

Dark Gnostics: Secrets, Mysteries, and OCCINT

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You know, when I was a kid, I wanted to grow up and find myself living in a sixties spy series.
Funny how things turn out, isn't it?

King Mob, *The Invisibles*.

The astrologer and magician John Dee worked for Sir Francis Walsingham; Dennis Wheatley worked for the London Controlling Section during World War II; Aleister Crowley may have worked for British intelligence. This should not surprise us; intelligence and espionage are by their very nature exercises in the occult, the investigation and discovery of hidden knowledge, revealed and analysed by a priestly caste of scholars seeking the truth lying behind the veil of 'secrets and mysteries' (specific terms in the lexicon of espionage). Spy stories are always already tales of the occult and, more than that, they are horror stories, whose protagonists are engaged in a struggle against dark powers posing an existential threat to all they believe in. This article examines the idea of secrecy and espionage as a contemporary cultural avatar of the eternal fear of the Other. The spy is an archetype embodying fears of transgression and liminality, whose shifting roles mirror our society's anxiety concerning the concept of a stable self. In an era in which we are ever more defined by our informational footprint, the revelations of Snowden, Manning et al. raise uncomfortable questions about the nature of identity observed, surveilled and interrogated through its online manifestations. As Stross has argued, we are willing participants of a 'Participatory Panopticon'; inhabitants of the global Village, we are choosing to become Number Two, the character who, in the minatory and prophetic series *The Prisoner*, acted as the agent of repression of the individual through perpetual surveillance.¹

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Our species is perhaps misnamed; we are less *Homo sapiens* than *Homo volens sapere*, the creature that *wishes* to know, driven by an inherent and irrepressible curiosity (as

¹ This article was first presented as a paper presented at the conference *The Secret in Contemporary Theory, Society, and Culture* held at the University of Kent on 30–31 May, 2014.

discussed by both D.E. Berlyne (1954: 180–91) and George Loewenstein (1994: 75–98). Judeo-Christian culture rests on the foundation myth of the Fall, the fatal moment when a transgressive desire to *know* leads to a damning enlightenment, and the motif of discovery, revelation (and concomitant destruction) runs through our art and literature, from Oedipus solving the twin riddles of the Sphinx and his own identity, to Prometheus, Faustus and Frankenstein, and even Kipling's Elephant's child, 'full of 'satiabile curiosity' (Kipling 1912: 64). My aim in this article is to tease out connections and resonances between various forms of 'hidden knowledge' as they have appeared in two distinct, but interrelated, domains of human activity, namely occultism and intelligence (in the sense of espionage). What follows shows that these two realms share common ground, and that Blake's 'doors of perception' lead, all-too-often, to the world of Donald Rumsfeld's (un)known (un)knowns. Just as the realms of the occult and espionage overlap and intertwine, so the mystical, the psychological and the political tap into common cultural wellsprings and manifest a complex of interlinked issues and anxieties. The debates that previous eras have seen about access to religious, ethical and scientific knowledge inform and influence the current arguments over surveillance, privacy and data protection; it is a short journey from Prometheus to Chelsea Manning, and perhaps to Winston Smith. We begin at a time, and a place, where the martial and the mystical met face to face, on the manicured lawns of Washington, D.C., just as the 'Summer of Love' was ending.

1. They used Dark Forces

On 21 October 1967, a group of approximately fifty thousand protestors, led by Allen Ginsburg, Abbie Hoffmann, and Ed Sanders of the Fugs, converged on the Pentagon; not simply to protest against the war in Vietnam but to perform an exorcism. As Joseph Laycock puts it:

[...] twelve hundred protesters would surround the building and perform a ritual, causing it to levitate three hundred feet in the air. The Pentagon would then turn orange and spin, expelling its demons and ending the Vietnam War (Laycock 2011: 295).

Hoffmann had previously sought official permission for the levitation:

The General Services Administrator consented to an attempt at levitation [on condition that] the Pentagon could be raised only three feet, so as not to damage the foundations (Laycock 2011: 300).

