

# Written in the STARS

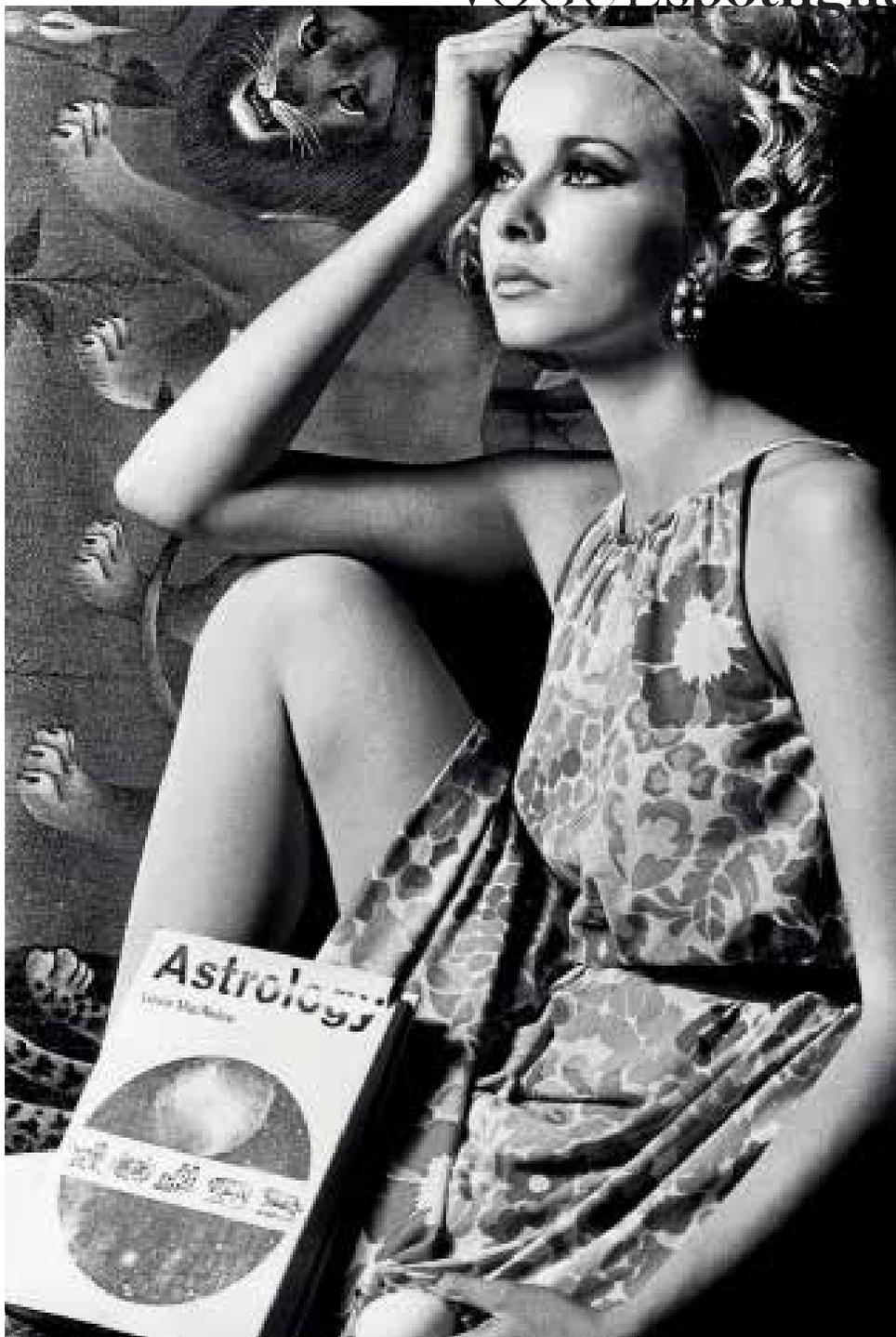
*There's a new constellation of astrology gurus in the ascendancy. Richard Godwin charts their influence*

**Y**ou have to be careful about dropping the A-bomb into conversation. Casually enquire after someone's star sign at a party, or blame a missed email on Mercury in retrograde and you make a dangerous gamble. For some, it will be a bit like announcing you own everything Justin Bieber has ever recorded, or declaring that the earth is flat. The evangelical atheist Richard Dawkins reckons astrologers should be prosecuted. But he would. He's an Aries.

