Interview with Gordon White

Troy Conrad Therrien

Gordon White is an author, practicing magician, permaculturist, and founder of Rune Soup, a multifaceted online source for teaching and using magic to unwind commonly held narratives by reenchanting the world. His quarterly magic classes help his followers to "jailbreak" occult practices, from Greco-Egyptian spellcraft to medieval esoteric Christianity and contemporary sigil magic, while his weekly podcast lays the metaphysical groundwork, covering everything from religion and philosophy to politics and conspiracy theory. His 2016 book *Star.Ships* brought together the latest thinking in comparative mythology and linguistics, paleoclimatology, archaeoastronomy, anthropology, archaeology, and other hard sources—mainstream and fringe—into a unique and robust "prehistory of the spirits" that traces the development of humanity over the past 50,000 years through its engagements with magic. In his ruthless quest to build more useful models to support his own magic practice, he has left a trail of crumbs for architecture history. Together, they add up to an iconoclastic narrative that reveals the amnesia of a discipline that has forgotten its own history.

Troy Conrad Therrien: Donald Trump became president and everything I thought I knew about the world was not simply no longer true, it had become a liability. I decided

to use it as a prompt to reconsider basic reality itself. That's when I found Rune Soup. Through your work it became obvious to me that magic can tell us a lot about the origins of architecture. Here, I hope we can effect a recontextualization of architecture by introducing your work into the discourse.

Gordon White: What it sounds like you are after, in aggregate, is to have architecture ontologically flooded in a similar way to what is happening in, say, anthropology. Because architecture's history—and as a result a lot of its ways of truth validation—comes from a faulty version of history and a faulty view of reality. What is hilarious about that in architecture's case in particular is that it's much older than the European Enlightenment premises that have seemingly stymied its growth, and it is, in fact, by definition magic because it is a topological rearrangement of the universe in order to achieve a desired effect. Archaeologically we now know that this praxis goes back 26,000 years earlier than people who study architecture commonly think it does, when you consider the revised dating of sites like Gunung Padang in Indonesia.

TCT: Right. The Official Story in architecture typically starts with ancient Greece.

GW: Yes. So, architecture needs to have happen to it in this century what anthropology had happen to it in the last century.

TCT: You're very quotable.

GW: As for using magic to tell a deep history of architecture, first we need a broadly agreed on definition of what magic is. Magic is a culture-specific way of exploring and

utilizing consciousness and psi effects that we have observed in labs hundreds of times over the last 140 years. That would be my definition of magic.

TCT: You have used this definition, and magic itself, to create speculative yet fact-based deep histories, such as your book *Star.Ships*. Can we pluck from these a long history of architecture?

GW: We can. We should start by outlining what we know of psi. If you look out across the world, that will boil down to essentially three powers for which we have 140 years of parapsychological research to support. Firstly, some form of divination. We have evidence for remote viewing, telepathy, or communicating with other humans over distance, which we all have personal experience of—about 90 percent of the population admits to some form of telephone telepathy experience, when you think of someone just before they ring you on the phone—thousands of rigorous, positive lab experiments and, in the case of remote viewing, a $20 million dollar CIA/military intelligence project that lasted over a decade in various forms. Secondly, we have some methods of altering the future or probability manipulation to ensure decent harvests and so on. This appears to work better in groups, as various intention experiments shown to influence random number generators demonstrate. The last one is interacting with the more-than-human or spirit world, whether that's trafficking with the dead or nonhuman spirits, and we have accounts of that phenomenon that goes back to the very beginnings of literature itself. We have documents from UFO encounters, religious texts, and so on. A majority of people who have lost a loved one, for instance, experience some form of after-death communication, and thanks to the work of medical professionals around the world like Pim van Lommel and Penny Sartori, as far as I can see the science is in on near-death

experiences. It's in the interaction with the more-than-human or extra-dimensional world that we find some potentially quite eerie implications for architecture.

TCT: What are some of these eerie implications?

GW: The archaeological record can only give us the "when" of a jump in technological complexity, be it a carved bone, cave art, or megalithic circles. The emergence of symbolic thinking and technology in the first place is architecture's very own "hard problem of consciousness." On a global basis, the origin of metallurgy, stone working, and so on as told in what we call mythology is very clear: something came down from the sky (usually) and taught it to us. Consider that in the light of the very good modern evidence that encounters like that really do happen.

TC: Is architecture a privileged, hyper-precise technology for manipulating psi effects?

GW: It can be and has been. If you consider what the aggregate theory or assumption is behind spirit contact or goetic contact, there is, on the part of humans, some form of "getting their attention," and that is done by throwing sacrifices into a fire or throwing a princess into a volcano, whatever it happens to be. It's essentially a rearranging of the physical world in a way that will attract the attention of the Other and very often providing a space in which to contain it.

