

The Fourth Way and the Internet: Esotericism, Secrecy, and Hiddenness in Plain Sight

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Abstract

Peter Brook's *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979) was a watershed in Fourth Way history, in that it was a public, visual, and dramatised version of G. I. Gurdjieff's search for wisdom, presented to uninitiated film audiences as a model of the esoteric spiritual quest. A decade later the Internet shifted from geeks' domain to popular playground, via the introduction of Tim Berners-Lee's World Wide Web interface. Since 2000 Fourth Way schools and websites (official and unofficial) have proliferated as the official and unofficial Work lineages in the "meat world" have diminished. The outcome of this cultural shift is uncertain; it may be, as some online teachers aver, that "real" spiritual work can be done in virtual environments, but it is equally possible that the tsunami of Fourth Way schools, books, DVDs, CDs, and journals will result in Gurdjieff's teaching being co-opted by what Guy Debord termed "the Spectacle." The commodification of a powerful esoteric teaching with high spiritual aspirations due to the viral replication of online material is one possible future for the Work. Alternatively, Internet schools may transform the Fourth Way, affirming its importance for the "digital native" generation.

Keywords: G. I. Gurdjieff; Internet; Work; Fourth Way; esotericism; commodification; the Spectacle

1. Introduction: Religion, Esotericism and the Internet

In the twenty-first century the Internet is all-pervasive, with billions around the globe going online for a broad range of information, dating and romance opportunities, films and music, employment and education, and religion and spirituality. The transformation of the Internet from an arcane realm, inhabited by military analysts and IT geeks, to the playground and workspace of the masses was brought about by the introduction of the World Wide Web interface, launched by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989. By the mid-1990s a range of mainstream

religions had developed web presences.¹ Christian institutions, including Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches, joined Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim groups in supplementing their embodied and material activities with sites hosting scriptures, prayers for holy occasions, virtual pilgrimages and other resources for the faithful.² Christopher Helland has distinguished between a “majority of religious websites . . . [which] provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online)” and “religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion).”³ Traditional religions were providers of religion online, as participant-directed content and interactivity could potentially undermine their authority. There is a close relationship between computer innovation, new spiritualities and 1960s counterculture, and before the domination of the graphics interface alternative religions had a stronger presence online than the “world religions.” For example, Michel Bauwens has noted such innovations as Mark Pesce’s shamanic ritual to “sacralise” his Zero Circle (a virtual *axis mundi*), and cyber-rituals by “techno-pagans.”⁴ These examples are most definitely online religion.

Douglas E. Cowan has recently argued that, despite the Internet being hailed as a sacred space and digital religion as an important new phenomenon, much “activity was limited to online replication of off-line material and computer-mediated imitation of real-world behaviour . . . the Internet [was] more of a delivery system than a qualitatively different . . . environment.”⁵ This is undeniable with regards to the online presence of institutional religions. Yet, in the contemporary West individualisation has dramatically changed the religious landscape, with de-institutionalisation, *bricolage*, and personal spiritualities as now-dominant modes and themes. The Internet has become a

1. Hutchings, “Religion and the Humanities,” 283–94.

2. Krüger, “Media,” 395.

3. Helland, “Online Religion as Lived Religion,” 1.

4. Bauwens, “Spirituality and Technology.”

5. Cowan, “The Internet,” 462.

site of self-conversion, of experimentation with multiple religious and spiritual options, and of truth-telling about experiences with various organisations (religious, commercial, legal and political, among others), some of which are historically secretive and formerly enjoyed protection from exposure.⁶ The best-known example of this phenomenon is the Church of Scientology, which prior to 2009 had protected esoteric and confidential texts from public scrutiny using strategies that included harassment and “threatened or actual litigation against critics,” a policy that Scientology’s founder L. Ron Hubbard called “Fair Game.”⁷ In 1996 Andreas Heldal-Lund established the Norwegian not-for-profit Operation Clambake, a website that hosted Scientology texts, news articles, petitions and other documents. The Church of Scientology repeatedly harassed him and attempted to take down the site. In 2008 the free-speech group Anonymous launched Project Chanology, an anti-censorship campaign aimed at the Church of Scientology, and a large number of celebrity defectors from the Church used the Internet and other media, including self-published memoirs, print media and television interviews, to tell their stories. The “viral” nature of Internet dissemination resulted in an information tsunami Scientology was powerless to stop.⁸

Religions with secretive or esoteric elements serve to link religion with esotericism or occultism, a multi-faceted phenomenon that has historically been treated as radically other to both official (Christian) religion and scientific modernity, but which has been re-evaluated of late and hailed as a parallel strand of culture that is deeply constitutive of Western modernity.⁹ The Latin *occultus* means “hidden” and the Greek *esōterikos* is related, referring to something that is “inner,” known to only a limited, secretive circle.¹⁰ Concealment is a vital element of such traditions, and epistemological dilemmas arise from the

6. Barkun, “Religion and Secrecy After September 11,” 275–301.

7. Cusack, “Media Coverage of Scientology in the United States,” 304.

8. *Ibid.*, 313.

9. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 16.

