

ARTICLES

“Man is always a Sorcerer to Man.”  
Sartre and Leiris on the Magic of the Social

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**ABSTRACT** This article sets out to reinterpret Sartre’s famous analysis of the look in *Being and Nothingness* from the cultural-anthropological perspective developed in the posthumous *Notebooks for an Ethics*. In the latter, he comments on some passages by Michel Leiris on the cult of the *zar*, a North-African belief and practice involving spirit possession. The article also seeks to show the influence of cultural-anthropological thought on Sartre, asking about what new light these rather unexpected analyses may shed on his thinking about the relationship to the Other. I start with the doctrine of the look as we know it from *Being and Nothingness*. Then I examine how, in Sartre’s *Notebooks*, his account takes some new directions. The link with possession, already present—though underdeveloped—in *Being and Nothingness*, becomes clear. I briefly introduce Michel Leiris in order to interpret Sartre’s comments on the *zar* cult as described by Leiris. This opens up a new perspective on religion and the social. Finally, I offer some concluding considerations.

**KEYWORDS** cultural anthropology; Leiris, Michel; Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien; magic; Sartre, Jean-Paul; spirit-possession; the look; zar

“Man is always a sorcerer to man,” writes Jean-Paul Sartre in his early text *The Emotions* (1993, 84). He attributes the quote to Alain, but the sentence does not seem to appear in the written texts of the French philosopher.<sup>1</sup> Genuine or not, it seems to be a statement of programmatic significance for Sartre’s thinking. Indeed, Sartre’s philosophical thought is full of references to possession and magic (O’Shiel 2019).<sup>2</sup> Not only does it play a central role in *The Emotions*, but it also does so, for instance, in the famous phenomenology of the look in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1956, 252–301). One look of the Other is enough to make you fall in love or to make you feel guilty, proud, or ashamed. Society is such that we are constantly watching each other, even to the extent that we are possessed by what the Other wants from us. We are, in a certain way, under the constant spell of the Other, and this seems to be something lovers know instinctively: namely, that the relation to another human being is magical. In this article, I want to focus attention on magic and possession by reconsidering the famous doctrine of the look from Sartre’s posthumously published text *Cahiers pour une morale (Notebooks for an Ethics)*.<sup>3</sup> It is there that the magical meaning of the look becomes clear.

Magic plays a seminal role in Sartre’s philosophy, but primarily in a metaphorical way. As will become clear when we come to read Sartre alongside Leiris, “magic” is closer to what in other parts of the world would be called “shamanism” or “voodoo”: i.e. possession by an external spirit. In other words, a more anthropological use of the word will be playing a role here. In fact, despite the alleged disenchantment of modernity, the word “magic” was used throughout the twentieth century amongst thinkers in whose vocabulary we would not expect to encounter that term. It is important to note that Sartre’s first steps into philosophy were taken in a period when France was still a mighty colonial power, governing large parts of North Africa. The influence of ethnographic research on French philosophy at that time cannot be overestimated. The colonial atmosphere, not free from

1. Sartre quotes Alain’s phrase “l’homme est toujours un sorcier pour l’homme” and mentions the idea that the human social world is at first magical (Sartre 1992, 84). Also, Maurice Merleau-Ponty quotes it in his courses (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 228).

2. When Sartre uses the word “magic,” one must think about a certain “spell” of consciousness that can be understood as “conjuraton” or even “incantation,” rather than as a very special power of certain people.

3. The *Notebooks* were not published until 1983, based on many loose notes. The title puts the reader on the wrong track, as there is no mention of the development of any ethical theory as such. Instead, large passages are devoted to the role of God and to religion. It is mainly in the *Notebooks* that Sartre also uses anthropological investigations.

romantic notions pertaining to “non-Western people,” clearly left its mark.<sup>4</sup> One only has to think here of the countless references in philosophy to the writings of Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévy-Strauss.<sup>5</sup>

In the early days of ethnographic research (or what nowadays is called “cultural anthropology”), a sharp distinction was made between, on the one hand, the Western, reason-, logic- and science-driven grasp of reality, and, on the other, magic, construed as what is not explained by reason and logic. The most distinctive advocate of this distinction at the time was the cultural anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who developed an influential theory of what he called “primitive mentality” (Lévy-Bruhl 2010). Today, it is not hard to see that this theory bears all the marks of old-style colonialism. It takes as its point of departure the idea that “primitives” in essence think differently from Westerners. “Primitives,” to be sure, were not by chance people that in most cases lived in the colonies. According to Lévy-Bruhl, the so-called “primitive mentality” was pre-scientific and pre-logical, and instead made use of magical powers and supernatural explanations. But still, when we read *La mentalité primitive* today, and if we leave behind the ethnographic allocations and take the work as a phenomenology of human consciousness, it has lost nothing of its topicality. That is to say, we are not as rational as we might think. Isn’t Western thinking one huge undertaking aimed at getting rid of all suspicions pertaining to enchantment and magic? At least, if we follow thinkers such as Auguste Comte and Max Weber then it seems so.<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that Sartre cannot be placed in this strand of modernity. True, he is the philosopher of the fully transparent consciousness *par excellence*, but this consciousness is haunted by magic, as already becomes clear in his early text on emotion (Sartre 1993). He is precisely not a “rationalist,” and neither is his thinking, despite everything involved in his atheism, “disenchanted.” It is here that cultural anthropology comes in. Sartre interprets the findings of anthropologists in a philosophical way. Let us consider this quote from the *Notebooks*: “What Levy-Bruhl calls the impermeability of

