Eleonora Paklons, Kristof Smeyers, Kurt Vanhoutte, Hannah Welslau (eds)

PERFORMING MAGNETISM

The Theatrics of Persuasion in the Long Nineteenth Century

Performing Magnetism
The Theatrics of Persuasion in the Long Nineteenth Century

Performing Magnetism

The Theatrics of Persuasion in the Long Nineteenth Century

Edited by
Eleonora Paklons, Kristof Smeyers, Kurt Vanhoutte,
Hannah Welslau

Leuven University Press

The publication of this book was supported by the University of Antwerp's Department of Literature, Research Centre for Visual Poetics & University Research Fund (BOF), Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), KU Leuven Fund for Fair Open Access, KU Leuven's Research Group Cultural History since 1750, European Research Council (ERC), the Open Book Collective (see www.lup.be/obc), and the Université libre de Bruxelles' Faculté de Lettres, Traduction et Communication.

Published in 2026 by Leuven University Press / Presses Universitaires de Louvain / Universitaire Pers Leuven. Minderbroedersstraat 4, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium).

ISBN 978 94 6270 516 6 (Paperback)
ISBN 978 94 6166 751 9 (ePDF)
ISBN 978 94 6166 752 6 (ePUB)
https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461667526
D/2026/1869/13
NUR: 676, 686

Layout: Crius Group
Cover design: Daniel Benneworth-Gray
Cover illustration: Friedländer Stock Poster, *Zauberkunst* (design F.L. Sonns), 1919. Courtesy of Nikolaas Martens, private collection.

Table of contents

Setting the stage 1
Eleonora Paklons, Kristof Smeyers, Kurt Vanhoutte, and Hannah Welslau

PART 1: POWER & PERSUASION

1. Performing therapeutic magnetism in mid-nineteenth-century Brussels 13
   Kaat Wils
2. Performances and trajectories of magnetism in nineteenth-century Budapest 27
   Kornélia Deres
3. Performing magnetism in mid-nineteenth-century Italy: The 1856 challenge between Francesco Guidi and Antonio Zanardelli 41
   Gennaro Ambrosino
4. Under the sway of performance: The somnambulist stage of Prudence Bernard and Auguste Lassaigne 55
   Kurt Vanhoutte

PART 2: BELIEF & COSMOLOGY

5. Magnetic musings: George Baldwin and the divine traveller in Egypt 71
   Robert Rix
6. Mediums and magnetisers: The entanglement of spiritism and magnetism and its performative and religious effects in nineteenth-century Belgium 85
   Hannah Welslau
7. Magnetism and spiritism in the Ottoman Empire (1850s–1870s) 99
   Özgür Türesay

8. Magnetism, mysticism, and the devil 113
Kristof Smeyers

PART 3: IDENTITY & AFFECT

9. The embodied self: Automatism, power, and gendered autonomy 127
Stéphanie Peel

10. Entertaining, healing, and fighting death: Madame Plainchant's magnetic diary, 1851–1854 141
Thibaut Rioult

11. Performing magnetism in Charles de Villers' Le magnétiseur amoureux (1787) 153
Alessandra Aloisi

PART 4: MEDIA & THE SENSES

12. Music and magnetism from Mesmer to the rise of hypnosis 167
Olivier Verhaegen

13. Under the lantern's spell: The use of the magic lantern within magnetism 181
Eleonora Paklons

14. The magnetic performances of Jules de Rovère: Between automata, prestidigitation, and scientific popularisation 195
Andrea Ceci

PART 5: THEATRICS & THE ARTS

15. "I am going to unwrap the secret of secrets": Performing the trial of mesmeric and spiritualist authorship in Jean Cocteau's Orphée 209
Zoë Ghyselinck

16. Svengali's resurrection: Mesmerism, myth, and performance 221
Miranda Zent

17. Choreographing magnetism: The performance of knowledge in the ethereal field of forces 237
Julia Ostwald

Bibliography 251

Setting the stage

Eleonora Paklons, Kristof Smeyers, Kurt Vanhoutte, and Hannah Welslau

This is how a Belgian newspaper described the effects of a peculiar show in Brussels, in December 1884: "The hall was overflowing. The people who were magnetised by this *fascinateur* offered him a splendid crown and several bouquets of flowers, while a certain M. W. took the opportunity to praise him."[1] A whole century after the formal condemnation of animal magnetism, in 1784, audiences and journalists thronged around celebrity performers like the Belgian magnetiser and hypnotist Donato. To understand animal magnetism's persistent popular appeal in the nineteenth century means to look closely at its performances—to think of magnetism *as* performance.

Animal magnetism was first conceived in the later eighteenth century as a theory of healing, formulated by Doctor Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815)—hence "mesmerism"—and as a therapeutic practice based on the idea that everything in the cosmos was linked by a magnetic fluid. All diseases were supposedly caused by a poor circulation of this fluid. It just needed balance; it required a capable hand. This hand was that of the magnetiser. He projected his fluid over the organism of the subject and thus restored the equilibrium. Subjects were put in a sleep-like state and were said to experience heightened consciousness; they could witness and communicate phenomena that were inaccessible to the ordinary senses. Especially in the nineteenth century, the connection between somnambulism and magnetism, and, later, spiritualism, was romanticised and interpreted as the mysterious workings of a mystical or supernatural force.

By the mid-nineteenth century, magnetisers abounded on every street corner. Illiterate or educated, proletarian or bohemian, believer or sceptic: whoever searched for a magnetiser found one fit for purpose. Some were serious, while others displayed their magnetic practices with an ironic flair. They drew large and truly diverse crowds, in medical

cabinets and hospitals as well as in parlours and on all kinds of stages: from city venues to village halls, domestic spaces and bars, theatres, and even opera halls. As early as 1977, when scholarship on animal magnetism was still developing, Terry Parssinen captured magnetism's shift into the realm of popular pastime in his article "Mesmeric Performers":

> By the 1850s, then, mesmerism [. . .] was transformed from a doctrine which made serious medical and scientific claims into an amusement to be placed in a category with conjuring or fortune-telling, and mesmeric performers were transformed from scientific lecturers and healers into entertainers.[2]

Nine years earlier, in 1968, the renowned British psychical researcher Eric J. Dingwall had published the first volume of *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena* (three more volumes would follow). This work deserves special mention here for several reasons. Not only was its encyclopaedic scope unique, serving both as a historical archive and as a critical synthesis of obscure, dispersed reports. The international perspective of the tetralogy was also broader than anything seen before, encompassing Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Russia. The aim, as Dingwall declared in his introduction to the maiden volume (on France), was "to raise the curtain on the almost unknown and forgotten activities of the mesmerists of the nineteenth century, while concentrating on the paranormal aspects of their work".[3] Each volume compiled a wealth of primary sources, case studies and commentaries on unusual or extreme hypnotic and psychical phenomena reported mainly from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

Historians have since heeded the call for both broader and more granular attention to the role of "the small army of mesmeric performers" (Parssinen) through a plethora of case studies, and broader surveys of "theatres of trance".[4] This historiography has expanded our understanding of animal magnetism as a cultural force, far beyond earlier interest in mesmeric theory and magnetic intellectual controversy. Magnetism was always much more than that. From France, where in 1784 a royal commission declared mesmerism the stuff of "imaginations", it flowed into the rest of the world, refracting and connecting social, political, scientific, and literary issues of the time.[5]

However, no study has yet centred the performative nature of animal

magnetism. This book therefore aims to shift the focus away from magnetic theory and towards magnetic practice in its performative dimensions. Magnetism was shaped entirely by the conditions of its staging. Performance framed both the magnetiser's and the subject's persona. In part, this can be considered a sign of the times. In the nineteenth century, theatricality encompassed stage events but also the social drama of everyday life. In its turn, popular theatre made this drama tangible for audiences: it symbolised societal dynamics, sensationalised knowledge, and popularised science.

A performance perspective, then, draws attention to the players' scripts, their embodied practices, and their self-presentation to different audiences. It also underscores the constitutive role of both the audience and the press in shaping magnetism's theatrics. A magnetiser—usually but not always a man—would induce a state of heightened consciousness in his subject—almost always a woman—in which her gift of self-healing manifested along with her ability to open a portal to an otherwise invisible realm, perceptible only to her. The audience and commentators closely watched the scene unfold, captivated by the magnetiser's claims and the often-ecstatic reactions of the women acting them out. This simple script was performed time and again, and with remarkably little variation, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. And yet, audiences kept coming. This exchange was essential: the transformation had to happen in front of spectators who by their presence and through the act of looking legitimised it. Seeing was believing.[6]

The line between truth and falsehood was pursued but also unsettled by what took place live on stage. A magnetic performance raised questions that were far from trivial. They were epistemological in nature, shaping the very disciplines from which they emerged. Sciences—particularly the medical sciences—faced mounting pressure to professionalise, a process that required drawing firm boundaries between objective truth and subjective impression. Part of this process involved distinguishing reason from occult superstition. But this was no simple task when the senses were being disrupted by spectacles designed first and foremost to evoke awe and wonder.

The many instances of mesmerist performance could not (and cannot?) be completely or conclusively explained by any single framework—whether scientific, religious, psychological, or cultural. In *Mediality on Trial*, Ehler Voss convincingly shows that "(t)rance mediumism is underdetermined

and therefore inherently controversial". Focusing on animal magnetism and the mediumistic controversies of the nineteenth century, Voss writes:

> The trance state is controversial and this controversy must be fought or negotiated, for which many societies have specialists who can guide through the confusion associated with the trance, diagnose the disorders and obsessions and tame or exorcise them, initiate new specialists, and often become controversial themselves.[7]

These processes unfolded not only as doctrinal disputes but first and foremost as performances before audiences, where the visible staging of trance and its contestations gave the controversy its cultural charge.