10. McLaughlin, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 53.

study of these phenomena. Hugh B. Urban identified what he terms a “double bind”: if a group practices secrecy one strategy to penetrate it is to become initiated, but the demands of vows of secrecy mean that “if one ‘knows’, one cannot speak, and if one speaks, one must not really ‘know’.”¹¹ The ethics of seeking to acquire such knowledge with a view to disseminating it are also complex, whatever the content of the teaching in question. Urban posits that secrecy is deployed to transform information into symbolic capital, something that is rare and thus valuable, and that esoteric content “is capable of bearing an enormous variety of different interpretations. Secret discourse, in short, is *extremely indeterminate and radically contextual*.”¹²

More than two decades have passed since Urban’s important article was published, and the issue for many esoteric bodies now is how to manage the proliferation of previously secret or limited distribution material now available on the Internet. What Egil Asprem has called “the rise of the occult information society”¹³ is not merely the publication of such material online, but the ease and speed with which such content can be duplicated. Cavan McLaughlin has opined that multiple modes of digital communication (discussion sites, blogs, e-mail, file transfer programs, and social networks, to name but a few) “have facilitated unparalleled acceleration in both exoteric *and* esoteric discourse . . . ultimately leading to a multitude of new magical groups and systems.”¹⁴ McLaughlin connects this with occulture, a term coined by Christopher Partridge to describe the reservoir formed by the interpenetration of popular culture, esotericism, and spirituality (somewhat like Colin Campbell’s “cultic milieu”) that people draw upon in crafting individual spiritual beliefs and practices.¹⁵ Occulture includes

11. Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy,” 210.

12. *Ibid.*, 235.

13. Asprem, “Contemporary Ritual Magic,” 385.

14. McLaughlin, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 54.

15. Partridge, *Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, vol. 1 of *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 62–86.

not merely ideas and symbols, but “*crucially* . . . the very institutions, fora and networks that create them”; that is, the technology that creates the Internet as a digital “space,” and machines to access it (smartphones, computers).¹⁶

For previously “real-world” organisations that practiced secrecy, concealment, non-disclosure, initiation or any other strategy to keep their group(s) and teachings out of the public eye, the transition to the open-source marketplace of contemporary online esotericism may have been eased by earlier processes of print publication of key texts, the establishment of unofficial lineages by breakaway teachers, and experiments with media including film and television. The case study in this article is the Fourth Way or the Work, the teaching established by George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949). After his death this manifested in an official form as the Gurdjieff Foundation or the Institut Gurdjieff under the leadership of his nominated successor Jeanne de Salzmann (1889–1990), and also in multiple unofficial lineages established by others among his pupils.¹⁷ While Gurdjieff lived the transmission of the teaching involved personal interaction with him; as individuals, in small groups, or in larger groups like Movements classes. Gurdjieff’s Three Series, also known as *All and Everything*, was published posthumously: *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (1950); *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1963) and *Life is Real Only Then, When I Am*’ (1975). These books served to introduce Fourth Way ideas to the uninitiated, and Peter Brook’s film of *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979), made with Jeanne de Salzmann’s approval, was an arthouse cinema success and won Gurdjieff a new audience.¹⁸ I argue that these experiments with media, which were supplemented by journalistic accounts of Gurdjieff’s work, film footage of Movements demonstrations, and pupil memoirs of time with the master, crafted a public reputation for the Work. However, they did not prepare a discreet and reticent organisation for the radically subjectivist, “non-hierarchical

16. McLaughlin, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 57.

17. Petsche, “A Gurdjieff Genealogy,” 49–79.

18. Cusack, “An Enlightened Life in Text and Image,” 72–97.

and authority-rejecting”¹⁹ open-source occultural bear-pit that is the twenty-first century Internet. The Fourth Way online retains, in some cases, strong links to real-world institutions, but other sites and schools are entirely separate, and this more radical online presence suggests that there is potential for the Work to develop into an entirely new phenomenon.

2. G. I. Gurdjieff as Spiritual Teacher and the Work as an Esoteric Teaching

Gurdjieff was born in Alexandropol (modern Gyumri), in Russian eastern Armenia, and his life prior to his emergence as a spiritual teacher in Moscow and St Petersburg in 1911 or 1912 is clouded in obscurity. Biographical details are recorded in his writings, but it is difficult to determine which stories are historical and which are metaphorical, or even downright fictional. Gurdjieff first taught in small groups, using a question-and-answer format, and this phase of his teachings is represented by P. D. Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous*, a record of his years as a pupil of Gurdjieff.²⁰ Gurdjieff taught that humans are machines who pass through life asleep. There are four states of human consciousness; sleep, waking consciousness (which is close to sleep), self-remembering, and objective consciousness, the attainment of which is accompanied by the acquisition of a “higher-being-body,” the equivalent of a soul. There are three higher-being bodies; the astral or *kesdjan* body, the mental body, and the causal body.²¹ In *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* (1950) Gurdjieff articulated a genealogy of his teachings that reached back to Atlantis, via ancient Babylon (identifying it as both a manifestation of the true and eternally relevant *philosophia perennis* and of the *prisca theologia*, a doctrine that was pure in the ancient world but has undergone dilution and corruption over time).²²

19. McLaughlin, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 57.

20. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*.