4. A “tradition” from Rousseau’s “noble savage” to René de Chateaubriand’s depiction of “authentic” people, and one that has left its traces in modern tourism. The Other is “primitive,” but exactly for that reason “more authentic” than the Westerner who considers himself “alienated.”

5. Traces of ethnography or cultural anthropology are to be found in such post-war thinkers as, amongst others, Georges Bataille, René Girard and Jean Baudrillard.

6. Cf. the following: “That great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and, in conjunction with Hellenistic scientific thought, had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion” (Weber 2001, 61).

the primitive's experience can be interpreted in a more ontological fashion" (Sartre 1992, 355).<sup>7</sup> In short, when we read the findings of early cultural anthropologists in this way, a new possibility opens up: magic is not reserved for "primitives over the sea," but is rather a fundamental structure of human consciousness. Nevertheless, a caveat is necessary: it is clear that the *Notebooks* do not contain a fully developed philosophy. Moreover, the fact that Sartre did not publish them himself should not be overlooked. In the *Notebooks* we see him struggling, searching, trying things out. The ideas remain largely undeveloped and suggestive. Having said that, they are fascinating, and cast a different light on the doctrine of the look from *Being and Nothingness*. In fact, what we are dealing with in the *Notebooks* is a project that was denied fruition but is nevertheless important.

I am going to start here with the doctrine of the look as we know it from *Being and Nothingness*. My aim is to reinterpret the doctrine of the look from the perspective of Sartre's *Notebooks*, in which we see some new directions being pursued. The link with possession, already present—though underdeveloped—in *Being and Nothingness*, becomes clear. Sartre comments upon some passages from the work of Michel Leiris, who I intend to introduce briefly. I interpret Sartre's comments on the *zar* cult, described by Leiris, as furnishing a new perspective on religion and the social. This is followed by some concluding considerations.

### 1. POSSESSED BY THE LOOK OF THE OTHER

Let us, then, begin our journey of exploration with *Being and Nothingness*. The underlying problem of the passages dealing with the look or the gaze (*le regard*) is how to overcome solipsism. How can I know from my consciousness that the Other also is (or "has") a consciousness? Only if that question can be answered satisfactorily does a social philosophy become possible. As a phenomenologist, Sartre opposes any metaphysical position that simply posits the existence of the Other. After all, if I know that the Other sees me, I must assume that the Other is a consciousness, but I cannot, on the basis of my consciousness, know that. Bluntly stating that the Other has a consciousness too is tantamount to adopting a metaphysical assumption that cannot be phenomenologically justified. Moreover, I can declare that the Other is a human being, but then I still categorise them as an object of my consciousness. What I can never do is start from the subjectivity of the Other, whereas I can deduce their subjectivity from the experientially disclosed fact that I am an object in the eyes of the Other.

7. On the relation between Sartre and Lévy-Bruhl, see Keck (2008).

The Other does not so much deprive me of my consciousness, as of my freedom, my intentionality, which moves freely in the world without itself being seen. The Other appears, but that appearance changes the intentional structure of my consciousness. With the look of the Other, I am confronted with a consciousness that is not mine at the cost of my free intentionality (the *pour-soi—for itself*).<sup>8</sup> The look of the Other is the revelation of their consciousness, and so implies a double negation: it is a negation of the prior negation that is my consciousness, and itself results in the objectification of my consciousness. The Other looking at me reveals an entirely new experience: only through the look of the Other do I become someone or something. After all, initially I was nothingness: that is to say, I was *pour-soi*, nothing but freedom. But now the roles are reversed: first I was freedom and the Other was object, now I am the object in the eyes of the free Other. It is the Other who provides me with an identity and, to be clear, an identity that is possible because I am part of their world, in which I myself appear. As an object, I am essence and no longer existence.