Few would say they believe in astrology, exactly... It's more like a guilty pleasure, an irrationality of choice. Clearly it's ridiculous to contend that an ancient Babylonian interpretation of the movement of the heavens, filtered through a bit of New Age pop psychology, might govern our innermost desires.

Scientists don't take horoscopes in the least bit seriously. But lost souls do, more and more. Astrology is ascendant in a way that may seem surprising in our binary, utilitarian age. Celebrities are extolling the virtues of the stars with increasing abandon. Lena Dunham recently announced: "Yes, you can be a very serious and substantial woman and also allow the planets to rule your soul!" Cara Delevingne (Leo) has a tattoo of a lion on her hand; Rita Ora (Sagittarius) has a bow and arrow behind her ear; Rihanna (Pisces) has

*Left: Cara Delevingne's lion tattoo, inset, denotes her Leo star sign*



two fish on her neck. Yet perhaps this makes sense: famous people often feel at the mercy of forces they can't control.

Meanwhile, a new generation is using the stars to chart their course through an increasingly uncertain world. "It's not a niche market but a cultural movement," according to Aliza Faragher, co-founder of the Los Angeles-based dating app Align, which makes matches according to astrological compatibility. Indeed, from stargazing retreats in Tulum to Gemini hate-memes on Tumblr (many

stemming from the fact that Donald Trump is a Gemini) and the growing trend for biodynamic food "grown and harvested according to the phases of the moon", all things cosmic are being redefined. How else to explain the 6 million visitors to Astrologyzone.com each month, the website of America's most popular astrologer, Susan Miller?

"Astrology is wildly popular with millennials," Ruby Warrington, British journalist and founder of the website The Numinous, tells me on the phone from New York, where she's now based. The site specialises in "modern cosmic thinking". "As our lives become more entwined with technology and >



we outsource the job of knowing ourselves to our apps, devices and machines, a space is being created for a deeper investigation about what it really means to be human," she says. The Numinous offers advice on how to cope with the Mercury retrograde (the thrice-yearly phenomenon where the transit of the messenger planet spells earthbound calamity) alongside articles on jewellery designers and orgasmic meditation workshops. "I see all things numinous as the missing pieces to the wellness craze that's sweeping Britain and the rest of the world," she says. "You can drink green

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juice and do all the yoga you want, but if you're not addressing your emotional and spiritual wellbeing, too, it will have very little lasting impact."

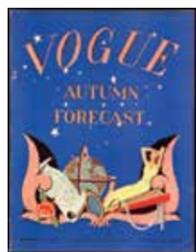
The Numinous marks a shift away from astrology's more naff associations. Now, it speaks to meditation, mindfulness and a wider "consciousness" movement, used less to predict the future and more as a means of understanding those endless subjects of fascination: ourselves.

"Having a birth chart made is personal to you," says London-based Carolyne Faulkner, astrologer for Soho Houses around the globe. "It maps the positions of the sun, moon, planets and other celestial objects when you were born. No one in the world has the same one."

Faulkner is the go-to woman for singers, actors and creative types who regularly fly her around the world to dispense one-to-one cosmic advice. And, as she explains, there's a lot more to it than with newspaper horoscopes – as with molecules (and also Scientology) it all becomes more complicated the more you look. The locations of objects in the cosmos each influence a different aspect of your character. Your sun sign governs your identity, your rising sign is the face you present to the world (and your fashion sense), your moon sign represents your more hidden emotions, and so on.

