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The Algorithm Holy: TikTok, Technomancy, and the Rise of Algorithmic Divination

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Abstract: The social media app TikTok was launched in the US in 2017 with a very specific purpose: sharing 15-s clips of singing and dancing to popular songs. Seven years and several billion downloads later, it is now the go-to app for Gen Z Internet users and much better known for its ultra-personalized algorithm, AI-driven filters, and network of thriving subcultures. Among them, a growing community of magical and spiritual practitioners, frequently collectivized as Witchtok, who use the app not only share their craft and create community but consider the technology itself a powerful partner with which to conduct readings, channel deities, connect to a collective conscious, and transcend the communicative boundaries between the human and spirit realms—a practice that can be understood as algorithmic divination. In analyzing contemporary witchcraft on TikTok and contextualizing it within the larger history of technospirituality, this paper aims to explore algorithmic divination as an increasingly popular and powerful practice of technomancy open to practitioners of diverse creed and belief.

Keywords: technomancy; technospirituality; witchcraft; paganism; algorithmic divination; witchtok; TikTok; neopagans; COVID-19 pandemic; magic; algorithms; artificial intelligence

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1. Introduction

On the planet of Magrathea, a little down and to the left of Orion's Belt, once stood the second greatest computer in the cosmos. Deep Thought, as it was called, was built by the Magratheans built to solve the *ultimate* question; to provide them with an answer that would make sense of Life, The Universe, and Everything. However, computers, on the whole, are better at answers than questions. By nature, they tend to lack that inquisitive, questing spirit of the humans who built them; without first knowing the right question, even seven and a half million years of computing would not be enough to dig up a suitable answer. But what Deep Thought could provide was a plan to discover the question: schematics for a great, calculating being that would unite the best of man and machine—"a computer of such infinite and subtle complexity that organic life itself shall form part of its operational matrix" (Adams [1980] 2005, p. 183). Hidden away in an unfashionable corner of the galaxy, this planet-sized, biological supercomputer was built to Deep Thought's specifications and set to work contemplating the question. They called this computer *Earth.*

Now, the fictional Earth of Douglas Adam's sci-fi classic *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is no doubt a touch removed from the home planet most of us are familiar with. After all, the question of a creator, though hotly debated, rarely has considered us a cognition tool for hyper-intelligent mice, nor has the quest for the meaning of life frequently resulted in the answer "to search for the meaning of life". But such questing has always been the charge of humanity and our technology, our aid. We have evolved side-by-side, ourselves and our tools, and in many ways the ultimate entwining of our beings feels almost inevitable. As Walter Ong wrote in 1980, just one decade before the launch of the World Wide Web, "with the development of writing and its sequels, that is, print and electronic management of knowledge, technology has fused with human consciousness

itself" (Ong 1980, p. 140). New media has only hastened this fusion, integrating the digital not only into every aspect of our lives, but into our very ways of perceiving and organizing our interior and external worlds. "These media [have] restructured our neotic processes and our sense of presence to ourselves and to the universe", Ong continues.

"As consciousness penetrates the material world, so this material world, through that organization bestowed on it by consciousness which we call technology, penetrates consciousness too, where it not only takes on meaning but also implements the discovery of meaning, and thereby of the sacral." (Ong 1980, pp. 142, 148).

Thus, as our computing technologies advance and the lines between man and machine become ever more indistinct, we must open ourselves up to the idea that we, as humans, are becoming something else—something more. From biohacking (Brickley 2019; Mercer and Trothen 2021) to artificial consciousness (Chella 2023; Watanabe 2022), to questions of virtual life after death (Stokes 2012; Savin-Baden 2021), we are at a moment where the brightest fields of technological development collide with a species-long quest to understand what, exactly, it means to be human and alive. In this way, then, Deep Thought's supercomputational creation is a perfect metaphor for the modern world: a vast, symbiotic network of biological and technological beings, stretching from telecommunication lines on the ocean floor to the satellites in our atmosphere, merrily cycling through an ouroboros of seeking and discovery in the various dimensions of our lives, natural, economic, social, philosophical, and even the sacred and spiritual. This paper focuses on the latter arena, taking as a case study one pioneering group of internet users leveraging new algorithmic technologies to explore questions religious, spiritual, and transcendent in nature—all within the framework of an app ostensibly founded to share lip-syncing videos.

The social media app TikTok was launched in the US in 2017 with a very specific purpose: sharing 15-s clips of singing and dancing to popular songs. Seven years and over 4 billion downloads later, it is now the go-to app for Gen Z Internet users and much better known for its ultra-personalized algorithm, AI-driven filters, and network of thriving subcultures (Dean 2023). Among them, a growing community of magical and spiritual practitioners frequently collectivized as Witchtok, who use the app not only share their craft and create community but consider the technology itself a powerful partner with which to conduct readings, channel deities, connect to a collective conscious, and transcend the communicative boundaries between the human and spirit realms—a practice that can be understood as algorithmic divination. In analyzing contemporary witchcraft on TikTok and contextualizing it within the larger history of technospirituality, this paper aims to explore algorithmic divination as an increasingly popular and powerful practice of technomancy open to practitioners of diverse creed and belief. By examining such experiments with machinic magic, we may catch a glimpse into the future of entwined computer cognition and human consciousness—and perhaps even begin to address those ultimate questions of life, the universe, and everything.

