**Discordianism**

The Discordian Society is a movement of psychedelicist militants who operate autonomously, as an international network of cultural insurgents, eschewing institutional hierarchy. Though their insistence on decentralization precludes the possibility of analyzing this movement in any comprehensive sense, recent scholarship has shed considerable light on the principal beliefs, practices, and theoreticians behind this esoteric fellowship. Established between 1958/59, the Discordian Society emerged out of the spiritual protest of the Beat Generation, and likewise took a decidedly psychedelicist turn in the mid-1960s, after lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) swept across the hip enclaves of North America. Though the fellowship originated as an inside joke between two precocious high schoolers from the Los Angeles suburbs, Greg Hill (b. 1941- 2000) and Kerry Thornley (b. 1938-1998), a serious body of Discordian doctrines has steadily developed over the last seventy years. To date, Discordian activists across the globe have produced a substantial library of autobiographies, novels, comic books, grimoires, music, artworks, videos, fanzines, and celebrations dedicated to propagating the Discordian brand of psychedelicist militancy. According to the informal 2018 census conducted by the Discordian researcher Brenton Clutter, there are currently hundreds of cabals spread across the Americas, Europe, Scandinavia, Asia, and Oceania, as well as thousands of unaffiliated Discordians.

When formalizing the initial doctrines of Discordianism, Thornley and Hill drew deeply from “Beat Zen.” Associated with the writings of Beat Generation authors Alan Watts (1915-1973), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), and Gary Snyder (1930-), this distinctly American school of Buddhism emphasized the use of shocking and often humorous behavior as the most expedient means of attaining enlightenment. The Discordians appropriated the soteriology of Beat Zen into their own theology system, which centered on chaos. At the core of Discordianism is the belief that order and disorder are illusions projected onto chaos, the fundamental ontological principle of the universe. Instead of associating chaos with conflict or violence, though, members of the society claim it is the source of all creation, much in the same fashion as Daoists conceptualize the Dao. As such, the foremost Discordian practice entails the use of pranks, hoaxes, and provocations (collectively termed “mindfucks”) that jolt people out of their conditioned mental patterns and into enlightenment. That said, a no less integral aspect of Discordian praxis concerns the use of mind-expanding drugs.

The cultivation and regular use of cannabis (particularly the strain “Acapulco Gold”) as a religious sacrament informs the theory and practice of Discordianism. Also, in keeping with the larger psychedelicist church movement, this society regards the consumption of more potent psychedelics (such as mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD) as an initiatic rite of passage into the universe’s deepest mysteries. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Discordian Society took a decidedly more militant turn after the federal prohibition of LSD in 1966. In retaliation, members of this psychedelicist fellowship reorganized themselves around “Operation Mindfuck,” a clandestine program of nonviolent guerilla warfare targeting the US government, among numerous other sources of centralized authority. Though the founders adopted the Greek goddess of chaos, Eris, as their patron deity, the Discordians’ distinctly jocular piety, not to mention their over-riding investment in cultural insurgency, sets them apart from reconstructed, or “Neo-Paganism” (🡪Paganism).

*The Early Discordian Network (1958-1968)*

During its first decade, the Discordian Society took shape as collaboration primarily conducted through the mail. Hill and Thornley established the earliest groups, or “cabals,” with their intimate friends, as well as likeminded bohemians who shared a common interest in the hip culture of psychedelicism. Aside from smoking cannabis together, the core Discordian practice during the early years of the religion (1958-1968) consisted of circulating chain-letters within their private network and among other psychedelicist churches. A ritual practice was employed in this epistolary exchange, insofar as recipients were instructed to set aside a portion of their day to ingest cannabis, read over the contents of the envelope, and compose responses. Their contribution was to be collated alongside the packet’s other material, and sent off to the next Discordian on the list. Termed “groovy packs,” these mailings included concealed joints, personal correspondence, poems, artwork, photos, and Discordian holy writ. The most famous holy book circulated in this fashion was the *Principia Discordia* (1963), which would be revised four times before Rip Off Press (the famed published of underground comix) released the finalized, 4th edition in 1970.

The earliest draft of the *Principia Discordia* was produced after Thornley relocated to New Orleans to reconnect with Hill in 1961. Together they founded the first Discordian group, the “French Quarter Cabal,” by recruiting their friends from the city’s famed bohemian neighborhood, the French Quarter. Members included the self-styled “voodoo priestess” Barbara Reid, Bob McElroy (“Mungojerry Grindlebone”), Rodger Watlington (“Fang, the Unwashed”), and others. Watlington took over as head of the cabal after Hill and Thornley moved to California, and subsequently increased Discordianism visibility in the French Quarter by publishing the city’s first underground newspaper, *The Garbled Word*.

