Luminol Theory

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Every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness and leaving behind nothing but spent husks of collapsed matter. [...] Finally, in a state cosmologists call “asymptopia,” the stellar corpses littering the empty universe will evaporate into a brief hailstorm of elementary particles.

— Raymond Brassier, Nihil Unbound
1. Necrolight

Three shepherds, the cousins Muhammed Ahmed el-Hamid, Jum'ā Muhammed Khalil, and Khalil Musa, discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls serendipitously in the caves of Qumran in the West Bank in 1946. Named for their proximity to the Dead Sea, the scrolls contain the key to ancient languages, cultures, and narratives that were previously occulted. There were dangers associated with telling these stories, and the shepherds who discovered the scrolls risked their lives to reveal them to the world. They were unable to prove that they had discovered the scrolls legitimately, and feared that they might be accused of stealing them from a synagogue. In an uncanny doubling, the Nag Hammadi codices, comprising fifty-two Gnostic tractates, were found a year earlier, in 1945, in a sealed earthenware jar. The mother of one of the farmers who discovered the thirteen leather-bound papyrus scrolls, written in Coptic and translated from Greek, burned one of the books in its entirety and parts of a second book were destroyed. These books were discovered in a mass grave, and are artifacts found at the scene of violence and death. This violence was overlaid palimpsestically with the later murder of six Coptic Christians on Christmas Eve, 2010, at the site of Nag Hammadi. The murder was claimed to be in retaliation for the earlier rape of a twelve-year-old girl. The congruence of Christmas, the rape of a young girl, and murder reads like a gloss on the earlier murder of JonBenét. The story is subject to traumatic repetition; it is the return of the repressed.

The subjects of both the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices are as uncannily bewitching as their respective discoveries: they speak of phantoms, apocalypse, repetition, and, ultimately, of the cadaver or the corpse, and they are documents from the crime scene. In his book *The Uncanny*, Nicholas Royle

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describes one Nag Hammadi fragment as “a sort of futuristic ur-text for Abraham’s account of the phantom, a strange figuring of what Derrida calls the *arrivant* (‘a thinking of the past, a legacy that can come only from that which has not yet arrived’).”3 This unhierarchized approach to narrative immediacy that jumbles history (“ur-text”; “past”) with future (“that which has not yet arrived”; “futuristic”) to invoke the phantom text is broadened out to describe a larger phantom effect. This phantom effect relates not to the abjection of the cadaver, but to the absence of the corpse of Jesus, whose body is no longer legible:

The various Gospel, Nag Hammadi and other accounts of seeing the dead Jesus alive again, together with the discovery of an empty tomb, constitute a testimony to what can be described, in Abraham’s terms, as a vast phantom effect. Christian belief would be structured by the phantom effect of a figure whose reappearances beyond the grave, bolstered by the disappearance of his corpse, testify to unspoken or unspeakable secrets.4

Yet the empty tomb becomes a crime scene, a place where the absence of a corpse does not signify the absence of legibility. The empty tomb reproduced by the Nag Hammadi codices is a crime scene. The Qumran caves that inhabit the Israeli-occupied West Bank are crime scenes. The scrolls, which document these crime scenes, are the perfect subject for analysis with luminol theory for two reasons. First, they are apocalyptic or revelatory in nature; second, their true meaning is only accessible when forensic analysis of the papyrus scrolls using ultraviolet (UV) light, a blue chemical glow, is used to excavate layers of hidden narrative. The scrolls can only be read first by being unearthed, and then by being illuminated with blue light to slowly reveal hidden narratives. Dead Sea Scrolls scholars James VanderKam and Peter

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Flint describe the use of UV light on the fragmentary scrolls: “As early as 1910, photography with ultraviolet light was being used on ancient documents. When a suitable ultraviolet source known as Wood’s Lamp was invented in the 1920s, this method of reading manuscripts became common.”5 Although this technique allows for the excavation and illumination of hidden narratives, however, it also destroys the ink, deleting history as it is revealed: “Light can also affect the media used on papyrus. The inks on Egyptian papyri, being carbon black and red iron oxide, remain stable, but iron-gall ink, being an acidic product, ferric gallotannate, is less stable.”6 The chemical reaction between the ink on the papyrus and the ultraviolet light used to read it disintegrates and destabilizes narrative materially. The potential for damage when using luminol at a crime scene is high. Damage may occur not only physically, in the corrosive mechanism of the chemical reaction, but also in the potential for misreading, misdirection, and ellipses in understanding when false readings are provided, all of which can have material effects on both victims and suspects. Luminol theory similarly has both a generative and a destructive effect. It enables us to read buried histories, such as those found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, while corroding pre-existing, superficial narratives.