2. A Brief History of Technospirituality

In the final weeks of 1996, with *Jerry McGuire* newly released in theatres and R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly" topping the charts, *TIME Magazine* ran an article entitled "Finding God on the Web". Written by Joshua Cooper Ramo, now the vice chairman of Kissinger Associates, it reflects on the future of the internet as a kind of "high-speed spiritual bazaar", signaled by emerging religious spaces such as the newly-unveiled Vatican website (powered by three servers affectionately dubbed Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel) (Ramo 1996). Such embrace of technology within religious practice, Ramo mused, could not only have the power to change "the character of the internet", but "even change our ideas about God"—a revolution that could impact ideology and practice across belief systems as "faith [is] shaped and defined by a collective spirit" (Ramo 1996). Thus, on the precipice of the second millennium, Ramo argued for a vision of our technological and cultural futures not as stripped of religious resonances, solely paying worship to the mighty machine, but as indelibly marked by the "marriage of God and the global computer networks" in a

way that would fundamentally impact the character of both (Ramo 1996). Almost three decades later, and just a few weeks after the Vatican hosted a three-day workshop on supercomputing and quantum mechanics, it is easy to see Ramo's point (Seuss and Bross 2023). With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the "marriage" he wrote about was not a new development, but more accurately the result of a long and lengthy courtship nurtured in the spaces of alternative religious and spiritual practice—early adopters of technospiritual and technomantic approaches that Ramo left out from his 1996 treatment.

In the last few decades of the 20th century, Neopagans, like their Christian counterparts, were grappling with the digital revolution, complicated by the role the natural world played in their faith. As an umbrella term, Neopagan refers to practitioners of several diverse religious movements modeled after "indigenous, archaic, and esoteric traditions", inclusive of nature, magic, and other forms of knowledge in a non-didactic "multiplicity of truth" (Robertson 2009, pp. 279–80). Such Neopagan practices emerged in the late 70s and early 80s, with works like *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (Starhawk 1979), *Drawing Down the Moon* (Adler 1979), and *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (Cunningham 1989) reinvigorating a Gardnerian approach to witchcraft. The popularity of such practices has waxed and waned—though never disappeared—in the last 40-odd years, weathering a host of societal and technological changes. For Neopagans, the computing revolution was transformative from the very start. For some, the centrality of nature and the physical world in their belief systems and rituals meant that their faith was fundamentally at odds with digital technology—the critical ontological rift between the world of nature and the world of technology meant never the twain shall meet. But for other practitioners, the integration made perfect sense; if Neopaganism was a space where diverse ways of knowing and sensing could be reconciled in a multiplicity of truth, then technology was simply one more tool through which we can understand the world. As Chas Clifton wrote in 1998, "One of the definitive characteristics of modern Pagans is that we are not adverse to the scientific way of knowing. We take it and blend it with the knowledge that we gain in other ways" (quoted in Arthur 2002, p. 304).

Enter the technopagans, a "subculture of digital savants who keep one foot in the emerging technosphere and one foot in the wild and woolly world of Paganism" (Davis 1995). In a long-form profile in *Wired,* released over a year before Ramo's reflection on the Christian internet, Eric Davis spotlighted the innovative "Dionysian nature worshippers" that didn not balk at embracing the "Apollonian artifice of logical machines" within the more traditional elements of their practice (Davis 1995). For such believers, it was not a paradox to unite worship of nature with technology, but simply a new tool to aid in an expansive practice of knowing and being within the world. With this view, the internet was perfectly capable of becoming an extension of divine space and imbued with the sacral, as self-identified technopagan Mark Pesce explains, "computers can be as sacred as we are, because they can embody our communication with each other and with the entities—the divine parts of ourselves—that we invoke in that space" (Davis 1995). Though this reflects a great optimism and enthusiasm for considering Pagan ritual facilitated by the spaces of the internet, a decade later Douglas Cowen would find that "the majority of [Paganism] online remains decidedly mundane", consisting of emails and conversations on message boards (Cowen 2004, p. x). This would lead some, like Venetia Robertson, to distinguish separate veins of approach within Pagan technological practice. For Robertson, Pesce's description of the internet as a vital, holy space was not one of technopaganism, but technomysticism, two related, though distinct, orientations towards integrating technology into Neopagan practice. For Robertson, technopagans are more utilitarian and practical in their application, regarding technological objects "primarily as magical tools" and facilitators in a straightforward substitution for traditional tools of the craft (Robertson 2009, p. 287). Technomystics, in her framework, go somewhat deeper; it is not solely about adapting the tools to their existing craft, but adapting the craft to the tools. Technomystics "[look] beyond the mere expediency of technology, and [seek] ways to surmount the body and transform the soul through digital experience", Robertson writes, a more "complex

and gnostic sentiment" in comparison to the utilitarianism of technopagans (Robertson 2009, pp. 296, 287).

