lovecraft. Among its most recognisable symbols – along with the Ouija board – is the tarot deck, a tool shrouded in mystery and adorned with a myriad of designs suitable for any occasion.

Even if the various designs often make newer tarot decks unrecognisable compared to the classic decks, the essence of the tarot lies in its structure: It consists of four suits of 14 cards each (i.e. one additional court card compared to a normal deck of playing cards), known as the minor arcana and totalling 56 cards, and a series of 22 illustrated trumps called the major arcana, culminating in a total of 78 cards.

The enigmatic imagery of the major arcana distinguishes tarot from ordinary playing cards and has embedded itself into our collective consciousness. From fan art to fashion, from art biennials to Dr. Martens boots, the major arcana's mystical symbols permeate popular culture.

These cards are not only tools for divination or self-development but also occultural icons, seen in various contexts from the fortune-telling gypsies of folklore to cinematic characters like Solitaire, the psychic employee of Dr. Kananga aka Mr. Big, the main antagonist in the 1973 James Bond film *Live and Let Die*.

The Evolution of Tarot

The tarot is most associated with divination and New Age psychics, but it was not until around the time of the French Revolution that it got adapted to occult and

esoteric purposes. According to cultural historian Helen Farley, it has been going through four distinct ages.

The first age began with the tarot's invention as a game for pure entertainment in the court of Duke Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan in the 15th century. The major arcana depicted various events in the Visconti family's history and its relations to, for example, pope and emperor. Most later decks such as the Marseilles are based on what is called the Visconti-Sforza deck, one of three surviving decks from the Visconti court. When the game spread across borders in the wake of political upheavals, it transitioned from entertainment to esotericism due to a loss of interpretative context.

This shift from the mundane to the sacred began in pre-revolutionary France where Antoine Court de Gébelin re-interpreted the deck as the remnants of the lost Book of Thoth, hiding the wisdom of legendary Egyptian magician Hermes Trismegistus in pictorial form and smuggled out of Egypt in a time of crisis by bands of gypsies. During this second age, the tarot became linked to kabbalah, astrology and magic through the works of French occultists such as Éliphas Lévi and Papus, both continuing the path begun by Court de Gébelin. When their works were translated and exported across the channel, it initiated the third age.

The third age built on the interpretations established by the French tarotists while further elaborating the deck with a complex series of correspondences by esotericists, artists and intellectuals connected to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the crowning achievement of the British Occult Revival. The Golden Dawn not only made the cards central to the study of magic but also laid the foundation for the publication of some of the first mass market decks.

The fourth age includes our contemporary and got started by the re-interpretation by New Agers and neo-pagans from the 1960s onwards. In this current age, it is not only a tool for divination and magical uses but also a tool for self-discovery. This age has been characterised by a plethora of decks featuring a multitude of themes, forms and functions which can be seen as responding to an

increased awareness and utilisation of esoteric thought as exemplified in the group show *The Fool's Journey*.

The Artistic Appeal of Tarot

The metaphor of "The Fool's Journey" represents the path of self-development where each major arcana has a consecutive role to play from the unnumbered Fool (0), who journeys to the World (Arcana XXI), just to soon start over again but with a greater level of knowledge.

Tarot's symbolic imagery has always captivated artists and writers, serving as a generator of narratives without a single author. On the contrary, it often seems to be stories arising from chance and generated collectively. It prompts the imagination encouraging flights of fancy through its characteristic blend of entertainment and esotericism even though it also has found more traditional literary form in, for example, Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* from 1973, where a group of travellers use tarot cards to share their stories.

Tarot is a plot-generating device that combines narrative elements into new myths and stories that can help us to navigate the past, present, future, or simply our inner selves. This need for new narratives is particularly poignant in times when the traditional stories lose their relevance.

Historically, the tarot, like spiritism, has played a part in empowering women by providing them a voice in public spaces in an age that tended to marginalise the accomplishments of women. This is evident in the recent re-discovery of female surrealists and esotericists such as Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington who both have had their individual tarots republished, but also of the works by Pamela Colman Smith and Frieda Harris who painted the iconic Rider-Waite and Thoth decks respectively.

These latter decks came directly out of the esoteric tradition from the British Occult Revival as the Rider-Waite was designed by Golden Dawn member A.E.