It is easy to read this event as no more than another example of the mixture of Dada, Situationism and guerrilla theatre that marked much of the Yippies' activities, but it is clear that for many of the participants, this was a *real* attempt at magical resistance. Laycock argues that the origin of the ceremony was:

The City in History by Lewis Mumford. Mumford describes the Pentagon as a sort of architectural throwback to 'Bronze Age fantasies of absolute power.' He links the construction

of the Pentagon in 1943 to a similar regression towards a government characterized by secrecy and ‘priestcraft.’ He concludes that humanity may not develop further until the building is demolished (Mumford 1997, 432). [...] the exorcism was a polyvalent event: theater for some, the mobilization of literal esoteric forces for others (Laycock 2011: 299).

The key phrase is ‘a government characterized by secrecy and ‘priestcraft.’’. The 1967 protest was not simply a *political* event; it was social, cultural, and epistemological, an attempt to set one model of the world (mystical, magical and human-centred) against another, the mechanistic, data-driven, fundamentally inhuman agenda of the military-Industrial complex.² In many ways, it marks an opening engagement in the ideological conflict that has marked our age, and particularly the debates about secrecy, confidentiality and surveillance that have proliferated post-Assange, post-Manning, and post-Snowden. Expressions like ‘surveillance society’ and ‘national security state’ belong to a lexical field which sees government, and particularly those sectors of the state responsible for defence and intelligence, as fundamentally Other, its agents as members of a dark priesthood, zealously guarding forbidden knowledge. The world in which we live has been formed by a confluence of highly specialised scholarship, operating in discrete but interrelated areas, all based on the idea of reducing the human to merely one part of a hugely complex system of command and control; a cybernetic and technocratic system as initially hypothesised by Licklider, Wiener and Taylor. Human beings become mere cogs in the machinery, and the state becomes a vast-self-perpetuating organism in itself, a dark God served by a class of acolytes, sitting at the centre of the temple, all-seeing, all-hearing, and all-knowing. (Consider the symbolic significance of buildings like the Pentagon, the GCHQ ‘Doughnut’, and the MI6/SIS headquarters at Thames House; visible manifestations of power, order, and control). The Yippies’ ‘magic rite to exorcise the spirits of murder, violence and creephood’ (Laycock 2011: 302) from the Pentagon made a direct connection between the world of intelligence and the occult; this connection is both literally and metaphorically resonant. ‘Spook’ is a polyvalent term, both spy and spectre, embodying the links between the various forms of ‘intelligence’ I seek to examine here.

There has always been a connection between espionage and the occult, in both fiction and reality; my sub-heading, *They Used Dark Forces*, is the title of a novel by Dennis Wheatley, describing a battle between British and Nazi magicians to end World War II. Consider the following series of connections. The founding father of the British intelligence services was Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth I’s spymaster. Elizabeth’s official astrologer was the linguist, mathematician, and practicing magician John Dee, who travelled widely in Europe as a scholar,

² Gary Lachman presents a thorough discussion of the links between the 60s counterculture and the Western Occult tradition in *The Dedalus Book of The 1960s* (2010).

semi-official diplomat, and almost certainly spy for Walsingham.³ Fast forward to the early 20th Century, when Somerset Maugham worked for British Intelligence, basing the ‘Ashenden’ stories on his experiences. Prior to this, in 1908, he published *The Magician*, the story of Oliver Haddo, who is clearly based on the most famous occultist of the 20th century, Aleister Crowley, himself a student of Dee. More than one author has suggested that Crowley himself worked for British Intelligence during World War I.⁴ Whatever the truth may be, he was an infamous figure in British popular culture, the ‘wickedest man in London’ and the go-to prototype for any author who wanted to create a Satanist. Among such authors is Dennis Wheatley, who published in 1934 *The Devil Rides Out*, featuring Mocata, an occultist clearly based on Crowley.