The Discordians forged alliances with a broad range of psychedelic churches, despite their diminutive size throughout the 1960s. Hill (who formally adopted the title “Malaclypse the Younger”) formed the second Discordian fellowship, the Joshua Norton Cabal, after moving to San Francisco in the mid-1960s. Positioned in the epicenter of West Coast psychedelicism, Hill exchanged initiations with Jefferson “Fuck” Poland (1942-), the head of the Psychedelic Venus Society and Sexual Freedom League. As a sister church, the Psychedelic Venus Society evangelized cannabis as a sacrament, dealt LSD within the hip community, and collaborated with the Diggers to stage public orgies, or “Fuck-ins.” Hill also allied the Discordians with the Neo-American Church led by Arthur Kleps (1928-1999), then a resident at Millbrook, the so-called “psychedelic Vatican” presided over by Timothy Leary’s League of Spiritual Discovery. Further south, in Los Angeles, Thornley (“Lord Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst”) formed his own cabal, which amalgamated Discordianism with Kerista, a psychedelic church founded in the mid-1950s by John Peltz Presmont (“Brother Jud”). Kerista originated in New York City, where it allied itself with another psychedelic sect, the Moorish Orthodox Church of America; however, constant police harassment forced Presmont to flee with the Keristans to the Caribbean, and eventually to California in 1966. After his initiation into this religion, Thorley subsequently converted his house into a temple, where his group lived in accordance with Kerista teachings, which meant the sacramental use of cannabis, communal living, and free love. Other Discordian cabals formed across the country, in both hip enclaves and rural farmlands. In the period that followed, though, the group centered in Chicago emerged as the most influential cabal in the Discordian movement.

*The Militant Turn (1968-1975)*

Cerebrated as “Pope Bob” by contemporary psychedelicists, 🡪Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007) was the most widely recognized member of the Discordian Society. Wilson joined the Discordian Society after exchanging letters with Thornley, whom he met through the letter columns of *The Liberator*, a libertarian-anarchist publication. While working as an editor at *Playboy* magazine, Wilson formed his own cabal, the Nameless Anarchist Horde, with another editor, Robert Shea (b. 1933-1994). Though an affinity for anarchist politics was commonplace across Discordian cabals, the Nameless Anarchist Horde was the product of the revolutionary milieu that developed around the Chicago Surrealist Group, co-founded by Franklin Rosemont (1943-2009) and his wife, Penelope Rosemont (1942).

Wilson and Shea directed their cabal, consisting largely of other journalists, in the execution of a media hoax, wherein mention of the Bavarian Illuminati was inserted into mainstream and underground publications alike. The resulting narrative, which I term the Discordian Illuminati thesis, painted a dualistic cosmological picture in which the fate of the world hung in the balance between the sinister forces of the Illuminati and the Discordian Society, here portrayed as an ancient order of mystical anarchists. Though conspiracy theories involving the Illuminati were formerly confined to the extreme Right of the American political spectrum, this secret society was installed in Leftist discourse due to the orchestrated effort of the Chicago Discordians.

The Nameless Anarchist Horde escalated their campaign of cultural subversion in 1968 with “Operation Mindfuck.” Their target was no longer the press, but the District Attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison (1921-1992). Garrison was heralded as a hero by the underground press on account of launching an independent inquiry into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy; however, the findings of his highly publicized probe provoked the Discordian epistolary into action. According to the Garrison investigation, Thornley and the Discordians were part of a CIA-led conspiracy to frame Lee Harvey Oswald for the president’s murder. Garrison’s theory hinged on the fact that Oswald and Thornley served in the Marines together; and incredibly, the Discordian patriarch wrote a novel about the alleged sniper three years *before* the assassination. In response to the allegation, Thornley’s fellowship inundated Garrison’s office with threatening communiqués signed by the Bavarian Illuminati. Here, the Discordians were exploiting the fact that Alan Chapman, a member of Garrison’s investigation team, was convinced that this shadowy group were likewise involved in the assassination. Their attack on Garrison was only the opening salvo in Operation Mindfuck.