Waite and published in 1909 while the Thoth was designed by British magician Aleister Crowley in the 1940s even though it was not published until 1969 amid the counterculture and its infatuation with occulture.

Both these famous decks were intended as tools for the spiritual progress and freedom of humanity. As Crowley wrote in his *Confessions*, the tarot to him composed a complete system of hieroglyphs representing the total energies of the universe. The decks were meant to be read according to the kabbalistic Tree of Life-glyph that describes the descendance of spirit into matter through ten sefirot and 22 connecting paths – one for each trump card – but both decks are more commonly used to delve into the unconscious and tap into the intuitive experience of exploring emotional realms through card imagery.

After the Golden Dawn and surrealism, where not only the women but also more shady characters like Salvador Dalí made their own tarots – not to mention on a whole other note the artist Austin Osman Spare who was in touch with both movements – the counterculture movement of the 1960s saw a surge of interest in the tarot. This interest continues today as traditional institutions struggle to adapt to political, social, and spiritual changes thus paving the way for alternative and esoteric doctrines.

Notable contemporary tarot projects such as Suzanne Treister's Hexen 2.0-deck – which is represented in the group show – or Orryelle Defenestrate-Bascule's Book of Kaos-tarot highlight tarot's enduring appeal. Treister's project, for example, merges politics with popular culture imagining utopian and dystopian futures through highly detailed tarot cards.

Tarot's Modern Relevance

Despite that online tarot-bots might soon eclipse both fortune tellers and psychics as our alternative spinners of tales, the traditional tarot deck remains relevant, offering new narratives in times of crises. It is still capable of balancing esotericism with entertainment as seen in the rise of boardgames and tabletop roleplaying

games such as KULT or the *Curse of Strahd*-campaign for Dungeons & Dragons that use the tarot as a plot device. It is no longer the card game of the Italian renaissance, but it is still within the magic circle of play.

What links magic and games, especially dice and card games that are relying on chance, is the effort to force the hands of chance and make the random predictable. It is the attempt to create a pattern where there seemingly is no pattern in the hope of a certain outcome.

Tarot cards maintain an essence of playfulness, but they also have a more serious worldbuilding side in their capability to make new connections and find alternative perspectives on and solutions to personal and societal problems. They have become a tool for conversation where we are drawn as much to the cards' mystical symbolism as to their creative potential.

In our current socio-political climate, tarot has taken on a renewed significance as a form of resistance and critique, an ally in the quest for a better world. As traditional narratives falter under the weight of political and social upheavals, tarot offers a means to question and re-interpret these narratives. It provides a space for marginalised voices to be heard and for alternative perspectives to emerge. By juxtaposing disparate meanings, it encourages critical thinking and the exploration of new paradigms.

The resurgence of the tarot can be seen as both a testament to its enduring relevance and as part of a broader speculative turn in contemporary art and culture where the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred. This speculative approach allows artists and thinkers to envision alternative futures and challenge the status quo. Tarot, with its rich symbolism and open-ended narratives, is uniquely suited to this task.

The countercultural movement of the 1960s, characterised by its rejection of mainstream values and exploration of alternative lifestyles, embraced tarot as a symbol of spiritual and intellectual freedom. Tarot's resurgence during this period

was more than a mere fascination with the mystical; it was a form of rebellion against the rigid structures of society. The use of tarot in this context aligns with the historical role of the occult as a countercultural force. Throughout history, esoteric practices emerge during times of crisis, offering alternative ways of understanding and engaging with the world.

As we navigate an era marked by environmental degradation, political instability, and social inequality, the tarot's ability to generate new perspectives is more valuable than ever while its capacity to balance the playful with the profound makes it a versatile tool for both personal and collective transformation. Whether used for divination, self-exploration, or political critique, as in the work of Suzanne Treister, the tarot invites us to engage with the world in a more nuanced and imaginative way.

Tarot decks are not just a mystical curiosity or a relic of the past. They are a dynamic and powerful medium that continues to evolve and adapt, offering insights and inspiration for those willing to delve into their depths. The tarot's ability to inspire new ways of thinking and being makes it a vital tool for navigating the complexities of our time.