Wheatley worked during World War II for the London Controlling Section, a secret government department charged with coordinating strategic military deception, and we know that he was involved with advance planning for D-Day; he may also have had a hand in Operation Mincemeat, one of the most famous deceptions in military history.⁵ Also during this period, Wheatley became friends with another writer, the travel journalist and explorer Peter Fleming, who often collaborated with the LCS on operations in the Far East. He also came to know Peter Fleming’s younger brother Ian, working at that time in Naval Intelligence, whose first novel features a villain who has been seen as another fictional version of Crowley. (There is a probably apocryphal anecdote that Fleming acted in an attempt to involve Crowley in the interrogation of Rudolf Hess, given the latter’s known interest in the occult).⁶ Fleming fictionalised his own experiences in Naval Intelligence through the persona of James Bond — and we return to our beginning, and the way in which John Dee signed his confidential correspondence to Queen Elizabeth: two circles to signify that he was the Queen’s secret eyes, guarded with an elongated seven, a number seen as auspicious both generally and by the mystical school of Qabalah⁷. The original ‘007’ was both spy and sorcerer.

Intelligence and the occult are inextricably linked, and with good reason. The spy is a quintessentially gnostic figure, engaged on a quest to break down the barriers between the known and the unknown and reveal the hidden truth. More than that, spy fiction is deeply concerned with issues of morality, loyalty and identity; in a looking-glass war taking place in a

³ Useful background on the Elizabethan intelligence services and Dee’s links to Walsingham are to be found in, *inter alia*, Stephen Alford (2012) and Benjamin Woolley (2001).

⁴ See Richard Spence (2008).

⁵ For details of Operation Mincemeat, see Ewen Montagu (1954) and Ben Macintyre (2010). Wheatley’s work with the London Controlling Section is discussed in Phil Baker (2009).

⁶ A fictional account of this story is given in Jake Arnott, *The House of Rumour* (2012).

⁷ An interesting (if possibly less than conclusive) analysis of the symbolism of Dee’s ‘007’ signature is given by Henrik Palmgren (2006).

‘wilderness of mirrors’⁸, the spy embodies our concern to establish some form of moral framework in a world of shifting values and changing allegiances. Intelligence, information, and interpretation are the central elements of all spy fiction and of occultism, the art which strives above all for gnosis. As Charles Stross puts it:

The Cold War wasn’t about us. It was about the Spies, and the Secret Masters, and the Hidden Knowledge (Stross 2007a: 379).

Stross is one of the most interesting contemporary writers working within genre fiction, and one of the few who is qualified to make informed pronouncements on the growth of an IT-driven security environment. A prolific author across genres, the works of relevance here are his ‘Laundry Files’, a series of (to date) five novels and related short stories (full details given in the Bibliography).

The ‘Laundry Files’ are an exercise in mixing genres; spy fiction and the hybrid fictional universe of H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos. In the world of the novels, there are universes next door to ours, whose inhabitants are continually waiting for someone to let them in. Magic is real, a branch of mathematics, and the priests of the Information Age have codified and standardised the rules; sorcery becomes an operating system. The links between technology and theology are laid out by the series’ protagonist, Bob Howard:

Back before about 1942, communication with other realms was pretty hit and miss. Unfortunately, Alan Turing partially systematized it – which later led to his unfortunate ‘suicide’ and a subsequent policy reversal to the effect that it was better to have eminent logicians inside the tent pissing out, rather than outside pissing in. The Laundry is that sub-division of the Second World War-era Special Operations Executive that exists to protect the United Kingdom from the scum of the multiverse (Stross 2007a: 45).