If you start to scale that up from the individual witch at the edge of a village or a shaman of a nomadic group to when we start to build our own permanent environments, it manifests most obviously in the temple but also in the earliest cities being astronomically

aligned. From the very beginning architecture is immediately associated with how humans live in conjunction with the entire cosmos. The earliest cities have astronomical, not just solar, alignment. So, from the beginning, it is a way of improving that connection, and it kind of builds from there. Once you get to the level of temple architecture, particularly once you get to Egypt but to a lesser extent Sumer as well—when compared to Classical Greece, which, as you point out, architecture inexplicably takes as its origin point—they are simply playing another game. Particularly when you look at the Egyptian Old Kingdom, they have a language of stone that we have entirely lost, and the parts of the ruins that are most structurally complete appear to have resonance capacity for some form of performative music or chanting, electromagnetic effects, minor radiation effects, and so on. Here you get the conjunction of architecture being a permanentization of mankind's relationship with the entire cosmos and the opportunity to activate this relationship in a more precise way, and that's essentially the story of Egyptian architecture. We don't see that as our inheritance because we use the nineteenth-century premise of materialism—falsified numerous times, most famously by quantum physics— to decide that all these effects, all this context, are the artefacts of primitive minds. However, I used the term "language of stone" deliberately. The Old Kingdom should be seen as the fulfilment point of a 12,000-year experiment in understanding the properties of stone for creating human and cosmic space, going back at least to Göbekli Tepe in Anatolia. It seems an inexplicable thing to ignore.

TCT: The pyramids are so bizarrely advanced, astronomically precise, and seemingly unknowable that they admit for any number of fantastical stories to be told. Is there a utility in the present for that explosion of storytelling, or does it obscure a deeper possibility of knowing?

GW: If you engineer what is essentially some kind of immortality device that is also a compelling work of art, you are looking at something that will yield infinite stories for as long as that work of art exists. More architecture should be doing that now, not less. Something about the uniqueness of the Giza pyramids in particular has meant that at every stage in history they have been described as objects from another time or objects out of time. For the early Arabic invaders they were built before the flood, sometimes understood as a tomb for Moses. Everyone that has come in and conquered Egypt, from the first Muslim expansion to the French and British empires, has had their own stories of what these structures were, and that's the response you get when you engage with the built environment in that kind of way, if it's built with the numinous in mind. Perhaps this is what they have always done.

TCT: In *Star.Ships*, you welcome "polyhistors" to write many stories from the data rather than one monolithic history. But maybe that pyramid was supposed to do one thing and did it well. What is the ontological status of truth in the magician's world view, and can it square what seems to be a contradiction here?

GW: I can answer this architecturally as well. The ontological status of truth in a magical world view is best described via a flow model. You may be correct that the pyramids, I think, were constructed as immortality devices rather than tombs for a succession of kings. Rather than just for one individual megalomaniac, a structure like that, or any structure in a flow model environment, has its own agency in an animist cosmology. It has its life as a ruin, it has its life as the bits and pieces of Cairo mosques made from a lot of the external casing of the Great Pyramid, it has its life as a tourist attraction, and it has

its life as an inspiration for (mostly not very good) alternative history books. So it may have had its original purpose in a utilitarian sense, but that's kind of binding truth to utilitarian interpretations. Buildings, like humans, have afterlives.

TCT: On your blog you have written a number of things in a conspiracy theory vein, like the Archonology series. What is the value of conspiracy theory?

GW: I call it conspiracy yoga. Its function is to make sure I never believe anyone in power's stuff ever again, whatever it happens to be, because from a communications theory perspective they have to be lying to me, and they are. There is a very chaos-magic attitude of a deep anarchic distrust of grand narratives, especially when they are being shouted out by the President of the United States in poorly spelled tweets, or whatever it happens to be—this stuff is toxic. So, I'll listen to anything as a palliative or corrective or even just a reminder to stay frosty. It's important to find where your edges are and blur them. It's a classic chaos-magic approach of dissolving the baby teeth of mono-narratives in the Coca Cola of reality.

TCT: The red pill for me that led me down the rabbit hole to find Rune Soup was Graham Hancock's alternative histories of ancient Egypt. If reality can admit a President Trump, Hancock's magical Egypt looks more like woke historiography.

GW: I think woke historiography is the right description for it. Now, more than ever, we need to assert evidence-based forbidden knowledge, as official knowledge sinks further into complicity with neoliberalism or explodes into a new McCarthyism.

TCT: You do this in your advocacy for "big table animism." Is the "big table" sort of like sitting at the big boy table or like having a very large table?