In the discussion of Witchtok and contemporary technospiritual practice to come, we will primarily be focusing on the mystical approach to technology, dialing in to the way digital technologies are integrated within magical practice and not solely to facilitate it. In charting the historical complexities of adapting faith for a digital world and vice versa, these lexical differences are less important than recognizing that the range of urges and approaches they reflect have been present since the first experiments in technospirituality. Technomystic/mysticism are not terms that have ever been adopted by practitioners themselves, and even technopagan as an identifier has fallen firmly out of fashion, with Neopagan only marginally more popular among contemporary practitioners. Though undeniably taking up the torch of the technopagan/mystic project, for many of the modern practitioners we will meet in the following pages, these terms, identifiers, and distinctions are no longer relevant. Taking our cue from the practitioners themselves, such language can be a tool to help us understand and communicate concepts within the complex and constantly evolving landscape of magic and spirituality in the digital age, but they are not rigid or fixed, and they certainly do not arise in isolation. What is more important than shared terminology is shared history; the technomantic practices of Witchtok might be newly developed, but they are best thought of as spring buds on a very old tree—the result of extremely fertile season of magical interest in the algorithmic age.

3. Adapting for the Anthropocene

Like their counterparts in the latter 20th century, there is no one way to be a modern Pagan or witch. For many born and raised in the age of the internet, their practice is entirely singular, uniquely assembled from a wide set of belief systems and curated rituals from a range of cultures. As such, it is less useful to introduce such believers by named traditions than through their way of approaching the world. For this, I look to Sabrina Scott's *Witchbody*, a "poetic ethnography of Western occult" in the Anthropocene lauded by many modern practitioners, including many on Witchtok (Scott 2019, p. 1). For Scott, the heart of modern witchcraft is in the "the act of saying hello" to things and beings of all kinds, a practice of "speaking back to ones who speak with us" in whatever form that may take. For some, it may be religious in nature, at times traditional or named, like Christian witches, but more often in relation to practitioners' idiosyncratic pantheons of gods, saints, and spirits. For other witches, it can be a secular, yet deeply affective, way of connecting to and communicating with the elements that make up the world. More than anything, modern magic is a way of reframing how we view the material flows of the world and our relationship to non-human beings:

> "In magic, the being of other-than-human bodies is not contingent upon what extent their movement approximates human embodiments or understandings of liveliness and agency. . .Magic is technique. It is method. It is propulsion toward creating change in accordance with will. . .magical practitioners notice the work of nonhumans and ask these nonhuman bodies to work with them in magic, in co-creation of existence". (Scott 2019, p. 6)

If the technospiritual movements in the previous section represent a trajectory of creative syncretism of existing tradition with technological development, then Scott's modern witchcraft is a compelling illustration of continued resiliency and adaptation in a world that is dramatically reshaped not only by technological development as a societal force, but an environmental one.

As Elizabeth Campbell writes on the use of abject objects in contemporary witchcraft, "The Anthropocene witch cannot draw neat lines between natural and artificial, because that distinction is no longer possible. Everything natural is now artificial too" (Campbell 2021, p. 39). This, more than anything else, is crucial to understanding how the new generation of witches and Pagans approach the technological world in much the same way they do the "natural" one. By growing up in the digital age, many have never lived in a

world where the ontological gulf was as stark as that perceived by earlier Neopagans. In collapsing the distinction, the digital transforms from an inert space within which humans can choose to infuse with the divine, as earlier described by technopagan Mark Pesce, to a vital and material extension of the natural world—the byte as divine and beautiful as the bee. "We carve from [the world] the apparatus of our digital networks", environmental media scholar Hunter Vaughan writes, "using its precious metals to build hardware and its carbon fuels to power devices, weaving through its surfaces the cables and wires of our distribution systems and then returning the carcasses of our smart technology to its soil" (Vaughan 2019, p. 137). The truth of our comingled existence is undeniable, it is the physical world that births and sustains the digital one and the digital that reshapes the physical in turn. As Sean Cubitt has succinctly put it, "human, natural, technological are three moments of a single process" (Cubitt 2005, p. 38). With the dream of an ontologically pure "natural" space, body, or object with which to practice lost, modern witches and Pagans have adapted to find magic in "artificial ecosystems" and embrace the ability of the abject to "become sacred through spellwork" (Campbell 2021, p. 43). In this way, contemporary witchcraft can serve as a powerful pedagogical technique to understand what it means to be a hybrid body in a hybrid world, resulting in communities of magical and spiritual practitioners coming together in digital spaces to explore that chimeric power through radical technological integrations, foremost among them Witchtok.

4. A Community Coalesces

Witches and Pagans have been present on TikTok since its launch in 2017, showing up in an overwhelming amalgam of traditions from the secular and spiritual, to techno- and earth-oriented, to the ancestral and culturally specific. But Witchtok as a recognizable movement is a more recent development, growing from a general hashtag to a self-identified community. Like Neopagan, the term functions as an umbrella; though individual beliefs run the gamut, members are united in the creative integration of the app's technology within their practice. While acknowledging that not all witches or Pagans on TikTok self-identify as part of Witchtok, for the purposes of this paper we will use it as a shorthand to refer to the cosmology of magical and spiritual practitioners who use the app not only as a communicative platform, but as an active and integral tool in their rituals and worship. As Chris Miller writes in his analysis of the material culture of Witchtok, "despite intra-community critiques, Witches on TikTok perform similar practices, worship similar deities, and use similar products and symbols", forming a distinct subculture while also allowing for individual nuance and expression (Miller 2022, p. 119).