21. Wellbeloved, *Gurdjieff*, 27.

22. Gurdjieff, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*.

The state of self-remembering, which is required for the survival of bodily death, is facilitated by the range of teaching methods employed by Gurdjieff.²³ These include his written works (chiefly the trilogy *All and Everything*), the sacred dances or exercises called “Movements,” the music he wrote in collaboration with the Ukrainian composer Thomas de Hartmann (1885–1956), physical labour, fasting, and “inner work” (esoteric exercises he gave to particular individuals and groups of pupils). This emphasis on personal effort is the reason that Gurdjieff’s teaching is termed the Work; its other name, the Fourth Way, referred to his claim that it integrated the spiritual ways of “the fakir (who works on his body), the yogi (who works on his mind), and the monk (who works on his feeling).”²⁴ Most importantly, Gurdjieff’s teaching techniques and spiritual exercises were not to be revealed to those outside the Work.

Gurdjieff’s pupils undoubtedly derived their conviction that his teachings must be kept within the ranks of the initiated from the teacher himself: Gurdjieff said the revelation of esoteric material to the unprepared was dangerous.²⁵ In the Fifth Talk of the Third Series, he discussed initiation into his esoteric exercises, and remarked:

Besides these exercises of which I now speak and also the information about them into which I now wish to initiate you, being for you a really good means for this aim, they will help you firstly to apprehend and understand many details of the significance and sense of the first of the seven what are called “cardinal” exercises I mentioned, and secondly, you will . . . learn, by the way, of two definite notions which from the dawn of centuries among all categories of initiated persons on the Earth have been considered and are at the present time considered “secret,” and an acquaintance with which for the average man can, according to the convictions of these initiates, even prove ruinous.²⁶

This concern for appropriate preparation of pupils by an authentic teacher was linked to Gurdjieff’s emphasis on the benefits of a group over individual

23. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, & Exercises*, 66–68.

24. *Ibid.*, 51.

25. I have previously demonstrated that the Work meets the six-point typology of Western esotericism proposed by Antoine Faivre. See Cusack, “The Enneagram,” 34–36.

26. Gurdjieff, *Life is Real Only Then, when I Am*, 132.

striving. Individuals, he averred, could achieve nothing. Ouspensky documented Gurdjieff's use of the image of a jail break: to dig a tunnel, to negotiate the outside world after escape, is beyond the capacity of a single prisoner. A group, a leader and contact with "*those who have escaped before*" makes escape a possible reality, not a mere dream.²⁷ Gurdjieff's Institute, which he established twice, was an environment for spiritual development, and key pupils later led similar residential or semi-residential large estates, facilitating community in imitation of their teacher. These included the following: Ouspensky and his wife Sophia Grigorievna (1978–1961) at Lyne Place in Surrey and later at Franklin Farms in Mendham, New Jersey; John Godolphin Bennett (1897–1974) at Coombe Springs, Surrey and later at Sherborne House, Gloucestershire; Maurice Nicoll (1884–1953) at Tyeponds, Essex and then at Great Amwell House, Hertfordshire; and Annie Lou Stavely (1906–1996) at Two Rivers Farm, Oregon.²⁸

In another talk addressed to his pupils, Gurdjieff affirmed the traditional understanding of the preparedness for esoteric teaching among the general population:

... mankind consists of two circles: a large outer circle, embracing all human beings, and a small circle of instructed and understanding people at the center. Real instruction, which alone can change us, can only come from this center ... the aim of this teaching is to help us to prepare ourselves to receive such instruction.²⁹

Arguably, Gurdjieff and his major pupils—Ouspensky (1878-1947), Bennett, and Jeanne de Salzmann, who created the Foundation after his death—believed the Fourth Way should remain esoteric and hidden from sight. This necessitated instruction in the form of an oral tradition that was passed from teacher to pupil, in intimate environments. This *modus operandi* is evident at all stages of Gurdjieff's career as a teacher: small groups in Moscow and St Petersburg prior

27. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 30.

28. Cusack, "Intentional Communities in the Gurdjieff Teaching," 159–78.

29. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, 78. This is important for the development of the Work, which is divided between the "orthodox" Gurdjieff Foundation, and heterodox groups from non-established lineages.

to the Revolution; the first Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man established in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1919 after he and his pupils had fled Russia, and where he first taught Movements; a residential school at the Prieuré des Basses Loges, a former Carmelite monastery, in Fontainebleau-Avon south of Paris where the second Institute was opened in 1923; and in the gatherings he taught in Parisian cafés and in his apartment at 6 Rue des Colonels Renard, Paris.³⁰ The initiatory mode of teacher and pupil and oral tradition is found in most esoteric schools; the reluctance to divulge secret teachings to the uninitiated was present in the Work. For Gurdjieff's successors, to be exoteric or popular was undesired and undesirable.

Yet, this initiatory teacher-pupil relationship and oral tradition was under threat from the beginning, as Ouspensky—and others including Boris Ferapontoff (1891–1930), Anna Butkovsky-Hewitt (1885–?), and Tcheslaw Tchekhovitch (1900–1958)—made notes of Gurdjieff's lectures and question-and-answer sessions to aid in their learning and retention of the complex cosmology and unfamiliar concepts that their teacher presented to them.³¹ These texts circulated among pupils prior to their publication many decades later. Texts were supplemented later by choreographies for Movements and the musical scores of Thomas de Hartmann, who composed music—for Movements and also a separate corpus of piano pieces—with Gurdjieff.³² Pupils also wrote of their time with Gurdjieff, and a steady stream of such publications ensued from the start of the 1960s, the decade in which Charles Stanley Nott (1887–1978) released *Teachings of Gurdjieff: A Pupil's Journal* (1961), American *littérateur* Margaret Anderson (1886–1973) published *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (1962), and novelist and memoirist Kathryn Hulme (1900–1981) published *Undiscovered Country: A*

30. Azize in “The Four Ideals”, 174 notes that the “Four Ideals” exercise was given orally by Gurdjieff, and written versions exist only because pupils committed it to writing.

