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Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century (Albma Rhetoric Cult & Soc Crit)

Joshua Gunn

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A broadly interdisciplinary study of the pervasive secrecy in America cultural, political, and religious discourse.

The occult has traditionally been understood as the study of secrets of the practice of mysticism or magic. This book broadens our understanding of the occult by treating it as a rhetorical phenomenon tied to language and symbols and more central to American culture than is commonly assumed.

Joshua Gunn approaches the occult as an idiom, examining the ways in which acts of textual criticism and interpretation are occultic in nature, as evident in practices as diverse as academic scholarship, Freemasonry, and television production. Gunn probes, for instance, the ways in which jargon employed by various social and professional groups creates barriers and fosters secrecy. From the theory wars of cultural studies to the Satanic Panic that swept the national mass media in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gunn shows how the paradox of a hidden, buried, or secret meaning that cannot be expressed in language appears time and time again in Western culture.

These recurrent patterns, Gunn argues, arise from a generalized, popular anxiety about language and its limitations. Ultimately, *Modern Occult Rhetoric* demonstrates the indissoluble relationship between language, secrecy, and publicity, and the centrality of suspicion in our daily lives.

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