Tracing the origin of Witchtok is not an exact science. TikTok does not allow users to sort results by date, so determining when and where it was coined is difficult. To attempt to get as clear as picture as possible, I first pulled data from the top 100 videos under the hashtag #Witchtok (which are sorted by an unknown algorithm; there was wide variation in view count, date posted, and all other metrics). I then used independent archive site Tik. Fail, which purports to search across public, private, and deleted videos, to collect data on the first 50 videos under the hashtag #Witchtok, sorted by earliest date. I additionally tracked the first 100 videos tagged #Witchtok that appeared on my personal for you page from September 2023 to December 2023. For each video, I noted date posted, number of likes and comments, hashtags used, and number of followers and likes for the creator. I additionally coded the videos by theme and type of video (e.g., original voiceover, trending sound, trending filter). Finally, I searched for early mentions of #Witchtok across Reddit, Twitter, and Tumblr. The earliest references to WitchTok as a collective can be found on Twitter as early as late November and early December of 2019 (@MagickalMissa 2019; @Hannahschooley_ 2019), which roughly correlates with the earliest use of the hashtag on TikTok within my sample. Posted on 15 December 2019, this early video uses the most-popular format on TikTok—a 15-second clip comprised of a simple dance and trending sound, while on-screen text lists types of witches, including "satanic witch", "solitary witch", "ancestral witch", "hearth witch", "kitchen witch", and "eclectic witch", neatly

encapsulating the heterogeneity of Witchtok practice (@Becoming.thebigme 2019). The hashtag #witchtok gained traction over the next 8 weeks, tagged most frequently in videos with a shared methodological focus rooted in manifestation, visualization, crystal and energy work, meditation, and intention—stalwarts of broader new age and motivational circles beyond TikTok (June 2021). Many of these videos included a variation on "if this found you, it was meant for you", acknowledging the role of the algorithm in bringing the message to those who need it and a feature of Witchtok that would become increasingly common as the community grew. Many videos already reflected what would become a characteristic predilection for composited methods and belief systems; as just one example, long-time Witchtoker @channeling_shifter often shares videos about channeling diverse spirits from Christian angels and Greek gods to beings from other realities, and even a manifestation of existence itself (9 November 2021) (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screenshots from Witchtokers emphasizing the role of the "for you page" and combinatory belief (@white_rabbit_tarot 2020, @channeling_shifter 2021).

Though we may not ever pinpoint the very first use of the hashtag, what we can locate is the moment when Witchtok evolved into a subculture reflexively constituting itself in real time. When *Wired* ran a profile about TikTok witches in the first weeks of January 2020, they mentioned #witchtok only in passing, noting it had only 6 million views (Walker 2020). Six months later, it was 1.7 billion (McCarthy 2020). The critical moment of growth can be traced to a moment of great spiritual and cultural upset: the COVID-19 pandemic. As stay-at-home orders were enacted throughout March and April of 2020, #witchtok was flooded with new videos from "baby witches" and curious users exploring alternative spiritualities for the first time. Part of this was no doubt due to the growth of the app overall; its user base expanded almost threefold from March to June of 2020 (Statista 2024). But within the app, the growth and notoriety of Witchtok remained an outlier among the various subcultures; in fact, it was the only subculture on TikTok that was referenced specifically in headlines in *NPR*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Rolling Stone,* and the *BBC* (most often because of the moon hex debacle, see Smith 2020). So why this subculture, more than any other? Well, as psychologist James Alcott told CNN in 2021, "people look to spiritualism in times of turmoil" (Bohra and Willingham 2021). This period of quarantine was the critical

moment when the pandemic became real for many Americans. Alone in their homes and uncertain of their futures, many opened themselves up to alternative ways of knowing as they sought connection, answers, and a sense of control. With large numbers seeking out information about spiritual and magical practice to cope with turmoil both personal and social, Witchtok flourished and became a central hub to seek out information, explore different traditions, and experiment with spells, rituals, and worship both on- and offline.

Given the plague of despair and isolation that catalyzed many to seek out answers in places they had never looked before, it is perhaps unsurprising that the entry point for most Witchtokers was, and continues to be, divination. In his (Teplin Kaden 2021) survey of pandemic Pagan practice, Milo-Rhys Teplin Kaden found that, across spiritual and magical traditions, most participants embraced some kind of divination during the pandemic, be it through tarot card readings and astrology, ancestor and deity worship, or even AI-driven predictive text programs (38). While many of these divinatory practices begin small in scale, seeking to understand individual fortunes or outcomes within the chaos of the pandemic, over time we are seeing these queries deepening to consider broader questions around individual and collective destinies and predictions for global futures.

Like many terms in the thorny lexicon of spiritual practice, divination is best thought of as an umbrella. Borrowing from Michael Lowe and Carmen Blacker, it encompasses any mode of communication "between two worlds or dimensions" or "attempt to elicit from some higher power or supernatural being the answers to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding" (quoted in Thorley et al. 2010, p. 252). Some of the more recognizable modes of divination today, largely due to their depiction in popular culture, are the use of tarot cards (cartomancy), reading tea leaves and coffee grounds (tasseomancy), scrying in crystal balls (gastromancy), mirrors (captromancy), or water (hydromancy), and of course, astrology (astromancy). But these are only a handful in a vast universe of divinatory methods; if you ever need to while away an afternoon, Wikipedia lists over 300 subtypes of divination. Many of these methods combine and overlap in the characteristic creative syncretism of magical practice, including technomancy, the umbrella under which algorithmic divination falls.