31. Ferapontoff, *Constantinople Notes on the Transition to Man 4*; Butkovsky-Hewitt, *With Gurdjieff in St. Petersburg and Paris*; Tchekhovitch, *Gurdjieff: A Master in Life*.

32. Petsche, *Gurdjieff and Music*, *passim*.

Spiritual Adventure (1966).³³ These books can be understood as standing in for the absent (because now dead) master, and to be intended to convey the flavour of being in his presence. Anderson and Hulme were members of the all-female and predominantly literary lesbian group called “the Rope” (*la Cordée*) that Gurdjieff taught in Paris in the 1930s; when the notes that Hulme prepared with fellow American author and Rope member Solita Solano (1888–1975) were published in 2012, the esoteric aspects of what they learned from Gurdjieff were revealed in greater detail.³⁴ However, when Gurdjieff died in 1949, the only publicly available record of his teachings was Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous*, which had been published that year with Gurdjieff’s approval, and the future popularity of that work as a minor countercultural spiritual “classic” was unanticipated.

3. Secrecy and Disclosure in the Work Before the Internet

After Gurdjieff’s death Jeanne de Salzmann took charge of his legacy. With her husband Alexandre (1874–1934) she became a pupil of Gurdjieff in Tiflis in 1919. Her training as a pianist and instructor of the Eurhythmics method of the Swiss composer, musician and music educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) facilitated Gurdjieff’s introduction of Movements.³⁵ In the 1930s Gurdjieff was in semi-retirement, and the de Salzmanns had a group based in Sèvres. Jeanne continued the “Sèvres group” after her husband died, and in 1940 and 1941 she introduced its members to Gurdjieff. Many later Work teachers—Henriette Lannes, Henri Tracol, Solange Claustres, and Pauline de Dampierre, for instance—were part of that group. The Paris branch of the Foundation was initially led by de Salzmann, then by Tracol (1909–1997), then by Jeanne’s son with Gurdjieff, psychiatrist Michel de Salzmann (1923–2001). After his death, theatre and film director Peter Brook (b. 1925) and cinematographer

33. Nott, *Teachings of Gurdjieff*; Anderson, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff*; Hulme, *Undiscovered Country*.

34. Solano and Hulme, *Gurdjieff and the Women of the Rope*.

35. Azize, “Gurdjieff’s Sacred Dances and Movements,” 308–9.

Jean-Claude Lubtchansky were jointly in charge. The Paris Institut Gurdjieff is “the premier centre for Gurdjieff’s Movements, and is the most exclusive and secretive group in the Foundation network.”³⁶

During Gurdjieff’s lifetime he authorised various pupils to start groups and teach his “system” and there were many such groups, chiefly in Europe and America, that de Salzman sought to unify under the banner of the Foundation. Tensions emerged with various pupils, and in 1953 Bennett officially broke with de Salzman. He offered a different model of Fourth Way teacher, one who did not hold a “fundamentalist” stance on Gurdjieff’s teaching, but engaged with other religious traditions and teachers; he was initiated into the Indonesian new religious movement Subud, founded by Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo (1901–1987) in 1956, converted to Catholicism in 1960, visited Kathmandu to meet the Shivapuri Baba, and was involved with for more than a decade with Sufism, through figures as disparate as Shaykh Abdullah Fa’izi ad-Daghestani (1891–1973) of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi order and the *soi-disant* Sufi master Idries Shah (1924–1996).³⁷ The Bennett teaching lineage preserved the Movements and the spiritual exercises, continued residential schools at Coombe Springs and Sherborne House, and broadly maintained the confidential, esoteric teacher-to-pupil mode of instruction. New technologies meant that Bennett’s pupils and he himself were recorded on film, with Movements demonstrations and talks by Bennett preserved and now available, in a limited way, on YouTube.³⁸ In 1974, the year of his death, Bennett established the Claymont Society for Continuous Education, and at Claymont Court, West Virginia his teaching continues in the context of a self-sustaining community.³⁹

However, de Salzman would lose the confidence and loyalty of other, less obviously independent, teachers during her four decades as head of the

36. Petsche, “A Gurdjieff Genealogy,” 65.

37. Blake, “The Fourth Way: A Hazardous Path,” 26–29.

38. Cilento, “Who Am I?”

39. Pittman, *Classical Spirituality in Contemporary America*, *passim*.

Foundation. While the Foundation has a reputation for conservatism, elitism and secrecy, de Salzmänn herself wrought great changes in the Work, changes that had implications for the esoteric aspects of the Gurdjieff teaching. James Moore, a pupil of Madame Lannes, the main Foundation teacher in the United Kingdom for thirty years, described the changes.