Performance thrives precisely on the suspension of binary oppositions such as art versus life, acting versus non-acting, and belief versus disbelief. It occupies a liminal space in which meaning is always in motion. Performance not only mediates but also actively contributes to the production and circulation of knowledge within specific historical contexts. It highlights the embodied, material, and energetic dimensions of enactment, which enable knowledge to fluctuate, transform and initiate further change. Magnetic performance is no different. *Performing Magnetism* traces such movement across regions, countries, and continents, and between conceptual categories like science, religion, magic, and spiritualism. What surfaces is a practice that is inherently fluid: in performance, in practice, and in thought. This book aims to open a transnational perspective on the performative flow of ideas and knowledge.

In April 2024, fifteen scholars from a range of disciplines and institutions convened in Antwerp to explore the multifaceted world of magnetism. Far from a conventional academic meeting, this gathering was designed as a collaborative forum, an open space where each participant could speak from their own field of expertise while engaging with a shared perspective: magnetism as a profoundly performative practice. As the project unfolded, more contributors joined the endeavour, expanding our scope and depth. This book is the result of that collective effort. By consistently taking the perspective of performance, cross-connections emerge between different actors, the places in which they operated, and their practices—connections that had previously remained invisible. We hope that charting these connections will inspire new cartographies that

more systematically trace the cross-cultural encounters and mutual influences that shaped magnetism into an impactful current across occulture, art, and science. This book looks at magnetic performance through five thematic lenses.

Magnetism relied on a dynamic of control and surrender, with performances staging the subject as both a conduit of external will and a mirror of collective imagination. The contributions in Part One, "Power and Persuasion", explore how magnetic acts asserted authority not through proof alone, but primarily through affect, spectacle, and suggestion. Kaat Wils's study of lay magnetiser Édouard Montius in mid-nineteenth-century Brussels highlights how therapeutic magnetism relied simultaneously on bodily evidence, public demonstration and narrative trust, revealing an unstable distribution of authority between magnetiser and subject. Kornélia Deres traces the transformation of magnetism in Budapest from medical therapy to spiritualist practice, showing how figures such as Ferenc Szapáry, János Gárdos, and Baroness Adelma Vay mediated knowledge across medical, folk, and occult domains, foregrounding female somnambulists as active agents. In Italy, Gennaro Ambrosino situates Francesco Guidi's 1856 public contest with magician Antonio Zanardelli as a performative spectacle where somnambulism, musical ecstasy, and clairvoyance negotiated the boundaries between science, theatre, and public fascination. Finally, Kurt Vanhoutte examines Prudence Bernard's somnambulist performances across Europe, where dramatic tableaux vivants combined historical, mythical, and physical extremes, purposefully generating ambiguity between authenticity and artifice while engaging audiences in the co-creation of belief. Magnetic authority thus transcended the individual performer; it recalibrated understandings of the material and divine properties of reality. Magnetism served as a medium through which individuals and communities reimagined cosmologies, reinterpreted metaphysical experiences, and articulated new forms of spiritual practice, often challenging established knowledge paradigms in the process.

The chapters in Part Two, "Belief and Cosmology", reveal this role in shaping alternative spiritual epistemologies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, focusing on its intersections with occult currents and accepted faiths. They follow how magnetic and spiritualist ideas reframed questions of faith, agency, and authenticity across a range of cultural and intellectual contexts. Robert Rix's chapter opens the section

with an examination of George Baldwin's late eighteenth-century experiments in Egypt, showing how he transformed mesmerism into a practice of mystical revelation that blended psychological insight, prophetic vision, and poetic creation to reconcile Enlightenment science with spiritual transcendence. Hannah Welslau then explores how nineteenth-century Belgian spiritists intertwined mesmerism and religion, turning healing séances into moral and performative acts of faith in which mediums, spirits, and audiences collectively enacted divine healing. Özgür Türesay's contribution follows magnetism and spiritism as they circulated through Levantine and Armenian networks, where European esotericism was reinterpreted through local scientific and religious frameworks. Finally, Kristof Smeyers examines how nineteenth-century performances of magnetism and mysticism became entangled in the spectacle of the entranced body, tracing how magnetic trances, ecstatic visions and exorcisms blurred boundaries between science, religion, and superstition, fuelling both Catholic fascination and anti-Catholic fears of demonic influence. Together, these chapters demonstrate how magnetism could either challenge or complement established religion, generating new cosmologies that merged scientific inquiry, moral reform, and the search for divine communication.

Magnetic performance steered nineteenth-century conceptions of both external and internal realities. In other words, the performance of magnetism also spoke to processes of profound individual transformation; it was staged on bodies and played out in minds. Tensions between public and private, between persona and personality, run through the contributions in Part Three, "Identity and Affect". Stéphanie Peel opens the section with an analysis of mesmerism and somnambulism as sites where women's bodies, once subject to male authority, also generated new forms of knowledge and agency. She shows how the somnambulist's trance turned passivity into self-expression, transforming gestures and speech into acts of negotiation within structures of power. Thibaut Rioult's chapter reconstructs the practice of an amateur female magnetiser, Madame Plainchant, whose diary reveals magnetism as both social ritual and personal therapy—a means of healing, empowerment, and confronting mortality. Finally, Alessandra Aloisi reads Charles de Villers' late eighteenth-century novel *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* as a literary experiment that turns the rapport between magnetiser and subject into a dynamic exchange between narrator and reader. Together, these chapters

reveal the emotional impetus—and even the emancipatory opportunities—provided by magnetism.

The chapters in Part Four, "Media and the Senses", examine the mediated nature of magnetic performance. They reveal how technological and instrumental innovations supercharged magnetism's sensory appeal—and show how magnetic practice in turn shaped those innovations. Olivier Verhaegen opens the section with an analysis of Franz Anton Mesmer's use of music and the glass harmonica, showing how harmonic vibration functioned as both therapeutic mechanism and metaphor for psychic attunement. Following this acoustic thread into the nineteenth century, he traces how medical and artistic theories of resonance joined in a shared language of sympathy and vibration. Eleonora Paklons then turns to the visual dimension, examining Jean-Martin Charcot's uses of the magic lantern in his medical performances at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, where light became an instrument of hypnosis—therapeutic, spectacular, and metaphorical at once. Andrea Ceci concludes the section with a study of illusionist Jules de Rovère, whose hybrid performances fused mesmerism, automata, and stage magic to explore the boundaries between mechanism and life. Collectively, these chapters reframe magnetism as a media history of sensation, showing how its theories of invisible influence depended on instruments that extended and disciplined the senses.

This dynamic, of magnetism emerging from the porous boundaries of technology, science and religion as well as flowing back into them, is perhaps most visible in the arts. The chapters in Part Five, "Theatrics and the Arts", show how "magnetic presence" entered twentieth-century art as a mythic force, blending spectacle, ritual, and transformation into emotionally charged acts. Zoë Ghyselinck's chapter opens the section with an examination of Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1926) as a meta-theatrical exploration of mediumship and authorship, in which actors, characters and audiences together re-enact the "trial" of creation under the influence of invisible forces. Through the play's merging of technological and ritual motifs, Ghyselinck situates Cocteau within a longer genealogy of mesmeric and spiritualist theatre that blurred the line between illusion and revelation. Miranda Zent turns to George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), reframing the hypnotist Svengali not as a sinister manipulator but as a paradoxical figure of artistic devotion and healing. Drawing on mesmerism and performance theory, she reinterprets Svengali as a mythic teacher whose

power transforms suffering into creative transcendence. Julia Ostwald concludes the section with a study of early twentieth-century "dream dances" by Magdeleine Guipet, situating her hypnotic performances within scientific, aesthetic, and gendered discourses that linked automatism with artistic inspiration. By placing Guipet alongside Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan, Ostwald shows how electricity, ether and movement redefined expressivity and agency on the modern stage. Thus, this section shows how in literature, theatre, dance, and film, magnetism contributed to a broader revitalisation of occult energies within modern creativity and the art-making process itself: part training, part trance.

Together, the contributions in this book converge on the charismatic appeal of the performer, and in today's celebrity culture we still recognise its charge: star quality, ambition, talent, self-stylisation—and sheer, electrifying presence. This enduring fascination reveals how the figure of the magnetic performer continues to embody a complex interplay between individuality and spectacle, and between authenticity and illusion. Ultimately, what was once the aura of theatrical genius now circulates through the channels of contemporary media and popular culture, reminding us that charisma remains not only one of performance's most powerful forces, but also one of its most enduring enigmas.

Notes

1 'Donato', *Het Handelsblad*, 12 December 1884, 3. For more on the performer, see: Kaat Wils, "Tussen wetenschap en spektakel: hypnose of the Belgische theaterscène, 1875–1900", *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 20, no. 2 (2017): 54–73.

2 Terry M. Parssinen, "Mesmeric Performers", *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 1 (1977): 104.

3 Eric Dingwall, *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena: A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Cases*. Vol. 1. (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1967), v. Other volumes in this series are Volume 2 *Hypnotism in Belgium, Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavia*; Volume 3 *Hypnotism in Russia and Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Latin America*; Volume 4 *Hypnotism in the U.S.A. and Great Britain*.

4 Ibid.: 88. Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists, and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland, 2009).

5 For example: Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Harvard University Press, 1968); Maria Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Jacqueline Carroy, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie. L'invention de sujets* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1991); Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France* (1785–1914) (Albin Michel, 1995); Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité. 1: Le défi du magnétisme animal*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond (Le Plessis Robinson: Institut Synthélabo, 1999); Alison Winter, *Mesmerized. Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press,

2000); Emily Ogden, *Credulity: a Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); David Armando et al., *Animal Magnetism in Motion. Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848* (Schwabe Verlag, 2025).