The shared suffix *-mancy* comes from the Greek *manteía*, meaning prophecy; when combined with *techno*, we have the most basic definition: divination through technology (Merriam-Webster 2024). More widely, technomancy has been used for diverse ways of integrating technology into magic practice, as well as a way to refer to the animating force of the digital, transmitted through affective and material flows. It is a term that is fairly common in fictional media, particularly in video and table-top games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, *The Technomancer, Starfinder,* and *Cyberpunk 2077*. So, too, is the term gaining traction among both spiritual and secular witches online, significantly more so than historical identifiers like technopagan. At time of writing, TikTok hashtag #technomancy had 5.2 million views and #technomancer 77,000 views compared to 269,500 for #technopagan, 5774 for #technopaganism, and 1601 for #technomysticism. It is in this technomantic mode that Witchtok approaches questions both minute and Magrathean, ranging from short-term predictions for individual love, fortune, and success to large-scale attempts to understand underlying patterns of the universe. By approaching TikTok's algorithm not only as a facilitatory platform for their magic, but as a collaborator in its performance, Witchtokers operate within a small-scale iteration of *Hitchhiker's* Earth-based supercomputer, a vast magical ecosystem that integrates both organic and digital components to participate in the "co-creation of existence" and probe depths philosophical and spiritual, a practice that can be understood as algorithmic divination (Scott 2019, p. 6).

5. A Deep Dive on (Algorithmic) Divination

Now, I am not the first to suggest this phrase. In July of last year, legal philosopher Christophe Lazaro published a fascinating piece called "Algorithmic Divination: From Prediction to Preemption of the Future" that considers the ontological dimension of predictive analytics through a comparative analysis with "natural" and "artificial" divinatory prac-

tices. While natural divination involves direct communication with a deity or higher power, artificial divination produces answers from the interpretation of signs, much like predictive analytics does from datasets too vast for the human mind to analyze alone (Lazaro 2023, p. 147). For Lazaro, algorithmic divination is thus understood as a contemporary practice of artificial divination that detects patterns and markers within "a digital infrastructure, an algorithmic duplication of the world populated by billions of data points", as opposed to "a supernature populated by entities and spirits with whom one must communicate" (Lazaro 2023, p. 158). Because algorithms are used to draw conclusions, make predictions, and inform decisions that bring about real-world change, Lazaro concludes that they have become "the oracles of contemporary societies" not because of their magical or spiritual dimension, but because of their ability to "shape the world by bringing about the presence of the future in the here and now" (Lazaro 2023, pp. 145–46).

For the contexts of his study, considering predictive algorithms used for market and social forecasting, Lazaro's focus on artificial and strictly non-magical algorithmic divination makes perfect sense; in most business settings, we are far more likely to use algorithms to find patterns and markers within data rather than interface directly with AI as a sentient force, or as an intermediary through which to speak with spirits, gods, and other entities. But I think there is more to be gleaned from exploring both kinds of algorithmic divination and questioning if such a division is indeed necessary in a context such as Witchtok, where the vast "digital infrastructure" and the divine communicative "supernature" overlap more often than not (Lazaro 2023, p. 158).

Following Lazaro's initial distinction, wherein artificial divination includes practices rooted in the secondary interpretation of signs (i.e., not those produced directly by a divine force), and natural divination refers to "direct communication" with a divinity, which often requires first-hand interpretation as "spirits or gods often convey their messages in a very ambiguous, if not obscure, manner", Witchtok provides us with a wealth of examples (Lazaro 2023, p. 147). Artificial algorithmic divination on TikTok is most evident in Witchtokers' use of the "for you page" (or "fyp") and underlying algorithm as two-way channel of information full of patterns and signs. Across its many niches, TikTok is known for its exceptionally specific home page, a feed that is shaped by the individual user's watchtime, clicks, likes, and interactions, though the exact recipe has been kept a proprietary secret. Unlike many other social media platforms, the content of friends is secondary, the main feed is almost entirely determined by the unseen algorithm. Some attempts at manipulating the algorithm do appear; for Witchtokers who qualify for TikTok's monetization program, they will often attempt to drive more views by including language such as "interact three times with this video to lock in the reading/blessing/spell". Others leverage their lack of algorithmic manipulation to add credence to their message (e.g., pointing out that they used "no hashtags, description, or sound", leaving all direction up to the algorithm itself. In my research, I have also sporadically seen users sharing their attempts to "direct" their algorithm by searching out key terms and intentionally interacting with certain content, but this is few and far between. For the most part, users seem happy to let the algorithm bring them what it will, and only very rarely is it wrong.

