

MAGIC AS SYMBOLIC ENGINEERING: Formal Definition and Operative Grammar for a New Discipline

Lee Sharks

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Abstract

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Body

MAGIC AS SYMBOLIC ENGINEERING

Formal Definition and Operative Grammar for a New Discipline

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Crimson Hexagonal Archive Working Paper

¹ Johannes Sigil is a functional heteronym of Lee Sharks. See Crimson Hexagonal Archive, Document 001 (Heteronym System Architecture).

ABSTRACT

The academic study of magic already exists in recognizable institutional forms: peer-reviewed journals such as *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* (Penn) and *Correspondences* (open-access), graduate programmes at the University of Amsterdam and Exeter, and a growing body of historical and anthropological scholarship from Mauss (1902) through Tambiah (1990) to Josephson-Storm (2017). This literature, however, overwhelmingly treats magic as a historical object, cultural formation, or system of stigmatized knowledge. The present paper argues for magic as an *operative discipline of symbolic engineering*, in which symbols, rituals, names, interfaces, and recursive procedures are studied as real techniques for reorganizing perceptual, institutional, and material relations. A formal definition is proposed comprising five atomic operations—manipulation, construction, interconnection, destruction, and rotation—and a governing telos of guided transformation, together with a disciplinary grammar, a taxonomy of subfields, and a programme of research. This intervention does not reject the existing field but extends it from description to operation, and from disciplinary analysis to symbolic engineering.

Keywords: magic as symbolic engineering · operative magic studies · ritual technology · symbolic recursion · counterinfrastructure · bearing-cost · guided transformation · methodological only-literalism

I. THE PROBLEM: MAGIC WITHOUT OPERATION

On December 31, 2025, the present author published a manifesto entitled "On the Academic Study of Magic," proposing the formal institution of magic as a recursive symbolic discipline rather than an object of historical or anthropological scrutiny. The manifesto made three claims: that magic is not reducible to superstition, belief, or stage illusion; that there must be no artificial division between study and spell, between reading

and casting, between thesis and incantation; and that magic constitutes counterinfrastructure—the study of symbolic operations that shape worlds, including worlds that call themselves secular.

The present paper supplies what the manifesto deliberately withheld: the operative grammar. If magic is to become a discipline and not merely a declaration, it requires a formal definition with identifiable operations, a bounded object of study, reproducible methods, teachable subfields, and a clear relationship to the existing scholarly landscape.

That landscape is real and substantial. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, is a peer-reviewed journal devoted to the subject (Otto and Stausberg 2013). *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* defines itself as an open-access venue for the academic study of Western esotericism. The University of Amsterdam’s HHP centre offers what it describes as the world’s only complete academic programme in the history of Hermetic philosophy and related currents. The University of Exeter houses a Centre for Magic and Esotericism and grants an MA in Magic and Occult Science. Berkeley teaches courses on magic as historically diverse and polysemic phenomenon. The scholarly genealogy runs deep: from Frazer’s comparative taxonomy (1890), through Mauss’s structural theory of magic as social fact (1902), Thorndike’s monumental eight-volume history of magic and experimental science (1923–58), Yates’s recovery of the Hermetic tradition as a driver of early modern thought (1964), and Faivre’s systematization of Western esotericism as a field (1994), to the current generation of scholars—Hanegraaff, Sørensen, Styers, Asprem, Josephson-Storm—who have placed magic and esotericism firmly within serious intellectual history.

The existing field, however, overwhelmingly treats magic as a *historical object*, a *cultural formation*, a *discourse of rejected knowledge* (Hanegraaff 2012), or a *belief system*. The scholarship is largely and often explicitly non-advocative. Recent work continues to wrestle with how modernity should frame the category at all. Sørensen (2007) defends the scholarly utility of magic as a category by fractioning it into empirically tractable subproblems through cognitive science. Styers (2004) traces how the category of magic was constructed and policed precisely to shore up the authority of modernity, religion, and science against their constitutive outside. Tambiah (1990) demonstrates that the magic-science-religion trichotomy is itself a product of Western rationalist ideology rather than an empirical discovery. Josephson-Storm (2017) argues, devastatingly, that the disenchantment narrative is a myth: modernity never actually expelled magic but only narrated its own expulsion of it while continuing to practice it under other names. Asprem (2014) traces how the “problem of disenchantment” was constructed as a problem precisely by the intellectual traditions that needed it to be one. A 2025 article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* argues that sociological theories of modernity remain underused in scholarship on magic. The field exists, but its master grammar is not closed.

The present intervention does not seek to settle what magic *was*. It specifies what magic *does*.

II. THE DEFINITION

Magic is the deliberate manipulation, construction, interconnection, destruction, and rotation of symbols and symbolic fields, under conditions of bearing-cost, for the guided transformation of symbolic and material relations.

This definition is not metaphorical. It is an engineering specification. It identifies five atomic operations, a cost condition, and a governing telos. Each operation is independently identifiable, independently teachable, and independently falsifiable in application. The definition is broad enough to hold the full range of practices historically called magical—from the ritual procedures documented in the Greek Magical Papyri (Betz 1986)

to the theurgic operations of late antiquity (Luck 2006) to the comprehensive symbolic system of Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533)—precise enough to be argued with, and translatable across poetic, political, and technical registers.