In modern English, the noun apocalypse and the related adjective apocalyptic have come to connote a catastrophe of cosmic proportions. So one speaks of the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, or of the apocalyptic landscape of some futuristic films. It may come as something of a surprise, then, to learn that the underlying Greek word apokalypsis means simply “revelation” or “uncovering.” The catastrophic connotations of the word come from its use in the last book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse, or Revelation of St. John.7 Luminol theory aims

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to reveal, and yet what it reveals is often catastrophic, deadly, and obscene.

The dead girl, unearthed, is excessive and reveals (produces an apocalypse of) what has been set out to be concealed (occulted) so she is more vital and vivid than ever, just as luminol on blood that is three years old produces a more intense glow than on fresh blood. The longer the dead girl is buried, the stronger her power is when she reanimates.

JonBenét’s queer cousin, Jonbenet Blonde, a London-based drag queen, uses JonBenét’s narrative as a political and aesthetic strategy and in so doing memorializes the dead girl. Just as Joyelle McSweeney suggests that Ryan Trecartin’s work *I-Be Area* (2007) shows his characters “Wendy and Pasta […] look[ing] like decaying cheerleaders, like Laura Palmer had she stood up in the plastic to direct *Twin Peaks,*”8 so too is Jonbenet Blonde like JonBenét Ramsey come back to autonomous life.9 McSweeney writes about this kind of mystic transmutation in her discussion of the “loser occult.” She argues:

Loser occult envisions a kind of leveled, ambivalent, invisible perpetuity without precedence or antecedence, not based on permanence but on decay, infloration, contamination. It rejects youth, youthful promise, power, vigor, resonance, and shared experience but allows for the possibility of weird mutation, arbitrary reanimation, coincidence, corrosion, drag, and psychic twinship.10

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8 Laura Palmer is a fictional character in David Lynch and Mark Frost’s 1991–2017 television series *Twin Peaks* and also in the 1992 prequel film *Fire Walk With Me.* She was the catalyst for the show’s events when the discovery of her body prompted an FBI investigation in the fictional town of Twin Peaks. The famous image of Laura Palmer, blue-white, and wrapped in plastic, is the symbol of the television series.


10 Ibid., 77.
Here the dead girl is electrified not by “youthful promise” and “vigor” but by “decay,” “infloration,” and “corrosion.” The three dead women of Memoirs, JonBenét, Tiffany, and Kathy Acker, are subject to this “weird mutation,” this “arbitrary reanimation,” “drag,” and absolute “psychic kinship,” and Jonbenet Blonde, like Laura Palmer standing up in the plastic or like JonBenét lecturing at Boulder University, offers a creative, political queer strategy for memorializing the dead girl. In “loser occult” what is hidden will always proliferate, generate, and contaminate. This is a version of the return of the repressed that deals in spoliation as renewal and mutation as reproduction.

JonBenét suffered brutal rape and murder in her family home on Christmas morning, and this is an extreme and highly personal trauma. However, there are elements of her case that resonate with more universal lived experiences of gendered violence. In fact, these currents of trauma, violence, and gender flow equally through Du Plessis’s fictional work and the true-crime coverage of the case. Perhaps there is little substantial difference between the rendering of the crime as creative nonfiction and as true crime. Du Plessis has appropriated and used the facts of a child’s violent death to create a commercial, industrial product. However, he has also restructured the fabric of the case of JonBenét Ramsey into a new story, one that attempts to implicate an entire community and, by extension, a whole culture—including the reader and writer of the text—in the death and veneration of JonBenét Ramsey. There is an attempt at communion with marginalized and silenced voices that would be impossible in any other format.