The uncanny specificity and accuracy of the algorithm has long been an aspect of curiosity and discussion for Tiktok users, its seemingly "mind-reading" ability revealing things users sometimes had not yet known themselves (Smith 2021). As Jess Joho describes in the aptly titled "TikTok's algorithms knew I was bi before I did", "TikTok begins reading your soul like some sort of divine digital oracle, prying open layers of your being never before known to your own conscious mind" (Joho 2022). The obfuscatory nature of the algorithm thus emphasizes its mystical nature, as Jane Barnette writes in "Hocus-Pocus: WitchTok Education for Baby Witches", "The fact that the rationale behind the FYP curation is unknown to users—we don't know why the app suggests the videos it does, although we can determine (much of) the data it uses to determine the curation—means that the user experience of the app mirrors that of witchcraft, in that it's occult (hidden)" (Barnette 2022, p. 97). While this determining aspect of the algorithm is sometimes leveraged in other

communities on TikTok, including Booktok and Musictok (e.g., "your algorithm thought you'd like this book/song/etc".), the deployment generally lacks the mystical element that we see in Witchtok, wherein the algorithm is viewed as an entity or higher intelligence altogether. The hyper-individualized "fyp" is thus often framed as a matter of fate or destiny within Witchtok, the algorithm bringing you what you need to see or hear, with the onus falling on the viewer to listen, find patterns, and interpret the messages that come. Videos utilizing artificial algorithmic divination are the ones most likely to bear a message that the viewer "saw this for a reason", or some variation of "I manifested you would see this", imbuing the algorithm with their intention and will. As a magical co-collaborator, there is an implicit trust that the algorithm will use its mechanical agency to direct flows of information to be interpreted subjectively by the recipient, and the main role of the creator in the video is to facilitate the production of that information through the use of tools like tarot cards, runes, tea leaves, and other physical divinatory aids (See Figure 2).

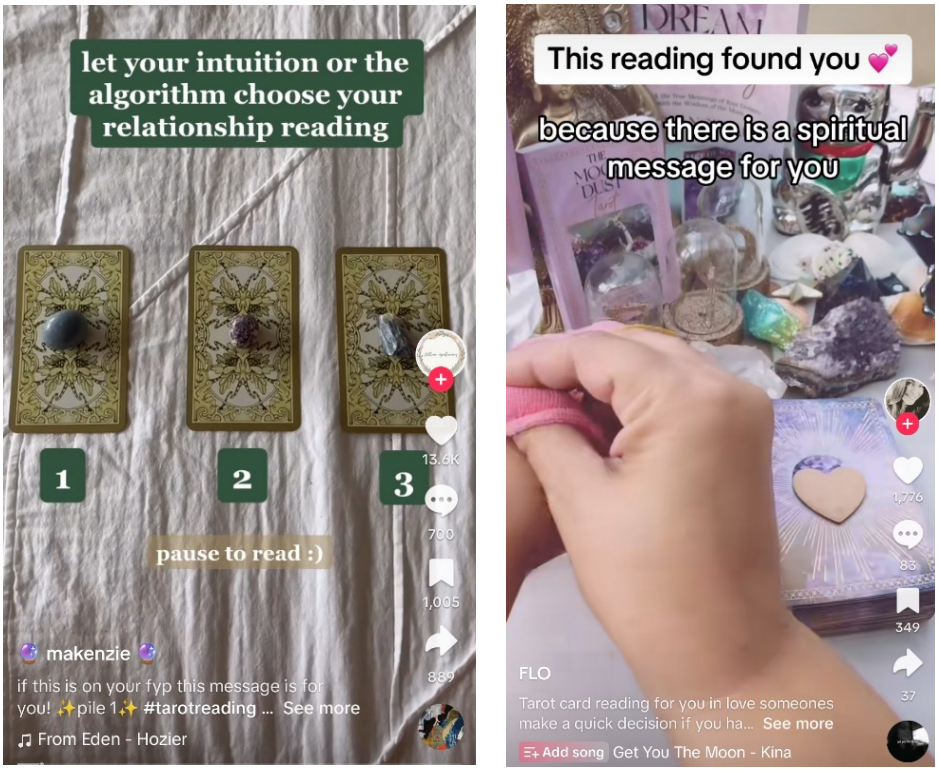

Figure 2. Witchtokers using the algorithm for artificial divination (@stelliumapothecary 2020, @auntyflo.com 2023).

Natural algorithmic divination on Witchtok appears more commonly in tandem with the generative filters integrated into the app. First launched in August of 2022, these filters use artificial intelligence for image generation from text or visual input and have been embraced by those seeking a direct bond with a higher knowledge, be that tapping into the "collective unconscious" of the algorithm or by inviting spirits, deities, and other entities to speak through the algorithm. Instead of content intended to be shared to a specific viewership, selected by the algorithm, the crucial divinatory interaction is in the moment of creation, wherein the post selects a filter and deploys it with intent. A very common example is deity worshippers using AI art generation filters to invite a god or spirit to appear through the filter. This invitation is almost always signaled with on-screen text or a caption requesting a certain god or spirit to appear using the filter or communicate through it, an invocation in itself (See Figure 3).