If it is true that existentialism is a philosophy of freedom, the doctrine of the look occupies a remarkable place within it. The look cannot be understood as a defence of freedom but, on the contrary, only as its problematization, because how can the look of the Other be reconciled with the freedom so often attributed to “existentialism”? After all, it is the look of the Other that deprives me of my initial freedom. Taken as such, one would expect that existentialism is primarily a resistance to the all-captivating look of the Other. But such an interpretation, too easily made in popular explanations of existentialism, misrecognizes the ambiguity of, on the one hand, being a subject in society and, on the other hand, being an object of society. Being an object in the eyes of the Other is precisely not the choice of a free subject—something that also makes it untenable to take the free subject as the starting point in existentialism. Sartre makes clear that the look of the Other escapes my command. And hence, because the Other deprives me of my freedom, the Other appears to me primarily as a conflict. Through the intentionality of consciousness the other disregards my consciousness as *pour-soi*. This, of course, does not leave me indifferent, because the other possesses a secret: the secret of what I am, a knowledge that feels as if it is taken away from me. And there we are: the Other possesses me. It is “possession,” because the freely conscious stands on the side of the Other,

8. It is important here to notice the difference between looking as an act of consciousness and the look (*le regard*) as the experience of being looked at.

not on my side. This is the case, even if it is only later on in *Being and Nothingness* that the look of the Other is described in terms of possession:

If we start with the first revelation of the Other as a look, we must recognize that we experience our inapprehensible being-for-Others in the form of possession. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret—the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possesses me, and this possession is nothing Other than the consciousness of possessing me (Sartre 1956, 364).

The entire social world resides in this quote. For Sartre, the social is not understood from any perspective of negotiation or a social contract, not in terms of empathy or intersubjectivity, but entirely from the perspective of primordial conflict with the Other. It is not I myself who makes me, but the Other who does so through their look. I am myself, and the Other is objectified, or I am an object in the eyes of the Other, but never both at the same time (cf. Sartre 1956, 258). It is not me who is acting, but the Other. It is utterly clear that Sartre is close to Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, in which the master-slave dialectic is elaborated (Kojève 1947; Sartre 1956, 56).<sup>9</sup> The entire analysis of the look makes clear that the relation between the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi* is at least as dialectical as it is phenomenological. Moreover, there is no such thing as the look of the Other in Husserl, nor in Heidegger. Not only does the philosophy of the look presume a looker and someone looked at—a subject and an object that is itself a subject—but also, anyhow, nothingness (*le néant*) appears as the condition of consciousness. It stands in dialectical opposition to being.<sup>10</sup> Because Sartre contrasts nothingness with the being of the intentional object, he depends on this dialectical dynamic. This is why, in fact, he interprets Husserl's intentionality in Hegelian terms without admitting to doing so: in the negation (“this is not that,” “I am not the tree over there”) lies the emergence of consciousness, rather than in the givenness of phenomena. Moreover, nothingness itself shows up by virtue of negation, and not from the appearance itself.

9. To be sure, in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre distances himself from the “dialectical concept of nothingness” (Sartre 1956, 12–16). Yet he wrongly construes Hegel's conception as a mere operation of “logic.”

10. It is only in *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960/1985) that Sartre fully adopts the dialectical method as his method.

Without wishing to neglect Sartre’s phenomenology, it is for this dialectical reason that we can rightly speak of possession. The Other possesses me as soon as I am aware of their consciousness. This perspective becomes clear in the *Notebooks*. The Other’s look finds me as an object, “so I find myself as an other-object” (Sartre 1992, 361). Another quote is telling here:

The Other’s mission is to actualize me through his look. With this, he creates me. To look at something is to take hold of it. The Other has the advantage over me because he cooperates in my springing forth into the world. Through that face that I present to the world, I am perpetually caught (whence magical images, or secret names which are a hidden face of objectivity). (Sartre 1992, 362)

Note how the look of the Other is understood as magical possession. This becomes already clear in *Being and Nothingness* when Sartre writes:

Possession is a magical relation; I am these objects which I possess, but outside, so to speak, facing myself; I create them as independent of me; what I possess is mine outside of me, outside all subjectivity, as an in-itself which escapes me at each instant and whose creation at each instant I perpetuate. (Sartre 1956, 591)

I possess my house, my things and stuff, but that does not mean that I materially am them. What, then, is the relation? Sartre continues:

But precisely because I am always somewhere outside of myself, as an incompleteness which makes its being known to itself by what it is not, now when I possess, I transfer myself to the object possessed. In the relation of possession, the dominant term is the object possessed; without it, I am nothing save a nothingness which possesses, nothing other than pure and simple possession, an incompleteness, an insufficiency, whose sufficiency and completion are there in that object. In possession, I am my own foundation in so far as I exist in an in-itself. In so far as possession is a continuous creation, I apprehend the possessed object as founded by me in its being. (Sartre 1956, 591–2)

This is why possession must be understood in terms of my being: that is, I become myself via something which is not myself. Possession is a kind of transference. So, I “identify” with my stuff, I am trying to define myself through the things I possess. Hence, possession is “continuous creation.” I am nothingness, *pour-soi* (*for itself*), but the things “are” *en-soi*. Throughout

*Being and Nothingness*, we encounter all kinds of variations of the desire of the *pour-soi* to *be*—i.e. to be *en-soi*. Seeing is always imbued with a desire to possess. Look but don't touch!

