

Esotericism and Global Visual Culture (Tokyo, 5–6 Oct 24)

The University of Tokyo, Oct 5–06, 2024

Deadline: Apr 4, 2024

Kristoffer Noheden

The power of images, diagrams of the beyond, and the dialectic of the visible and the invisible are key aspects of many esoteric currents worldwide. From visual art and moving images inflected with esoteric motifs, to aura and spirit photography or esotericists working with sigils, symbols and cosmograms, images are invested with powers of amplification, transformation, and divination, or used for mapping occult relations. Imagination is central to both esotericism and visual culture. As the faculty of producing images, whether inner or outer, in the mind or unleashed in the world, imagination does more than imitate the world: it transforms it.

Alchemical illustrations, Shingon mandalas, kabbalistic diagrams, I Ching hexagrams, and tarot cards have travelled from esoteric contexts to a broader global visual culture. This intermingling ranges from pop-occultural phenomena to avant-garde art, from TV series to underground film. The relationship is moreover often reciprocal, with said visual culture impacting esoteric practice, meaning that demarcations are far from clear-cut. Esoteric exercises bleed into the visual worlds of avant-garde or popular culture – and vice versa.

Wassily Kandinsky, Etsuko Ichihara, Emma Kunz, Hilma af Klint, Mariko Mori, and Leonora Carrington are but a few examples of figures who have produced visual creations for simultaneously esoteric-spiritual and artistic purposes. Kenneth Anger, Marjorie Cameron, Shinya Tsukamoto, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Jan Švankmajer invest their films with powers of ritual and transmutation. Movies and TV series like *Sekai Ninja Sen Jiraiya* depicting esoteric ninja powers have been produced both in Japan and elsewhere, impacting the actual global practice of ninjutsu. Rachel Pollack, Alan Moore, and Grant Morrison have used the visual medium of comics to conjure forth the otherworld, declaring themselves actual magicians and diviners.

In many, arguably most, of these contexts, the visual works complicate and deconstruct essentialist notions of “Eastern” and “Western” esotericism as separate phenomena. The conference will approach its topic broadly, and from an inter-disciplinary angle. Presentations on globally entangled dimensions of esotericism and visual culture are especially welcome (but not a mandatory perspective).

Please send a 200-word abstract, and academic affiliation, by April 4 to:

esotericism.and.visual.culture@gmail.com

Notification of acceptance or rejection will be given by mid-April.

The conference will be held at the University of Tokyo, Japan on 5–6 October 2024. The conference fee, not yet determined, will be modest. Presenters must cover their own travel and accommodation expenses.

Conference organizers:

Per Faxneld, Associate Professor, Study of Religions, Södertörn University.

Kristoffer Noheden, Research Fellow, Cinema Studies, Stockholm University.

In cooperation with The East Asian Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism

Reference:

CFP: Esotericism and Global Visual Culture (Tokyo, 5-6 Oct 24). In: Arthist.net, Jan 30, 2024 (accessed Aug 14, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/41104>>.