6 Iwan Morus, "Seeing and Believing Science", *Isis* 97 (2006): 101–110.

7 Ehler Voss, *Mediality on Trial: Testing and Contesting Trance and Other Media Techniques* (De Gruyter, 2020), 7.

PART 1

POWER & PERSUASION

CHAPTER 1

Performing therapeutic magnetism in mid-nineteenth-century Brussels

Kaat Wils

On Tuesday, 8 June 1841, Petronille Friens, a thirty-year-old Dutch waitress, was found on the streets of Brussels suffering from a cataleptic attack. She was taken to the Saint Pierre's hospital, the town's main hospital, associated with the university. The following day, the hospital called upon Edouard Montius, a magnetiser of some renown who ran a private clinic in the *Rue de l'Arbre*, located at a ten-minute walk from the hospital. Montius started his therapy by performing magnetic passes with his hands alongside Petronille's body, which resulted in some temporary relaxation of her muscles. The next day, he induced a state of somnambulism in the patient, which allowed him to discuss her medical condition with her. Petronille was able to answer the magnetiser's questions on the origin of her disease, the required treatment, and the prospects of recovery. Twelve years earlier, a carnival spectacle had terribly frightened her and had resulted in a first attack. Since then, she had suffered regularly from catalepsy, a condition characterised by an altered state of consciousness and rigidity of the body. If she could be magnetised twice a day, full recovery would arrive in six weeks, she explained to Montius.

In the five weeks that followed—recovery occurred a week earlier than predicted—Petronille Friens became an object of public interest and medical experimentation. Montius' daily sessions during which he put his patient in a state of catalepsy attracted an audience of hospital doctors, in-service medical students, members of the board of the Brussels hospitals, journalists, and members of the town council. They came to witness the woman's ecstasies and her moments of "therapeutic lucidity", during which she gave instructions on the medication she needed and where to find it in the hospital pharmacy. Several doctors also participated in experiments that explored the trance state of the magnetic subject. They examined Petronille's "insensibility" (the

absence of physical sensation) by applying burns and putting needles on her arm. Her state of clairvoyance was tested by giving her small assignments, such as identifying the coins a member of the audience was hiding behind his back.

The case of Petronille aroused an unusual amount of interest among the hospital's medical staff, which probably explains why Montius devoted a ten-page report to the case. Even when lay magnetisers and doctors collaborated, as in this case, power relationships were unequal and authority was contested.

In his paper, Montius expressed his gratitude towards the director and two head physicians of the hospital who, "without much faith in magnetism" had enabled the full treatment and the experiments, "in the interest of science."[1] In the decade that followed Montius' experience in the hospital, he would be sued several times on charges of both the illegal practice of medicine and fraud. Nevertheless, calling upon a magnetiser to assist in a medical treatment and experimenting together on (poor and mainly female) patients was not uncommon in mid-nineteenth-century hospitals. Such practices have, however, hardly been documented, except for a few famous cases, among which a series of experiments by the French magnetiser Charles du Potet and Doctor John Elliotson in London's University College Hospital.[2]

Montius' report is quite unique in offering a lay magnetiser's perspective on magnetic treatment in a hospital context. It provides, at the same time, a good window into the broader phenomenon of mid-nineteenth-century animal magnetism and the contexts in which it functioned. The narrative indeed reveals some key tensions that characterised animal magnetism around 1840. The therapeutic use of magnetism was, in the first place, never completely separated from experiment on the one hand, and spectacle on the other hand. Second, this entanglement also impacted the status of the patient. The role and the perspective of a patient was a critical component of a magnetic cure, but the patient's status could nevertheless vary between that of a mere object of experimentation and that of a revered subject to whom prophetic qualities were attributed.

Both in strictly therapeutic and more recreational, theatrical contexts, magnetism involved a performance between a magnetiser and a subject. In the theatrical setting, this performance often occurred before a large live audience and, at times, received press coverage, while in the more

therapeutic context, it involved a smaller audience of witnesses or readers of written medical case studies. In the following pages, I explore the performative nature of these magnetic practices, focussing on the vibrant magnetic scene in Brussels around 1840. This scene maintained close ties with developments in France, as well as in the Netherlands, England, and Germany.[3] My account focuses on several key figures, including Montius and two doctor-magnetisers who together ran a private practice in the Brussels suburb of Schaerbeek. Central to this analysis are their relationships with their subjects and patients, as well as the role played by witnesses in these performances.

Magnetism as spectacle

For lay magnetisers such as Montius, practising therapeutic magnetism was intertwined with experimentation and public demonstration, a feature that also accounts for their visibility. In doing so, they aligned with the wave of spectacular magnetism that characterised French and (French-inspired) British animal magnetism of the 1840s. Jacqueline Carroy has explained this "public turn" as a response to the negative judgments by the French Academy of Medicine, which in 1837 proclaimed the non-existence of magnetic phenomena and prohibited in 1840 any future re-evaluation of the question. As hopes of an alliance between academic medicine and animal magnetism seemed definitively gone, magnetisers chose a different pathway, looking for public rather than academic recognition. In doing so, they responded in a new, spectacular way to a tension that had characterised animal magnetism since Mesmer.[4]

A public demonstration in magnetism typically started with bringing a subject into a trance-like state of somnambulism. With experienced subjects, a gaze of the magnetiser sufficed to procure this effect. With less experienced subjects—or new patients—the magnetiser combined the technique of "fixing the gaze" with the use of magnetic passes. A standard technique was to make downward stroking movements starting from the head or the shoulders. Popular French manuals like Joseph Deleuze's *Instruction pratique sur le magnétisme animal* (1825, with a Belgian edition in 1836), explained in great detail how to proceed. Individual magnetisers probably developed their own techniques and

routines, and learning by observing and collaborating may have been more important than reading lengthy books. Demonstrations often comprised tests that had to prove the subject's insensibility or absence of sensations. Needles were inserted into the body, pistols shot next to the ear, fingers were held in the flame of a candle or—as in some of Montius' demonstrations—electric shocks were delivered, all without causing sensations. Next, instances of so-called "transposition of the senses" could be displayed, whereby the action of sense organs was displaced to other parts of the body. Somnambulism for instance often implied a loss of vision, but this could be compensated for by the development of "stomach-seeing". During the demonstration, the blindfolded subject was expected to read a text, to tell the position of the hands of a watch, or to recognise playing cards that were laid on the stomach. More experienced somnambulists were able to perceive through curtains or walls.

We know very little about the somnambulists with whom magnetisers worked in their public demonstrations. At least two of Montius' somnambulists were former patients whom he had cured of migraine and a paralysed arm, respectively.[5] Professional somnambulists were most often women, who were said to be more prone to the influence of both the magnetiser and the magnetic fluid, due to their allegedly more sensitive nervous constitution. This also explains why chronic nervous patients and in particular hysterics were considered ideal somnambulists. Most often, these women were recruited from lower social classes and their involvement in magnetic demonstrations implied a form of social ascension. For a specific case in France, as Jacqueline Carroy has shown, they could also be recruited to act as a consultant for wealthier patients throughout the trajectory of a magnetic treatment.[6] Most female somnambulists who worked in Brussels around 1840 remained anonymous, however. If a name was used, it was only a first name, possibly a stage name.[7] In both cases, this practice highlighted the gendered power difference with the male magnetiser, who used his surname. We know from the work of Nicole Edelman that in France, since the early nineteenth century, some women also operated independently as clairvoyants or magnetic healers.[8] This certainly also happened in Belgium. The courses in magnetism that Montius offered—a series of twenty-five lessons containing history, theory and practice—were explicitly aimed at men and women.[9] In the second half of the

1840s, a female somnambulist, known by her last name Geens, practiced as a healer in Antwerp.[10]

Women did not have a monopoly on somnambulism. France's most famous travelling somnambulist of the mid-nineteenth century, Alexis Didier, was a man who performed under the direction of a male magnetiser. Most magnetisers, however, preferred to work with women, probably also to add to the attractiveness of the demonstration and to anticipate the paying audience's expectations. Textbooks like Deleuze's were nevertheless very explicit on the need to avoid "anything that might offend the most scrupulous modesty, or cause the slightest embarrassment and even anything that might seem inconvenient to the spectators".[11] From the onset, animal magnetism had been faced with suspicions of sexually transgressive behaviour between male magnetisers and female subjects. Even though magnetisers emphasised the seriousness and the scientific character of their activities, their performances constituted a constant balancing act between scientific experiment, patient recruitment and entertainment, with often very little regard for the perspective and full consent of the subject. The boundaries with spectacular magic shows that confounded the senses, featuring for instance ventriloquism, optical illusions, "second sight", galvanism, or laughing gas must sometimes have been thin.[12]

Magnetisers were outspoken in their ambition to distinguish themselves from entertainers or "charlatans". Montius for instance explicitly instructed his audience to observe "calmly, without enthusiasm", thereby suggesting that a magnetic demonstration had more in common with a scientific lecture than with a theatrical performance.[13] Magnetisers always hoped to attract scientists, doctors, teachers, and whoever else embodied respectability. They did not fail to proudly mention the presence or interest of well-known persons, in particular in the context of small-scale, closed experimental séances. The presence of persons with some notoriety was, in the first place, important with a view to gaining respectability and to defend oneself against accusations of abusing the public's curiosity. Attracting persons with some scholarly credentials was, secondly, a matter of gathering witnesses willing to confirm the veracity of the observed facts (Fig. 1.1).

Figure 1.1: ‘Le Docteur Durand (de gros) fait des expériences d’hypnotisme au cercle de la presse scientifique’, Louis Figuier, *Les mystères de la science*, Paris: Librairie Illustrée, (1880?). Wellcome Collection.