GW: Big boy table. It's a small table, actually. The table has materialism, idealism, and panpsychism at it. Arguably, transcendentalism, to cover other religions, and I'm kind of okay with that one as long as it doesn't bring up whichever book it thinks we all should read: Bible, Koran, whatever. So, there are currently four seats at the table of approved cosmologies, and there should be a fifth because I don't think these four accurately or sufficiently describe reality. I suspect that there's something to learn from elevating animism as an epistemology rather than a belief system, as a way of validating truth, because the other four all have their own and we are using them instead—we actually only use materialism in official contexts. I think reality will unfold very differently if we finally banish the Eurocentrism of epistemology and consider modes of truth validation that fall outside the Anglosphere. Given its celebration of the now or immanence, and its far more nuanced understanding of the physical, I think animism will destroy materialism, but people seem to think it will destroy the periodic table or something. It will actually redeem it.

TCT: You've recently spoken quite a lot about Charles Fort's early-twentieth-century forecast of what he called the "dominant of wider inclusions." If this describes the era we are entering, what will the table look like?

GW: I think materialism will be out in the dominant of wider inclusions and the others will be able to stretch because materialism is the outgoing dominant of science.

The way Fort characterized the movement of dominants was that truth changed. He had a flow model of truth. It's not this Enlightenment guess that maybe we will learn a few more things and get a more and more detailed view of "Reality with a capital R." Truth literally changes. This is where Thomas Kuhn got it wrong. Fort's conceptualization of that was that we would encounter enough "damned facts"–which are data points that exist yet simply aren't allowed to in the prevailing dominant–that eventually the dominant breaks and is replaced by a new one because the outgoing dominant can no longer contain them. It all comes down like a backyard swimming pool with the hose left running. We are sort of at a point now where you have to have had some sort of serious military-induced head trauma to think that materialism is a sufficient description of reality in face of all contrary evidence. And so we are moving into the wider inclusions model now because we have just accumulated way too many "damned facts."

I would like from Big Table Animism an epistemology that incorporates the notion that the entire universe is alive to be taken seriously. Animist epistemology *might* be wrong, but a materialist one provably is. So I also want Big Table Animism to bring the sword rather than the ploughshare.

TCT: Can you speculate on what role you could imagine architecture playing in this transition? Do you envision a classical renaissance of revitalizing ancient models or a radical innovation into something new?

GW: I think in a way both, but also I want to hang a light on the fact that architecture has a long, long, long way to go—further than a lot of disciplines—to break free from Enlightenment Eurocentrism. I'm not expecting the sort of Egyptian mania we saw in the

Victorian and Georgian eras, but it would be exciting to see functional inspiration drawn from further afield, rather than a few aesthetic nods in an otherwise samey-samey design approach. There are house-cooling methods developed in Moorish Spain and Arabia using underground pipes and trompes we should be using. The thin end of the wedge for these changes would be to sneak them in under the guise of energy efficiency or whatever the latest golden idol happens to be. However, an architecture of wider inclusions should incorporate some of these "damned facts" currently becoming less damned. There are decades of Soviet research into the use of pyramid structures showing they actually improve the growth rates of crops grown underneath them. Too often we are held up by why something works, and if we can't find an explanation that doesn't break the official worldview, then we abandon it. Who cares? It works. Why aren't pyramid greenhouses being built at domestic or commercial scale? Why isn't the form incorporated into community gardens or—worst of all—corporate green spaces that should be community gardens, anyway?

The majority of domestic structures on this planet have ancestor shrines in them—and have had them as far back as the days of Neanderthals—and we still think that's weird, but we are actually the minority. What about the inclusion of spirit rooms or psychomantea in domestic dwellings? If psi is real and if meditation can improve your life to the point that if it were a pill it would be a miracle drug, why aren't these opportunities to dramatically improve quality of life being incorporated into domestic and work environments as regulatory requirements?

Domestically, I would basically want to see pyramids, spirit rooms, and edible, medicinal weeds sustained by gray water growing on suburban roofs, where they also moderate the

interior climate, become normalized. Paul Stamets has found a whole host of mushroom species that appear to cure cancer. Why isn't it a local area building code requirement to grow these wherever it is possible to do so? Why are public parks not inoculated with beneficial mycelia? People often say the commons needs to be reclaimed—which is certainly true—but it also needs to be thoroughly haunted. It looks like Terence McKenna's worst trip as well as his best trip.

TCT: When McKenna explained his canonical trip on DMT, he began with describing geometric patterns, then green elves, and then architecture, articulating the temples and cities that appear on the other side of consciousness. What do you make of this?