The Discordian Society did not emerge into public consciousness until the publication of *Illuminatus!* (1975), a trilogy of pulp novels authored by Shea and Wilson. As the definitive statement of the Discordian Illuminati thesis, these voluminous tomes portrayed the US government of the 1960s as a front for the Bavarian Illuminati, which itself is beholden to H.P. Lovecraft’s monstrous “Old Ones,” whose evil designs are beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Casting their friends in the Discordian Society as the story’s protagonists, the authors depicted the allied forces of the psychedelicist church movement as the vanguard of an underground tradition of spiritual illumination passed down since the time of Atlantis. Within the appendices of *Illuminatus!*, the authors break the “fourth wall” and address the reader directly. They explain how the plot intentionally combined campy narrative elements with experimental writing techniques so as to “mindfuck” the reader into a higher state of awareness. In short, the books were not merely entertainment but a program by readers could initiate themselves into the mysteries of chaos.

Wilson and Shea believed the publication of *Illuminatus!* would revitalize the waning militant psychedelic insurgency (or “flower power”) of the early 1970s. However, their immodest expectations were dashed by its publisher, Dell, which delayed production of the trilogy for six years. By the time *Illuminatus!* hit newsstands in 1975, the zeitgeist had shifted away from the unbridled optimism of Flower Power, and towards the violent ideology of “armed love.”

*Discordian Internationalism (1975-2000s)*

Discordianism had split into two currents following the publication of *Illuminatus!* Representing the “second wave” of Beat Zen, Thornley’s Erisian faction advocated an anarcho-pacifist interpretation of chaos. Writing under the *nom de guerre* Ho Chi Zen, Thornley described the doctrines of this school as “Zenarchy,” a portmanteau of Zen and anarchy, which proposed that the fall of the state would only be accomplished through a paradigm shift effected through meditation and cannabis. Other members of the Erisian school included John Overton (“Camden Benares”), author of *Zen Without Zen Masters* (1977), as well as the accredited Zen master and student of Seung Sahn, Jim Wilson (“Tundra Wind”). Together, these second wave Beat Zennists formed a small but vocal sangha, which commanded a sizable audience in the 🡪zine scene of the mid-1980s.

The other, more prominent branch of the Discordian Society formed around Wilson and Shea, whose *Illuminatus!* trilogyattracted a cult following on the fringes of science fiction fandom. A robust intellectual culture emerged across numerous fanzines, including *The* *Golden APA* (1979-2003), Arthur Hlavaty’s *Fan-Shaped Destiny*, and Ed Zdrojewski’s *The Benton Harbor Rat-Weasel.* The centerpiece of this textual community was Shea’s own zine, *No Governor*, which featured the major players in the Discordian Society, including Wilson, Thornley, and Hill. This zine served as an open literary forum for discussing their enchanted doctrines of chaos over and against what they saw as the desiccated secularism of the Left. The Discordians presumed that the necessary point of departure for radical politics was the psychedelic expansion of consciousness, and therefore they denigrated the anarchist movement for its rigid ideological dogmas, fetishization of personal sacrifice, and mindless devotion to “political correctitude.”

A contributing factor in the occult boom of the 1970s, the combination of paranoia and psychedelicist humor in *Illuminatus!* appealed to esotericists that were equally turned off by the “love & light” metaphysics of New Age Buddhists, and the sinister theatrics of Left Hand Path traditions. Wilson and Shea’s Discordian tome played a particular significant role in New York City’s occult scene, which was centered around the Magickal Childe bookshop in Manhattan. This shop sent shockwaves across the occult scene in 1977, when it published an alleged translation of the *Necronomicon*, a legendary book invented by the American horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). An avid admirer of *Illuminatus!,* the pseudonymous translator of the text, “Simon,” followed Wilson and Shea by presenting a workable magical system in the guise of a literary hoax. The *Necronomicon* was an underground bestseller, and subsequently rereleased by Avon in a mass market paperback edition in 1980. Followed by three popular sequels (*The Necronomicon Spellbook* [1998], *The Gates of the Necronomicon* [2006]), this Discordian hoax set into motion the current craze over Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos.

Though ignored by reviewers, the *Illuminatus!* trilogy sold over 100,000 copies by the 1980s. The steady growth of the Discordian Society was spurred by the arrival of a new psychedelicist fellowship, the 🡪Church of the SubGenius, a revivalist sect of militant pranksters that appropriated the Discordian Illuminati thesis into its own intentionally bizarre mythos. Dissolving the boundaries of institutional affiliation, the Church also absorbed Discordian cabals into its ranks, and openly honored its patriarchs, especially Thornley, as “saints.” Setting into motion the rise of the zine scene, this united front of psychedelicist factions led the way in what was regarded as the “neo-psychedelic renaissance,” a phrase coined by the Discordian futurist R.U. Sirius in the early 1990s.