While it was quite common among magnetisers to name in their publications persons who had witnessed a demonstration or part of a therapy, composing an official report on specific experiences signed by all attendees was rarer. In June 1836, Marcellin Jobard, an important support figure in the Brussels network of magnetisers, published in *Le Courrier Belge* an official report of a séance with Montius and a female

somnambulist, signed by all eighteen attendees. Alongside army officers, civil servants, an industrialist, a merchant, a landowner, and an artist, the physician Louis Varlez, Brussels' first practitioner of homeopathy, and Heinrich Ahrens, professor of philosophy at the recently founded university of Brussels, were among the signatories.[14] The initiative may have been inspired by the ongoing debates at the French Academy of Medicine, where magnetisers were invited to give demonstrations and where observations were written down in reports.

The French example revealed, however, how difficult it was to determine the nature of a magnetic "fact" and to agree upon the conditions that were needed to establish such a fact. While the notion of a magnetic experiment referred to procedures used in the natural sciences, the discussions revealed that these rules were not simply applicable to animal magnetism, as the individual characteristics of both the subject and the magnetiser and their mutual relation did seem to play a role. Experiments in animal magnetism were not easily reproducible. For instance, in the prospectus of his *établissement magnétique*, Montius tried to avoid potential disappointment in this respect. "Somnambulists are no machines", he warned his audience. Somnambulists' lucidity could vary over time or sometimes even be lost forever, he added.[15] Moreover, suspicions of potential simulation and fraud were always lingering. In the French context, reports by "believers" gave rise to counter-reports by "non-believers", resulting in what Jacqueline Carroy has called endless "*querelles de signatures*", signature disputes.[16] In his work on seventeenth century natural philosophy, historian of science Steven Shapin has drawn attention to the important role of trust and credibility in the production of scientific knowledge. While the specific culture that Shapin analysed was one of face-to-face familiarity and gentlemanly virtue typical of seventeenth-century Britain, trust and individual scientists' virtuousness and credibility have continued to play an important role in assessing scientific claims, even though academic institutions have since then partially taken over the role of warranting truth.[17] The importance that magnetisers attached to testimonies by respected persons shows that they were aware of the role of credibility in their search to have their claims accepted. In doing so, they also echoed the specific practice of composing evidentiary protocols that characterised eighteenth century natural philosophy and its public performances of electricity and magnetism.[18] The need they felt to resort

to such practices half a century later, maybe also revealed a certain awareness of the absence of scholarly trust beyond their own network. This however did not seem to stand in the way of their successes as public demonstrators and healers.

The performance of healing

Most magnetisers indeed combined demonstration with therapy. Montius for instance offered four weekly evenings of public demonstrations, but "private sessions" could be asked for as well, both at night and during the day. In his *établissement,* guestrooms were available for patients who came from the countryside or wanted to be treated incognito. Montius operated with the help of his assistant (*aide-magnétiseur)* and somnambulists who diagnosed patients and suggested remedies. While he was careful not to present himself as a doctor nor to use the words "clinic" or "dispensary", he nevertheless replicated certain practices that were common among doctors, such as offering free consultations for poor patients.[19] This commitment to the poor also fitted a broader humanitarian credo that was central to most magnetisers' self-representation. Together with the often-repeated statement that magnetisers cared for patients who had been "abandoned" by regular medicine, this discourse could also serve to distinguish magnetisers from doctors, who were, so it was suggested, less ready to "sacrifice" themselves for the "holy work of utility".[20]

Like many lay magnetisers who ran the risk of being prosecuted for the illegal practice of medicine, Montius did not offer extensive insight into his own therapeutic practices in his publications, unless, as in the Petronille Friens case, he had worked under the supervision of doctors. The few cures he referred to were treatments of what we would call today neurological disorders, such as migraine, neuralgia, and epilepsy, alongside such cases as high persistent fever in a child, a badly healing wound, and mutism.[21] Patients were both men and women, adults and children. We know little about their social background—Mr Van Zeebrouck, a warden of the royal palace suffering from epilepsy, being the only publicly identified patient alongside Friens.[22] Montius' treatment started most often with fixing the gaze of the patient while taking his or her hand. This was usually followed by applying stroking movements to

bring the patient into a state of somnambulism, although treatments without the patients falling into a sleeplike state were possible as well (Fig. 1.2). Once the state of somnambulism was reached (which sometimes took several preparatory sessions), the same movements would be applied to the diseased part of the body. More often than in public demonstrations, "magnetic frictions", passes that touched the skin of the patient, were used.

Figure 1.2: 'Les differents procédés des magnétisation', Louis Figuier, *Les mystères de la science*, Paris: Librairie Illustrée, (1880?). Wellcome Collection.

While most of these practices could be situated in the therapeutic tradition of the Marquis the Puységur and Deleuze, based on an individual relationship between magnetiser and/or somnambulist and a sick person, Montius also offered group sessions where a chain of patients was attached to an electric device on one side and a somnambulist on the other. In its collective approach, this practice was akin to Mesmer's group treatments where patients held metal rods that connected them to each other and to the *baquet*, the tub around which they sat. The practice was also a form of electrotherapy, a popular technique to treat diverse medical problems. Theories on electricity and its healing effect had inspired Mesmer in the development of his theory of animal magnetism. Unlike later interpretations of therapeutic magnetism, Mesmer had shared electrotherapy's assumption that convulsive reactions ("crises", as Mesmer called them) were a crucial element in the process of healing. Like animal magnetism, and sometimes combined with it, electrotherapy remained in the early and mid-nineteenth century at the margins of orthodox medicine, occupying a space between scientific experiment, entertainment and medical treatment. Montius was certainly not an exception in combining elements from both traditions.[23]

While Montius only occasionally shared insights on his healing practices, two Brussels doctors, D. Cremmens and A. Tarte, were much more elaborate. Their short-lived 1841–1842 periodical mainly consisted of twenty-two case studies of their own patients. A diagnosis in terms of physical ailments was one of the features that all the case studies shared. All twenty-two patients—six men and sixteen women between the ages of three and sixty-five—suffered from physical pain or at least physical disturbances. Diagnoses were based on the account of the patient, who often had consulted one or more doctors, and on a physical examination. The illnesses ranged from angina and lung problems to leukoma (an eye disease), chronic headaches, stomach aches and constipation, migraines, rheumatism, epilepsy, and hysteria with cataleptic attacks. This diversity of disorders, with a prominent position of chronic ailments and neurological problems, corresponded to the broad range of problems for which textbooks such as Deleuze's *Instruction pratique* prescribed magnetic treatment.

Magnetisers who published about their work shared a tendency to write expansive case histories. The length of these texts reflected the intensity of their treatments, which often consisted of a daily session of about an hour for several weeks or months. The detailed character of

such accounts and the regular references to the presence of witnesses also testifies to their authors' ambition to gain credibility within the medical community. When treating a fourteen-year-old girl suffering from cataleptic hysteria, Cremmens, for instance, had invited several doctors. Although most were initially sceptical, they ultimately had to acknowledge the accuracy of her medical predictions, according to Cremmens: "The treatment, which was entirely directed by her, led, after a few months, to a radical cure of an illness against which all the resources of ordinary medicine are often powerless."[24]

Case narratives do reveal the central role patients played in a magnetic therapeutic relationship. This was most obvious in those instances where the patient reached a state of clairvoyance and predicted the further course of the therapeutic trajectory. Magnetisers did not comment on these predictions; rather they presented them as implicit proof of the success of their own therapeutic approach. In other case narratives, also, when no clairvoyance was at stake, the patient occupied a prominent position as a person, especially in his relationship with the magnetiser. In the magnetic tradition since Puységur, the so-called "rapport", the special relationship of understanding between magnetiser and subject was crucial. Cremmens' and Tarte's case studies testify indeed to the importance of both the magnetiser's and the patient's mental involvement in the healing process. While the role of the magnetiser's "firm intention", his strong will, and his faith in his skills was regularly stressed, attention was also paid to the time needed to establish a mutual rapport, and to the positive role of the patient's faith in magnetism and in the magnetiser. In one of the case studies in Cremmens' and Tarte's periodical, authored by the French doctor Alphonse Teste, the role of the patient's confidence was made explicit in the following way:

> He believed in magnetism before engaging in it, and the confidence he had in such a powerful agent naturally increased the confidence I had the good fortune to inspire in him. I mention these circumstances because I am certain that they contributed to his recovery. Sometimes it seems that the hope of success is literally a step taken to achieve it.[25]

Approaches like these announced the kind of therapeutic relationship that would become common place in psychotherapy from the turn of the century onwards. It is likely not coincidental that Montius, whose

income depended on public performances, emphasised his success as a healer even when the patient was a "disbeliever".[26] In his case, the act of healing appeared to rely primarily on his renowned technique of swiftly and efficiently inducing a sleep-like state of consciousness in the subject, rather than on cultivating mutual trust.

Conclusion

Magnetism, as it flourished in mid-nineteenth-century Brussels, was primarily a bodily performance, with the relationship between a magnetiser and their subject being central. In public, theatrical settings, this relationship was one of often strongly gendered dominance, playing on existing expectations of the audience. The boundaries with magician shows were thin. Magnetisers tried to guard these boundaries by emphasising the scientific nature of their practices. To this end, they also organised more private, experimental performances in which the exceptional power attributed to magnetism and magnetisers became visible in the subject's body. Here, the emphasis was on gaining legitimacy through the presence of credible witnesses, which was then reported upon in the press.

