

Speak of the Devil

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Pandemonium

Although most western and largely Christian societies are now accustomed to the idea of one Devil (albeit accompanied by many lesser demons), early modern Europe was afflicted by a much more complex pandemonium. These were specialist devils: each responsible for tempting hapless citizens into a wide range of sins. There were Devils devoted to the crimes we might expect - murder, theft, etc. - but they were joined by colleagues responsible for everything from glancing in the mirror (*Spiegelglanzteufel*), dancing (*Machatanzteufel*), marital infidelity (*Eheteufel*), to the possibly less serious offence of wearing baggy trousers (the *Hosenteufel* having imported this dangerously lascivious trend into German lands from the morally questionable Dutch). Enumerating these demons and their associated evils was an early publishing sensation in the form of the *Teufelbücher* (Devil Books) of the early 16th century. In one notable case, Martin Borrihaus claimed to have identified no fewer than 2,665,866,746,664 individual Devils tormenting his fellow Germans. Very few of these folk Devils survived very long in the popular imagination, not least because many were so ridiculous. However, those associated with metal and money were often more enduring.

This was particularly the case with the devils of the mines. Miners have always been superstitious - hardly surprising given the precarious conditions in which many worked, particularly in preindustrial settings. Whatever the formal religion above ground might have to say, miners throughout the world have always hedged their spiritual bets by populating their shafts and galleries with various other entities. Cornish and Welsh miners, for example, exported their long-established belief in the 'Tommyknockers', or 'Bwcas' to the USA, where they remained an active part of mining culture well into the 20th century. Not devils as such, the 'knockers' were small hominid creatures dressed as miners who earned their name - depending on local legend - either by knocking to warn of tunnel collapses or by knocking on pit-props to cause them to fail. Knocking was also a characteristic of the 'Perkmandlc' pit elf believed to inhabit the mercury mine at Idrija in Slovenia. Although chiefly a minor nuisance - responsible for stealing tools and extinguishing lamps - Perkmandlc's knocking also indicated the presence of the richest ores or warned of imminent danger.

Most of these demons died out with the closure of mines and their working cultures over the past century or so. Two notable exceptions to this do survive, but in a far more benign form. Sitting quietly and soberly at the heart of the periodic table, cobalt is named for the German household demon *kobold* who would trick miners into believing that his mineral form was copper ore. For cobalt's near neighbour on the table, nickel, Satan himself was deemed responsible for planting *kupfernickel* (Old Nick's Copper) in place of the real thing. Until they were found to have important metallurgical qualities of their own, both substances turned to dross in the crucibles of the copper miners and were thus deemed evidence of evil at large. It is perhaps unsurprising to find that the father of one of the most demon-conscious and devil-afflicted figures of Europe's religious turmoil - Martin Luther - was a master smelter in the copper and silver mines of the Harz mountains.

While most of the northern hemisphere's mine demons have fallen victim to the onset of modernity, if only in the form of proper ventilation and lighting, elsewhere the devil of the mines still reigns supreme. Nowhere more so, perhaps, than in the 500 year old mines at Potosí.

El Tío

To the Quechua people of the high Andes in what is now Bolivia, Potosí means 'the mountain that thunders'. According to legend early attempts by the Inca to extract the extraordinary wealth of the mountain – chiefly silver in ores so rich that veins of the metal itself could be seen on the surface – were met by a thunderous voice that exclaimed, 'This is not for you; God is keeping these riches for those who come from afar' (Galeano, 1973: 21). When the others came from afar – the Spanish conquistadors – they wasted no time in taming the thunderous mountain. Starting in 1545, the Spanish colonial administration presided over the rapid development of the first truly 'global' extractive industry. Long before steam, steel and investment banks Potosí grew in a few short years to become the world's first, largest, and, for a long time, only industrial city. Notorious both for its staggering wealth and its loose morals, Potosí thrived at the heart of an empire of metal, exporting a vast tide of silver to Europe and drawing in mining experts, merchants, smugglers, opportunists and adventurers from all over the world. But whilst many of these people held claims to the mountain's many seams, shafts, drifts and adits, it was the Quechua who actually dug the ore.

Most of the workers used in the mines were recruited through the *míta* system of tribute labour. Not technically slave labour, which was officially outlawed in the Spanish empire, the *míta* required all the villages under Spanish imperial control to provide a proportion of their young men to dig the silver at Potosí. With them they brought their families, their belongings, their livestock and their beliefs. As with all the subject peoples of the Americas the Spanish forcibly Christianised the Quechua. And as with all the other subject people this was only partially successful. For the Quechua, even if the Catholic Church held sway above ground, in the tunnels and galleries below other spirits held sway.