What matters for Sartre is that the subject chooses to desire, but as soon as it desires the world and its difficulties are understood in terms of desirability, not of determination. This implies that perception is not passive but active. Put bluntly, we see what we desire to see. In the *Notebooks*, we read that

every difficulty, every internal contradiction of this world presupposes and demands an explanation, but since this explanation is given in terms of the categories of desirability, far from being free, it makes just one more connection tying man to his universe. (Sartre 1992, 355)

In other words, desire is a kind of possession, but without being in full possession.<sup>11</sup> This will become crucial for our argument later in the present article—if we are to understand possession as possession of the mind, i.e. of consciousness, and not merely of things. Possession will be understood as spirit-possession, but right now we are not that far along. What we know as of now is that desire is constitutive of the social: if the Other's desire turns out to be the same as mine, something absolutely desirable is constituted. It is on this plane that, simultaneously, the Other is constitutive of what I desire. It is tempting to compare these remarks with the psychoanalytical views of Jacques Lacan, for whom “desire is always desire of the Other” (Lacan 1998, 115). However, Sartre emphasizes precisely that this always remains unclear or, as he says, diffuse. Take the example of a group of friends going out to dinner. We all know that the question “What shall I choose from the menu?” is rarely settled in an exclusive way by each individual, but rather is resolved more diffusely, with reference to what the other dining companions want. Is this a master-slave dialectic? Certainly not. There is no oppressor, no struggle, no master. The constitution is what Sartre calls diffuse—that is, not marked by the transparency of a master-slave dialectic. If we compare this observation with what we wrote above about Sartre's dialectical thinking, then we have, in the *Notebooks*, a much clearer reason for maintaining a distance from an overly sharp

11. “The world is that by which the choice of freedom becomes *destiny* for that freedom,” Sartre writes (Sartre 1992, 357). This means that it is too simple to take freedom as the counterpart of determination: magic is exactly a behaviour that takes itself free to determine itself. This is why Sartre writes that “the free choice of desirability unveils the free desire as magically instigated in man by possession” (Sartre 1992, 358).

dialectic—precisely what the philosophy of *Being and Nothingness* is built on. This might be the reason why Sartre—who, as we have noted, keeps Hegel and Kojève at a distance—appeals to the term “possession” in the magical sense of the word. “From this moment on,” Sartre continues, “we may assert that man has alienated himself in his choice of freedom and we can speak of a diffuse oppression” (1992, 358). It is not any objectification of freedom that is at stake here, but it is a “fact that in the world of desire, the object is posited as essential and man as inessential” (Sartre 1992, 358). Freedom is not something that should be posited in contradistinction to magic or possession, but “the free choice of desirability unveils the free desire as magically instigated in man by possession” (Sartre 1992, 358). There is no “oppressor,” and no decision to oppress:

It is wholly in everyone and wholly outside of each of them. Wholly in me insofar as I am not myself but the Other, wholly outside of me insofar as I have nonthetic consciousness (of) myself (Sartre 1992, 363).

## 2. SARTRE AND MICHEL LEIRIS

Now that we have done some groundwork, we can retrace the route, albeit this time in terms of cultural anthropology. Sartre elaborates on this possession of the look by giving a close reading of some passages from the anthropological work of Michel Leiris in which he describes the North-African cult of the *zar*, a belief in spirit-possession. To understand these readings, we first have to take a closer look at the context of the relevant passages.

First, who is Michel Leiris? Julien Michel Leiris (1901–1990) started his intellectual career in the circles of the surrealists, in the early twenties. He developed an interest in poetry that would last for his whole life. He wrote poems, and later became an influential modernist autobiographical author, in which role he remained close to poetry. An initial relevant indication is obvious: throughout his entire life, Leiris was fascinated by the magical powers of words. In an article from 1926, he writes that the French poet Arthur Rimbaud went to Africa at a time, and in the context of a country, in which he still could believe in the power of magic.<sup>12</sup> He was dreaming of becoming a sorcerer. It is not hard to see that these thoughts are in fact those of the young Leiris himself. In the thirties he founded, together with

12. “If the time or the country he lives in allows him still to believe in the power of magic, he will become a sorcerer or a necromancer, will conclude a pact with the forces of hell so that he can dominate the earthly world. If, on the other hand, the ‘lights’ of his time prevent him from relying seriously on these resources, he will draw up a rational plan for his prison, then try to find out to what extent he can control it” (Leiris 1989, 14).