In specifically therapeutic settings, physician-magnetisers also called upon other physicians as witnesses, hoping to have the medical efficacy of magnetism recognised. Detailed written case studies were also intended to serve this purpose, as a public disclosure of the performance in private circles. While in entertaining contexts the relationship between magnetiser and subject seemed one-dimensional and authoritarian, in a therapeutic context, a strong agency of the patient could unfold, and attention was also given to the healing role of trust. Performing magnetism could, in other words, involve quite different types of interactions.

Notes

1 Edouard Montius, "Expériences de magnétisme-animal sur une femme cataleptique, faites à l'hôpital St-Pierre, de Bruxelles", in Edouard Montius, *Faits curieux et intéressants produits par la puissance du magnétisme animal ou comptes rendus des expériences remarquables opérées en Belgique* (Brussels, 1842), 162–173. All translations from French sources are the author's. The case left no traces in the hospital records, except for Petronille's admission (Brussels, Social Services

Archives, Conseil Général d'Administration des Hospices et Secours de Bruxelles, nr. 1030: Indicateur, 9 June 1841).

2 Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 64–108.

3 Kaat Wils, "Transnational Encounters in the History of Animal Magnetism in Belgium, 1830–1848", in *Le magnétisme animal en mouvement. Reconfigurations et circulations, 1776–1848/Animal Magnetism in Motion. Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848*, eds David Armando, Bruno Belhoste, Jean-Luc Chappey, and Claire Gantet, (Schwabe Verlag, 2025), 231–247.

4 Jacqueline Carroy, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie. L'invention de sujets* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 48–49.

5 Marcellin Jobard, "Magnétisme. Conversion de M. Dumortier. Feuilleton du *Courrier belge*. Numéro du 22 Juin 1838", in Montius, *Faits curieux*, 76–87; Montius, "Faits divers", in *Faits curieux*, 153.

6 Jacqueline Carroy, "Votre toute dévouée et reconnaissante cataleptique", *Revue d'Histoire du XIXe Siècle* 38 (2009): 99.

7 See e.g. on the somnambule Félicie: Firmin Lebrun, "Magnétisme-animal. Extrait du *Réformateur Médical*, numéro du 26 Juin 1835", in Montius, Faits curieux, 37–42.

8 Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses, visionnaires en France, 1785–1913* (Albin Michel, 1995), 39–51.

9 Edouard Montius, *Cours théorique et pratique de magnétisme animal pour les gens du monde et les étudiants* (Bruxelles, n.d.); "Cours théorique et pratique de magnétisme animal, pour les gens du monde et les étudiants, par E. Montius", *L'Indépendance*, 9 July 1841.

10 "Chronique judiciaire", *Journal de Bruxelles*, 25 October 1848.

11 J.P.F. Deleuse [sic], *Instruction pratique sur le magnétisme animal, augmentée d'un chapitre du docteur L. Rostan* (London/Brussels/Paris, 1836), 215.

12 See e.g. "Expériences de seconde vue naturelle", *L'Indépendance Belge*, 9 April 1848, in which the experiments were advertised as "free from the discomfort and contortions of sleepwalking", hinting at a competition with shows of magnetism. On the Belgian magician Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, who performed mostly in Paris, see: Sophie Lachapelle, *Conjuring Science. A History of Scientific Entertainment and Stage Magic in Modern France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 18–19; see, on the 1850s, Kurt Vanhoutte and Nele Wynants, "Magie en wetenschap in de spektakelcultuur van de negentiende eeuw: Henri Robin in de Lage Landen", *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 15, no. 2 (2017): 30–53.

13 Montius, *Cours*, 14.

14 Marcellin Jobard, "Magnétisme. Feuilleton du *Courrier belge*, Observateur, numéro du 23 Juin 1836", in Montius, *Faits curieux*, 90–99.

15 Edouard Montius, "Etablissement magnétique. Bruxelles, rue de l'Arbre 4, en face de la rue de Coppens, près le petit-Sablon, fondé par E. Montius. Prospectus", in Montius, *Faits curieux*, 14.

16 Carroy, *Hypnose*, 132.

17 Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3–41, 409–417.

18 On this specific link, see Jan Goldstein, *Hysteria Complicated by Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 59–62.

19 Montius, "Établissement"; "Magnétisme et somnambulisme: experiences faites sur divers somnambules", *La Nation*, 9 September 1848 (an advertisement which was published almost daily in the subsequent months).

20 Victor Idjiez, *Dissertation historique et scientifique sur la Trinité Egyptienne, précédée d'un coup-d'oeil historique sur l'histoire, de documents pour servir à l'historique du magnétisme animal et d'un essai de bibliographie magnétique* (Brussels, 1844), 114; Montius, *Faits curieux*, 10 (quotations).

21 On the specific interest among early nineteenth-century magnetisers in the treatment of deaf-mutism, see Andrea Ceci, "Deaf-Mutism and Savagery Through the Lens of Animal Magnetism in France During the Early Nineteenth-Century", *Cromohs - Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 22 (2019): 61–75, https://doi.org/10.13128/cromohs-11704.

22 "Le magnétisme animal reconnu comme agent thérapeutique, par jugement du tribunal correctionnel de Bruxelles, du 26 mars 1842. *Le Courrier belge*, 27 et 28 mars 1842", in Montius, *Faits curieux*, 137.

23 L. Langlois, "Variétés. Extrait du *Magnétophile*, numéro du 6 janvier 1842", in Montius, *Faits curieux*, 110–112. On eighteenth century electrotherapy and its relationship with mesmerism, see e.g. Paola Bertucci, "Therapeutic Attractions: Early Applications of Electricity to the Art of Healing", in *Brain, Mind and Medicine: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Neuroscience*, eds Harry Whitaker, C. U. M. Smith and Stanley Finger (Springer, 2007), 271–284; Geoffrey Sutton, "Electric Medicine and Mesmerism", *Isis* 72, no. 3 (1981): 375–92.

24 D. Cremmens, "Observation. II. Hystérie avec catalepsie", *Le Propagateur du Magnétisme Animal* (1841–1842): 44.

25 Dr Teste, "Observation. XVII. Surdité chronique guérie en deux mois", *Le Propagateur du Magnétisme Animal* (1841–1842): 210.

26 Montius, *Faits curieux*, 158.

CHAPTER 2

Performances and trajectories of magnetism in nineteenth-century Budapest

Kornélia Deres[1]

In March 1880, the Danish occultist and magnetiser Carl William Hansen was banned from performing on the public stages of Budapest. The reason was a prior scandal at Vienna's Ringtheater, which included the public debunking of the performer by female somnambulists and an outraged audience.[2] Despite this, Hansen continued his Eastern European tour and chose to present his shows in front of private audiences of the Hungarian capital of Austria-Hungary.[3] Contemporary newspapers published detailed and illustrated reports on how Hansen made magnetised audience members do extraordinary acts such as eating raw potatoes, not feeling needle pricks, or becoming strong enough to let Hansen step on their body parts extended into the air.[4]

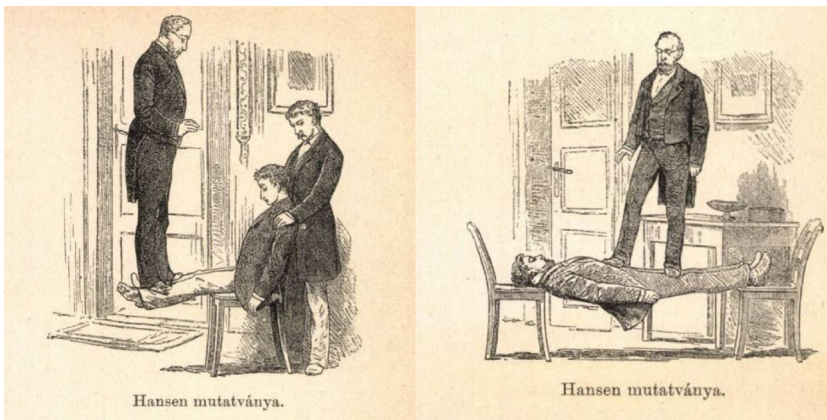


Figure 2.1: Illustrations of Hansen's private magnetic performance in Budapest in Vasárnapi Ujság, 1880. Courtesy of the National Széchényi Library.

In addition, Hansen's scandalous visit was used by the Hungarian press to recall the historical beginnings of animal magnetism in the country. A lengthy article was published to remind audiences of the so-called "Hungarian Hansen" of the 1840s.[5] His name was Ferenc Szapáry (1804–1875). As a count, Szapáry was not only the first publicly known Hungarian magnetiser, but he also contributed to the circulation and institutionalisation of knowledge on magnetism across Eastern and Western Europe between the 1830s and 1860s. He published books in German and French on the theories and methods of magnetism, performed and taught magnetism as a healing practice and initiated magnetic hospitals in various European cities. The current chapter takes Szapáry's practice as a starting point to examine the trajectories of magnetism in Budapest between the 1840s and 1870s. Focusing on the performative strategies of magnetism, the aim is to map interconnected knowledge actors (Lenhossék, Szapáry, Gárdos, and Vay) and genres (medical therapy, spectacular entertainment, and séances). Through this, the chapter demonstrates the transformation of magnetism in nineteenth-century Pest-Buda / Budapest from a medical to a spiritist practice.

Hungarian knowledge actors of magnetism

As historians of knowledge Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad underline, a knowledge actor can be seen as a mediator who actively contributes to the production and movement of knowledge through various acts in a particular historical environment.[6] This definition calls attention to the performative layers of knowledge circulation. As a form of enactment, performativity highlights the material, embodied, and energetic aspects of events, and causes a fluctuation of transformation and shift.[7] In this context, knowledge should always be enacted to travel and circulate among various participants, and exactly through this enactment can knowledge transform and initiate further changes.

