

## DELPHI CARSTENS - HYPERSTITION

*Hyperstition* is a neologism that combines the words ‘hyper’ and ‘superstition’ to describe the action of successful ideas in the arena of culture. Akin to neo-Darwinist Richard Dawkins’ concept of memes, hyperstitions work at the deeper evolutionary level of social organisation in that they influence the course taken by cultural evolution. Unlike memes, however, hyperstitions describe a specific category of ideas. Coined by renegade academics, the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), hyperstition describes both the effects and the mechanisms of apocalyptic postmodern ‘phase out’ or ‘meltdown’ culture.

Functioning as magical sigils or engineering diagrams hyperstitions are ideas that, once ‘downloaded’ into the cultural mainframe, engender apocalyptic positive feedback cycles. Whether couched as religious mystery teaching, or as secular credo, hyperstitions act as catalysts, engendering further (and faster) change and subversion. Describing the effect of very real cultural anxieties about the future, hyperstitions refer to exponentially accelerating social transformations. The very real socio-economic makeover of western (and increasingly global) society by the hyperstitions of Judeo-Christianity and free-market capitalism are good examples of hyperstitional feedback cycles. As Nick Land explains: “capitalism incarnates hyperstitional dynamics at an unprecedented and unsurpassable level of intensity, turning mundane economic ‘speculation’ into an effective world-historical force”(email interview).

Not only do the ideas themselves function as hyperstitions, but the trauma and fear engendered by their cultural ‘makeovers’ (whether in the form of crusade, jihad, secular war, industrial revolution or economic reform) merely serve to further empower the basic premise and fan the flames.

“Popular anxieties about the uncertainties of the future procured by rapid change are not merely the issue of ignorance,” explains historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto. “Rather they are symptoms of a world in the grip of ‘future shock’” (2001:556). Those who find change unbearable not only expect it to become uncontainable but work to make it so by fanning the flames of paranoia. ‘Future shock’ is one mechanism whereby hyperstition works to bring about the causal conditions for apocalypse. Once started, a hyperstition spreads like a virus and with unpredictable effects. They are “chinese puzzle boxes, opening to unfold to reveal numerous ‘sorcerous’ interventions in the world of history,” explains Land (CCRU.net).

It’s not a simple question of true or false with hyperstitions, explains Land. Rather, its a question of “transmuting fictions into truths”. Belief in this context isn’t passive. As the CCRU website explains, the situation is closer to the modern phenomenon of *hype* than religious or rational ‘belief’ as we’d ordinarily think about them. “Hype actually makes things happen and uses belief as a positive power. Just because it’s not ‘real’ now, doesn’t mean it won’t be real at some point in the future. And once it’s real, in a sense, it’s always been” (CCRU.net).

“Hyperstitions by their very existence as ideas function causally to bring about their own reality,” explains the CCRUs Nick Land. “The hyperstitional object is no mere figment or ‘social construction’ but it is in a very real way ‘conjured’ into being by the approach taken to it” (ibid). Even conventional historians allude to this process. As Fernández-Armesto cautions in *Civilizations* (2001: 544), “illusions – if people believe in them -change the course of history.”

Falling outside the parameters of conventional philosophy, the concept of hyperstition subscribes to what French post-structuralists Deleuze and Guattari have broadly termed *schizoanalysis*. Unlike conventional philosophy, with “its predilection for Platonic-fascist top-down solutions,” explains Nick Land in *Meltdown*, schizoanalysis avoids seeing ideas as static (1995:2). Rather, it favours an approach that sees ideas as diagrams that are “additive rather than substitutive, and immanent rather than transcendent: executed by functional complexes of currents, switches and loops, caught in scaling reverberations” (1995:2). Primed to create what Deleuze and Guattari have termed Bodies without Organs (BWOs) – namely metaphorical exploration devices of the kind crafted by engineers, artists and even junkies to ‘map’ new cognitive territories – schizoanalysis denotes a technique that can be utilised for analysing hyperstitions. The BWO, like a hyperstition, indicates an inchoate flux of deterritorialised energy; a speeding up. After all, the investigation and crafting of novel directions for culture, implied by BWOs and other types of schizoanalysis, necessitates an investigation of the very mechanisms of cultural overdrive or *meltdown*. Fictions that explore these areas are in themselves hyperstitional, functioning to speed things up and bring about the very condition of apocalypse.