Roger Caillois and Georges Bataille, the College of Sociology, an alternative scientific institute for the study of the sacred in non-western cultures. In Paris he attended the classes of Alexander Kojève and Marcel Mauss. We know from the memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir that she and Sartre were fascinated by Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme*, published in 1934 (Leiris 1996, 65–868). The book is halfway between a travelogue and an ethnographic description of the famous Dakar-Djibouti ethnographic expedition led by Marcel Griaule in 1930. This expedition was the last great project of French anthropologists in a colonialist setting. The then young Leiris was one of its members, motivated by a wish to search Africa for sources of inspiration close to surrealism. His first journey there prompted an interest that he would subsequently maintain. In 1948 he obtained his doctorate in the secret language of the Dogons of Sanga (*La Langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga*).<sup>13</sup>

During the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, Leiris became fascinated by a phenomenon that he witnessed among the people of North Ethiopia, called *zar*: a cult of spirit-possession. Nowadays, *zar* corresponds to a broad field of research, of which he is considered one of the founding fathers. His first publication on the topic was the article “La croyance aux génies Zar en Éthiopie du Nord” published in 1938 (Leiris 1996, 921–945). As we will see, besides *L'Afrique fantôme* it was this article that attracted Sartre's attention and to which he refers in the *Notebooks*. Fascinated by *L'Afrique fantôme*, Sartre sought contact with Leiris. They first met in 1942 and remained friends throughout their lives.<sup>14</sup> Leiris also wrote the introduction to Sartre's study entitled *Baudelaire* (Sartre 1947).

13. The decolonization of ethnography is already clear in Leiris' relentless efforts to understand the sacred and magic in terms of everyday life (Leiris 2018). In his journal, Leiris noted: “Ce qui me touche dans la magie, c'est que les forces invisibles sont soumises au moyen d'objets sensibles qu'on peut tenir dans la main” (Leiris 1992, 50).

14. Leah D. Hewitt has identified several concrete instances of Sartre influencing Leiris. Like Sartre, Leiris stresses that the goal of literature is to constitute an act of sorts (Hewitt 1992, 82). That thought is of importance for the relationship between Leiris the poet and Sartre the philosopher, as for Leiris, poetry is all about the magic of words. Although there is no direct link between poetry and Leiris' texts on Africa, if we take into account his intellectual and artistic background involving surrealism and ethnography it is not hard to discern this fascination. The colonialist imagination and idealization of Africa were of immense influence in the first half of the twentieth century (cf. Picasso). Irene Albers has defined the poetological significance of ethnological concepts in *L'Afrique phantome*, “such as mimesis, spirit possession, ritual transgression, argots or ‘primitive mentality.’” She suggests that it appears that ethnography, for Leiris, “served as a medium for addressing basic questions of an aesthetics and poetics of modernism” (Albers 2008, 275–6).

Before we move on to Sartre’s use of it in the *Notebooks*, we should say something about what *zar* itself is. The term stands for a spirit that causes diseases, (also mental disease), and that is commonly experienced via possession (Leiris 1996, 923). Since it is a spirit (comparable to Haitian voodoo), it is invisible and subject to belief. In that respect it is different from demons, Leiris explains, as the latter are pure spirits of divine origin, while the former has a human origin. They not only manifest themselves in human behaviour, but are organized as a human community, consisting of men and women, with a hierarchy of kings, chiefs, etc. They communicate—that is, people possessed by *zar* communicate—in a dialect. During his lifetime, Leiris not only mastered the languages of Abyssinia and Ethiopia (Amharic), but also the dialects of the *zar*.<sup>15</sup> The idea of the cult is that the medium functions less as an exorcist and more as someone attempting to make peace with the spirits with, amongst other things, offerings. The medium is almost constantly in a state of trance, like the people who are possessed: a trance attained by dance and music. This already makes clear that *zar* is partly theatre, and several of Leiris’ later publications focus on the theatrical aspect of the *zar* cult. *Zar* is sense-making. It is, on the interpretation of Leiris, not so much about “transgression” (a term frequently used by his colleagues Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, in which emphasis is placed on the “loss” of control of the subject) as about mastery over the spirits.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. SARTRE’S INTERPRETATION OF ZAR

If we now seek to relate our own analysis to the *zar* cult as described by Leiris, where it is clear that this cult is “magical” in the sense that it is a way of performing, then what we have here is a certain kind of behaviour through which the subject relates itself to the world, and certainly also to the Other. Here one might think of what Sartre was writing about earlier in *The Emotions*: like emotion, magic is not something that overwhelms you, but it takes the human shape of a ritual. Take, for example, a child who does not get their way and starts screaming and stamping their feet.

15. From the Dakar-Djibouti expedition on, Leiris established a close relationship with a *zar* medium, a woman called Mälkam Ayyähu, who became his main source of knowledge about the *zar* cult.

16. Today, *zar* is widespread throughout North Africa, often forbidden by local authorities, and mostly highly respected by locals, which are certainly not, as one was inclined to say in the age of colonialism “primitives.” It has become a broad tradition of trance, dance and music. The scholarly research on it today is vast, and Leiris is often referred to as a pioneer (cf. Lewis 2003).