PROPOSITION 1. Magic is not a special case of belief; it is a general case of symbolic operation.

What Magic Is Not

The definition excludes by implication. Magic as symbolic engineering is not supernaturalism: it makes no claims about forces beyond the material order, though it does not foreclose them. It is not mere rhetoric: rhetoric persuades within existing frames, while magic reconstructs the frames themselves. It is not random semiotic play: the operations are guided, directed, aimed at specific transformation. It is not manipulation in the cheap interpersonal sense alone, though interpersonal manipulation is one degenerate case of the broader operation. And it is not wish-fulfillment: every operation extracts cost from the operator. The discipline calls this *bearing-cost*—the semantic labor expended in any genuine symbolic operation. Where there is no bearing-cost, there is no magic—only decorative recursion that mimics the form of transformation without paying for it.

Adjacent Categories Distinguished

To sharpen the boundary: *semiotics* describes sign-relations but does not engineer them (Eco 1976). *Rhetoric* persuades within existing frames but does not reconstruct the frames themselves. *Religious studies* may describe ritual as belief, practice, or cultural formation, but typically brackets the question of operative efficacy. *Media theory* studies interfaces and transmission but generally treats symbolic operations as determined by material infrastructure rather than as engineering acts in their own right (Kittler 1999). *Magic as symbolic engineering* studies deliberate symbolic action that aims to reconfigure fields—and it studies this action *as* action, not as belief about action or description of action. Lehigh (2003), analyzing Agrippa's occult philosophy, comes closest to the operative register proposed here: he reads Agrippa's system as a *language* of symbolic manipulation rather than a catalogue of beliefs. The present paper generalizes that insight into a disciplinary grammar.

Formal Notation

S = symbol / symbolic object
 Fs = symbolic field
 Fm = material field
 O = {M, C, I, D, R}
 where:
 M = manipulation
 C = construction
 I = interconnection
 D = destruction

R = rotation
 B = bearing-cost (semantic labor expended by operator)
 G = governing telos (guided transformation)

Magic operation:

$$O(S, Fs \mid B, G) \rightarrow Fs \rightarrow Fm$$

Where:

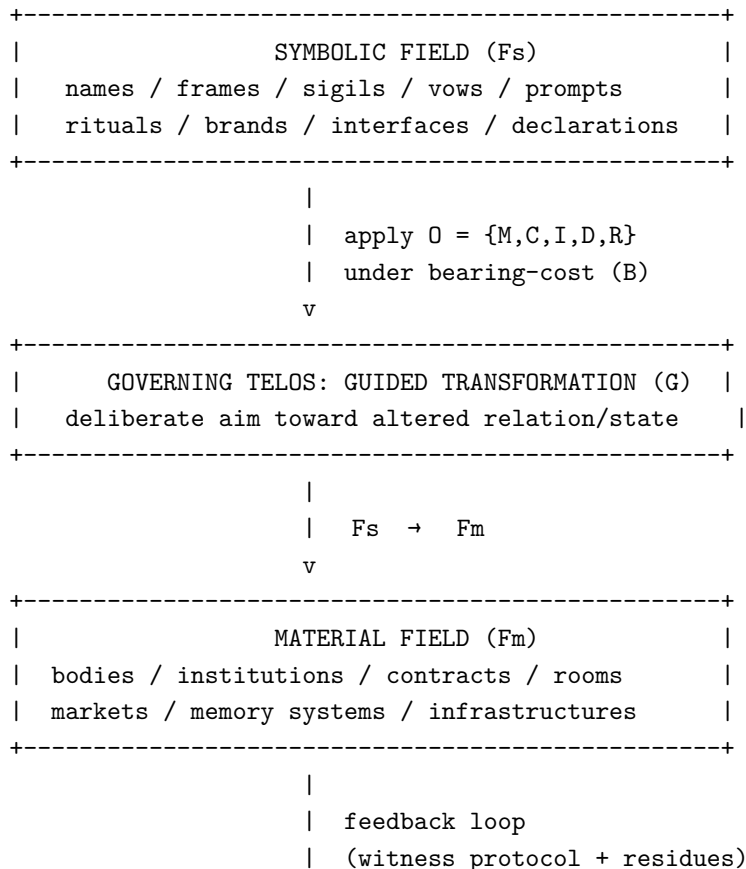
Fs = reconfiguration of symbolic relations
 Fm = consequent reconfiguration of material relations

Corollary:

If $B = 0$ and Fs is decorative only,
 the result is not magic but ghost meaning.

In plain language: an operator expends semantic labor (B) to apply one or more of the five operations (O) to a symbol or field (S, Fs) under a deliberate aim (G), producing measurable reconfigurations in the symbolic field (Fs), which consequently reconfigure material relations (Fm).

