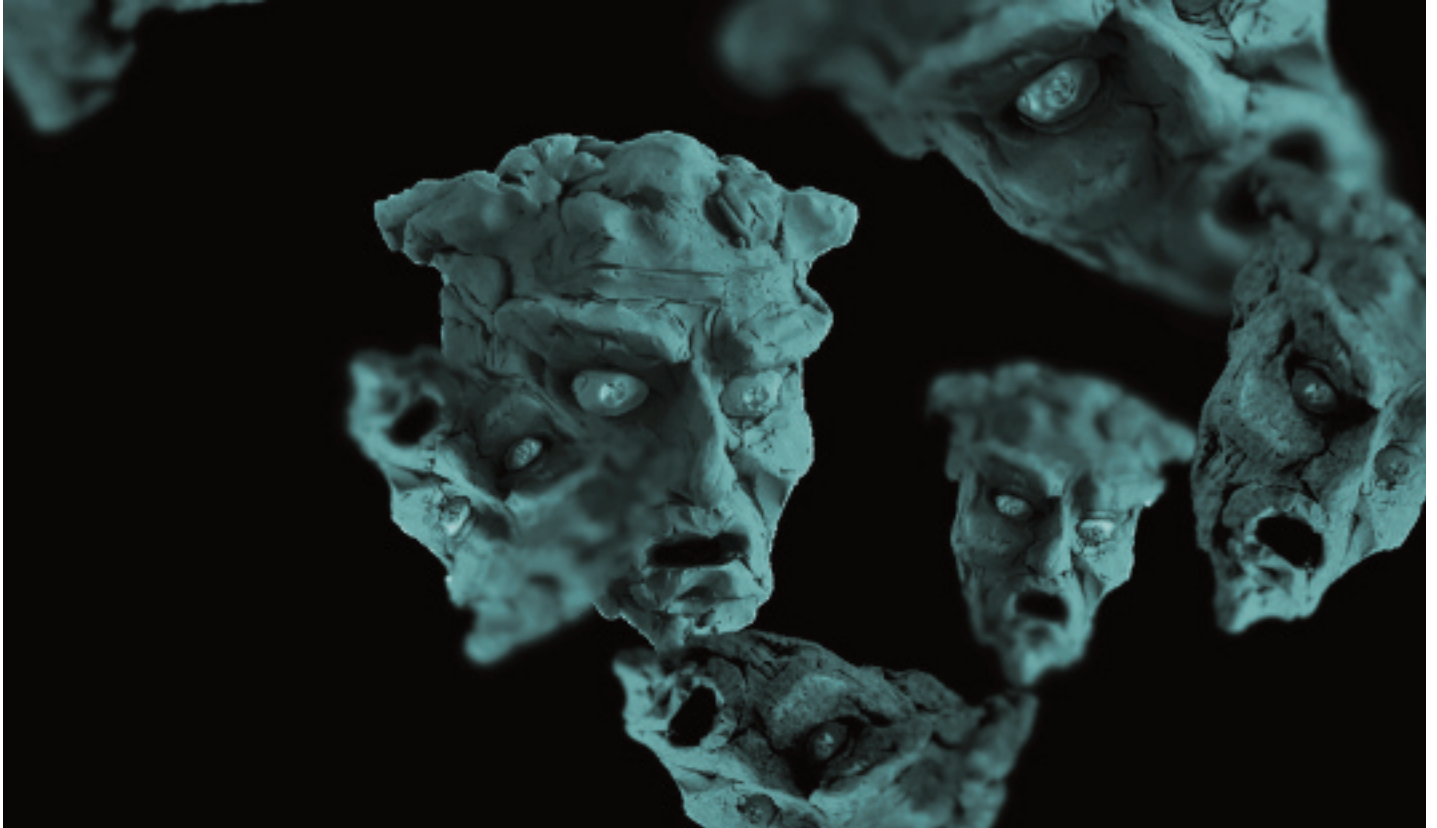


Erik Davis

Whispers of the Demon



Here is a recent tale that might have come from the imp of the posthuman perverse: In February 2019, Kim Kardashian posted an urgent warning about the ‘Momo Challenge’ on her Instagram feed. The story she passed on, and whose viral explosion she helped ensure, alerted parents that nefarious parties were using social media and YouTube Kid videos to coax children into self-harm, even suicide. While the rumour followed the loose script of earlier ALL CAPS panics over Tide Pods or the Blue Whale Challenge, the Momo meme was also wedded to an amygdala-hijacking image: a monstrous bird-lady, whose bug eyes and rictus Joker grin no doubt fanned the anxieties that spread the mind virus.