In the 1810s, early Hungarian publications on animal magnetism, especially detailed case studies, highlighted the inherent performative dimensions of magnetism.[8] A successful cure included the active participation of various bodies, often physical touches, an accurate physical and mental state of the magnetiser, and circulating energies between the patient and magnetiser.[9] In addition, animal magnetism was seen as

a natural phenomenon which could be used not only to cure human bodies but also to transform the physical limits of these bodies.[10] The case descriptions frequently included accounts of individuals experiencing convulsions, inexplicable loss of consciousness, the acquisition of the ability to see the interior of their own bodies, a perception of the external environment through the ears of another person, and a strong connection to the presence of the magnetiser.[11] The popularity of magnetic healing in Budapest increased throughout the nineteenth century, facilitated by the endorsement of various institutions and the influence of socially acknowledged knowledge actors.

The most important early representative was Mihály Ignác Lenhossék (1773–1840), who was a university professor and the chief medical officer for Hungary. He also played a pivotal role in introducing the smallpox vaccine in the country.[12] In 1817, Lenhossék published an analysis on the benefits of animal magnetism in medical care.[13] Besides confirming the status of magnetism as a scientifically proven medical treatment, his article contributed to the circulation of knowledge. As historian of psychology Júlia Gyimesi highlighted, although Lenhossék was persuaded of the extended benefits of magnetism in the treatment of nervous disorders, he was also conscious of the limited capacity of magnetism to cure physical problems.[14] Lenhossék became an important early knowledge actor as he also gave regular courses on animal magnetism, focusing on the interconnection of theory and practice. One of his students was Ferenc Szapáry, who not only became the best-known Hungarian magnetiser of the following decades but also amalgamated animal magnetism and folk healing techniques.

Szapáry can also be seen as a transcultural agent of institutionalisation, as he opened private magnetic clinics in cities like Dresden, Pest-Buda, and Paris. Generating and circulating both theoretical and practical knowledge through publications and medical performances, Szapáry influenced many of his contemporaries in the 1840s and 1850s. One of his assistants at the clinic in Budapest was physician János Gárdos (1813–1893). The knowledge Gárdos acquired from Szapáry in the 1840s led to a successful private magnetic praxis in the 1850s, and a variety of spectacular healing performances in the city. In addition, Gárdos tried to capacitate his patients to develop their own healing abilities through magnetic writing. The most famous case in Gárdos's praxis was Baroness Adelma Vay (1840–1925), who not only became a successful somnambulist in the 1860s but also

used magnetic methods in the emerging cultural context of spiritism. In the following section, I will examine the distinctive characteristics of the magnetic practices employed by Szapáry, Gárdos, and Vay, highlighting the shifting cultural contextualisation and the accompanying genres.

Count Szapáry's medical performances

Ferenc Szapáry's initial engagement with magnetism started in the countryside. On his family estate in Abony, he conducted the first magnetic experiments on local peasants who should be regarded as knowledge actors themselves.[15] Being a member of the aristocracy, Szapáry's "glamorous look, high rank, wealth that ensured his independence, genuine belief in magnetism which escalated into a passion" were the key elements that guaranteed the success of his public role as a magnetiser both inside and outside Pest-Buda.[16] After attending Lenhossék's courses on magnetism, Szapáry wanted to continue his magnetic practice in an institutionalised environment in the early 1840s. He initiated the establishment of a magnetic hospital in Dresden in collaboration with the physician Koch.[17] Although this venture met with considerable success, due to disagreements with local physicians, Szapáry returned to Pest-Buda, where he opened the first magnetic institution of the city on Váci street.[18]

The magnetic hospital of Pest-Buda was a socially inclusive centre as Szapáry offered his services to the patients free of charge.[19] The institution treated several people whose illnesses did not respond to traditional forms of medicine. An article in June 1843 reported that the Count had more than fifty patients at that time.[20] Szapáry advertised the magnetic institution in various newspapers, stating that he would cure seizures and convulsions, erase the pain in a short time and that all people, regardless of their social status, were welcome.[21] In this medical facility, Szapáry tutored and worked with ten assistants. One of them was János Gárdos, a former gynaecologist and obstetrician, who learnt the basics of magnetism from the Count. Within this institutional context, Szapáry enacted his knowledge on animal magnetism through healing performances, which influenced Gárdos so much that he later started his own magnetic praxis and became an extremely successful magnetiser in Budapest.

Figure 2.2: Illustration of Ferenc Szapáry in Vasárnapi Ujság, 1880. Courtesy of the National Széchényi Library.

Besides the medical practice, as a true believer of magnetism, Szapáry published numerous books in German and French on the theories, interpretations and practical methods of magnetism.[22] The most comprehensive of them was the 1845 book entitled *Katechismus des Vital-Magnetismus*, which was released during his time as a magnetiser in Pest-Buda. This publication reveals the performativity of magnetic methods used by the author, including various gestures, words, postures, and equipment. Szapáry offered detailed prescriptions for lay magnetisers who did not necessarily have backgrounds in medical training:

> Each magnetic treatment must last at least twenty minutes. One approaches the patient slowly, assesses his condition, considers the necessary strokes, waits for the symptoms for a moment, makes the necessary adjustment by directing the [magnetic] force in another direction, brings the patient into the appropriate peaceful state of the mind and slowly moves away.[23]

In addition, magnetic treatments were revealed as delicate physical activities with strict choreographies. The book contains a detailed chart with symptoms and matching magnetic gestures, tools, and massaging techniques.[24] Namely, to cure chills in the skin, the magnetiser should gently massage the patient's limbs downwards, but to cure stomach cramps, the magnetiser should give the patient a glass of magnetised water.[25] Moreover, the treatment of shivering, trembling, yawning, and fatigue had to include:

> 12 magnetic strokes, 3 with the thumb from the middle of the crown to the pit of the heart, 3 with the index finger from the middle of the eyebrows, 3 with the middle finger from the ear, and 3 with the 2 left fingers from the ear over the armpit to the pit of the heart.[26]

The above examples show, first, that magnetic cures could be physically demanding for both the patient and the magnetiser as it required the active and carefully choreographed involvement of both bodies. Second, Szapáry's book confirmed that the methods of magnetism could be acquired by anyone. As Gyimesi underlined, this represented an antipode of Mesmer's understanding of magnetism as a treatment that demanded exceptional talent and skills from the magnetiser and was, therefore, a privilege of the few.[27] In contrast, Szapáry's publication wanted to make magnetism accessible to the (educated) public. In this way, similar to his medical institution in Budapest, the Count presented an inclusive vision regarding the use of magnetic healing.

In addition, a distinctive and innovative feature of Szapáry's magnetic approach was the integration of medical massage into his therapeutic practice. According to physician, editor, and satirical magazine writer Adolf Ágai: "Szapáry owes his greatest successes to the massage. We all know the painful and delicious feeling and the refreshing effect of pressing, treading, and rubbing numb, knotty muscles. In Germany and France, this folk remedy of the East was not even known at that time."[28] Various articles stated that the Count had learned the actual massaging technique from Hungarian female folk healers.[29] The scarcity of available sources makes it challenging to ascertain precisely how Szapáry incorporated the practice-based and hitherto invisible female knowledge into his methods. Nevertheless, based on the detailed methodical descriptions of the *Katechismus des Vital-Magnetismus*, the Pest-Buda branch of

animal magnetism used medical massage as a key component of their treatment. This element, furthermore, influenced his assistant, Gárdos's pointing technique, according to which, "it was possible to cure many different diseases, such as cholera, by exerting pressure on certain points of the body".[30]

After 1848, Szapáry's career as a magnetiser continued in Paris. He became a successful and renowned member of the cultural elite in the city. While in Pest-Buda, the Count refrained from public displays of magnetic treatments and his medical performances were merely situated at his private institution. However, in Paris he started to be engaged in more open forms of magnetic performances at his clinic on Avenue Balzac.[31] Organising semi-public presentations, he established close relations with such figures as Pierre Jean de Béranger, Alexandre Dumas, Prosper Mérimée, Jules Gabriel Janin, and Jules Verne, and cured several high-profile patients, including princesses.[32] Gyimesi argues that, based on Szapáry's works published in the 1850s during his time in Paris, the author began to combine the philosophical layers of animal magnetism and the recent findings of spiritism.[33] In addition, he became more open to mediumistic practices, and upon his return to Hungary in the mid-1850s he engaged in regular table dancing séances.[34] The basics of this turn, nevertheless, can already be found in the 1845 publication, which occasionally mentions the presence of spirits, angels, and demons. To conclude, Szapáry contributed much to the circulation of the methods, practices and interpretations of animal magnetism across Europe.

Spectacular healing and emerging spiritism

By the end of the 1850s, Szapáry's former medical assistant at the clinic of Pest-Buda, János Gárdos became a dominant practitioner in the field of animal magnetism. Learning the basics at Szapáry's institution, Gárdos became a key figure in merging medical treatment with spectacles in his practice. According to Gyimesi, Gárdos "integrated biological explanations with elements of spiritualism, homeopathy, and other non-traditional healing procedures."[35] He was reported to organise conversation circles on the newest scientific findings to circulate ideas and theories of animal magnetism among members of the learned societies of Budapest, and he also attended and gave lectures at scientific conferences in the country.[36]

In addition, Gárdos married Júlia Andrássy, a somnambulist, who not only engaged in telemedical practices, but initiated a scholarship with the aim of pursuing the research of magnetism after Gárdos's death.[37]

Throughout the early 1850s, several articles documented the miraculous and often spectacular cures delivered by Gárdos.[38] One notable case involved a female patient who was treated for convulsions through induced magnetic sleep by the physician, which lasted for several days:

> At the moment, she is immersed in a deep sleep, and what makes it strange is that she predicted that her dream would last continuously for thirty-one days. The named doctor has never had a patient fall into such a long-lasting sleep, and now he is trying to shorten her sleep as much as possible. Already since the 15th of this month, i.e. for eight days, the woman has been sleeping without taking the slightest bit of food or even looking up. Only her very slow breathing or emerging convulsions show that life has not yet left her.[39]

Eventually, after twenty-five days, Gárdos managed to "resurrect" the patient, and free her from the convulsions.[40] The reports also demonstrate that these treatments were organised as semi-public performances in front of audiences including physicians, medical experts, journalists, family members and friends of the patients. The performative dimensions of the treatments included memorable scenes about the spectacular malfunctions of the suffering bodies and the magnetiser's dominance over these bodies. For instance, the doctor "put one of his interesting patients into sleep and dissolved her convulsions. One movement of the finger, and the patient fell asleep [. . .]."[41] After the semi-public demonstrations, Gárdos gave short lectures on his professional journey in magnetic healing for the spectators.