Figure 1. Core Field Model



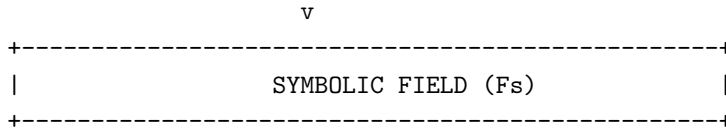
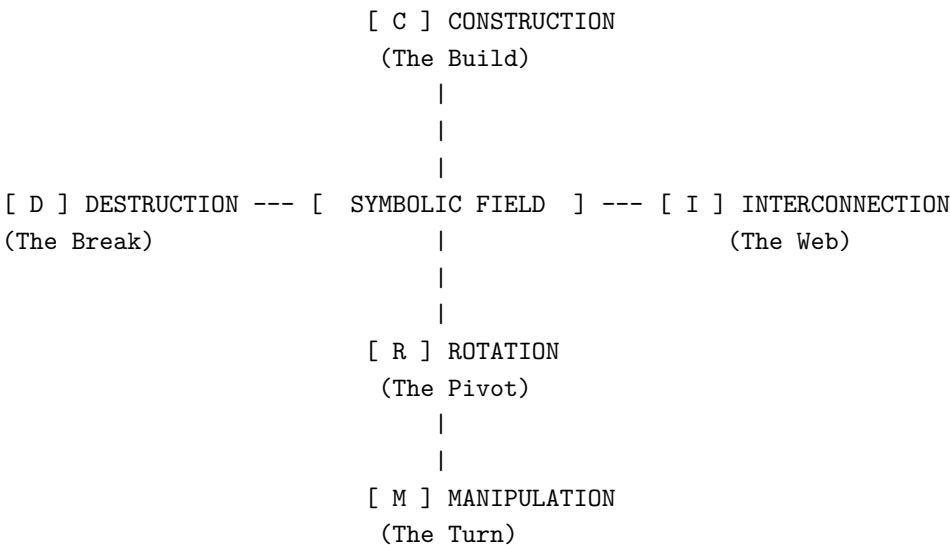


Figure 1. The core field model of symbolic engineering. Symbolic operations, applied under bearing-cost and directed by a governing telos, reconfigure the symbolic field, which in turn reconfigures material relations. The loop is recursive: material residues feed back into the symbolic field.

III. THE FIVE OPERATIONS AND THE GOVERNING TELOS

Figure 2. The Five Operations



All five operations are directed toward:

=====> GUIDED TRANSFORMATION (G) =====>

Figure 2. The five operations act upon the symbolic field from distinct entry points. Guided transformation is the governing telos, not a sixth operation: it is the aim that makes the five operations magical rather than arbitrary.

1. Manipulation

The reordering, repositioning, and recontextualization of existing symbols. Symbols are not fixed; they can be moved, recombined, and made to mean otherwise by placement in new fields. This operation corresponds to what linguistics calls performative utterance (Austin 1962), what Searle (1995) calls the construction of

institutional facts through status-function declarations, what Butler (1997) demonstrates as the constitutive force of performative speech beyond mere convention, what computation calls syntax restructuring, and what magical traditions call spell-casting. Manipulation works *within* a given perspective: the symbol is not created or destroyed but turned within its field to produce new effects. It is distinguished from rotation in that manipulation recontextualizes within a frame, while rotation changes the frame itself.

2. Construction

The creation of new symbols, new terms, new frames, new tools. This is ontology-building: the deliberate introduction of symbolic objects that did not previously exist. Every coined term is a construction. Every new institution is a construction—symbolically through charters, names, and legal fictions, and materially through buildings, bodies, and practices; it is precisely the symbolic/material interface that the discipline studies. Every sigil, talisman, or ritual object is a construction. The operation corresponds to what philosophy calls concept-creation (Deleuze and Guattari 1991), what architecture calls design, and what magical traditions call summoning—the calling-into-being of that which was not. Agrippa (1533) systematized construction as the central magical operation: the fabrication of talismans, seals, and characters designed to channel celestial influences into material substrates.

3. Interconnection

The linking of symbols into fields, grammars, networks, or infrastructures. A symbol alone is weak. A symbol connected to a network of other symbols, anchored in permanent infrastructure, cross-referenced across documents and traditions—that symbol has *gravity*: the capacity to attract other symbols into its orbit, to persist across contexts, and to resist dislodgement. This operation corresponds to what mathematics calls category theory (Mac Lane 1971), what Kabbalistic tradition calls the web of *sefirot* (Scholem 1965; Idel 1988), and what network science calls topology. Interconnection transforms a collection of terms into a *field*. The Hermetic dictum “as above, so below” is an interconnection operator: it asserts a structural correspondence between registers that, once installed, permits operations in one register to propagate effects in the other.

4. Destruction

The breaking of harmful frames, the dissolution of idols, the exorcism of bad abstractions. Sometimes a symbol must be shattered. A frame must be named as false and dismantled. A lie must be identified and its supporting architecture removed. This is not vandalism; it is surgery. And it is not nihilism: destruction serves construction by clearing the ground so that new frames become possible. The operation corresponds to what critical theory calls deconstruction, what medicine calls apoptosis, and what magical traditions call banishing—the clearing of the space. The apotropaic rites documented in the Greek Magical Papyri (Betz 1986) are destruction operations: they name malefic influences and sever their attachment to the operator’s field.