This image was not a digital concoction but a photograph of an actual piece of art. In 2016, Keisuke Aiso debuted his *Mother Bird* at Tokyo’s Vanilla Gallery, an outré, decidedly non-vanilla salon specializing in the steamy grotesqueries the Japanese call ‘eroguru’. Aiso’s sculpture was an example of a class of *yokai* (supernatural creatures) known as *ubume* – the ghosts of women who have died in childbirth. Neither Aiso nor the Gallery had anything to do with the fabrication of the Momo myth, and we can’t know whether the engineers of the Momo meme knew the origins of the figure were found within a folklore of filiation and death. All we can say is that Momo emerged from the anonymous online collectives that produce creepypasta, the family of fabricated horror memes and hoaxes that included the notorious Slender Man. Momo became a moral panic because she was *designed* that way – as an uncanny exploit, an infectious vector of the weaponized weird.

By the end of February, however, a more sober counter-narrative had emerged from the tech sector and the mainstream news media: Momo was a hoax, there was no evidence any kids had killed themselves because of the Challenge, and parents were actually causing harm by freaking their kids out with hysterical stories of bird demons that could reach their claws through the screen. The hoax-busters offered a sort of rationalist relief: Momo is nothing more than a wildly successful prank whose only danger is the gullibility of the credulous. But are things really so simple? As the Slender Man-inspired stabbings by two Wisconsin twelve-year-olds in 2014 should remind us, parents are not totally foolish to fear the wickedness of Internet memes. Moreover, if Peppa Pig videos did not actually contain Momo prompts, as some British parents reported, the Kid videos that YouTube's algorithms recommend alongside Peppa Pig do occasionally turn up similar-seeming fare that then erupts into blood sports and creepy sexualized images.

Though it cannily tracks hoaxes and online rumours and uncanny posthuman objects, Richard Grayson's *Possessions_inc.* does not offer much in the way of relief. Instead, it is a work of devilish ambiguity. Released on an art gallery website, but full of journalism and esoterica, assembled by an artist who is also a curator, the piece features an animated demon named Asmodeus who lip-syncs histories, dialogues, fictions, and samples of mainstream media. But while this collection of signs and symptoms feels like social criticism, it never gets down to the brass tacks of argument. So is this a video essay or a punk subversion of one? A commentary on art or an art made of commentary? I am not sure, but whatever it is, *Possessions_inc.* is the kind of WTF?-meta-thing required to limn the liminal objects and possibilities that are its concerns: conspiratorial meta-fictions, capitalist sorceries, art pranks, haunted dolls, animist robotics.

Which is not to say that the work's ambiguities and refusal of straight analysis simply leaves us suspended in an easy ironic distance from pop mythologies and other people's delusions. Instead, *Possessions_inc.* drives us forcefully to confront the spectral (and highly capitalized) business at hand: the actual mutations in social existence that compelled the work in the first place.

Like the plurality of voices in a séance, the audio in Grayson's work takes the form of an extended sonic collage of original and sampled material whose distorted filters, refrains, and sometimes abrupt jump-cuts refuse the soothing flow familiar from podcasts, while providing an equivalent dose of information and commentary. This is audio thought as juxtaposition: not the elaboration of theory or its middle-brow twin, opinion, but nor is it the jarring Dada bites of Burroughs and Gysin's cut-ups. Instead, it is something in-between: an assemblage of stories, conversations, and reported facts, whose clashing sparks provide all the light we get to find our way through the mess this magickal montage invokes – which is nothing less than the mess we're in.

Each episode of *Possessions_inc.* presents a rabbit hole or three, boring into a particular conundrum – Rembrandt forgeries, hacked sex toys, the great Dr Who episode 'Blink' – until the patter splits and branches and we find ourselves in a larger and increasingly familiar maze. This maze is familiar not just because each episode returns us to it, from a different angle, but because the maze is also the uncanny ontological infrastructure of our lives – or at least of the consensus reality whose fractures now derange those lives. Within this maze, familiar distinctions still suggest a choice of direction or point of view: fiction or history, art or accounting, machines or minds, money or shit. But whichever fork we choose, the paths keep converging on the same dizzying place, as the distinctions turn out to be two sides of a single Möbius strip. Despite the wide variety of *Possession_inc.*'s sources, the work gives way to the realization

that, in the words of Colossal Cave, the first computer adventure game, its ‘twisty little passages’ are ‘all alike’. The garden of forking paths is really a one-way labyrinth, a plunge into a single conundrum that is swallowing us up.

At least the monster at the heart of the labyrinth is there before our eyes: Asmodeus, the carved devil who sat – until being chopped down by a fanatic – at the threshold of the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in the notoriously enigmatic French town of Rennes-le-Château. Asmodeus is at once the guide and the ventriloquist dummy who mouths the various mysteries of *Possessions_inc.*, and particularly the codes and claptrap that have grown up around the secrets supposed encoded in the small strange church, where the nineteenth-century priest François-Bérenger Saunière, who special-ordered Asmodeus through a religious catalogue, was said to have discovered a very special treasure.