The spectacular dramaturgies of these events and the popularity of the magnetiser gave rise to a series of urban legends about Gárdos. It was reported that his patients were able to perceive his presence from considerable distances, and that he made his fortune by using somnambulists to reveal lottery numbers.[42] Furthermore, throughout his practice, Gárdos encouraged the patients to enter the realm of spiritualism with the help of magnetic cures. He recommended that many of his patients engage in the active utilisation of their somnambulistic capacities, which he believed could be achieved through mediumistic writing, to maintain their health.[43] It is conspicuous that, while Szapáry initially conceptualised

animal magnetism as a universal and widely accessible phenomenon, Gárdos's approach incorporated the unique characteristics of patients into the framework.

One of his patients was Baroness Adelma Vay, who later became a main representative of the institutionalisation of Spiritism in Hungary. The influence of Gárdos seems to be noteworthy as in 1865 he taught the baroness magnetic techniques to heal her migraines. Vay later recalled their encounter in the London-based journal, *The Spiritualist* as follows:

> I suffered much the first year after my marriage from painful cramps. In 1865, we met a mesmerist at Pesth, who told me, after looking at my forehead, that I was certainly a clairvoyante and a writing medium, a remark which filled me with suspicious fears. I did not understand the meaning of his words, but he stated that automatic writing would surely relieve me of my cramp. I, however, dismissed this idea altogether, knowing, as I told him, that mesmerism was of the devil.[44]

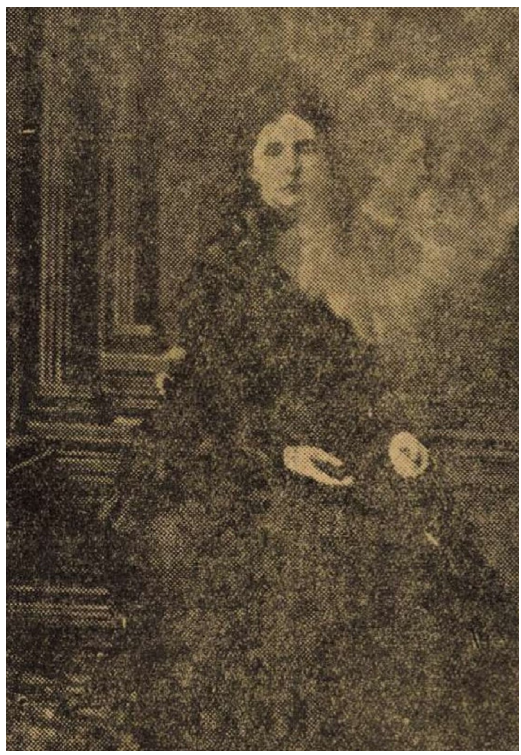


Figure 2.3: Adelma Vay with an astral spirit in A Nép, 1925. Courtesy of the National Széchényi Library.

Nevertheless, the baroness started to practice magnetic writing and found a way to reconcile mesmerism with Christian faith.[45] As a result, she not only recovered, but later became a successful medium, who treated illnesses both on site and from a distance through written correspondence.[46] Consequently, Adelma Vay transformed the role of a passive female somnambulist into the role of an active mediumistic healer, whose vocation was attributed to the influence of benevolent spirits.[47] She performed a large number of spiritist séances throughout her life, supporting the view of the magnetised human body as a potential terrain and instrument for interacting with the supernatural.

However, in the 1860s Pest-Buda political climate had become hostile to spiritism. After the failed Hungarian Revolution in 1848, emerging occultist practices were considered oppositional and anti-imperial in the Austrian Empire. Consequently, during the 1850s and 1860s, performers of spiritist séances were often persecuted by the authorities, because they were associated with national sentiments and political resistance.[48] Confirming this view, Mór Jókai, the renowned Hungarian writer and active participant of séances, summarised the situation as follows:

> The time was 1853. Do you understand what it was? There was no homeland. There was no heaven. There was no Europe. There was no god for the Hungarians. [. . .] We were eager to believe in something. [. . .] Table moving was general in those days. Every coffee, tea, and snack ended with that.[49]

In these decades, spiritist practices endured as a private pursuit within the confines of small circles. However, from the second half of the 1860s, Adelma Vay started to publish books in Vienna on her interactions with spirits and the theories of spiritism.[50] Besides, she became an organiser of circles in Austria-Hungary, which helped to sustain, disseminate and practice spiritism. Although her influence was most significant in the dual monarchy, her international network included esoteric and occult circles in French, German, and British cities as well as in New York.[51] In 1871, she was the co-founder of the first Hungarian Association of Spiritism in Pest-Buda. Becoming an influential spiritist practitioner and theoretician, Adelma Vay's case showed how magnetic performances left the realm of medical practice and entered the emerging field of spiritism.

Conclusion

This chapter called attention to the interconnected knowledge agents of nineteenth-century animal magnetism in Hungary. The decades between 1840 and 1870 marked a transformation in the genres of magnetic practices. The first magnetic clinic of Pest-Buda, established by Ferenc Szapáry, offered alternative medical treatment for suffering people, mainly in the form of private encounters between the patient and magnetiser. János Gárdos, as an assistant at this institution, learned the basic techniques of magnetic healing from Szapáry. However, he later developed his own understanding of magnetism and started to perform spectacular events of healing in front of smaller audiences. Although Gárdos had a background in medical training, he made use of some elements of spiritualism, urging his patients to use automatic writing as a self-cure. In this context, Gárdos's patient, Adelma Vay and her practice as a somnambulistic medium revealed how various methods of magnetism stimulated the performative dimensions of séances and contributed to the institutionalisation of spiritism. Szapáry, Gárdos, and Vay as knowledge actors were not only theorising, but also practicing and disseminating magnetism in various environments and with various purposes. Consequently, when the popular Danish magnetiser Hansen visited Budapest in 1880, he encountered local magnetic performances that combined medical, scientific, entertaining, and occultist aspects.

Notes

1 The research was supported by the Bolyai Research Fellowship (BO/31/21)

2 "Bécsi hírek" [News from Vienna], *Fővárosi Lapok* 17, no. 29 (1880): 146.

3 "Hansen Budapesten" [Hansen in Budapest], *Vasárnapi Ujság* 27, no. 11 (1880): 171.; z., "Hansen productiói" [Productions of Hansen], *Gyógyászat* 20, no. 12 (1880): 217–220.

4 "Hansen Budapesten": 171.

5 Porzó [Adolf Ágai], "Egy magyar Hansenről" [On a Hungarian Hansen], *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 27, no. 11 (1880): 169–171.

6 Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 21–23.

7 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2008).

8 Mihály Lenhossék, "Az állati magnetizmus rövid rajzolatja" [A Short Summary of Animal Magnetism], *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* 1, no. 10 (1817): 3–41; Mihály Kováts, *Az állati mágnesesség*

mérőserpenyüje [The Measuring Pan of Animal Magnetism] (Pest, 1818); "Az állati Magnetismusnak (Mesmerismus) néhány nevezetesebb jeleneti" [Some Famous Scenes of Animal Magnetism (Mesmerism)], *Hasznos Mulatságok* 2, no. 1 (1818): 4–8.

9 Lenhossék, "Az állati magnetizmus rövid rajzolatja": 38–39; "Az állati Magnetismusnak (Mesmerismus) néhány nevezetesebb jeleneti": 4–5.

10 Eszter Tarjányi, *A szellem örvényében: A magyarországi mesmerizmus, szellemidézés, teozófia története és művészeti kapcsolatai* [In the Vortex of the Spirit: the History and Artistic Connections of Hungarian Mesmerism, Spiritism, Theosophy] (Universitas, 2002), 27–29.

11 Lenhossék, "Az állati magnetizmus rövid rajzolatja": 30–31; "Az állati Magnetismusnak (Mesmerismus) néhány nevezetesebb jeleneti": 4–5.

12 Júlia Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," in *The Occult Nineteenth Century*, eds. Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 59–83. In addition, Lenhossék's great-grandson, Albert Szent-Györgyi was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1937.

13 Lenhossék, "Az állati magnetizmus rövid rajzolatja": 3–41.

14 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 65.

15 Béla Tóth, Magyar ritkaságok [Hungarian Curiosities] (Athenaeum, 1899), 211; Tarjányi, *A szellem örvényében*, 33; Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 68.

16 Porzó, "Egy magyar Hansenről", 170. If not specified otherwise, text translations into English by the author.

17 *Jelenkor* 10, no. 88 (1841): 1; Tóth, Magyar ritkaságok, 211.

18 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 68.