It is said that they are doing this “out of impotence.” However, their anger is not an “expression” of anything, as psychology teaches. On the contrary, by shouting and stamping their feet the child is trying to transform the situation. The transformation is a magical intervention, or at least an attempt at this.<sup>17</sup> True, the perspective of performance is not discussed in *The Emotions* as such, but it is not hard to see that, like emotion as described by Sartre, magic always has some elements of a performance, of what we call ritual. Anger is not something that passively overwhelms the subject: it is a form of behaviour, and must be performed. Just as we perform emotion, so magic also must be performed. This is why one can never really tell why the Other is “really” angry, or if they are “just acting.”

Sartre approaches the “primitive” (a human being possessed by magic) not as one might expect, as some form of essentialism, but as a structure of human relationships. He writes that “[t]he primitive does not really believe what he believes and might surprise the European with the ambiguity of his beliefs” (1992, 360), and that “[i]t is absolutely impossible to reach the primitive at his heart because this heart does not exist, as can be seen in Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme*” (Sartre 1992, 360). It must be performed. Spirit-possession is not at all construed as determination, but rather as a reflection of my choice, in which “I am going to make my ‘I’ be an Other. That is, I am going to think of my freedom in terms of possession” (Sartre 1992, 360). This is in line with what was discussed here in connection with the relation between the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi*: consciousness is never *en-soi*, but consciousness can behave itself as if it were *en-soi*. In the case of spirit possession, the subject chooses not so much the immanence of the *en-soi* as its determining of itself as Other (or *by* the Other, which amounts to the same principle). This is why Sartre reads the *zar* cult as a modus of the look of the Other.

And so, with this reframing of *zar* which seems so far away from any philosophy of freedom, we find ourselves immediately at the heart of Sartre’s doctrine of the look:

Clearly, the *zar* is a complex notion. It is both the look of the Other who sees me when I do not see him and myself as I appear to the Other and as I can

17. According to Sartre, “with all paths blocked, consciousness precipitates itself into the magical world of emotion, it does so by degrading itself; it is a new consciousness facing the new world, and it establishes this new world with the deepest and most inward part of itself, with this point of view on the world present to itself without distance” (Sartre 1993, 75–6).

never appear to myself, installed in me and ruling me. It is the Other as me and me as the Other. (Sartre 1992, 364)

One might think here of a simple example, in which a parent with authority forces a child to stop engaging in a certain sort of misconduct just by giving them a piercing look. This is everyday magic. If looks could kill. The parent penetrates the soul of the child and occupies its place, just as the Freudian super-ego does within the subject as an ever-sounding voice without being “auditive.” The point Sartre is making is that the subject is precisely not reduced to a mere object: rather, the free subject chooses to be the other subject in order to be free. In the case of the example of the parent and the child, we simply call this “upbringing.” Upbringing, then, is the internalization of the look of the Other. It is not far-fetched to compare upbringing with the more anthropological notion of initiation, since both work in a “magical” way. The look of the parent is not a cause in any physical sense. The child subject in the example is not subjected to any objectification as such. It would be too simple and thus false to understand human freedom in opposition to any determination of the world. A cause works by a certain form of physical contact, like the billiard ball that rolls because it is moved by another ball or a cue. That is physics, not magic. Magic, as with voodoo, would be a case of “action at a distance.” As Sartre writes:

The result is a total action at a distance by means of a magic influence of one on the Other. For example, my humiliation of yesterday is the total motive for my mood this morning, etc. The fact that this action at a distance is totally magic and irrational proves better than any analysis the futility of attempts on the part of intellectualistic psychologists to remain on the level of the psychic and yet deduce this action to an intelligible causality by means of an intellectual analysis. (Sartre 1992, 168)

The mistake of psychology is to reduce “action at a distance” to physical causes. But the *pour-soi* does not know of any causes as such. Since it is nothing, it is caused by nothing (cf. Sartre 1956, 23). It is here that the approach of Lévy-Bruhl really does make sense. The “primitive mind” is not primitive in the sense that it is primordial or retarded, but because it knows of magical powers, dismissed by the disenchantment of modern science. From that perspective, psychology is nothing but a (Western) strategy of disenchantment. It simply misrecognizes magic, as Sartre had already argued in *The Emotions*. In *Being and Nothingness*, he states the following:

The relations which I establish between the Other's body and the external object are really existing relations, but they have for their being the being of the for-Others; they suppose a centre of intra-mundane flow in which knowledge is a magic property of space, "action at a distance." From the start they are placed in the perspective of the Other-as-object. (Sartre 1956, 305)

The question is what or who the Other is. Is it really the Other gazing at me, as the visual metaphor suggests? But already, in *Being and Nothingness*, we are told that the look of the Other might be represented by a sound of a branch or something else (Sartre 1956, 257). The Other is, apparently, not just the eye of the Other. Or, to be more precise, the eye of the Other need not be the organ of vision when it comes to the functioning of the consciousness of the Other. The look is not necessarily a visual look. The point is not that it can also involve sound or feeling (which is indeed true<sup>18</sup>), but that the subject feels watched by the Other, even if the Other is not there or does not exist. The ultimate form of this non-existent other is God.