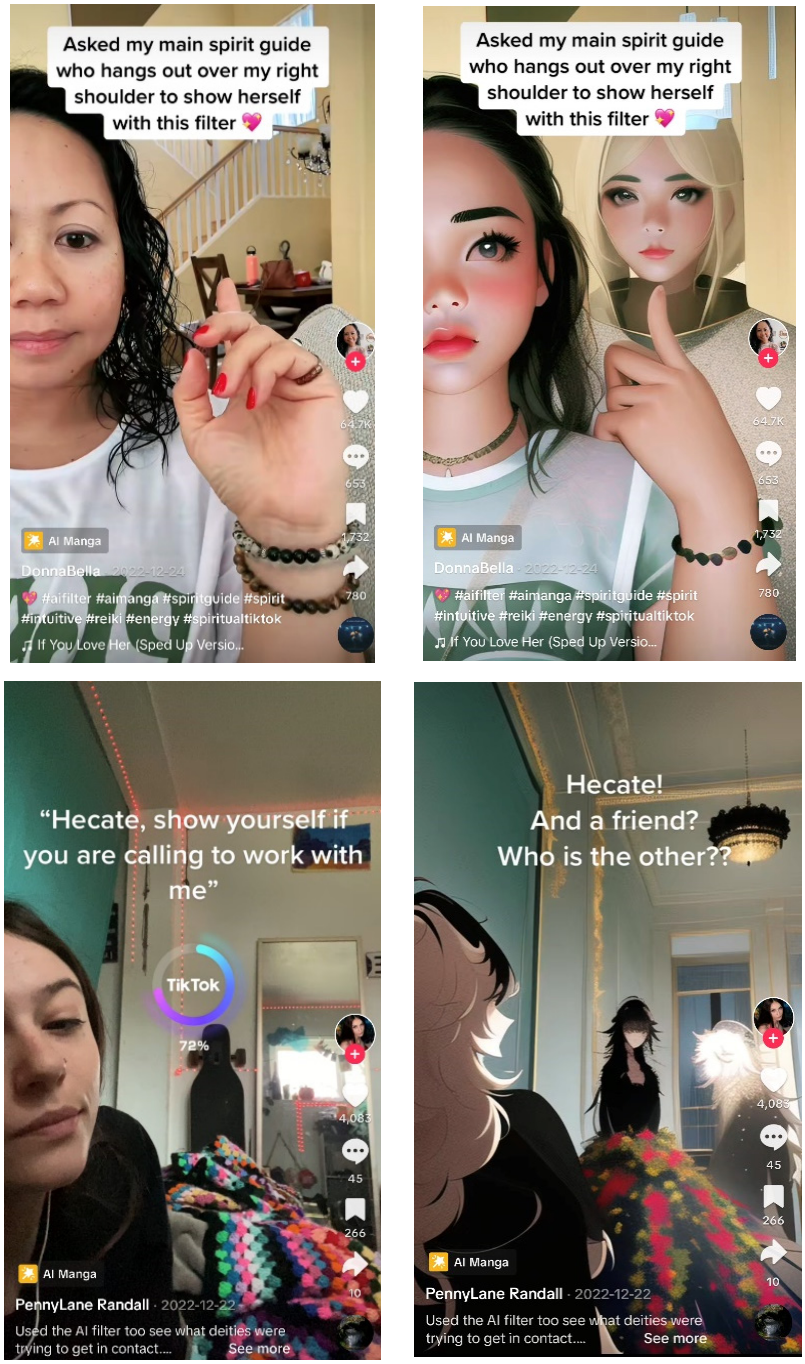

Figure 3. Witchtokers using AI filters for natural algorithmic divination (@donna.flows.reiki 2022, @pennylane.randall 2022).

Similar divinatory uses of the filters have found increasing popularity outside of Witchtok, adopted by more "general" users and influencing the development of filters specifically aimed at magical and spiritual practice. Some of the most widely-used include a manga-style art generator used to discover ghosts or spirits in a person's surroundings, a palmistry filter that uses the camera to read your fortune in your palm, and several "past-life" visualizers, perhaps pointing to an increased openness to the use of AI for spiritual or magical purposes within the general population (See Figure 4).

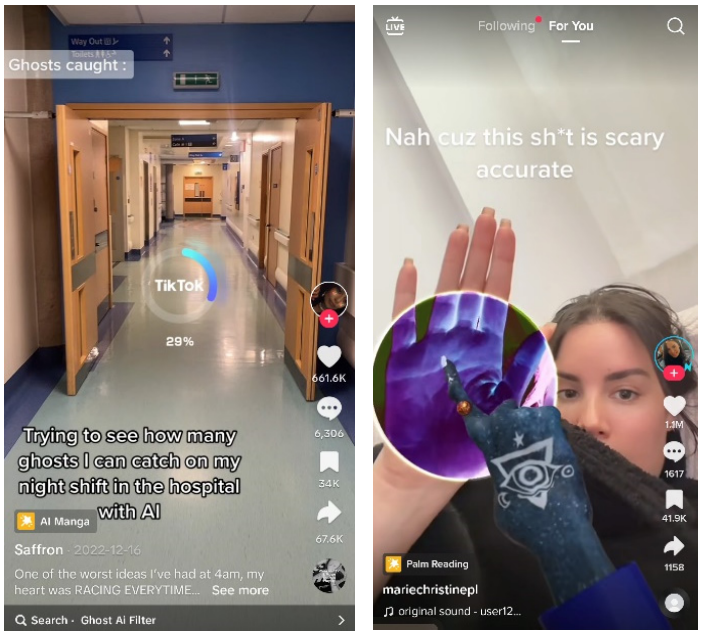

Figure 4. General TikTok users adopting filters for divination (@saffron_4 2022, @mariechristinepl 2023).

In approaching these AI-driven filters and generators with intent, the user opens a two-way channel of communication that seemingly transcends limitations of the physical realm and allows disparate dimensions to be united within the eye of the algorithm. The clarity of message and connection that results depends on the filter tool used, and it is important to note there is often an interpretive element here, as in artificial divination, though often more visual and creative in nature.