GW: The reason materialism is false is that matter itself has an interiority. We know that from most aboriginal cultures around the world. These things only sound outlandish to people who are suffering under a delusion of materialism; they wouldn't raise an eyebrow in Polynesia or Central Australia. The interiority or spirit world has structure. You can see that Europe grappled with these ideas in its own way and that has probably sent us down a winding path in which we picked up a few good things in that *Master and His Emissary* sense, but you can see that this is kind of what Plato was trying to grapple with—the idea of where does form come from. Instead of interiority, he goes for transcendence: the nonphysical beaming the physical into existence. This means he starts with mathematical shapes, but if you go to the Amazon or if you come out to the red desert in Australia, it's not shapes, it's other things; it's living structures, it's animals, it's star beings, it's ornate, bio-technological dwellings for human ancestors and their gods. Europe inherited an intellectual tradition that disenchanted the spirit world to the point where it's difficult to

recover from using only the ideas that got us here in the first place. Architecture needs to be less parochial and drink from deeper and more interesting wells.

TCT: On your podcast with Aaron Cheak, you discussed Classical-era Hermeticism as a miniaturization of Egyptian architecture-scale magic to that of sculptures, rings, amulets, and other personal scale trinkets. What was the role of Catholicism on the subsequent crackdown on magic?

GW: The miniaturization happened, definitely, and that went off with the Arab astrologers to become talismanic magic in Moorish Spain and so on, but Catholicism *used* a lot of that stuff, it didn't ban it. Basilicas, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean, are repurposed temples. There was some really interesting stuff that happened in early Christian communities in Egypt that suits my aesthetics quite a bit. They were sort of living and praying among the ruined temples and tombs, repurposing some parts while attacking others. They would use stele that had the god's name or the pharaoh's names on them as steps to come into their temples or churches so they were literally stepping on the dead gods to approach the new. In permaculture, you are required to do an audit of on-site resources early in the design process and this seems a cosmic extension of that notion. Catholicism had its own Egyptian magical projects. The gothic building project was the rediscovery of Hermetic principles that actually moved more stone than the whole of the New Kingdom. It was an enormous effort to build more of these immortality machines in stone, again. St Peter's itself was renovated into an openly Hermetic Sun Temple. They were using it rather than suppressing it.

TCT: So Catholicism, then, is actually more sympathetic to magic than contemporary architecture. Magic is so taboo in the discourse that when the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao actually performed a feat of socioeconomic magic it could only be pilloried by architecture theorists.

GW: There's actually a double amnesia there. The history of architecture you would have learned is also not only Eurocentric but anglicized because the major universities in either Britain or America are actually quite anti-Catholic. Even though they say they weren't, they were. So you miss all the good Catholic stuff. You get the banker-funded projects of the Renaissance—which is what all that high Florentine art was, corporate art for banking dynasties—but you don't get the Gothic cathedrals, you don't get the Northern European and British abbeys that performed the same remarkable economic transformation on the local area you describe having happened in Bilbao. The other amnesia comes from the masons and stone masons that were in secret societies, because they knew these techniques did have effects we would describe using terms like psi and psychology today, and this was all locked up behind guild signs and secret clubs. Architecture descends from these strange men in a way, which means they inherited and are practicing a form of magic while actively disbelieving in its existence.

TCT: Last question. Theorist Mark Wigley's project to translate Jacques Derrida's deconstruction into architecture in the 1990s was to convince his peers that even more than building, architecture is the image or metaphor of a building that is used to structure ideas about society itself. Since working with metaphor is so central to magic, I'm curious what you think of this interpretation.

GW: I agree with it but I probably take metaphor more seriously. What frustrated me about postmodernism in general and Derrida in particular is it's sort of an ersatz animism. If you look at Michel Foucault's analysis of history it's essentially a flow model with no magic, and if you look at Derrida's levels of deconstruction you are dealing with the idea that spirits or ideas could be autonomous and yet relational in a really crappy way. Animism got to "everything is relational" over 30,000 years ago as far as I can tell, and as a system it doesn't completely violate the law of non-contradiction the way Derrida does. I really like the idea of the building as a metaphor, but I would prefer to say as an embodiment of classical Greek ideas.

TC: What do you mean by embodiment?

GW: It goes back to whether or not ideas have their own life, and I think that they do and all other cultures elsewhere including our own up until quite recently did. When Carl Jung was actively imagining, he's in his own head, and these thoughts are saying we don't live in here, we don't actually belong to you. *Humans don't have thoughts, thoughts have humans.* So thoughts can just as well have buildings. Why not? This is the interiority of matter problem. It's a binary: once you realize that materialism is falsified, these ideas that sounded outlandish beforehand no longer do. What sounds outlandish is clinging to a falsified belief system. It only needs to be mostly wrong to be better than the way we currently think, which is entirely wrong.