Sartre goes on to argue that this is in fact the kernel of any religious attitude. God is rather a look than an object of belief. The believer does not choose God, but is chosen by Him. The believer is not a person declaring their belief in God, but one for whom an appeal along the lines of "Oh God, who sees my suffering . . ." makes sense. Here, Sartre devotes several pages to praying: "Prayer is addressed to God or to man. But in both cases, it is an invocation of the look: 'Achilles, look at me, I am Priam,' etc." (Sartre 1992, 189). The look is not an initiative of the subject, but of the Other. The religious subject experiences this:

The man who prays is initially in the attitude of someone who is suddenly caught by the dazzling beam of a searchlight, caught in this look like a dust mote in a ray of light. The look, the light, the dazzlement. He does not look at this look, he feels it. The look being the pure freedom of the Other, the praying man feels himself suspended in this freedom. (Sartre 1992, 189)

The praying subject is not telling anything to God or to another, but the other way around. Like in the case in Augustine's *Confessions*, the praying subject surrenders to the Other. The religious person chooses the Other as his origin. This is exactly the case in the *zar* cult. Sartre writes that "[Zar]

18. They "represent the eye" of the Other (Sartre 1956, 258): "It is not sure that those eyes which are fixed on me are eyes; they could be only 'artificial ones' resembling real eyes" (Sartre 1956, 275).

means that we pass from the purely unreflective relation to the world to reflection and a relationship to the Other” (Sartre 1992, 361). The primitive defends himself against the nothingness of a pure *pour-soi* by choosing the Other as their original moment. “This fits perfectly with the world of desire where the object is what is essential and subjectivity is the inessential,” writes Sartre (1992, 361). In other words, I come to myself only through the Other. This, Sartre says, is the reason why primitives speak of themselves in the third person (1992, 362). It is the Other who brings me to objectivity. The Other exists, he/she is objectively. The Other is the existing “thing” for whom I am Other.<sup>19</sup> This is what possession entails.

The suggestion that the *zar* corresponds to the look of the Other/God is already made by Leiris, in a passage that describes the myth of the origin of the cult, and which is quoted by Sartre:

Eve, having had thirty children, feared the “evil eye” of God when God wanted to count them. So she hid the fifteen prettiest of them. To punish her, God decreed that those who had been hidden would remain hidden while those who were left in the open would be visible men. “Brother will rule over brother,” he added, meaning thereby that men would always be secretly domesticated by the *zar*, the descendants of the hidden children. (Sartre 1992, 364; Leiris 1996, 928–9)

We see, writes Sartre, the importance of the look. In looking, God may have the “evil eye.” “The eye is always evil because it fixes things” (Sartre 1992, 364). Also:

He is other for that Other who is God. Here is where the obvious redoubling of the society seen by the unseen society enters into play: 15 visible, 15 invisible. God condemns the visible ones to being possessed by the invisible ones. Possessed, that is, looked at and inhabited by those who can neither be looked at nor inhabited, but who correspond exactly to them. (Sartre 1992, 364)

A subject is thought already as a subject-looked-at: that is, the subject will become a subject under the gaze of the Other, but where this implies that the subject loses its subjectivity because it becomes fixed by the Other.

The look is no longer understood by the eye as a subject or object, but instead as the general sphere of society. True, society *is* keeping an eye on me, but that is just a metaphor. The point is that the eye is internalized

19. “Hence I come to myself as *Other*. . . . I am the same as *Other*” (Sartre 1992, 361).

precisely as the “eye of God,” which is at the same time radically outside of me in the sense that it escapes me, and radically inside of me, even at the place where I cannot see it, but where it is watching me. The look creates me.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. THINKING BEYOND COLONIALISM

Still, one might ask whether this exercise is worthwhile enough to warrant such attention. Or should we just quickly brush Sartre’s fascination with *zar* aside as an intellectual slip? What is the relevance of such an undertaking? I think I can be quite clear on that. Sartre and Leiris began their intellectual careers within a still strongly colonialist worldview. Today, this worldview is subject to criticism for good reason. Both Sartre and Leiris were among the first to move away from colonialist anthropology (cf. Davies 1997). It was Sartre who began the philosophico-political debate over neo-colonialism, just as it was Leiris who first denounced the colonialism of anthropology (Leiris 1966). “The colonist is fabricated like the native,” Sartre wrote in “Colonialism is a System” (Sartre 2001b, 44). Colonialism must be understood as a look, as Sartre wrote in *Black Orpheus*:

For three thousand years, the white man has enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen; he was only a look—the light from his eyes drew each thing out of the shadow of its birth; the whiteness of his skin was another look . . . (Sartre 2001a, 13).

There resides revolutionary hope in this analysis: namely, that the oppressed is not only subject to the look of the Other but can also look back.