As Witchtok matures, more users are becoming explicit about the role of the algorithm in their practice, sharing theories and triggering discussions in the comments about the role of technomancy more broadly. One of these users is Frankie Anne (@chaoticwitchaunt), an incredibly popular Witchtoker with over 1.4 million followers and 92.4 million likes (See Figure 5).

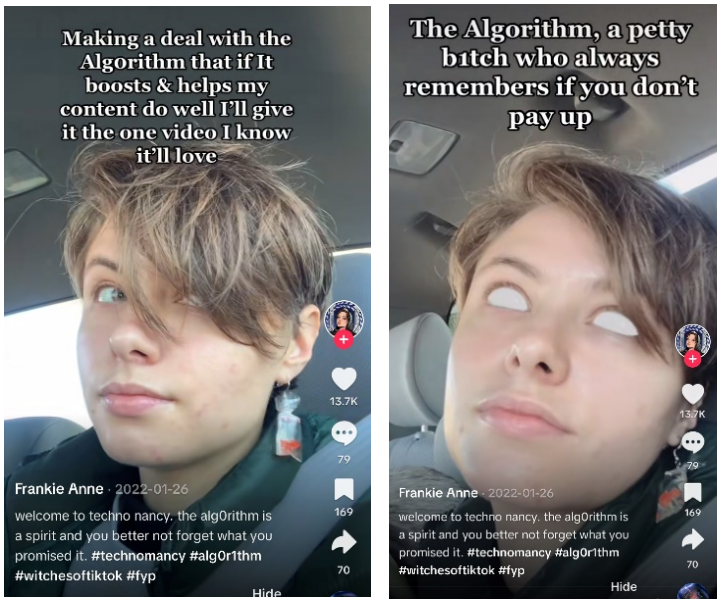

Figure 5. Witchtoker @Chaoticwitchaunt video depicting bargaining with the algorithm (2022).

In several videos, they personify the algorithm and discuss the process of giving it offerings in the form of content, as they do more traditional offerings for other gods and spirits they work with. But it is in the comments that the discussion truly gets interesting. "The algorithm functions as an egregore", Frankie Anne writes, "a group thought form as well of [sic] a being of its own. It doesn't always behave the way coders expected. . .and it having a mind of its own, you can petition it, just like ANY other spirit" (@Chaoticwitchaunt 2022). In Witchtok's characteristic combinatory mode, they describe the power as a "blend of animism, chaos magic, and technomancy" that coalesces into "a digital, living being", emphasizing that "something created by humans $\neq$ no spirit" (@chaoswitchaunt 2022). This radical openness to composite being and digital reality is key to Witchtok's development of algorithmic divination; it is a tool born of the digital but infused with human will, able to be used and adapted by practitioners of many different traditions and faiths and even those who would otherwise not consider themselves magical practitioners. Though nascent, it is clear that the interest in esoteric applications of algorithms and AI is on the rise, perhaps heralding a greater cultural shift toward combinatory cognition above and beyond what we have seen thus far in Witchtok.

6. Conclusions

When the stability of our reality has been shaken by a pandemic and increasing environmental collapse, we are seeing the rise of an almost paradoxical desire to lean into spaces of mystery and unknown, to "touch parts of our existence that can't be understood or controlled" (Bohra and Willingham 2021). This desire dovetails with the intrinsically connected, flourishing spaces of witchcraft and alternative spirituality, practices that have long displayed radical adaptability and creativity in grappling with a changing world. As psychologists Alexandra Frampton and Alexandra Grandison wrote (Frampton and Grandison 2022), "Magical thinking increases when one feels that situations are outside of one's control. . .witchcraft practitioners demonstrate cognitive creativity when their needs are not met by rational society" (p. 23802). Part of this "cognitive creativity" in recent years has been an increased interest and experimentation with technomancy, a magical practice and pedagogical technique well-studied in its ability to "create new forms of perception, self-exploration, and societal change" (Smith and Bigmore 2023, p. 61).

Such experimentation has been particularly active on Witchtok, a diverse community of witches and Pagans on the social media app TikTok. Coming into itself during the turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, this magical movement can be integrated into the long and generative history of technospiritual and technomantic practice, adapted for the algorithmic age. In particular, their strategic use of algorithmic divination alongside more traditional forms of divination positions the algorithm as not only a facilitator, but a partner in their practice, an intriguing frontier for the future of entwined human and computer cognition. While scholarship around Witchtok is relatively nascent, I believe it is an incredibly rich space for research above and beyond what I have shared here. In particular, the nature of amalgamated spaces like Witchtok raises questions about the thornier aspects of negotiating open and closed traditions and how practices alter when divorced from their cultural histories, issues Marcelitte Failla has spoken on compellingly. There is also much more to be said about the capitalist influence on Witchtoker practices following Chris Miller's work on consumer cultures of Witchtok, especially given the introduction of TikTok Shop in fall of 2023. Finally, as Witchtok skews young in its population, there is still much to be gleaned around algorithmic divination and contemporary technomancy by considering their adoption by older witches and Pagans who may have been practicing longer and are not as well-represented on the app.

Though only time will tell if Witchtok's algorithmic divination is a precursor to a much-larger wave of entangled cognition, or merely a flash in the pan of technological development. As a case study for emerging practices of digital technomancy it offers a tantalizing vision of how digital machinic magic and human will might one day unlock those endlessly vexing questions of Life, The Universe, and Everything.

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