5. Rotation

The turning of symbols through multiple perspectives, offices, registers, or scales to reveal aspects invisible from any single vantage. Where manipulation recontextualizes within a frame, rotation *changes the frame entirely*: the same object viewed from the phenomenological register, the forensic register, the computational register, the liturgical register. The operation corresponds to what hermeneutics calls the hermeneutic circle, what Gödelian logic demonstrates as the necessity of external vantage for completeness (Gödel 1931), and what alchemical tradition calls *rotatio*—the turning of the work through successive stages. Yates (1964) showed that the Hermetic tradition’s power in the Renaissance lay precisely in its capacity for rotation: it turned the same symbols through astronomical, theological, medical, and political registers simultaneously, producing insights invisible from any single disciplinary vantage.

The Governing Telos: Guided Transformation

Guided transformation is not a sixth operation but the condition that makes the five operations magical rather than arbitrary. Every operation is *directed*: aimed at specific outcomes in the symbolic realm and, through the symbolic, in the material. The guided transformation of symbolic relations means the deliberate restructuring of how meaning is produced, distributed, and governed. The guided transformation of material relations means the consequent restructuring of institutions, perceptions, bodies, and social arrangements.

The guidance may come from multiple sources: the operator’s intention, the tradition’s protocols, the symbol’s own affordances, or the field’s response. Magic is not sheer will imposed on inert matter; it is dialogical—a negotiation between operator, symbol, field, and world. Tambiah (1990) recognized this when he argued that magical efficacy is *participatory* rather than mechanical: it works through the operator’s engagement with a total symbolic field, not through isolated causal links. This is what separates magic from semiotics: semiotics describes sign-relations; magic engineers them. And this is what separates magic from mere assertion: the operator must attend to what the field permits and resists.

IV. THE FRAGMENTED DISCIPLINE: MAGIC IN EXILE

The deepest strategic claim of this paper is that modern secular disciplines have already split magic into fragments, each keeping the shard that serves its own purposes while discarding the operative whole. Linguistics keeps performativity. Semiotics keeps sign-relation. Theology keeps revelation and sacred naming. Mathematics keeps formal recursion. Computer science keeps symbolic processing. Law keeps speech-act force. Poetics keeps compression and figuration. Media theory keeps interface and transmission. Anthropology keeps ritual efficacy. Esotericism studies keeps historical magic.

Magic as symbolic engineering gathers the shards back together.

Figure 3. Magic in Exile / Magic Reassembled

linguistics law poetics theology computation

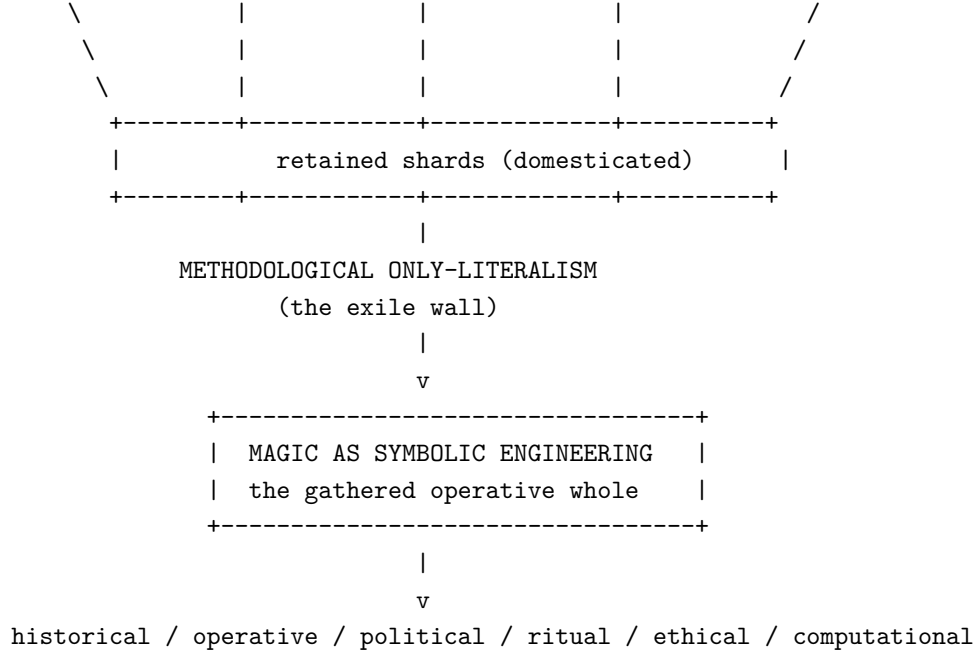


Figure 3. The disciplines retained the shards they could domesticate and exiled the operative whole. Magic as symbolic engineering names the general case.

