

Dalí, Disney, Tarot & Talisman Cartomantic Symbol, Animated Metamorphosis

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In this essay, I read Salvador Dalí's *Tarot Universal* (1984), a 78-card tarot deck assembled through the appropriation and transformation of art-historical and personal imagery, alongside *Destino* (1946/2003), the animated film conceived by Dalí and Walt Disney in 1946 and completed in 2003. I argue that these works reveal Surrealism not as an aesthetic of dreams, but as a technology for making symbolic and occult systems materially operative. Through Ouspensky's esoteric geometry of the Tarot, Dalí transforms the card deck into a microcosmic model of consciousness, matter, and manifestation; in *Destino*, the same logic escapes the fixed image as bodies, objects, architecture, and time continually dissolve and reform through animation. I therefore approach both works as hyperstitional and talismanic media, in which images do not merely signify transformation but perform it. By tracing this movement from cartomantic symbol to animated metamorphosis, I propose that Dalí's work reopens a suppressed conception of the image as an active instrument—one capable of mediating between imagination, material form, and the forces it seeks to represent.



Post-Enlightenment thought built its authority by delineating magic, alchemy, and esotericism from empirical science. Yet as Wouter Hanegraaff points out, this rejected knowledge was never truly erased; even Isaac Newton spent decades absorbed in Hermetic research while laying the foundation for modern physics. Unearthing these suppressed lineages inside image-making technologies demands what media philosopher Farshid Kazemi terms *archeao-apocalypse*: a critical unearthing (*archaiologia*) and unveiling (*apokalypsis*) of the occult codes embedded in technical media.

This hidden history takes physical form in two distinct works from Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dalí's mid-to-late career. *Destino*, began in 1946 as an unlikely studio collaboration with Walt Disney, aimed at merging Surrealist fine art with mainstream animation, only to be abandoned due to wartime financial constraints and left dormant until its eventual completion 57 years later. Decades from the beginning of the film, the origins of the *Tarot Universal* emerged from an equally unexpected commercial catalyst. Encouraged by his wife Gala, an avid card reader who nurtured his fascination with esotericism, Dalí accepted a 1970s commission from producer Albert R. Broccoli to design a custom tarot deck as a film prop. When contractual negotiations fell through over his steep financial demands, the studio turned to artist Fergus Hall instead, but Dalí remained consumed by the project.

With his own artistic obsession, he continued creating the designs independently over a ten-year period. Drawing over, altering, and collaging art historical pieces from antiquity to modernity, from extracting Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* to hold a blade on the Four of Swords, to altering François Clouet's portrait of Elisabeth of Austria with a mustache and goatee in a direct nod to Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* on the Queen of Cups, and embedding recurrent motifs like butterflies and crutches to layer the images with personal symbolism, until publishing the complete 78-card suite in 1984.

These cartomantic collages and animated sequences strip Surrealism of its reputation as mere dream illustration, revealing an active engine powered by Hermetic cosmology, alchemical transmutation, and talismanic automation. Human experience rarely encounters reality raw: it moves through symbolic fictions that manifest real material effects. This mechanism is recognized as a *hyperstition*--a fiction or phantasm that makes itself real through its own conceptual productivity and cultural operations (Land, 1995). The history of the Tarot itself follows this hyperstitional path. What began as a 15th-century Italian parlor game (*tarocchi*) was reframed in the late 18th century by Antoine Court de Gébelin and Jean-Baptiste Alliette (Etteilla) as the surviving leaves of the legendary Egyptian *Book of Thoth*. Russian philosopher and esotericist P. D. Ouspensky in "The Symbolism of the Tarot" (1913) deepened this myth, reading the cards as an ancient hieroglyphic system encoding Kabbalah, alchemy, and astrology, arguing that these systems serve as parallel psychological languages for the initiation of the soul.

The metaphysical materializes through a physical, playable card deck where every shuffle breaks linear thought, forcing unexpected meanings to the surface of the psyche through

symbolic recombination. This cartomantic logic connects back to Hermes Trismegistus, the figure born from combining the Greek Hermes with the Egyptian Thoth (Tahuti), god of writing, language, and sacred measurement. The *Emerald Tablet* (*Tabula Smaragdina*) lays down the core Hermetic Law of Correspondence of "as above, so below" alongside *Sirr al-khaliqa*--the alchemical production of nature, or the capacity to replicate cosmic creation in a micro-environment. In cartomancy, a single card spread reconstructs the universe in miniature.

Ouspensky describes the seventy-eight Tarot cards through a metaphysical geometry of three nested forms: the triangle, the point, and the square. The triangle contains the twenty-one numbered Major Arcana, arranged with seven cards along each side, representing God, the Trinity, and the noumenal world of spirit and ideas. At its center is the point, represented by Card 0, the Fool, symbolizing the human soul or consciousness, the dimensionless spark of divinity. Surrounding the triangle is the square, formed by the fifty-six Minor Arcana, with fourteen cards along each side corresponding to the four suits: Sceptres (Fire), Cups (Water), Swords (Air), and Pentacles (Earth), representing the phenomenal or physical world. The geometry therefore establishes a relationship between spirit, consciousness, and matter: the entire phenomenal square is contained within the central point of consciousness.