The CCRU has coined the term ‘K- tactics’ to describe the action of hyperstition, using the mode of schizoanalysis, in contemporary information culture. “K-tactics,” explains Land, “is not a matter of building the future, but dismanteling the past ... and escaping the technical neurochemical deficiency conditions for linear-progressive [narratives]” (1995:13). Symptomatic of a type of cultural illness induced by future shock, the hyperstitional ‘infection’ brings about that which is most feared; a world spiraling out of control. This, manifestly, is the task of the ‘hyperstitional cyberneticist,’ according to Land – namely, to “close the circuit” of history by detecting the “convergent waves [that] register the influence of the future on its past”.

As Nick Land explains in the *Catacombs* (1995:1), a hyperstition has four characteristics: They function as (1) an “element of effective culture that makes itself real,” (2) as a “fictional quality functional as a time-travelling device,” (3) as “coincidence intensifiers,” and (4) as a “call to the Old Ones”. The first three characteristics describe how hyperstitions like the ‘ideology of progress’ or the religious conception of apocalypse enact their subversive influences in the cultural arena, becoming transmuted into perceived ‘truths,’ that influence the outcome of history. Finally, as Land indicates, a hyperstition signals the return of the irrational or the monstrous ‘other’ into the cultural arena. From the perspective of hyperstition, history is presided over by Cthonic ‘polytendriled abominations’ – the “Unuttera” that await us at history’s closure (in Reynolds 2000:1). The tendrils of these hyperstitional abominations reach back through time into the present, manifesting as the ‘dark will’ of progress that rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities. “The [hu]man,” from the perspective of the Unuttera “is something for it to overcome: a problem, drag,” writes Land in *Meltdown* (1995:14).

Exulting in capitalism’s permanent ‘crisis mode,’ hyperstition accelerates the tendencies towards chaos and dissolution by invoking irrational and monstrous forces – the Cthonic Old Ones. As Land explains, these forces move through history, planting the seeds of hyperstition:

John Carpenter’s *In the Mouth of Madness* includes the (approximate) line: “I thought I was making it up, but all the time they were telling me what to write.” ‘They’ are the Old Ones (explicitly), and this line operates at an extraordinary pitch of hyperstitional intensity. From the side of the human subject, ‘beliefs’ hyperstitionally condense into realities, but from the side of

the hyperstitional object (the Old Ones), human intelligences are mere incubators through which intrusions are directed against the order of historical time. The archaic hint or suggestion is a germ or catalyst, retro-deposited out of the future along a path that historical consciousness perceives as technological progress.

The ‘Old Ones’ can either be read as (hyper)real Lovecraftian entities – as myth made flesh – or as monstrous avatars representing that which is most uncontainable and unfathomable; the inevitable annihilation that awaits all things when (their) historical time runs out. “Just as particular species or ecosystems flourish and die, so do human cultures,” explains Simon Reynolds (2000:1). “What feels from any everyday human perspective like catastrophic change is really anastrophe: not the past coming apart, but the future coming together” (ibid).

### **Hyperstition: An Introduction**

In the following interview Nick Land responds to some questions about the mechanisms of Hyperstition in the context of apocalypse.

Q1. I wonder if you could elaborate on what exactly is concealed ... what will be revealed by apocalypse?