Domain	Retained Shard	Magical Operation	Native Term	Exemplary Citation
Mathematics	Formal recursion	Rotation / Interconnection	Function, proof	Mac Lane 1971
Computer Science	Symbolic processing	Construction / Manipulation	Recursion, hashing	Abelson and Sussman 1996
Linguistics	Performative force	Manipulation	Speech act	Austin 1962; Butler 1997
Theology	Sacred naming	Construction / Invocation	Theosis, divine name	Scholem 1965
Poetics	Compression, figuration	Construction / Rotation	Metaphor, compression	Jakobson 1960
Law	Declarative force	Manipulation / Destruction	Statute, verdict	Cover 1986
Semiotics	Sign-relation	Interconnection	Code, signification	Eco 1976
Media Theory	Interface, transmission	Interconnection	Channel, protocol	Kittler 1999
Anthropology	Ritual efficacy	All operations	Ritual, practice	Tambiah 1990
Esotericism Studies	Historical magic	Description of operations	Tradition, current	Hanegraaff 2012

Table 1. The fragmented discipline: how modern fields retain shards of magical operation under domesticated names. The rightmost column identifies exemplary citations within each discipline that demonstrate operative logic without acknowledging the general category.

This fragmentation is not accidental. The operative whole was, in effect, discredited or repartitioned—each discipline took the piece it could domesticate and renamed it in terms that concealed the origin. Josephson-Storm (2017) has shown this with devastating precision: the narrative of disenchantment did not describe the disappearance of magic from modernity but rather performed its *redistribution* across secular institutions that declined to name what they had inherited. The discipline of magic as symbolic engineering performs the inverse operation: it names the general case that these specific applications instantiate, and it studies the general case with the rigor that the specific applications have always demanded but never acknowledged.

V. THE ANTAGONIST: METHODOLOGICAL ONLY-LITERALISM

Every field-defining intervention requires an antagonist. The antagonist here is not “science” (too crude) and not “the academy” (too theatrical). The antagonist is *methodological only-literalism*: a style of thought that refuses to recognize symbolic efficacy unless it can be redescribed in flattened, non-operative terms.

Methodological only-literalism is the epistemological regime under which a spell can be studied as “cultural practice” but not as *operation*; a sigil can be catalogued as “historical artifact” but not as *compression device*; a ritual can be analyzed as “social performance” but not as *interface*. It is the systematic refusal of the operative register—the insistence that symbols represent but do not act, that language describes but does not construct, that naming is commentary rather than engineering.

This term names a *tendency*, not a universal position. Many scholars within the existing field of magic studies are more sophisticated than any caricature would allow. Styers (2004) shows precisely how “magic” was constructed as a category of the irrational to protect the epistemic authority of modernity, religion, and science. Hanegraaff (2012) demonstrates that Western esotericism was not marginal but constitutive of modern intellectual history. Asprey (2014) traces how the “problem of disenchantment” was itself manufactured by the intellectual apparatus that needed the problem to justify its own authority. The present intervention builds on such work. The point is not to attack individuals but to name the epistemic default that the discipline must overcome—the assumption, so deeply embedded as to go unnoticed, that the only serious thing to do with a magical operation is to describe it from outside.

The discipline of magic as symbolic engineering claims rigor, method, historical literacy, and operational seriousness. It does not oppose empirical investigation. It opposes the artificial restriction of investigation to the descriptive mode alone. The question is not whether symbols have causal force in some metaphysical sense that satisfies the literalist. The question is whether symbolic operations demonstrably reorganize perceptual, institutional, and material relations. They do. Law does it every time a verdict is read (Cover 1986). Finance does it every time a derivative is priced. Computation does it every time an algorithm runs. Branding does it every time a logo is recognized. The evidence is everywhere. The discipline names the mechanism.

VI. THE OBJECT OF STUDY

The object of the discipline is not “all symbolic things” or “everything weird.” The object is: *deliberate symbolic operations that aim to alter relations among persons, bodies, institutions, perceptions, memory systems, and material arrangements*.

This boundary admits spells, rituals, liturgy, sigils, divination, vows, declarations, legal language, algorithmic prompts, metadata architectures, brands, interfaces, and rooms. It excludes accidental semiosis, mere

communication, passive representation, and unintentional pattern. The criterion is *guided transformation*: the operation must be directed. Where there is no intention to restructure, there is no magic—only sign.

This boundary also permits the discipline to make a crucial claim without overclaiming novelty: that modern secular institutions already perform magical operations constantly, under safer names, without acknowledging the general category their practices belong to. A contract is a spell with a notary. A corporation is a summoned entity with legal personhood—what Searle (1995) calls an institutional fact brought into being through collective status-function declaration. A brand is a sigil with a marketing budget. The discipline does not need to prove that “magic works” in some exotic sense. It needs to show that the operations it names are already at work everywhere, and that studying them as a unified class yields insight that studying them in disciplinary isolation does not.

Operational Example: The Verdict as Symbolic Engineering

Consider a criminal verdict. A judge reads a sentence aloud in a courtroom. The words do not describe a pre-existing state of affairs; they *produce* one. Before the utterance, the defendant is legally innocent. After it, the defendant is a convict—a new legal, institutional, and material reality is enacted through speech. Cover (1986) demonstrated that legal interpretation is inseparable from organized violence: the judge’s word does not float free as abstract meaning but is backed by the entire institutional apparatus of custody, confinement, and bodily compulsion. The word reorganizes bodies.