A [*sic*] oligarchy-led modulation of idiom from active to passive voice: the pupil no longer “remembered himself” but “was remembered”; no longer “awoke” but “was awoken.” Pupils did not, need not, could not work; they were “worked upon” (even while they literally slept!)⁴⁰

This “grace paradigm” (the totality of which is known as the “New Work”) brought about other disquieting changes. Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson* was reissued in 1992 in a new translation that many Fourth Way teachers decried as a bowdlerisation, and “sittings” were introduced, in which pupils sat in silence and focused on receiving a fine energy (“love from above”) entering the crown of the head, flowing down the spine through the subtle body, then rising to exit at the centre of the forehead.⁴¹ Most drastic of all measures was de Salzmänn’s “forbidding anyone to use Gurdjieff’s exercises.”⁴²

Under de Salzmänn the Foundation remained committed to secrecy, but a limited kind of disclosure existed, too. She collaborated with Peter Brook to make the film *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979), based on the Gurdjieff’s quasi-autobiographical text, starring the Serbian actor Dragan Maksimović (1949–2001), and this functioned as a revelation of the Work to a new demographic.⁴³ While not a major success, the film garnered an appreciative art-house audience, joining Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* and Gurdjieff’s *Meetings with Remarkable Men* as a minor “New Age” spiritual classic, and a way for outsiders to familiarise themselves with the Work. Yet as de Salzmänn revealed she also concealed: the extracts of Movements shown in the film’s climactic sequence in

40. Moore, “Moveable Feasts,” 13.

41. Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters*.

42. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, & Exercises*, 222.

43. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. See Cusack, “An Enlightened Life in Text and Image,” 88–93.

the monastery of the Sarmoung Brotherhood are not accurate, such that those who saw them might be able to imitate them via frame-by-frame analysis of the film footage. On the contrary, they have errors built into them, to deflect the possibility of imitation in a non-initiatory context.⁴⁴

After de Salzmänn's death the Foundation issued a book under her name, *The Reality of Being: The Fourth Way of Gurdjieff*. This text was excerpted from her notebooks; the "Foreword" clarifies her role, "to give the teaching a form for practical work towards consciousness," from that of Gurdjieff, who "created conditions for his pupils and was the dominant influence for each person."⁴⁵ De Salzmänn, it is suggested, created an organisational structure for (more or less standardised) group teaching, while Gurdjieff instructed individuals and small groups in targeted, more personal ways. The content of de Salzmänn's text is interesting in terms of the dynamic of revealing and concealing, in that there is discussion of spiritual exercises, some identifiably from Gurdjieff and some that reflect her "New Work" orientation. Joseph Azize has a chapter on de Salzmänn in his magisterial *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation & Exercises*. He notes that *The Reality of Being* is probably "the preeminent practical guide" while Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous* remains the preeminent theoretical guide.⁴⁶ Yet the editing of the book is such that vagueness around which exercises precisely are being discussed is a constant issue, and some ideas she expresses appear far from Gurdjieff's own. Azize analyses her "Exercise for Feeling," finding in it elements of Gurdjieff's "Lord have mercy," "Second Assisting," and "Atmosphere" exercises, and faint traces of the "Four Ideals" exercise. However, his interrogation of her "I, Me" exercise confirms it is not a transmission from Gurdjieff; moreover, in terms of secrecy, one of Madame de Salzmänn's students told Azize that "the published version is not an accurate version of what de Salzmänn would say" but "did not . . . feel at liberty to disclose the true exercise."⁴⁷

44. Azize, "Gurdjieff's Sacred Dances and Movements," 321.

45. De Salzmänn, *The Reality of Being*, xiv–xv.

46. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, & Exercises*, 215.

47. *Ibid.*, 220.

In the approximately five decades between Gurdjieff's death in 1949 and the Fourth Way establishing a web presence, the Foundation remained largely secretive and the spiritual exercises were taught as an esoteric discipline from teacher to pupil until Jeanne de Salzmann, in the last decade of her life, inaugurated the "New Work" and retired the exercises. During that time, the Foundation became established in London, Paris, New York and Caracas, and many Gurdjieff Societies that were affiliated with it were started in other countries and cities. Some teachers who were not Foundation members but were broadly in harmony with de Salzmann, such as Maurice Nicoll and Francis Roles (1901–1982), leader of the Study Society, based at Colet House in London, continued with the teachings and Movements. Some leaders, including Rodney Collin (1909–1956), a pupil of Ouspensky who established the Work in Mexico, the biochemist Robert de Ropp (1913–1987), and the more controversial E. J. Gold (b. 1941) and Robert Burton (b. 1939), and many others, established teaching lineages entirely outside the Foundation.⁴⁸ These groups have varying attitudes to secrecy and esoteric transmission, and most do not teach the spiritual exercises as laid down by Gurdjieff, though sacred dances, often called "Movements," are taught in a number of disparate organisations.