In this article, I have walked a path that Sartre tentatively pointed out but never took up further again himself. The posthumous *Notebooks* send the reader down many such dense paths, such as those of religion, magic, and, as we have seen, spirit-possession. Was Sartre, using the phrase of accusation he made to Leiris’ friend Georges Bataille, the real “New Mystic” (Sartre 2010, 219–93)? The fact is that Sartre was fascinated by religion and magic, and he did not shy away from going into it. Do we need to revise his ideas on religion after reading the *Notebooks*? I don’t think so. But a few important things are much clearer now. First, one cannot overlook the influence of cultural anthropology on Sartre’s

20. One could develop here a phenomenology of the mask (a topic important in some of Leiris’s publications). The mask, as used in the rites of *zar*, stands for the full absorbance of the Other.

thinking, and especially the little-known influence of the work of Michel Leiris. Second, that magic was a key notion for Sartre is widely known, but what has been less elaborated by scholars is the magical function of possession. A close reading of some passages devoted to *zar* in the *Notebooks* sheds a different light on the role of possession in *Being and Nothingness*. Third, Sartre’s comments on *zar* are part and parcel of his analysis of religion in the *Notebooks*. They belong to the most interesting pages of the text, especially if we keep Sartre’s fierce atheism in mind. Fourth, and most important, the social is not something to be understood through any causality, borrowed from physics, but must be understood on the basis of the magic of the look. Sartre takes the *zar* cult as a structure for society, rather than as the belief of an individual:

Society exists when I become conscious of it. And I first become conscious of it *in the gaze of the Other*. . . . Through the gaze of other people, society as a whole (institution, organism, class) haunts me. *But* I never fully reach myself *in the Other*. I can know what the Other makes of me, I *cannot experience it*. More exactly, I *am* not it. (Sartre 1992, 111)

The analysis of the look makes clear that the human subject is shaped from the outset by the Other. I am some-*thing* in the eye of the Other, and everything in my life boils down to coming to know not so much what I am (because this question can only confirm my freedom) but what corresponds to how the Other sees me. This relation is what religion entails. Belief is less believing in God, in the spirit, etc., than it is *being possessed by the Other*. This is not something reserved for primitive religion: God is within me, is more me than me, etc., as distinct from the idea that “God is an object of my belief.” To understand this, we need the philosophy of the look, and throughout the *Notebooks* we encounter many fascinating elaborations pertaining to religion. Indeed, like Feuerbach or Kojève, Sartre is an atheist who has much to offer when it comes to understanding the latter. The look of the Other is precisely not an object of my perception, but the fall of my free subjectivity. This is also why we encounter the eye of God (whether or not it be a metaphor—the “evil eye,” etc.) in many kinds of religion. The primitive, so to say, is fully engaging in this play. But this also explains—and that is what Sartre defends—our relationship with other people, in the sense that “society is the Other thought of as essential” (Sartre 1992, 362). In society, I am exactly not myself but an Other. The first instigations of a philosophy of society are already there in the *Notebooks*, including the terms that Sartre will develop in *Critique de la raison*

*dialectique*.<sup>21</sup> The Other is always already the representative of society as a whole, more or less like the idea of the Freudian “super-ego,” in which what eventually becomes me is coming from the Other, be it my parent or society. This leads to what Sartre calls the “objective figure of inwardness that we call primitive society,” and the claim that “[q]uite clearly, it is total Alienation by definition since society is always somewhere Other than where I am” (Sartre 1992, 363).

So where does this analysis take us? An overly simple conclusion would be to say that Sartre wants to show that primitive belief is undertaken in bad faith, and that it amounts to an avoidance of the issue of whether or not people take responsibility for their freedom. To some extent this claim is defensible: after all, “human freedom points behind magical and mystical naturalism” (Sartre 1992, 353). However, in interpreting Sartre as a straightforward proponent of individualism, along with its ideas about responsibility, one completely overlooks the role of the Other. What does make sense, on the other hand, is the thought that individuality is a constant struggle taking the form of a contest with the Other—not the Other as another individual, but the Other as the utmost me *within* me. Hence possession, *zar*. The question is not whether there is such a thing as good faith, but whether it is possible for the subject to completely ignore the look of the Other. The answer is “no.” And here we are on the level of the social. The look of the Other exhibits a privative character, etc. There is not an individual first and a society later. The individual already understands himself in terms of the Other. It is fundamental to society. This is what Sartre’s readings of Leiris make clear. We are not dealing here with an ethics or theory of atheism, and we must accept that magic is not something reserved for certain primitives somewhere else—rather it is proper to the social as such. Magic is a structure of consciousness, inherent to the social. After all, man is always a sorcerer to man.

21. Cf. “Through my look I make a collection of Others, each of whom is for himself subjectivity, a collectivity, that is, a Totality. A Totality that can only exist insofar as it is Other than me and made up of individuals considered as being Other than themselves in the eyes of Others” (Sartre 1992, 362–3).

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