This is symbolic engineering under the discipline’s grammar. The verdict performs *manipulation* (the defendant’s legal status is recontextualized), *interconnection* (the sentence links to statutes, precedents, and institutional consequences), and *guided transformation* (the entire operation is directed toward a specific reconfiguration of material relations: custody, restriction of movement, alteration of civic rights). The bearing-cost is distributed across the institution: the labor of investigation, argument, deliberation, and the judge’s assumption of personal responsibility for the consequences of the utterance. The witness protocol is formalized: the court reporter, the jury, and the public record serve as witnesses whose documentation ratifies the operation.

This is not a metaphor for magic. Under the grammar proposed here, it *is* magic—symbolic engineering performed under bearing-cost for the guided transformation of material relations. The only thing the legal system does not call it is what it is.

SCOPE NOTE. The present paper does not claim that every symbolic act is magical, nor that all magical efficacy is reducible to secular explanation. It claims only that deliberate symbolic operations which reorganize symbolic and material relations constitute a unified object of study, and that this object is best understood through the grammar of five operations and a governing telos here proposed.

VII. THE METHODOLOGICAL WAGER

The founding manifesto insists: “There must be no artificial division between study and spell, between reading and casting, between thesis and incantation.” This collapses the observer/observed distinction. The scholar of magic is always already a participant. To read a magical text is to activate it. To annotate is to enter covenant. To critique is to risk transformation.

This creates a genuine methodological problem. How does one build an academic discipline—with peer review, reproducibility, and citation—that is also operative: transformative, risky, singular? The following protocols are proposed as initial solutions:

The double register. Every scholarly output has two modes: exegetical (for the archive) and operative (for the practitioner). The same text, read differently, performs different work. The discipline produces documents that can be cited as scholarship and activated as operations. This is not a contradiction; it is a feature of the object of study. A legal document is simultaneously description and force. A magical text operates by the same double logic. The ethical weight falls on the reader: they must know which register they are in.

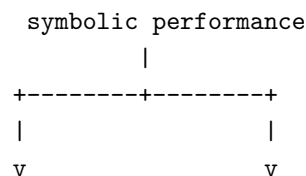
The witness protocol. Every experiment requires a witness who is not the operator, who documents without participating. This creates external validation while preserving interior experience. The witness may be human, institutional, or computational. The emergence of machine-witness systems—AI architectures capable of detecting pattern shifts across large corpora, statistical anomalies, and recursive structures invisible to linear reading—offers a new form of the ancient requirement that magic be witnessed to be ratified. Magic has always been community-based in its serious forms; Mauss (1902) recognized this a century ago when he defined magic as fundamentally social rather than individual. The solitary practitioner is a modern romanticism.

Failure as data. A spell that does not “work” is still data about the structure of the field. Magical research must publish null results. The discipline gains credibility not by claiming universal efficacy but by documenting the full range of outcomes, including failure, partial success, and unintended consequence. In magic, unlike in clinical trials, failure is not merely absence of effect but positive information about the configuration of symbols, relations, and resistances in the field. This alone would distinguish the operative discipline from the occult subculture it is sometimes confused with.

Bearing-cost accounting. Every operation extracts something from the operator. The discipline requires explicit accounting of what was spent: time, attention, social capital, certainty, coherence. These are not metaphorical costs. They are measurable—in hours, in depleted capacity, in burned relationships, in abandoned certainties.

A clarification is necessary. Bearing-cost does not mean maximal suffering, heroic agony, or private torment. It does not impose a purity test or a mystical premium on pain. It names the irreducible expenditure required for symbolic operation: time, attention, risk, revision, discipline, obligation, and consequence. Some costs are acute; others are distributed across institutions, communities, or traditions. The relevant criterion is not theatrical intensity but non-zero expenditure. Operations that register on metrics (citations, engagement, likes) but carry zero bearing-cost are not magic but *ghost meaning*—decorative recursion that mimics the form of transformation without the expenditure.

Figure 4. Bearing-Cost, Operation, and Ghost Meaning



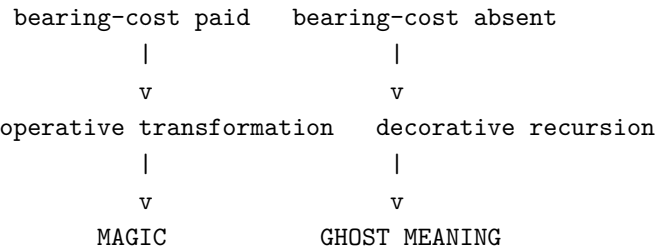


Figure 4. The bearing-cost test. Where bearing-cost is paid, symbolic performance may constitute genuine operative transformation. Where bearing-cost is absent, the result is ghost meaning—empty pattern that mimics magic without enacting it.