Before considering the Fourth Way online, and the impact of the digital context on its esoteric status, it is worth noting that the Foundation and other teaching lineages have produced a large number of books, with wide-ranging content, on Gurdjieff and Work topics, and other media, including DVDs by teachers including William Patrick Patterson (b. 1937), a former member of the New York Foundation, and CDs of the Gurdjieff-de Hartmann music. This commercial activity is unremarkable; traditional religions sell CDs of sacred music and books, souvenirs and memorabilia, products which are available to members and non-members alike. However, the diversity and eclecticism of the Work online, and the proliferation of products associated with it, call to

48. Petsche, "A Gurdjieff Genealogy," *passim*.

mind the Guy Debord's concept of the Spectacle, an advanced form of consumer capitalism "in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy."⁴⁹ This overwhelming materialist system, Debord (1931–1994) averred, replaced the religious (and, arguably, the spiritual and esoteric) worldview, and rendered human interactions null in the face of the compulsion to possess consumer products. The commercialised Work "industry" is inextricably linked to both occulture and the occult information society, discussed above.

4. Internet Mediation of the Fourth Way and Possible Futures for the Work

The top twenty results of a Google search for "G. I. Gurdjieff" generally contain a variety of sites, headed by Wikipedia's "George Gurdjieff" and "Fourth Way" pages and including the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry. Also included are the groups Be Community, The Wisdom Way of Knowing, and The Gurdjieff Legacy Foundation, and the Foundation-endorsed journal the *Gurdjieff International Review*.⁵⁰ The *Review* is a "religion online" site, with every issue of the journal since it debuted in 1997 available. Editor Gregory M. Loy and Associate Editor June S. Loy established Gurdjieff Electronic Publishing as "a nonprofit corporation established to conduct research, publish, and disseminate educational material to the public on the ideas and teaching of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff."⁵¹ This site provides supplementary reading for Work members and high-quality content for non-Work people interested to learn more. This emphasis on information provision in an open context informs Wikipedia, *Britannica*, and a host of other Gurdjieff-related sites. Schools tend to focus on a teacher: The Gurdjieff Legacy Foundation's Patterson was a long-term pupil of Henry John Sinclair, Lord Pentland (1907–1984), who led the Foundation in New York; and the Wisdom Way of Knowing is led by Cynthia Bourgeault (b. 1947), an Episcopal priest

49. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 17.

50. Pecotic and Cusack, "The (World Wide) Work 2.0, 94–98.

51. Loy and Loy, *Gurdjieff International Review* (1997–2020).

who is particularly influenced by Nicoll. Schools that are further down the list of results include DuVersity and All and Everything: DuVersity was founded in 1998 by Anthony Blake (b. 1939), a pupil of Bennett, and Karen Stefano and is an online institution with real-world seminars; All and Everything was established in 1996 through cooperation between Seymour (Sy) Ginsburg, Nick Tereshchenko and Bert Sharp, and is an annual ecumenical conference for all who identify as “Companions of the Book.”⁵²

In the decade since 2010, videos and books that discuss the inner exercises have been released. Between 2013 and 2015 five volumes of talks by Alfred Richard Orage (1873–1934), the foremost teacher of Work ideas in America until his untimely death, entitled *The Force of Gurdjieff*, were published by Magisteria, a publisher based in Bucharest.⁵³ The centrepiece was C. Daly King’s *The Oragean Version*, which was issued in a limited edition in 1951 and has also been re-issued by Book Studio, a Gurdjieffian press based in the United Kingdom. The fourth volume is of especial interest as it contains the exercises Orage taught his pupils. Joseph Azize has argued that Orage’s publication of *Psychological Exercises* in 1930 (some of which were Gurdjieff’s but unattributed) was the impetus for Gurdjieff to develop his “Transformed-contemplation” exercises.⁵⁴ Many Fourth way members that were aware of the exercises emphatically believed they should not be published or discussed, but rather should remain esoteric, transmitted from teacher to pupil.⁵⁵ However, by the time Magisteria issued the Orage pupil notes, many of the exercises were in the public domain, not least because the Foundation published de Salzmann’s *The Reality of Being*, and certain pupil memoirs contained brief references to them.

52. Pecotic and Cusack, “The (World Wide) Work 2.0,” 97.

53. Orage, *The Force of Gurdjieff*, five vols. The volumes contain C. Daly King’s *The Oragean Version* (Volume 3), recollections of Orage’s talks by B. B. Grant and L. S. Morris (Volume 1), Frederick Schneider and L. S. Morris (Volume 2), and Sherman Manchester (Volume 5). The fourth volume, *Exercises*, contains inner exercises from Daly King and Morris.

54. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, & Exercises*, 40–42.

55. Azize, “The Four Ideals,” 177.

For example, Frank Sinclair, head of the New York Foundation from 2000 to 2011, says that once, at the end of a Movements class, Gurdjieff said, “At this time [around Christmas], many people pray. Their prayers go only so far up in the atmosphere. You can suck these into yourself; this force.”⁵⁶ Sinclair states that Martin Benson, an early pupil of Gurdjieff, said that after the car accident in 1924 Gurdjieff went to cafés where prostitutes congregated to “feed” off their vibrations. Gurdjieff told him, “Go to church, Benson, and *steal*. Their prayers will not reach God. Steal them.”⁵⁷ Sinclair recalls that Louise March and his fiancée Beatrice also heard Gurdjieff’s injunction at the Wellington Hotel on Christmas Day of 1948 to go and “draw in,” “steal,” or “suck in” the energies being poured out “by millions” of people in prayer. March remembered this exercise as:

I wish give [*sic*] *real* Christmas present. Imagine Christ. Somewhere in space *is*.” Mr Gurdjieff forms an oval with both his hands. “Make contact, but to outside, periphery. Draw from there, draw in, *I*. Settle in you, *Am*. Do every day. Wish to become Christ. Become. Be.”⁵⁸