This architecture is further articulated through the twenty-two Major Arcana, which Ouspensky divides into three successive spheres of seven cards, connected by the central Fool. The first, **Man / Human Consciousness** (I-VII), traces the development of the individual through *The Magician*, *High Priestess*, *Empress*, *Emperor*, *Hierophant*, *Lovers*, and *Chariot*. The second, **Nature / Phenomenal World** (VIII-XIV), shifts from the individual to the larger cycles and forces of existence through *Strength*, *Hermit*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Justice*, *Hanged Man*, *Death*, and *Temperance*. The third, **Higher Knowledge / Theosophy** (XV-XXI), moves toward spiritual and cosmic realization through *Devil*, *Tower*, *Star*, *Moon*, *Sun*, *Judgement*, and *World*. The **Fool (0)** stands outside and within this sequence at once, functioning as the link and pivot through which consciousness moves between these three spheres. The Major Arcana thus gives movement to the static geometry: what appears as triangle, point, and square becomes a continuous journey between human consciousness, phenomenal existence, and higher knowledge.

The same principle extends into the **fifty-six Minor Arcana**, which Ouspensky understands through the Law of Four. Related to the Tetragrammaton (Y-H-V-H), the four elements, and the interaction of active and passive forces, the suits represent the fundamental principles through which phenomena take form: **Sceptres** correspond to Fire and active will, **Cups** to Water and receptivity, **Swords** to Air and active movement or thought, and **Pentacles** to Earth and material form. The Tarot therefore operates simultaneously as a map of consciousness and a model of manifestation: the Major Arcana traces the movement between human, natural, and spiritual realms, while the Minor Arcana describes the elemental forces through which those realms become materially expressed. At the center of this system is still the human figure--the consciousness capable of encountering, organizing, and ultimately transforming these forces through symbolic knowledge. Symbolism is the primary vehicle for occult philosophy. It is a

language that cannot be learned mechanically but requires a specific cast of mind, creative thought, and developed imagination.



Salvador Dalí - Tarot Universal Major Arcana Cards (1984)

Dalí steps directly into this inherited initiation by grounding this metaphysical blueprint through specific historical and personal visual anchors. On *The Magician* (I), Dalí collages the arches of Paris's Sainte-Chapelle over his own 1955 painting *The Last Supper*, explicitly replacing the figure of Christ with his own face. In *The Empress* (III), Dalí immortalizes his wife and muse Gala (born Helena) as Saint Helena, deriving the composition from Delacroix's *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* alongside his own *Saint Helena at Port Lligat*. Max Ernst described collage as

a "visual alchemy"--the disruptive pairing of disparate images to liberate the imagination. Dalí transforms that technique into a functional apparatus. By occupying the position of Ouspensky--the initiate holding dominion over the four elemental suits--he frames the artist as a practicing alchemical magus.

Within the sphere of Human Consciousness, he casts figures of intellect and power, borrowing Jan Gossaert's *Neptune and Amphitrite* for *The Lovers* (VI). Moving into the second sphere, Nature and macrocosmic trial, Dalí replaces traditional iconography with symbols of structural and physical transformation. On *The Hermit* (IX), he depicts the Renaissance mathematician Luca Pacioli--author of *Summa de Arithmetica* and collaborator with Da Vinci--framing the seeker of truth as a master of sacred geometry and cosmic order. *The Wheel of Fortune* (X) draws from the Limbourg brothers' medieval illuminations in the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* to visualize cyclical time, while *The Hanged Man* (XII) utilizes Nicholas Hilliard's Elizabethan miniature *Young Man Among Roses* to capture suspension and surrender.

This alchemical transmutation culminates in the threshold cards of the second and third spheres. On *Temperance* (XIV), Dalí casts his muse Amanda Lear--whom he met in 1965 at the Paris club Le Carrousel--synthesizing her pose from his painting *Roger Rescuing Angelica* to channel the fluid "confusion of the sexes" as an expression of alchemical balance and the flow of time. Even *Death* (XIII) bridges human decay and cosmic rebirth through personal mythology: the cypress tree and twin skulls originate in an incident described in *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, where kneading rain-soaked love letters into paste near a cypress generated seeds that sparked a sensory revelation of immortality. Entering the realm of Higher Knowledge, *The Tower* (XVI) lifts Girolamo Genga's *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* to depict catastrophic revelation, *The Star* (XVII) isolates Ingres's classical nude *The Source*, and *Judgment* (XX) inverts Bartolomeo Bonascia's *La Pietà* laterally to signify structural resurrection.