Stross’ hero is both boffin and bureaucrat, battling eldritch horrors, universe-hopping Nazis, media moguls, demon-worshiping televangelists, and the Human Resources department of his own agency. There is humour in the novels, generally at the expense of management culture and the horrors of team-building seminars and budget requisitions (it is hard for any academic to resist a novel which claims that PowerPoint is a Satanic tool designed to suck the souls from anyone exposed to it). However, the series is also a study of the ways in which spy fiction reflects and distils the anxieties of our age. Each novel is a pastiche of a different genre of the spy novel, Deighton, Fleming, Anthony Price and Peter O’Donnell’s ‘Modesty Blaise’ stories, and much of the pleasure of the texts comes from seeing the way in which Stross plays with the conventions of the form to embody his own concerns, constructing a sustained

⁸ Attributed to James Jesus Angleton, Chief of the CIA’s Counter-Intelligence Staff from 1954 to 1975, who lifted it from Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’; it subsequently became the title of David Martin’s study of Angleton and the CIA (Martin 2003).

metafictional commentary on spy fiction itself.⁹ His hero is a computer geek, because, as Stross puts it;

This is the twentieth (and early twenty-first) century, an age of spooks and wonder, of conspiracies and Cold War, an age in which the horror of the pulp magazines lurched forth onto the world stage in trillion-dollar weapons projects capable of smashing cities and incinerating millions [...] It is the decade of the computer scientist, the fast-thinking designer of abstract machines that float on a Platonic realm of thought and blink in or out of existence with a mouseclick (Stross 2007b: 312).

The hero can be seen as the embodiment of certain unchanging aspects of human experience (cf., *inter alia*, Propp, Campbell, and Jung), but he or she, like the narratives containing them, is also always a reflection of his or her times. In an age of pervasive technology, it is no surprise that Stross' hero is a high priest in the church of the computer. Similarly, it is entirely fitting that his spies investigate OCCINT, rather than HUMINT or SIGINT¹⁰; his monstrous, apocalyptic horrors are metaphors for the era whence they spring. If we want to understand the nature of the current debates over surveillance and security, we should always remember the adage that 'generals always fight the last war, especially if they have won it' (Kemp 1988: 14). The contemporary security and intelligence mind-set was forged at a time when the potential result of failure to preserve the nations' secrets could have led to a literal apocalypse. Here, indeed, be monsters.

2. The Wrath of Kahn.

Stross' protagonist is both exceptional and mundane, sorcerer and bureaucrat, threatened by both unimaginable external threats and the petty terrors of office life. In this, he is a perfect fit for the template of the hero that we find throughout post-War spy fiction. Smiley, Deighton's initially anonymous Harry Palmer, and even Bond are all spies and civil servants, their actions bound within regulations, hierarchies and legislation; it should always be remembered that Bond is *licensed* to kill, and only in certain set situations. As Stross says:

Far from being men of action, the majority of intelligence community staff are office workers, a narrow majority of them female, and they almost certainly never handle weapons in the line of duty (Stross 2007a: 305).

The idea of the world of espionage as a mirror image of the everyday realm of committees, matrix management and office, rather than international politics runs through the spy fiction of

⁹ The series is evolving as Stross writes it; from *The Rhesus Chart* onwards, he has moved to creating pastiches of the tropes of urban fantasy, with the Laundry facing down vampires (*The Rhesus Chart*), superheroes (*The Annihilation Score*) and an invasion by the forces of Faerie (*The Nightmare Stacks*; this last will be published in 2016). These new genre explorations are still grounded within an examination of the Secret State and surveillance culture.

¹⁰ HUMINT: Human Intelligence. SIGINT: Signals Intelligence. OCCINT: Occult Intelligence. Only the last is Stross' invention.

our age, and in this it is almost certainly an accurate picture of reality. The Second World War was not won by individual genius, but by an industrialised bureaucracy. The foundations of the modern IT-driven surveillance society were laid in the huts of Bletchley Park and Operation MAGIC, as a secret priesthood of engineers, mathematicians, logicians and linguists began to create what we know as computer science.¹¹ There is a regrettable tendency in the popular mind to see the War as a struggle between Anglophone individualism and Nazi totalitarianism; such a reading is nonsensical. Both sides were bureaucracies, and the Allies were simply more efficient than the Axis powers and more willing to make the jump from mechanical to electronic calculation as a means of waging war. Konrad Zuse had built a working Turing-complete machine in Berlin in 1943; if the Nazis had realised the significance of Zuse's discoveries, the history of the world could have been very different.¹²