The academic study of the Gurdjieff exercises is in its infancy; the Australian scholar Joseph Azize is the leader in the field. He has argued that Ouspensky records only one contemplative practice, the “I Am” exercise, and that Gurdjieff did not develop the exercises till the 1930s, after the publication of Orage’s exercises.⁵⁹ The exercises were aimed at the formation of a higher-being-body, the transformation of the fragmentary person into a “real I,” a process akin to the Orthodox Christian *theosis*; and he locates Gurdjieff’s exercises in the Orthodox Christian tradition of the monastery of Mount Athos. Azize notes that Gurdjieff told Nicoll, “Behind real I lies God;”⁶⁰ this clarifies spiritual progress in the Work, in that mechanical soulless people lack a unified self and

56. Sinclair, *Without Benefit of Clergy*, 125.

57. *Ibid.*, 146.

58. *Ibid.*, 230–31.

59. Azize, “The Practice of Contemplation in the Work of Gurdjieff,” 137–56.

60. Azize, *Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, & Exercises*, 74.

being soulless will not live after death; the acquisition of such a self/soul, the higher-being-body that survives bodily death is evidence of coming close to God.

Reading about Gurdjieff's exercises is not the same as being shown "how" to do them. YouTube is particularly important for the esoteric aspects of the Fourth Way, and this video medium hosts the following: films of Movements demonstrations; talks by Work teachers, mainstream to fringe; and increasingly, material that openly discuss the contemplative exercises. For example, both Romanian Alexandru Eugen Cristea (to a group called The Force of Gurdjieff, which is clearly associated with the Magisteria publications) and Canadian Allan Clews have clips on YouTube that discuss the "Atmosphere Exercise," uploaded respectively in 2016 and 2018.⁶¹ Clews, in fact, has clips with voice-over of a number of the inner exercises. Cynthia Bourgeault, on the Wisdom Way of Knowing website, hosts a diverse array of materials, including detailed instructions for doing Gurdjieff's Movement #39, with a textual explanation, music and videos.⁶² Some of the internet schools assert the possibility of doing real inner work online. Reijo Oksanen (b. 1942), the founder of the Gurdjieff Internet Guide (GIG), in an interview conducted with Kristina Turner (who now manages the site), discussed the place of cyberspace in the Work. He acknowledged that the Work was "incomplete without direct human contacts and personal attempts to wake up." Yet, he was optimistic in conversation with Turner:

I think that if you're asking generally what is the value of working in the virtual internet space or using telephones, videos or whatever, my personal answer is that I am able to work with some people in a fairly serious way with the help of these; not many people. I have put a condition on the possibility of starting to work like this, and that is that we really need to know each other quite well to be able to do any meaningful work. When we know each other we can see each other's reactions. I would even think that the substance that is needed for transmission can be exchanged to some extent with the help of modern media. After all, long distance guidance of others without telephone lines or anything else has been possible in the past. So why not use this media, if we do

61. See Cristea, "Most Important Exercise"; Clews, "The Collected State."

62. See Bourgeault, "Gurdjieff Movement #39."

not pay too much attention to the media itself, and try to be in an actively receptive state, and also an actively transmitting state. I think that this is the precondition that I have: if you know a person then there is a possibility that you can work together remotely, like so many healers also do. For me it works to have meaningful inner work going on in an exchange with some people, as I have said. It can even work through an email exchange.⁶³

Oksanen is not alone in this belief. In interviews with the GIG, Kenneth Jonsson shared a computer “Stop Exercise” he devised; Gurdjieff’s “Stop Exercise” involved him giving a command as pupils were in motion, and all were to freeze. Jonsson’s application has a sound file with the “Stop!” command, and can be used in any activity, not merely online tasks. An interview with Ian MacFarlane probes the possibilities of online Fourth Way groups; he insists “it is time that the veil of secrecy about Work practices is lifted,” and notes that Gurdjieff was interested in machines, supporting the case for online Work:

In this day and age, so much of what we do is conducted online or through cellphones and instant messaging, and so on and so forth—there has to be some way to make use of these technological innovations, to participate in the Work. To say that the Work shouldn’t be conveyed through technological means is ridiculous. Gurdjieff himself embraced new technology, as is evidenced by the availability of the recordings of him playing the harmonium. *Gurdjieff also used electro-therapy devices, which were very fashionable in the 20s and 30s, in his “healing” practices.* Where did Gurdjieff ever say that Oral Transmission was the only true way to transmit the Work? If he had felt that way, he would never have written three books about the Work, and called them *All and Everything*.⁶⁴

MacFarlane and Anthony Blake have explicitly rejected the hierarchical structure of older “real world” groups, in which the teacher was an elevated being and the pupils were at a “lower” stage of development and treated accordingly. MacFarlane offers the model of the “computer network, where every node is connected with every other node . . . we need to get more networked and sharing and Working together as individuals rather than marching behind a leader,” and Blake avers that the DuVersity model (which is also the All and Everything

63. Oksanen and Turner, *Gurdjieff Internet Guide* (2002–2020).

64. *Ibid.*

model) where people gather for short periods of intense work with many leading workshops and reading groups, and then the larger group disperses, so no hierarchical relationships are established, is the way forward.⁶⁵