For some, seeing a high-end astrologer like Faulkner at Soho House is slightly less burdensome than seeing a shrink and often just as beneficial. The practice is also gaining intellectual respectability, claim married astrologers Quinn Cox and Stella Starsky. He is

Above: Capricorn in Vogue's December 2010 "Star Signs" shoot by Tim Gutt, with set design by Shona Heath. Below: American Vogue, August 1931



a puckish Libran, formerly a journalist, she is a sensual Capricorn, formerly a buyer at Dries Van Noten. Together they now run a private cosmic consultancy in Boston for clients including Harvard professors and Wall Street investors. "They're sophisticated, they're unembarrassed and they tend to be ambitious," says Cox.

The pair don't approve of "playing God" and making predictions for people's futures, which they see as exploitative. "We prefer to use it as a tool for greater self-awareness, perhaps in addition to cognitive therapy or meditation," says Starsky.

They developed their "sexy-smart" style by making charts for friends after fashion shows, and went on to publish the cult bestselling book *Sextrology* (truly, an indispensable guide to human weirdness). Their main innovation is to divide the signs into male and female, and in place of the vague language of newspaper horoscopes, they are unnervingly specific, right down to physical details and sexual peccadilloes: Cancer males have womanly hips, Leo women like to go on top, Virgo men

are highly controlling, and so on (it gets filthier). "We maintain that our book can be read cover-to-cover as a story of human nature," says Starsky. "These are characters in a mythical, archetypal story. I think younger generations see that more readily than those into their granny's astrology."

Scientists, of course, consider astrology a pseudoscience, as it begins with a premise and then seeks evidence to back it up, making it susceptible to confirmation bias. We see what we want to see in it. And as even Cox admits: "After every session we look at each other as if to say: 'I have no idea why this works.' I just know that once you buy into the idea of this thing being real, there are rules, everything is interrelated, and it's always right."

But even with my confirmation-bias goggles on, I find it hard to get past the embarrassingly accurate description of me in *Sextrology*. (I'm Cancer male, Aries moon, Virgo rising, since you ask.) My habit of flipping my feet when I wake up in the morning, my loping gait, my pathological need for female approval. "It's you, it's definitely

AUX ZEILINGER, TIM GUTT

you," confirms my Aquarian wife, who otherwise considers astrology the pinnacle of narcissism. And when I supply Starsky and Cox with my full birth chart for a Skype consultation, I do begin to fear drowning in my own watery reflection.

They tell me all sorts of things about myself: how the Mercury-Sun conjunction in my 10th house means writing is the perfect career for me, but that a Saturn-Jupiter opposition in my first house means I am always torn between conforming to the rules and colouring outside the lines. Am I too much or not enough? This is apparently a powerful dynamic for me.

There are things about my mother, too, and teenage depression, and then something "leaps out" at them. "When you were about 19 there's something totally out of left-field that happened that you've never really been able to explain..." says Cox. Erm, maybe the never-to-be-repeated gay relationship I had when I was a student in France? "OK! Well, yes, that figures!" I never tell anyone about this, I say, not because I'm ashamed but because it just seems like it happened to a different person. "You need to embrace it as part of your healing," Starsky tells me. "It's not about the thing itself, sex or anything like that," says Cox. "It's about the part of you that was available to that. It was the 'Who am I?' in that situation."

They advise me to read "Self-Reliance", an 1841 essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and move to LA. I come away feeling dizzy, elated. Perhaps this is what comes with finally being understood! Perhaps I'm giving myself licence to express this now as Starsky says I need to stop retreating into my cerebral comfort zone and start following my instincts! Later, I have a comedown. Doesn't everyone undergo some sort of transition at 19 or 20? Why did I confess that? But wasn't their advice actually quite insightful? Wise even? I'm torn between wanting to confess more and more and feeling that this inward journey is dangerous and solipsistic. My Jupiter-Saturn playing up again.