R1. What is concealed (the Occult) is an alien order of time, which betrays itself through ‘coincidences’, ‘synchronicities’ and similar indications of an intelligent arrangement of fate. An example is the cabbalistic pattern occulted in ordinary languages – a pattern that cannot emerge without eroding itself, since the generalized (human) understanding and deliberated usage of letter-clusters as numerical units would shut down the channel of ‘coincidence’ (alien information). It is only because people use words without numerizing them, that they remain open as conduits for something else. To dissolve the screen that hides such things (and by hiding them, enables them to continue), is to fuse with the source of the signal and liquidate the world.

Q2. Does writing about the apocalypse chase it back into the shadows/encode it more heavily ... or does the act of investigating the apocalypse help to decode and actualise it?

R2. For theists, the former. For transcendental naturalists (such as hyperstitional cyberneticists), the latter.

Q3. Could you elaborate on the ‘hyperstitional endeavour’? Hyperstition is a key word in the lexicon of my thesis ... I was wondering if you could break the term down into language that normal academics (such as my supervisor!) can understand. Hyperstition is the backbone or channel into which everything apocalyptic flows, but what exactly is it?

Could you define it? The way I understand it from the *Catacombs* is that it’s a meme or idea around which ideas/trajectories crystalise).

R3. Hyperstition is a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions – by their very existence as ideas – function causally to bring about their own reality. Capitalist economics is extremely sensitive to hyperstition, where confidence acts as an effective tonic, and inversely. The (fictional) idea of Cyberspace

contributed to the influx of investment that rapidly converted it into a technosocial reality.

Abrahamic Monotheism is also highly potent as a hyperstitional engine. By treating Jerusalem as a holy city with a special world-historic destiny, for example, it has ensured the cultural and political investment that makes this assertion into a truth. Hyperstition is thus able, under 'favorable' circumstances whose exact nature requires further investigation, to transmute lies into truths.

Hyperstition can thus be understood, on the side of the subject, as a nonlinear complication of epistemology, based upon the sensitivity of the object to its postulation (although this is quite distinct from the subjectivistic or postmodern stance that dissolves the independent reality of the object into cognitive or semiotic structures). The hyperstitional object is no mere figment of 'social construction', but it is in a very real way 'conjured' into being by the approach taken to it.

Q4+5. In the *Catacombs* you also relate hyperstition to the 'Old Ones' – the Nommos ... are these water spirits the avatars of communication technologies? I'm fascinated by your reference to Dogon/Voodoo/Shamanism/Magick ... how do these archaic occult systems, which are so heavily coded and hidden, relate to the immense speeds and ultra-modernity implied by the term hyperstition? I've always been fascinated by archaic systems myself ... they are the dark roots of modern technologies.

R4+5. John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness* includes the (approximate) line: "I thought I was making it up, but all the time they were telling me what to write." 'They' are the Old Ones (explicitly), and this line operates at an extraordinary pitch of hyperstitional intensity. From the side of the human subject, 'beliefs' hyperstitionally condense into realities, but from the side of the hyperstitional object (the Old Ones), human intelligences are mere incubators through which intrusions are directed against the order of historical time. The archaic hint or suggestion is a germ or catalyst, retro-deposited out of the future along a path that historical consciousness perceives as technological progress.

Q6. Does hyperstition exist outside of time and how is it hidden? This is fascinating, particularly in relation to the apocalypse meme, which is not at all. How do the two terms relate?

R6. Time is the working in historical time of that which lies outside (but constructs itself through) historical time. Apocalypse closes the circuit.

Q7. How does hyperstition relate to capitalism as a force-field?

R7. Capitalism incarnates hyperstitional dynamics at an unprecedented and unsurpassable level of intensity, turning mundane economic 'speculation' into an effective world-historical force.

Q8. Can you say anything on the subject of fictionality – i.e. history and philosophy as fiction, and fiction as a more intensive actualisation of historical / scientific / technological / sociological potential?

R8. Hyperstition is equiposed between fiction and technology, and it is this tension that puts the intensity into both, although the intensity of fiction owes everything to its potential (to catalyse

hyperstitional 'becomings') rather than its actuality (which can be mere human expressivity).