MAKING THE DONKEY VISIBLE:
DISCORDIANISM IN THE WORKS OF ROBERT ANTON WILSON

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Introduction

Discordianism was invented in 1957 by two school friends, Greg Hill (1941–2000) and Kerry Thornley (1938–1998). It is based on the worship of Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos, and is notable for its use of irreverent humour. Although originally satirical, Discordianism developed into a sophisticated system of belief during the 1970s, and came to occupy a position of some respectability among Neo-Pagan groups in the United States. Although generally dismissed as a parody religion, some scholars have argued that despite its roots, Discordianism deserves to be treated as a ‘real’ religion (Cusack 2010: 46–51; Adler 1986: 328–337).

The principal scripture of Discordianism is the Principia Discordia, first published in 1969, though not widely available until the 1979 edition. Arguably, the most successful dissemination of Discordian ideas was in the works of American writer Robert Anton Wilson (1932–2007). The success of Illuminatus! (1975, co-authored with Robert Shea) and the autobiographical Cosmic Trigger (1977), transmitted Discordian ideas into the broader cultural milieu more successfully than Hill and Thornley were ever able to.

This chapter examines specific examples of how these cultural products functioned as sites for the dissemination of Discordian ideas. Utilising the production of culture perspective, which holds that culture and social structure form a developmental dialectic in which cultural products are both affected by, and capable of affecting, broader social structures (Peterson and Anand 2004: 311–312), I argue that Wilson’s exegesis of Discordianism appealed to groups who would never have otherwise come into contact with it, notably those utilising emergent technologies, such as computer hackers and dance musicians. In effect, Wilson operated as a ‘contact man’, mediating the meaning of controversial spiritual ideas like Discordianism or Jung’s synchronicities within the cultic milieu, and ultimately within culture more broadly (Hirsch 1972: 650–651).
This chapter begins with a description of Discordianism's origins, its tenets and its relationship to other religions. This is followed by an account of the life and work of Robert Anton Wilson, his historical and thematic links with Discordianism, and a discussion of how *Illuminatus!* and *Cosmic Trigger* form a conceptual whole in which Discordianism exemplifies Wilson's philosophy of 'model agnosticism'. I then seek to demonstrate how three of the most widespread examples of Discordian ideas in popular culture were influenced by these and other works of Robert Anton Wilson, specifically computer programming 'hacker' subcultures, the emergent sample-based popular music, here exemplified by the British group the KLF, and the appropriation of the '23 Enigma' by mainstream cinema. In concluding, however, I reassess how successful Wilson's dissemination of Discordian ideas was, given the broader context of his work; less so, I shall argue, than it might at first seem.

The Birth of Discordianism

Kerry Thornley and Greg Hill grew up in East Whittier, California, where, along with Bob Newport and Bill Stevens, they constituted a small circle of what would nowadays be called 'geeks', interested in science fiction, the irreverent humour of *Mad* magazine, philosophy, Humanism, poetry, Eastern religions and unusual beliefs of all sorts (Gorightly 2003: 26–28). The group would meet at local twenty-four hour bowling alleys, where, although underage, they could purchase alcohol. On one particular night in 1957, Hill and Thornley were discussing poems that Thornley had written on the theme of order emerging from chaos. Hill disagreed with Thornley; order, he insisted, was a construction of the human mind, and only chaos was real (Gorightly 2003: 57–58). This revelation was later mythologised in the *Principia Discordia*:

They looked around and saw that the bowlers were frozen like statues in a variety of comic positions, and that a bowling ball was steadfastly anchored to the floor only inches from the pins that it had been sent to scatter. The two looked at each other, totally unable to account for the phenomenon. The condition was one of suspension, and one noticed that the clock had stopped…

There walked into the room a chimpanzee, shaggy and grey about the muzzle, yet upright to his full five feet, and poised with natural majesty. He carried a scroll and walked to the young men.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “why does Pickering’s Moon go about in reverse orbit? Gentlemen, there are nipples on your chests; do you give milk? And