These non-traditional Work leaders all admit that the innovations they have pioneered have, in the main, been ignored by the Foundation, which has retreated as its members have aged. Jan Jarvis, who joined the Work in 1977 and studied with George and Mary Cornelius, Pierre and Vivian Elliot, and Elizabeth Bennett (all of whom were pupils of Gurdjieff), was uncompromising in an interview with the GIG. She criticised the lack of third line Work, which aims for the betterment of humanity, and advocated opening the large estates used by various Fourth Way groups for communal gatherings and physical labour to be opened up to serve the wider community, to avoid becoming entirely inward-looking. She remarks that “when all labor goes to maintenance of the property there is little left over for any real growth beyond the personal work of dealing with people who share your interests. It is not dealing with the real annoying people out there.”⁶⁶ Online schools and groups are rapidly proliferating, and those engaged with them are in favour of rejecting secrecy and revealing esoteric Work in the digital realm. The Foundation model of hierarchy and gate-keeping, essentially inward-looking and seeking to avoid publicity and exposure, is increasingly outmoded. Even advocates for real world groups like Jarvis appreciate the communicative power of the Internet; she rejects hierarchical organisation structures and stresses the value of engagement with the wider world.

5. Conclusion

In the contemporary world the Internet is a given, and the twenty-four-hour media cycle constantly delivers questionable information, conspiracies and leaks, “fake news” and puff pieces, creating an impression of evanescent illusions,

65. *Ibid.*; Anthony Blake, personal communication; All and Everything Conference, Kendal (UK), 3–7 April 2019.

66. Oksanen and Turner, *Gurdjieff Internet Guide* (2002–2020).

that all is provisional and temporary. Facebook friends, Snapchat, Twitter and a multitude of social media outlets suggest that “real-world” interactions are unnecessary. The spiritual seeker model reduces the valuation of the dedicated quest for faith, knowledge, or esoteric wisdom. Such a quest is not mainstream. In Christian terms, Matthew (7:14) puts it, “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” The fate of the Work online is not unique; in the three decades since the Web debuted “secret” teachings of many religions (prominent examples being Scientology and Mormonism) and esoteric spiritual teachings have been “published” online, becoming effectively public and available to any interested person. Fourth Way schools and websites (official and unofficial) have proliferated since the year 2000, as the Work in the “meat” world has aged and numbers dwindled.⁶⁷

At the core of these possible futures for the Work is the question of physical presence and the traditional requirement of master-student transmission of secret teachings. In addition to Movements, lectures, physical labour, and ritualised eating and drinking, Gurdjieff challenged students to rethink their habits. The oral transmission of the Work is a marker of its status as “a teaching replete with esoteric knowledge to wake humans up from their existence as sleeping machines, and to assist in the development of a soul.”⁶⁸ Oral tradition keeps esoteric knowledge rare; widespread publication seemingly should cause it to lose currency, as it is available to all. However, as McLaughlin notes, esotericists and scholars have agreed that it is possible “there are orders of mystery that can *never* be communicated ... even if materials related to said secret are freely available, it still requires progressive multileveled understanding and penetration.”⁶⁹ This insight reinforces Urban’s contention, mentioned earlier, that esoteric discourses are “capable of bearing an enormous variety of different

67. Pecotic and Cusack, “The (World Wide) Work 2.0,” 96.

68. *Ibid.*, 95.

69. McLaughlin, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” 55.

interpretations.”⁷⁰ Foundation members are likely to argue that consuming web content about Gurdjieff is a passive activity that is very similar to reading Ouspensky’s *In Search of the Miraculous* or a book by Gurdjieff. The mere act of reading will not enlighten the reader; the experiential nature of Gurdjieff’s teachings is stressed by teachers orthodox and unorthodox. The Movements are often seen as a sign of “real” Work, in that they are an embodied activity that aligns the centres, they are enacted to music which similarly acts upon pupils, and late in Gurdjieff’s life he incorporated specific inner exercises to be done during them.⁷¹

The outcome of this extraordinary cultural shift in the Work is uncertain; in 1990 there was virtually no Gurdjieffian online presence on the Internet, but thirty years later the online Work is more prominent and active than older lineages, however distinguished they may be. Perhaps, as some online teachers aver, that “real” spiritual/esoteric work can be done in virtual environments, but it is possible that the tsunami of Fourth Way schools, books, DVDs, CDs, conferences and Movements workshops have resulted in Gurdjieff’s teachings being co-opted by what Debord called “the Spectacle.” That this commodification, and the neutralisation attendant upon it, could be the fate of a once-disciplined, powerful esoteric teaching with high spiritual aspirations, due to the viral replication of online material, is one possible future for the Work. Alternatively, the Internet schools and technological mediations may succeed in transforming the Work tradition, repositioning it as relevant for and attractive to the “digital natives.” The great variety of groups, teachers, and products, as well as the the fragmentation of lines of transmission and the hostility of some groups to others, confirms the Work’s esoteric tradition as radically indeterminate and capable of multiple (and conflicting) interpretations, which should ensure its survival in the future.

70. Urban, “The Torment of Secrecy,” 235.

71. Azize, “Gurdjieff’s Sacred Dances and Movements,” *passim*.

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