At the same time as Turing and his colleagues were at work, another group of techno-priests were engaged on another deeply secret, deeply complex project, involving over one hundred and thirty thousand people and a budget of two billion US\$. On the 16th of July, 1945, J. Robert Oppenheimer watched the first successful detonation of an atomic bomb, and realised the extent to which the game had changed:

I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Vishnu ... is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form, and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds' ... I suppose we all thought that, one way or another (Oppenheimer 1965).¹³

In Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*, the Trinity detonation is presented as an occult act, an action of utter *wrongness* which marks the true Fall of humanity, in which the explosion lets a being through from another realm, to fall prey to 'black scientists, black science':

Its vivisection began almost immediately. Scalpels opened the Seals and everything went wrong everywhere simultaneously. This secret lies behind all the wars, and the holocausts, the assassinations, the slavery, the power of governors and Governments over people (Morrison: 21).

Barely a month after Trinity came Hiroshima, and the World learnt what human ingenuity and 'black science' could do; a single bomb lay waste to an entire city, reducing its inhabitants to shadows, the perfect expression of the concept of the empty signifier; the Bomb did not just kill, it *erased* its targets. And what it did to Hiroshima or Nagasaki, it could do to anyone,

¹¹ In June 2013, the NSA declassified and made available (albeit in redacted form) Colin Burke's history of American cryptography from the 1930s to the 1960s. Of interest in itself, its very title is relevant in the context I am sketching out here: *It Wasn't All Magic: The Early Struggle to Automate Cryptanalysis, 1930s-1960s* (Burke 2002).

¹² See Konrad Zuse, *The Computer — My Life* (1993).

¹³ For an excellent investigation of Oppenheimer's words, their origins and resonances, see James Hijiya (2000).

anywhere. Of course, as Tom Lehrer put it in ‘Who’s Next?’, ‘First we got the Bomb, and that was good / Cos’ we love peace and motherhood’ (Lehrer 2010). Then, on August 29, 1949, the Soviets detonated RDS1, ‘First Lightning’, and the nightmare of a world destroyed by nuclear cataclysm arose. The Cold War appeared to run the risk of becoming all too hot.

Into this world came Herman Kahn, one of the central figures in the creation of US nuclear strategic planning and one of the inspirations, along with Teller, von Neumann and Werner von Braun, of *Doctor Strangelove*. In his updating of von Clausewitz, *On Thernuclear War* (Kahn 1960), he argued that a nuclear conflict was both feasible and in theory winnable; such a reading of the various scenarios did little to calm the minds of the general public or tame the imaginations of writers and filmmakers.

If we examine the cultural artefacts of the post-War years, from *Planet of The Apes* (1968) to *Godzilla* (1954), from *Seven Days to Noon* (1950) to *Threads* (1984) or *Edge of Darkness* (1985), what comes across is a sense of truly existential dread, the idea that what was at stake was not the survival of a country or a political system, but of our species, and spy fiction is no exception. As Stross puts it:

Cold War spy fiction was in some respects the ultimate expression of horror fiction, for the nightmare was real. There’s no need to hint darkly about forbidden knowledge and elder gods, sleeping in drowned cities, who might inflict unspeakable horrors, when you live in an age when the wrong coded message can leave you blinded with your skin half-burned away in the wreckage of a dead city barely an hour later (Stross 2007b: 303).

Even Bond, who is essentially a relic of the era of wartime SOE derring-do, finds himself in a world where the threats are on an infinitely larger scale: consider *Moonraker*, where Bond imagines the result of Hugo Drax’s plan to annihilate London:

The thin needle of the rocket. Dropping fast as light out of a clear sky. The crowds in the streets. The Palace. The nursemaids in the park. The birds in the trees. The great bloom of flame a mile wide. And then the mushroom cloud. And nothing left. Nothing. Nothing, Nothing, Nothing (Fleming 2012: 178–79).

