Erik Davis


With the anthology of previously published material aptly named _Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica_, Erik Davis provides an excellent overview of his body of work and wide-ranging interests. It is an inspiring as well as entertaining book, just like the previous three titles _Techgnosis_ on technomysticism (1999), a depth study of _Led Zeppelin IV_ (2005), and _The Visionary State_, a travel account on California’s spiritual topoi (2006).

The book itself consists of 32 pieces of varying length and complexity, from 2-page music reviews to full-fledged scholarly discussions of “marginalia” such as the important article on Lovecraftian Magick, “Calling Cthulhu” (originally published twenty years ago in the journal _Gnosis_), the more recent analysis of Burning Man festival called “Beyond Belief” (from the university press anthology _Afterburn_), or the discussion of Lee Scratch Perry and the dub scene, “Dub, Scratch and the Black Star”, taken from the “apocalypse noir” magazine _21C_. In between we find looser ruminations on subculture and exotica, esoteric or otherwise, which nevertheless seldom fails to move: travel reports on Burmese spirit mediums or the Goa trance scene, reflections on important figures like Joe Firmage, Peter Lamborn Wilson or Philip K. Dick, or semi-scholarly riffs on Gnosticism, Tantrism and psychedelia. Some of these feels like well-written blog posts, others like personal reflections on issues of importance for “infnauts” of the twenty-first century, and a few like pitches for academic studies. Incidentally, this is both a strength and a weakness.

The strength lies in the material itself and the variety exhibited by the selections. The editing is gentle and unobtrusive, letting the pieces speak without unnecessary contextualization or management. After the “prolegomena”, a not-too foreign intellectual biography-with-drugs, sections covering “Orientalismo”, “Invocations”, “Inner Space”, “Mad Science” and “Kalifornika” covers enough nooks and crannies in occulture to satisfy most readers. The final coda, “Bardo Flight”, is a meditation on transition, letting the reader leave the book gently behind. It is easy for anyone to find something reassuringly known and something excitingly new, and the anthology invites the reader to make connections between the various, highly idiosyncratic stopping points.

But this is also the weakness. Apart from the basic argument informing the book, ‘that a single terrain kept appearing between the lines of whatever subjects and genres I was exploring’, there is no sustained analytical engagement with the topic; it is nomadic, with all that that implies. As Davis continues in the preface quoted above: ‘Call it occulture, or, as I have here, modern esoterica.'
It’s a hazy no-man’s-land located somewhere between anthropology and mystical pulp, between the zendo and the metal club, between cultural criticism and extraordinary experience, whether psychedelic, or yogic, or technological. It is a dodgy terrain to explore; I like to think that it calls for the intrepid adventurer to shed any territorial claims and go nomad’ (p. 15). Contrary to the wide-ranging but also rigorous analysis found in *Techgnosis*, this is a book of teasers—often eye-opening, but always too short and too superficial to satisfy the scholar.

Of course, this is wholly outside the intentions of the book. Judged on its own merits, it is fulfilling, funny and foundational. Further, by covering both sides of the esotericism/popular culture divide still haunting both popular and academic interest in occulture, it is sidestepping easy judgments of authenticity or marginality to let the material speak in its own voice. Itself inhabiting a liminal role—too scholarly for the deeply weird or the casual reader, but also too weird for academia—*Nomad Codes* flickers between primary and secondary source material. Sometimes it coalesces into one or the other, but it is mainly in the between state.

To describe the flickering nature, I am tempted to cite a section from the article “Snakes and Ladders” from 1994, where Davis is describing a primordial nature state: ‘You are an archaic nomad. You are deeply and inextricably embedded in the immanent matrix of natural rhythms, flows, and forces ... You live in a world without settlements, and where there are no settlements there are no walls’ (p. 153). When I first read this, I thought I was invited into a thought experiment; “imagine for a moment you are a nomad” and so on. Further on, it becomes clear that this is in fact a dramatic description of the “natural” impulse of “the pagan”, contrasted analytically (and historically) by the transcendent mode of “the gnostic”. Even though this is highly engaging, such analytical dichotomies are as dangerous as the Apollonian and the Dionysian, for example, regardless of the reservations taken from the outset. More importantly, the investigation of these impulses or styles is less a study of discursive practices or life-worlds than the application of esoteric reflections to facilitate liberation into multiplicity. Scholarly distance gives way to participant intimacy, analysis to synthesis. Somewhere in occulture’s ‘fractal field of contradictory and constantly shifting possibilities, perspectives, and practices’, virtual or otherwise, Davis believes there are no walls. Here, we are going nomad.

This is good enough for occultural consumption, but is sure to turn away scholars looking for proper academic work. In that case, I would direct the reader to monographs like Christopher Partridge’s *The Re-Enchantment of the West*. That said, *Nomad Codes* is highly recommended to any scholar interested in occulture, exotica, and psychedelica. Suitable for both newcomers and