There are various accounts of how *El Tío* – the uncle – came to occupy the Potosí mines. The most common is that he is a manifestation of the ancient Inca and Aymara god of the underworld – *Supay*. *Supay* was not a devil in the Christian sense of the term, but combined with the imported beliefs and fears of Catholicism – particularly during the devil-infested years of the Counter-Reformation during which the mines were opened up – he morphed into *Tío*: a demon particular to the mines. Shaped from the dust and rocks of the mountain itself, *Tío* still presides over the main galleries deep in the mountain – feared and revered in equal measure by the men who give him form. Like the Tommyknockers, *Tío's* role in the mines is not simple. When crossed he is a portent of accident and death. Potosí has been notorious throughout its history as a place of extreme danger and death: so much so that its other epithet is the 'mountain that eats men'. But *Tío* can also bring good fortune. If sufficiently mollified with offerings of tobacco, coca leaves, alcohol, decorative streamers and, once a year, a blood offering in the form of a slaughtered llama, *Tío* protects to the miners. As such he is closer to Trickster than to Satan: capricious, elemental, libidinal, priapic, the ruler of a supernaturally earthly domain. *Tío* is not therefore a hybrid expressing Christian *and* Quechua demonology, but is an altogether older demon holding dominion over those places in the ground beneath, before and beyond the Imperial Catholic landscape. Even long after the fabled wealth of the Potosi mines has passed, *Tío* continues to represent a brutal disjuncture between the cultures of proto-capitalist European colonialism and the indigenous peoples. The licentious *Tío* may carry on the tradition of *Supay*, but he is nevertheless always represented as, 'Bearded like a Spaniard' (Ferry 1999: 152).

Despite the entrenched beliefs of the Potosí miners, and a long-established association between money and the devil, modern, western industry and finance have long dispensed with such figures. Mines have been rendered relatively safe and efficient by technology and, in any case, money is no longer dug from the ground. Now that it is more often conjured from thin air we have convinced

ourselves – paradoxically perhaps - that it is rational, real, and secure. However, as Henri Lefebvre remarked in his essay on the metamorphoses of the devil in the modern world, 'Right up the present day, every era, every people, every class – and every group, every political party – has had its devil, has seen it, conjured it up, made it, lived it, pursued it and immolated it, only to resuscitate it in order to kill it anew' (Lefebvre 1995:58).

Formerly Lehman Brothers

Released in 2010, the child-friendly film *Despicable Me* is a light-hearted musing on the nature of evil and the redemptive power of family. The 'me' in question is the vaguely east-European sounding Gru, who competes with other super villains to commit ever more audacious crimes. His adoption of three children as part of one of his schemes ultimately provides the source of his personal salvation. Prior to that, however, Gru's ultimate goal is to steal the moon with the aid of a shrink ray. As he descends into the underworld 'Bank of Evil' to beg a loan for this latest outrage from the grossly demonic manager, Gru passes beneath a sign over the bank's door. In small letters under the bank's title appear the words, 'Formerly Lehman Brothers'.

Although obviously a rather arch joke in the context of the ongoing crisis of the global banking industry following the turmoil of 2007-8 - of which Lehman's was the most notorious casualty - *Despicable Me* was not alone in reviving the subterranean and demonic aspects of money and banking. Indeed in the years following the crisis the devilish nature of finance fueled a minor publishing boom in a new form of *Teufelbuch*. The global economic chaos, we were told, was attributable to 'Gods that Failed' (Elliot and Atkinson 2008), a 'Spectre at the Feast' (Gamble 2009), the pursuit of 'Fool's Gold' (Tett 2009), in an 'Age of Greed' (Mason 2009) and in which 'All the Devils are Here' (McLean and Nocera 2010).

Although such appeals to the demons of finance may have been primarily a marketing exercise - spicing up some otherwise rather dull books about banking – it also suggests something more important about our relationship with money. What these authors and the makers *Despicable Me* have all tapped into is an enduring suspicion about our relationship with money. This can be seen partly in the efforts we exert to make money look 'real'. Tactile inks, embossed metal foils, architectonic forms and the many other elements used to make our notes and coins hard to counterfeit, also try to convince us that the whole system is not just a fake. Gold and silver coloured coins that contain only base metal. Paper currencies promise to pay the bearer, but can do so only in versions of themselves. But every day we blithely accept that these tokens stand, as Mephistopheles claims in the 'paper money scene' in Goethe's *Faust*: 'für gutes Gold'.

Melanie Jackson's prints – *El Tío* and *Cerro Rico* – draw together the complex strands of metallurgy, demonology and materiality that run through the history of money. Embossed reproductions of silver molecules hover spectrally over the devil and the mountain. Like no other mine before or since, Potosí turned the world upside down in pursuit of the riches of the earth. That brutal inversion – overseen by the leering *Tío* deep in the 'Rich Hill' – brought more than silver into the light. With it came all the absurd ambiguities of modern capital: substanceless value, baseless wealth, endless poverty.

As Goethe was well aware even at the very beginning of the era of modern fiat money, just below the cool, mathematical, machinic veneer of finance lurks something darker and altogether more threatening. It is not just that we all live in fear of our personal financial well-being – measured in credit-scores, price indices and tax returns (or lack of them) – but that our faith in the system as a

whole remains so brittle. And when the evidence of that fragility becomes impossible to ignore – as it did most palpably when the hitherto ‘solid’ Lehman Brothers vanished into thin air in September 2008 – our first port of call is the devil. Just as *Tío* has been an entirely rational and supernatural response to the terrors of the mines at Potosi, so the newly conjured devils of post-modern finance make completely anti-rational sense. Confronted with and threatened by the consequences of our own credulity and greed, like the miners of the Harz and of Potosí we have summoned up some new demons to explain it all away. In the case of Lehman Brothers we may also have killed them anew - a symbolic sacrifice of the ‘Bank of Evil’ – but only far enough to appease the capricious devils of banking and force them back out of sight. We lack the courage to exorcise them completely.

Ferry, SN, 1999, *I am Rich Potosí: The mountain that eats men*, New York, Monacelli Press.

Lefebvre, H, 1995, *Introduction to Modernity*, London, Verso.