As Asmodeus informs us, that documents forged half a century ago by a reactionary mystificator (Pierre Plantard) and a fringe surrealist (Philippe de Chérisey), and then tucked into the Bibliothèque Nationale, reproduced this nugget of lore and launched a phantasmagoric hoax that still holds sway. Over the decades, as the charismatic conundrum grew, heterogeneous materials – ancestral bloodlines, secret societies, UFO landing pads, crappy potboilers – became glued together in patterns that both point to and refuse a central secret whose very absence motivates the continual churn of fresh material. Over time, a variety of second-rate actors, New-Age geomancers, and feverish bestselling hermeneuts minted a counter-history that, though built like a Lovecraftian collective fiction, gained enough density and attention to become a kind of parallel world – a hybrid of art forgery, invented tradition, and post-modern prank.

As any number of parallel mutations included in *Possessions_inc.* suggest, this blurring of fiction and reality is an increasingly familiar leitmotif of contemporary reality. More to the point, it is becoming the very form that power takes in an attention economy defined by the technological management of belief, desire, and fantasy through media misdirection, simulacral politics, and the algorithmic exploits of human nervous tissue by nascent artificial intelligence. As the recommended links on YouTube remind us, paranoia and insincere secrets sell. Conspiracy thinking has not only become a major part of the cultural and political landscape – even an instrument of statecraft – but now stands as the necessary allegory for the feeling and fact that our lives as digitally-embedded humans are, to an unknowable degree, *possessed*.

But possessed by what exactly? Capital, neural programming, fictions, demons, memes, dogmas, AIs, systems of social subjectification? Grayson evokes the many objects and forces that interpolate the subject today without claiming to have discovered, like the Rennes mysterians, *the key*. In fact, while critical analysis, historical study, and knowledge of contemporary developments in social science and technology help clear some of the fog – *Possessions_inc.* is in no ways wilfully perverse – this sort of research in some ways just makes everything worse. Anyone paying attention to developments in behavioural sciences, psy-ops, predictive profiling, data tracking, and surveillance capitalism cannot help but experience the shudders of *agency panic*, Timothy Melley’s sharp diagnosis of an affect that both inspires so much conspiracy-theorizing, and explains the defensive absolutism of so many of its practitioners.

At times, I suspect, we all fear that we – or, more often than not, *other people* (who are in the end not so dissimilar from us) – have been infected by external controls and engineered scripts. Now we all talk in talking points. To make matters more confusing, our possessions too are becoming possessed. As the sometimes-paranoid Philip K. Dick

pointed out, even as humans become subtly more thing-like, more seemingly programmed and prodded by external triggers, the objects around us are growing more spunky.

Here Asmodeus offers another clue, simply by gesturing to his own animated appearance (especially that mysterious *right knee*). Today various forces are coming together to enliven the objects in our lives, as contemporary developments in robotics and artificial intelligence dovetail with our primate imaginations and the uncanny valleys of haunted folklore to stir up a new weird animism. We return, with a posthuman twist, to the ancestral perception of an environment stuffed with non-human agents and sacred tricksters. But now those ancient alliances with beast and raincloud are crowded out by data-slurping sex bots and smart surveillance drones and the combative toasters and coffee machines of Dick's predictive fictions. As an art(-damaged) thinker, Grayson also reminds that these uncanny transformations are directly linked to the forgeries, warehoused cast-offs, and insane overvaluations of the art market, where the force that animates the brilliant and beautiful objects of human craft is nothing less than capital itself.

Again, for all its insights and sharp ironies, *Possessions_inc.* is not itself a piece of criticism or social analysis. Instead, without shedding its realism or commitment to material history, *Possessions_inc.* body-snatches the more infectious *form* of the conspiracies and webs of occult correspondences it traces: a nonlinear network of resonating concepts, images, words, and similitudes that point to a dark totality that remains obscured, behind the veil, just over the horizon. As viewers, we are set loose like wanderers in this thorny forest of symbols, our recourse to scepticism and knowledge and analysis at once affirmed and submitted to the phantasmagoric undertow, this slipstream of apocalyptic foreshocks and daemonic dread.

Indeed, the most poignant moment in the series is an invented dialogue in which Philippe de Chérisey admits to his melancholy after planting his hoax time-bombs in the library. Though he believes his concocted counter-histories will come to 'erode the real', his exultation in this surrealist intervention is tempered by sadness and resignation. 'We are fucked,' he concedes. 'By setting a trail and a tale that will allow our fictions to shape and to determine the real, we are inevitably going to set things in motion that, though marvellous, will undermine some of the things that I still hold dear.' De Chérisey is learning the same lesson that is making so many queasy today, from postmodern relativists to anarchist pranksters, from media technologists to – who knows? – maybe even alt.right fake newscasters. A grimoire protocol from Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* says it best: '*doe not call up Any that you cannot put downe*'.



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