Right-wing Discordinaism has developed as a subcurrent alongside the two main branches of the Society. More accurately described as anarcho-Capitalist, the authors in this current rely heavily on Ayn Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism. Thornley and Wilson both endorsed Objectivism in their earliest Discordian writings, though their enthusiasm was short-lived. The same cannot be said for Tim Wheeler (“Harold Lord Randomfactor”), an early Discordian conspirator who worked alongside William F. Buckley, Jr. as a staff writer for *The National Review*, which was formerly America’s most popular Conservative magazine. This subtradition of anarcho-Capitalist Discordianism also includes the Eris Society in Aspen, Colorado, and the post-cyberpunk author Racheal Haywire, whose scandalous autobiography *Acidexia* (2012) garnered general acclaim amongst trans-humanists.

The 1990s saw the migration of Discordianism across the Atlantic, where it was taken up by a new generation of artists and musicians. Born in Scotland, the writer Grant Morrison (1960-) has been a vocal proponent of Discordianism, which he likens to a strain of 🡪chaos magick. Often cited as the chief influence on *The Matrix* film trilogy, Morrison’s comic book series *The Invisibles* was a direct homage to *Illuminatus!* In fact, the author styled his series as a retelling of the Discordian Illuminati thesis, albeit updated for the “technoshamanism” of 1990s rave culture. Morrison is not the only Brit to exploit the medium of comics to evangelize Eris. His rival, Alan Moore (1953-), has embedded Discordian references in much of his work as well. The famed author of *V for Vendetta* (1982) and *Watchmen* (1986) has, likewise, been a visible presence at Discordian conclaves, including the recurring psychedelic party, Festival 23, customarily hosted in rural parts of England.

Popular British musicians have also appropriated Discordianism in their work. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the avant garde electronic duo KLF topped the charts with a series of pop hits including “3am Eternal.” Fronted by Bill Drummond (1953-) and Jimmy Cauty (1956-), the KLF made the cover of newspapers worldwide after they set fire to £1,000,000 in an abandoned fishing shack on the Scottish island of Jura. According to the historian John Higgs, this was not simply a media stunt, but a magical working orchestrated to initiate a new, chaotic aeon. Reformed as the Justified Ancients of MuMu (named after a Discordian cabal that appears in *Illuminatus!*), the group is also notable for writing the only explicitly Discordian song to reach the top of the British music chart, “Justified and Ancient” (1991), which featured the American country music star, Tammy Wynette (1942-1998). The KLF branched out into the literary world by authoring a step-by-step manual for manufacturing hit records, and more recently, *2023* (2019), an unauthorized sequel to the *Illuminatus!* trilogy.

Theatre troupes in the UK have adapted Discordian works for the stage. The first and largest theatrical event was Ken Campbell and Chris Langham’s adaptation of *Illuminatus!* Produced by the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool in 1976, this ten-hour performance debuted at London’s National Theatre (and included a cameo by Robert Anton Wilson) before it traveled to venues across the UK, Europe, and the US. The first book of Wilson’s memoir, *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secrets of the Illuminati* (1977), was later adapted for the stage by Campbell’s daughter, Daisy Eris Campbell, so named after the Discordian goddess. Running for twenty-three nights at the Cockpit London, her production of *Robert Anton Wilson’s* *Cosmic Trigger* galvanized the organization of the aforementioned Festival 23, as well as the Find the Others “confestival” in 2014. Though not strictly Discordian, Wilson’s play *Wilhelm Reich in Hell* (1984) has been staged by companies in Santa Cruz (CA), Brooklyn (NYC), and Dublin, Ireland.

Since the turn of the millennium, Discordians have undertaken a number of institutionalization efforts. With the notable exception of the Krewe of Eris, which regularly terrorizes the official Mardi Gras festivities held annually in New Orleans, (LA), the most recognizable of these projects are Adam Gorightly’s online archive, *Historia Discordia*, and an online school dedicated to the ideas of Robert Anton Wilson, the Maybe Logic Academy. These professional endeavors attracted the attention of scholars, who hastily proclaimed that Discordianism was paradigmatic of a new style of belief, alternately termed “parody religion,” “invented religion,” and “hyper-real religion.” These typologies are unlikely to stand the test of time, as they do not present an adequate synthesis of the many and diverse primary source materials of Discordianism, which are only now being recognized in the scholarship. Nonetheless, they serve as instructive waymarkers for further excavations into what is now the oldest strain of psychedelicist militancy.

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