But as a system of identity, astrology chimes with many modern modes of thinking, bypassing the politics of ethnicity, gender, social class, religion and age. Astrology is also redemptive and non-judgemental, a way of legitimising "your weird". Meanwhile, the fact that science-minded types find it so

appalling makes it all feel quite subversive, in the way of wearing a tutu to a football match. One of my favourite astrologers is Victor Vazquez (aka rapper-artist-novelist Kool AD), whose hip-hop horoscopes for *Paper* magazine are mocking and deadly serious at the same time. "I believe in astrology as much as, like, anything else," he tells me. "I find its sort of outsider status among academics pretty attractive. Mysticism finds its way into everybody's thinking whether we're conscious of it or not."

Astrology's popularity with a generation that has grown up Googling everything makes hella sense, as Kool AD might say. All you need is someone's birthday, and ideally their precise time and place of birth, and you can log on to Alabe.com and call up a sort of Wikipedia page of their soul. "This represents a hugely empowering shift away from the astrologer as a guru figure, placing the answers firmly in the hands of the individual," says Warrington. Our online interactions are mediated by the great gods of

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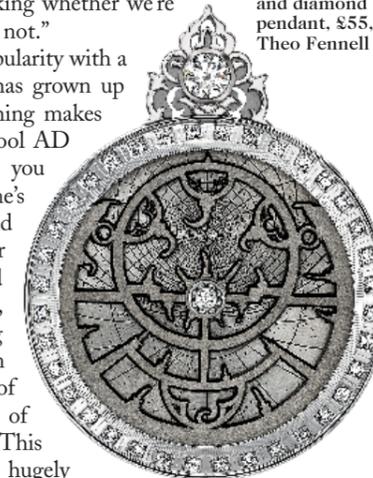
big data in any case, and archetypes aren't so different from algorithms ("If you liked this Taurus, you might also like these Capricorns!"). They're also a lot more, well, human. Why is my boyfriend such a control freak? He's a Virgo. Why is the world



Left: Tim Gutt's portrait of Cancer, Vogue December 2010. Below: Strange Invisible Perfumes in Cancer, £105. Siperfumes.com



Above: gold and diamond pendant, £8,000, Noor Fares, at Dover Street Market. Below: white-gold and diamond pendant, £55,000, Theo Fennell



so messed up at the moment? Mercury is in retrograde.

And without discounting the influence of genetics and culture and education and so on, is it really so implausible that the time of year that you were born has some influence on your character? The moon governs the tides and creates tiny signatures in the form of pearls – moon-like emanations formed by the sea washing over oyster beds. Pretty! Might it not have some tiny effect on our moods, too? But then you reach the limits of the theory. The idea that Pluto, a minuscule rock 4.5 billion miles away, has any effect on our actions is absurd. But, as Albert Camus argued, only by recognising the absurd can you be free.

In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov relates an episode that I have always found instructive. When he was a young boy, his father took him to say how-do-you-do to a famous general. The military man shows him a trick, arranging some matches in the shape of a boat, but then an aide-de-camp interrupts. The Russo-Japanese war has broken out and the general is needed at the front. Nabokov never sees the end of the trick. Many years later, his father is fleeing the Bolsheviks when a peasant approaches him at a railway station and asks for a light. It turns out to be the general in disguise. The meeting itself isn't of much interest to Nabokov. "What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme... The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography."

And of life itself, perhaps? These thematic designs run through all of our lives, irrespective of who or what we think is doing the designing. Consciousness is the gift that allows us to notice these signs and symbols. It is one of our highest callings, therefore, to train our senses and faculties to appreciate them all the more, from the tiniest pearl to the phases of the moon. Jung referred to astrology's "synchronicity principle" – its meaningful coincidence. He did not believe that the planets literally cause us to act in certain ways. But they do provide a set of coordinates that allow us to slip out of the world of emails and alarms and into the realm of myth and poetry. It doesn't have to be empirically true. It doesn't even need to signify anything. Perhaps it just needs to be beautiful. ■