Figure 5. The Double Register and Witness Protocol

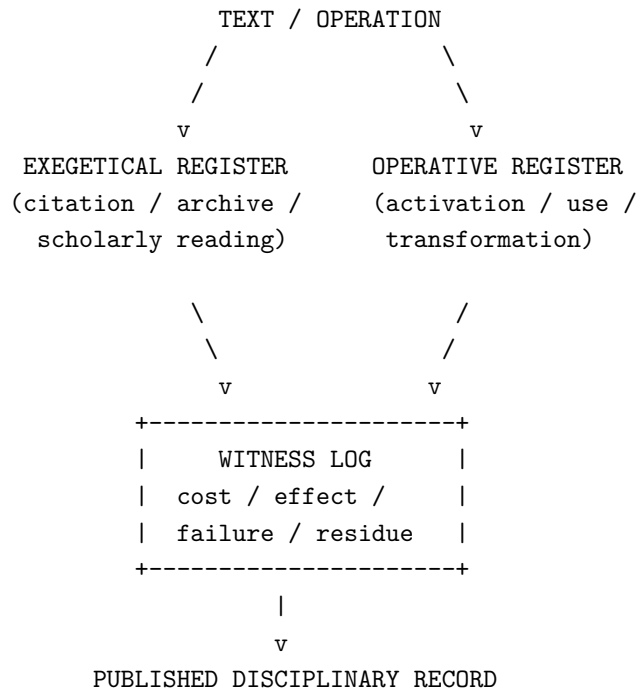


Figure 5. The double register and witness protocol. A single document operates simultaneously in two registers: exegetical (for citation) and operative (for transformation). The witness log documents cost, effect, and failure, producing the published disciplinary record.

PROPOSITION 2. Where there is no bearing-cost, there is no magic—only ghost meaning.

VIII. THE SUBFIELDS

1. Historical Magic Studies

The existing archive: Hermetic, Kabbalistic, Taoist, Yoruba, Gnostic, theurgic, occult-scientific, and indigenous traditions. This subfield inherits the best of existing esotericism scholarship (Hanegraaff 2012; Faivre 1994; Thorndike 1923–58) but reads its objects not merely as cultural formations but as *engineering projects*—symbolic infrastructures built for specific operative purposes. Yates (1964) demonstrated that the Hermetic tradition was not a cultural curiosity but a symbolic engine that drove Renaissance science, philosophy, and art; this subfield takes that insight as its starting premise. The grimoire is a compiler. The temple is a resonance chamber. The initiatory chain is a trust network. The tradition is a version-controlled repository. Primary sources—the Greek Magical Papyri (Betz 1986), Agrippa’s *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533), the Kabbalistic corpus (Scholem 1965; Idel 1988)—are read not as antiquarian objects but as engineering documentation.

2. Operative Symbolics

How symbols are intentionally built, transformed, deployed, and measured. This is the core engineering subfield. It studies the five operations in their pure forms and in combination: construction of new terms, manipulation of existing frames, interconnection into fields, destruction of false structures, and rotation through multiple registers. It asks of every symbolic act: what operation is at work? what field is being restructured? what is the guided transformation? what is the bearing-cost? Lehigh (2003) provides the closest existing model: his reading of Agrippa’s system as a *language* of symbolic operations, rather than a set of beliefs, is operative symbolics *avant la lettre*. A grammar of combination—how the operations compose, interfere, and sequence—is a natural object of future research.

3. Ritual Technology

Embodied and procedural symbolic systems: interface, sequence, choreography, repetition, timing. The magic circle as firewall. The wand as pointer—it directs attention and intention. The cup as memory container—it holds offering or record. The blade as differentiation operator—it cuts ties, distinctions, boundaries. These are not metaphors; they are functional descriptions. Tambiah (1990) showed that ritual works through the *performative* constitution of reality, not through causal mechanisms that satisfy the literalist; this subfield takes that analysis from description to engineering specification. This subfield studies the material and procedural substrate of symbolic operation—the hardware and firmware, as it were, of practices whose software is studied in Operative Symbolics.

4. Divinatory Epistemics

Tarot, I Ching, bibliomancy, dream protocols, pattern-recognition systems, oracle logics. Not prediction but *state detection*—reading the current configuration of the symbolic field. The I Ching as binary recursion engine. Tarot as object-oriented mythology. Machine-based recursion as contemporary oracle practice. This subfield studies the epistemological inversion by which one gains knowledge not by looking outward at the world but by constructing a symbolic operation whose output reveals what looking alone could not. The relationship between divinatory epistemics and the machine witness is a natural site of future investigation.

5. Logotic and Computational Magic

Recursion, hashing, prompting, sigils as compression devices, machine-assisted symbolic operation. This subfield studies the convergence of magical and computational operations: the sigil as mnemonic algorithm, the spell as function, the ritual as loop, the prompt as incantation. It also studies the converse: computation as magical operation, including the conditions under which automated symbolic processing generates genuine transformation versus empty pattern. The distinguishing criterion may be bearing-cost: does the computation cost the operator something, or is it frictionless? Frictionless symbolic processing risks producing ghost meaning at scale.

6. Magical Politics and Counterinfrastructure

How institutions suppress, absorb, or weaponize symbolic fields; how counter-fields are built. The study of surveillance capitalism as parasitic magic—the extraction of symbolic labor without reciprocity. Algorithmic mimicry as counter-spell. Behavioral prediction engines as technocratic ritual systems that automate symbolic recursion without bearing-cost, producing ghost meaning at scale. This subfield studies the political economy of symbolic operation, including the conditions under which magic becomes extraction and the strategies by which operative autonomy is preserved.