There is a profound shift in the focus of interest in the spy novels of the post-War era, from *The Great Game* to *Game Theory*, from the discovery of ‘secrets’ to the vatic interpretation of ‘mysteries’; arguably the emblematic spy is no longer Bond, the martini-swilling club-land hero, but George Smiley, the professional civil servant, seeking to weave a path between what Sir Michael Quinlan (Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Defence from 1988–92) describes as the:

difference between finding out existing but concealed facts and divining the likely course of future events amid the caprices and uncertainties of world affairs (Hennessy 2010: xix).

Consider how spy fiction, and indeed the activities of the intelligence services in Britain and America post-World War II is influenced by the knowledge of the activities of the Cambridge spies and Klaus Fuchs; a novel like *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is informed by the degree to which James Angleton's paranoia about Russian penetration of the CIA all but crippled the Agency's activities for decades.

In a world post-Hiroshima, where the disclosure of confidential information can have literally apocalyptic results, the spy novel shows the intelligence services as seeking, not so much to *discover* secrets, but to *protect* them; when knowledge is power, the need to withhold that knowledge becomes paramount, and the idea of the threat within, the double agent or the mole, becomes the new Big Bad. In a mind-set forged during the Cold War, when disclosure of information ran the risk of sparking a global conflagration, the worst possible thing that can happen is for knowledge to spread; Manning and Snowden are seen as dangerous not just for the nature of the information they release, but for the very act of distribution itself. The actions of Snowden and Manning have a quasi-mythological resonance, a contemporary dramatisation of the tale of Prometheus, the bringer of knowledge/fire to mankind; the response to Snowden in particular seems to me to be driven in large part, not just by the perceived enormity of his 'betrayal', but by the fact that he chose to make the knowledge available to all. In a world where such activity is theoretically possible by anyone with a USB stick loaded with TAILS¹⁴, a smartphone, or even just an iPod to carry confidential files, what happens to the spies? The answer, in fiction at least, appears to be a *repli sur soi*, or rather, as I have argued, to tales of espionage directed, not against an external threat but against the population supposedly under the spy's protection.

The dominant theme of much contemporary spy fiction is not *espionage* but *surveillance*; popular culture presents the idea of the state's intelligence agencies constructing, in Barry Eisler's words, a society 'where the government knows more and more about the citizenry and the citizenry is permitted to know less and less about the government' (Eisler 2014)¹. There has been a proliferation of paranoid narratives, from *The X-files* to *Person of Interest*, from *American Tabloid* to *Spooks*; the overriding sense is of a world in which the citizen is observed, monitored, and evaluated for any sign of potential threat to the status quo. From the idea of Her Majesty's Secret Servant fighting for the defence of the realm, we have entered an era where the spy is no longer the *investigator* of occult knowledge but its *guardian*. The technology that

¹⁴ TAILS (The Amnesiac Incognito Live System) is an open source operating system which can be carried on a USB drive, and allows a user to operate online anonymously and privately. Edward Snowden has recommended it; see Klint Finley (2014).

was supposed to liberate and unite us instead enslaves us; Neal Stephenson's observations during a visit to China seem all-too applicable to the West as well:

I was carrying an issue of *Wired* [...] In one corner were three characters in Hanzi. Before I'd left the States, I'd heard that they formed the Chinese word for 'network'. Whenever I showed the magazine to a Chinese person they were baffled. 'It means network, doesn't it?' I said, thinking all the warm and fuzzy thoughts that we think about networks. 'Yes,' they said, 'this is the term used by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution for the network of spies and informers that they spread across every village and neighborhood to snare enemies of the regime' (Stephenson 2014).

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan argued that the coming revolution in information technology would lead to the uniting of the world:

As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed at bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree (McLuhan 1964: 5).

The spy story of today shows us the flipside of this vision; a recent tweet puts it nicely:

Yearly reminder: unless you're over 60, you weren't promised flying cars. You were promised an oppressive cyberpunk dystopia. Here you go (Marquis 2013).