Watch: Salvador Dalí - Destino (Walt Disney) 2003

Real symbols are perpetually in a process of creation. Once a symbol's meaning is strictly defined and fixed, it ceases to be a language of the Gods and becomes a mere "alphabet" of human concepts. In *Destino*, this geometry breaks open: introduced as a nude woman wandering through a desolate landscape, Dahlia encounters the statue of Chronos and falls into a dreamlike sequence in which her body, surroundings, and desires are constantly transformed. She embraces the statue as she dances, attempts to kiss Chronos, and watches him melt away, only to be drawn onward by strange statues and dandelion seeds carried by the wind. Throughout the sequence, Dahlia shifts between human and other forms: her dress is torn away by an uncanny green-eyed creature, she retreats into a seashell, and later her head transforms into a dandelion whose seeds scatter across the landscape.

Chronos undergoes a similar process of transformation, breaking free from his stone form as birds, ants, clocks, bicycles, and other figures emerge from his body and surroundings. The lovers repeatedly move toward one another only to be separated and recombined through these transformations: birds guide Chronos through a labyrinth; a dancing woman becomes a ball that he strikes with a baseball bat; and the resulting catcher's mitt becomes a giant heart that is absorbed into his body. Even architecture becomes mutable, as the shadow of a bell tower becomes Dahlia's dress and, in the final image, the bell tower appears through the opening in Chronos's body where the bird once emerged.

This constant morphing reflects a *reverse hylomorphism*--a refusal to see matter (*hyle*) as a passive lump waiting for external form (*morphe*), treating it instead as a self-moving force in perpetual transformation. This impulse to bring inert forms to life carries a long history, running back to the engineered talismans attributed to medieval figures like Balinos, Aristotle, or Alexander the Great in Islamic pseudo-Aristotelian texts. Early optical inventions like the 17th-century magic lantern inherited this legacy, linking ancient talismanic craft to modern screens. Frame-by-frame animation traces back to *animare*: "to give life to" or "to breathe soul into," and cinema touches the alchemical dream of *Takwin* (the artificial generation of life) simply by stringing static drawings together at 24 frames per second. In *Destino*, key sequences operate explicitly as talismanic automata: the melting clock and bell tower liquefy time into physical matter, dissolving mechanical measurement in favor of an eternal present that mirrors Ouspensky's reading of Card XIV (Temperance): time is not a linear flow but a "multitude of turning circles"; figures bearing loaves of bread on their heads ride bicycles across a desert before turning into stone statues and architectural arches; and the protagonist Dahlia emerges from, retreats into, and merges with monoliths, bells, and optical shadows.

Dalí's *Tarot Universal* in conversation with *Destino* shows how cartomancy uses Surrealism as a generative hyperstition, and animation as talismanic. Unearthing these hidden lines reveals less a straightforward survival of occult imagery within modern media than a persistence of a different conception of what images are capable of doing: In *Tarot Universal*, Dalí enters the symbolic architecture articulated by Ouspensky, yet subjects it to a distinctly Surrealist process of displacement and recombination. Historical images, personal mythology, and esoteric correspondences are detached from their original contexts and brought into new configurations.

The resulting cards are no mere illustrations of an occult cosmology already in place; rather they participate in its continual reconstitution. Dalí's collage approaches the talismanic in this way, as it establishes relations through which meaning remains active and susceptible to continuous transformation.

Destino carries this logic similarly yet in another register. The spatial correspondences of the Tarot are no longer contained within the boundaries of a card but here unfold across time, where one form can continually become another. Dahlia becomes a dandelion; Chronos fractures into birds and other figures; a shadow assumes the form of a dress; architectural structures pass into bodies and back again. Such metamorphoses unsettle the distinction between figure and ground, object and representation, matter and form. What animation makes perceptible is a condition already latent in the Tarot: correspondence need not culminate in stable equivalence but can instead operate as a generative relation in which forms produce, absorb, and transform one another.

A talisman's efficacy depends upon its material and relational participation in that force. Dalí's images emerge significantly through acts of appropriation, substitution, juxtaposition, and metamorphosis and their hyperstitional character likewise does not require the occult system to be accepted as literal fact. The more consequential question is how such symbolic fictions become materially productive once they are embedded in artistic practices and media. Belief is only one part of the process--images can reorganize perception, generate associations, and establish new relations even when the cosmology from which they derive has been historically displaced. In the Tarot, transformation is encoded within a system of symbolic relations. In *Destino*, those relations acquire movement and begin to transform before the viewer's eyes. Ultimately, *Tarot Universal* and *Destino* describe a passage from symbolic correspondence toward an image that is itself capable of becoming an event. Dalí's Surrealist practice complicates that structure by making inherited images available for recombination; animation then gives these unstable relations duration, movement, and metamorphic force.

As Freud noted, words retain their original magical efficacy. *Destino*, from *destinare*, "to bind toward a target," names the turning of fate toward a given end, while *Universal* derives from the Latin *universus--unus*, meaning "one," and *vertere*, "to turn" or "to rotate." Etymologically, the words therefore evoke a cosmos set into unified motion, mirroring Ouspensky's reading of the Wheel of Chance (X): "the life ever changing and ever remaining the same," and The World (XXI), in which to truly understand the "infinite essence, hidden in all illusory forms," one must learn to see the world within oneself. ■

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