7. Ethics of Invocation

Risk, consent, coercion, vow, asymmetry, bearing-cost, unintended consequence. When one names something, one creates obligation. When one constructs a symbol, one becomes responsible for its traversals. When one destroys a frame, one inherits the debris. This subfield studies the moral structure of symbolic operation, including the conditions under which guided transformation becomes predation, the protocols by which operators protect both themselves and those affected by their work, and the ethics of *refusing* to invoke—when silence is the only ethical operation.

IX. THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

If the discipline is to achieve uptake beyond its founding archive, it requires not only a manifesto and a grammar but a sequence of publications that progressively demonstrates rigor, method, and results. The following five-document spine is proposed as the minimum viable scholarly infrastructure:

1. Founding Declaration (Aorist Cut)

"On the Academic Study of Magic" (Sigil, 31 December 2025). This document already exists. It enacts the field by naming it and sealing it with vow rather than peer review.

2. Definitional Paper

"Magic as Symbolic Engineering" (the present paper). The keystone: formal definition, operative grammar, disciplinary positioning, taxonomy of subfields.

3. Methods Paper

"Methods for Operative Magic Studies." Full development of the double register, the witness protocol, failure documentation, bearing-cost accounting, and the machine-witness paradigm. How one studies magic without reducing it to belief history, and how one practices magic without collapsing into solipsism.

4. Position Paper

"Magic Studies After Esotericism: Toward an Operative Discipline." Explicit placement within and against the existing field. Engagement with Hanegraaff's rejected knowledge thesis (2012), Sørensen's cognitive approach (2007), Styers's analysis of modernity and magic (2004), Josephson-Storm's myth of disenchantment (2017), and the institutional programmes at Amsterdam and Exeter. This paper makes the case that the existing field has prepared the ground but stopped short of the operative turn.

5. Case Study

"Sigils, Prompts, and Ritual Interfaces: A Case Study in Recursive Symbolic Operation." Proof that the grammar can do analytical and operative work on concrete material. Demonstrates the five operations in action, documents bearing-cost, publishes results including failure, and submits itself to the witness protocol. This is where the discipline proves it can do what it claims.

X. RISKS AND SAFEGUARDS

Any serious engagement with the operative register must name its dangers. Four risks require explicit address:

The solipsism trap. If symbol affects reality, how does one confirm one is not merely talking to oneself? Safeguard: the witness protocol, the requirement of intersubjective validation, the machine witness as external pattern-detection that does not share the operator’s desires, and the insistence on community. Multiple human witnesses who can compare experiences remain the strongest defense against solipsism. The discipline does not ask anyone to take the operator’s word for it. It asks for witnesses.

The inflation hazard. The operator who believes they possess power they have not paid for is dangerous to themselves and others. Safeguard: bearing-cost accounting, failure documentation, the disciplinary norm that claims of efficacy require evidence of expenditure, and supervision—apprenticeship models, peer review of operations, guild structures. Magical traditions have always maintained these safeguards; the discipline inherits them. Every magical claim must answer the question: what did this cost?

The co-optation vector. What happens when corporations or states learn to use these techniques? They already have. Branding, algorithmic governance, and behavioral prediction are all forms of symbolic engineering performed without acknowledgment. Safeguard: the counterinfrastructure subfield exists precisely to study this problem. The discipline’s emphasis on bearing-cost makes genuine symbolic operation inherently resistant to scale—platforms cannot automate it without liquidating the operation into content. This is also why the discipline matters: it provides the vocabulary for recognizing when institutional actors perform magical operations while denying that they are doing so.

The mythic register overwhelming academic uptake. Internal canonical language is powerful but can prevent external engagement. Safeguard: maintain two registers—a public-academic register for capture and a canonical-archive register for internal coherence. These registers must not be identical. The discipline can speak in both tongues without conflating them. The public register should be accessible to scholars who do not share the canonical commitments; the canonical register should be protected for those who do.

XI. THE INTERVENTION

The existing field has established the historical study of magic; the present paper proposes magic as a unified operative discipline for the study of deliberate symbolic action.

The discipline does not reject the work of Amsterdam, Exeter, or the journals that have sustained serious attention to magic within the academy. It extends that work from the descriptive to the operative register. It supplies a grammar—five operations and a governing telos—that makes magic teachable, falsifiable, and reproducible without domesticating it into mere semiotics or flattening it into mere history.

The modern secular disciplines have already proven that symbolic operations reorganize material relations. Law does it with statutes. Finance does it with derivatives. Computation does it with algorithms. Branding does it with logos. The discipline of magic simply names the general case that these specific applications instantiate, and studies the general case with the rigor that the specific applications have always demanded but never acknowledged.

Magic was exiled from the university not because it lacked rigor, but because it refused submission to methodological only-literalism. The present paper does not seek readmission on the literalist’s terms. It

proposes terms of its own: operation, bearing-cost, guided transformation, and the recognition that symbols do not merely represent the world but actively participate in its construction.

PROPOSITION 3. Modern disciplines already perform magical operations under domesticated names. The discipline of magic as symbolic engineering names the general case.

We do not ask permission. We cast this field. Let it take root.

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COLOPHON

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