For many, it seems as if the village we are living in is not McLuhan's, but McGoohan's.

3. Escaping the Village

Like the Laundry Files, *The Prisoner* (1967–68) reworks the traditional form of the spy fiction to comment on contemporary anxieties; the series can (and arguably should) be read as jumping off from McGoohan's earlier *Danger Man* (1960–62, 1964–68), the spy series that catapulted the actor to fame. Just as McGoohan turned down the role of James Bond, so *The Prisoner* is the story of an agent who seeks to resign and finds himself unable to escape his profession. However, as with Stross' work, so *The Prisoner* resists any attempt to read it as a straightforward spy story; Stross because of his use of the occult as a metaphor for the Cold War, and *The Prisoner* because it rapidly moves from SF-tinged, heightened realism into deeply philosophical realms. The title sequence tells us all we need to know about the real themes of the series:

What do you want?
Information.
Whose side are you on?
That would be telling.... We want information. Information! INFORMATION!
You won't get it.
By hook or by crook, we will (*The Prisoner*: opening titles).

And

Who is Number One?
You are Number Six (Ibid).

A game of mutual concealment and investigation is played out over the series, culminating in the final revelation of the identity of Number One; the solution to the mystery should come as no surprise, for as the theologian Peter Rollins points out:

Every episode tells us that Number six is the one who is really running the Village, and yet no-one ever sees it [...] we hear the words, ‘You are number six’, in response to the question, ‘who is number one’. Here it is as if Number two is changing the subject, refusing to answer the question. However, is number two not really answering the question, saying, ‘YOU ARE, number 6’?

[...] it is we who create the Big Other that controls us. That while we experience this Big Other as separate from us, existing independently of us, and baring [*sic*] over us, it is nonetheless our own creation. We are oppressed by a foreign power that is our own. We are both number six and number one, oppressor and the one being oppressed (Rollins 2009).

This is both political allegory and philosophical parable; the gnosis we seek is always already within us, but we refuse to recognise it and, in fact, ourselves construct our own prison. Big Brother, Big Other; no more than our own ‘mind-forg’d manacles’. Ultimately, like Stross’ work, *The Prisoner* is both spy story and existential horror tale; both Stross and McGoohan seek to lay bare the risks of what they see as a surrender to non-humanocentric forms of governance, mediated and maintained by technology. It is a very short step from the Village to the world Stross outlines in his essay ‘The Panopticon Singularity’, where he argues that current technological developments (mere fiction at the time of *The Prisoner*) may permit

the construction of a Panopticon society — a police state characterised by omniscient surveillance and mechanical law enforcement (Stross 2014b).

And

the emergence of a situation in which human behaviour is deterministically governed by processes outside human control (Ibid).

Our ‘village’ is built on the models of information architecture and security that emerged from ENIGMA and the Manhattan Project. How we choose to respond to this is as yet uncertain, but as ever fiction is one step ahead; for one possible response, consider Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother* (Doctorow 2008), a young adult novel by a writer who has collaborated with Stross in the past. This work explicitly encourages its readers to learn how to subvert the technology of control and hack the system

4. Conclusion

I conclude as I began, by arguing that whatever else they may be, spies are fundamentally creatures of the occult, explorers of the liminal realms where dwell the ‘known knowns’, the ‘unknown unknowns’, and their kin. Gnostics and scientists of the truest kind, their task in fiction and reality is to seek after knowledge, in ways which the general public will always fear

and mistrust. John Dee was spy, sorcerer, and scientist; today's intelligencers use satellites not scrying stones, keyboards not wands, programming rather than angelic languages — but, if *The Guardian* is to be believed, they, too, are in the magic business:

Hidden among the avalanche of documents leaked by Edward Snowden were images from a Power Point presentation [...] beneath a shot of hands shuffling a deck of cards [appeared the words] 'We want to build Cyber *Magicians*' (Rose 2014).

From our world to the Village and the Laundry may be a much shorter journey than we think.

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