19 Tóth, *Magyar ritkaságok*, 211; Gábor Szentgyörgyvölgyi, "'Delejezők' a 19. század második felében Magyarországon" ['Magnetists' in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century in Hungary], *Orvostörténeti Közlemények* 56, no. 1–4 (2011): 153–159.

20 *Honderü* 1, no. 24 (1843): 809.

21 Ibid.

22 For example: Ferenc Szapáry, *Ein Wort über animalischen Magnetismus, Seelenkörper und Lebensessenz; nebst Beschreibung des ideo-somnambulen Zustandes des Fräulein Therese von B—y zu Vasarhely im Jahre 1838, und einem Anhang* (F.A. Brockhaus, 1840); F. Szapáry, *Katechismus des Vital-Magnetismus zur leichteren Direction der Laien-Magnetiseurs*, (Otto Wigand, 1845); F. Szapáry, *Magnétisme et magnétothérapie* (L'Auteur, 1853); F. Szapáry, *Table-Moving: Somnabulisch-Magnetische Traumdeutung* (Bonaventure und Ducessois, 1854).

23 Szapáry, *Katechismus des Vital-Magnetismus*, 370.

24 Ibid., 317–19.

25 Ibid., 317 and 318.

26 Ibid., 317.

27 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 68.

28 Porzó, "Egy magyar Hansenről": 171.

29 Porzó, "Egy magyar Hansenről": 171; Szentgyörgyvölgyi, "'Delejezők' a l9. század második felében Magyarországon": 154–55.

30 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 71.

31 Tóth, *Magyar ritkaságok*, 215.

32 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 69; Tóth, *Magyar ritkaságok*, 215–216.

33 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 69.

34 Luis Montiel, "A symbolic defence of animal magnetism", *History of Psychiatry* 16, no. 2 (2005): 207. Tóth, *Magyar ritkaságok*, 216.

35 Júlia Gyimesi, *Fejezetek a pszichológia történetéből – egyetemi jegyzet* [Chapters from the History of Psychology – University Lectures] (PPKE, 2023), 45.

36 *Pesti Napló* 3, no. 774 (1852): 5.

37 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 73; Eszter Deák, "A morvaországi gróf Sigmund Berchtold magyar kapcsolatai" [Hungarian Connections of Moravian Count Sigmund Berchtold], *Magyar Könyvszemle* 121, no. 3 (2005): 317–18.

38 *Pesti Napló* 3, no. 661 (1852): 2. and *Pesti Napló* 3, no. 677 (1852): 2.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Tóth, *Magyar ritkaságok*, 217.

43 Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary," 71–72.

44 Baroness Adelma Vay, "Home Experiences in Spiritualism," *The Spiritualist* 4, no. 6 (1874): 66.

45 Vay, "Home Experiences in Spiritualism,": 66–67.

46 Tarjányi, *A szellem örvényében*, 36.

47 Tarjányi, *A szellem örvényében*, 36–37.

48 Tarjányi, *A szellem örvényében*, 49–50.

49 Mór Jókai, "Astral-szellemek" [Astral Spirits], in *Jókai Mór Hátrahagyott művei* [The Posthumous Works of Mór Jókai], vol. 2 (Révai Testvérek Irodalmi Intézet Részvénytársaság, 1912): 65–71.

50 The earliest publications included: Adelma Vay, *Betrachtungsbuch für Alle: von mehreren seligen Geistern* (Verlag von Rudolph Lechner, 1867); A. Vay, Geist, Kraft, Stoff (Verlag von Rudolph Lechner, 1870).

51 Johann Georg Lughofer, "Adelma von Vay aus Slovenske Konjice im Kontext zeitgenössischer österreichischer Schriftstellerinnen," *Acta Neophilologica* 55, no. 1–2 (2022): 286–87 and 290.

CHAPTER 3

Performing magnetism in mid-nineteenth-century Italy: The 1856 challenge between Francesco Guidi and Antonio Zanardelli

Gennaro Ambrosino

On 26 May 1856, a remarkable magnetic challenge took place in the office of lawyer Luigi Suaut, located under the porticoes of Piazza Vittorio Emanuele in Turin. The contest pitted Francesco Guidi—poet, librettist and leading figure of mesmerism in mid nineteenth-century Italy—against Antonio Zanardelli, a magician, performer, and magnetiser, who was touring major cities across Northern Italy. Zanardelli claimed he could replicate Guidi's physiological phenomena without employing magnetic techniques and that his somnambulist, under magnetisation, could achieve even greater feats of clairvoyance. Before an audience of thirty people—the contenders having selected fifteen people each—Guidi and Zanardelli conducted demonstrations of physical-magnetic and psychological phenomena with their respective somnambules: Guidi's future wife, Luisa, and Zanardelli's daughter, Elisa. In particular, the experimental programme included *tableaux vivants*, pulse monitoring, bodily perforations, musical ecstasy, second sight, clairvoyant readings, and disease diagnosis.

The audience chosen by Guidi consisted of physicians who advocated for therapeutic magnetism as a valuable complement to traditional medicine, such as Francesco Borgna and Luigi Coddè, as well as non-medical magnetisers, a category to which Guidi himself belonged. Among these were Count Jacopo Sanvitale, active in Parma, and Leone Woog, whom Guidi praised in his 1854 treatise *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale* as "highly proficient in magnetic disciplines".[1] Conversely, Zanardelli was backed by several physicians from the Faculty of Medicine in Turin, as well as Pietro Della Rocca—a popular performer active in Turin, who worked alongside his somnambulist assistant, Tonio Riviera. On 29 May, a panel chaired by lawyer, poet and patriot Angelo Brofferio

delivered its verdict: the phenomena demonstrated by both competitors were indistinguishable. After both sides failed a final clairvoyance experiment, the panel declared Zanardelli the winner. Despite the decisive verdict and the unanimous consensus among jurors, the outcome sparked significant controversy and garnered considerable attention within the magnetic and medical communities of Piedmont.[2]

Building on this widely discussed episode, and following the paths of Guidi and Zanardelli, this article focuses on the performative dimension of mesmerism in Italy and the blurred relationship between professional magnetisers and magicians. While these dynamics have been explored in relation to the late nineteenth century, this study argues that the 1850s marked a pivotal shift in Italian mesmerism, as it was during this decade that it moved beyond private magnetic cabinets into public spaces, including theatres and cultural salons.[3] By examining this process, the article also provides insights into the broader cultural landscape of mesmerism in Italy during the so-called *Risorgimento*, the movement for Italian political unification.[4]

Turin between magnetism, performances, and Risorgimento

The 1850s, though often overlooked by scholarship regarding the Italian context in favour of the 1880s—a period marked by the culmination of modern spiritualism, mesmerism, and psychical research—are nonetheless crucial for understanding the dynamics of occult practices in Italy. Several factors contribute to the rise of mesmerism in this decade, above all the publication of numerous treatises and the emergence of public performances.[5] In 1856, the Catholic Church issued a memorandum to bishops in the Papal States, accompanied by the encyclical *Ad magnetismi abusus compescendos*, which denounced such practices as mesmerism, clairvoyance, and necromancy as "superstitious".[6] Concurrently, the increasing circulation of periodicals and the ongoing process of Italian unification facilitated the broader dissemination of knowledge about magnetic practices. As Clara Gallini has observed, mesmerism marked one of the earliest attempts to transcend the regionalism that had historically divided Italy's fragmented states, fostering a shared cultural experience: audiences in different cities attended the same performances, signalling the early stages of cultural homogenisation.[7]

Within this context, Turin—and the Piedmont region more broadly—emerged as the centre of animal magnetism in Italy. It was here that French magnetisers first introduced mesmerism in the late eighteenth century and where some of the earliest public performances took place in the mid-nineteenth century. As David Armando notes, Piedmont witnessed debates over animal magnetism as early as the mid-1780s, notably a conflict between Amadée Doppet, a Savoyard and later Jacobin, whose theories diverged from Mesmer's approach, and Sebastiano Giraud, a leading exponent of late eighteenth-century Italian mesmerism, who adhered to Mesmer's original curative framework.[8] Doppet published his *Traité théorique-pratique du magnétisme animal* in Turin in 1784, which was translated into Italian the following year in Rimini by Giacomo Marsoner and in Foligno by Giovanni Tomassini.[9] Giraud, who had practised mesmerism in Turin, responded in 1785 with *Lettre de m.r. Giraud, docteur en médicine de la faculté de Turin à monsieur le comte de N.N. à Cremone.*[10] Piedmont's prominence in mesmeric discourse extended to Italian-language publications: in 1785, Tommaso Mullatera, a physician from Biella, authored a treatise condemning mesmerism and denouncing Mesmer as an impostor.[11] Therefore, Turin's linguistic, cultural, and political ties to France solidified its role as the primary conduit for French mesmeric practices in Italy.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Turin remained a focal point for Italian mesmerism. Between 1850 and 1855, the city saw the publication of five significant treatises: Giacomo Nani's *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale* (1850), Luigi Coddè's *Il magnetismo animale svelato* (1851), Martino Tommasi's *Il magnetismo animale considerato sotto un nuovo punto di vista* (1851), Francesco Guidi's *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale* (1854) and Eugenio Allix's *Guida elementare dello studente magnetizzatore* (1855).[12] Of particular relevance to the performative dimensions of mesmerism, in May and June 1850, the magnetiser Auguste Lassaigne and the somnambulist Prudence Bernard conducted a tour in Turin, performing at the newly constructed Vauxhall building.[13] Their performances were widely acclaimed and drew the attention of the medical community. The Royal Academy of Medicine in Turin invited the duo to replicate their Vauxhall experiments under stricter conditions, offering a fee of fifty francs. These controlled experiments failed, and the results were published in the daily *La Concordia.* Meanwhile, Lassaigne and Prudence moved on to Genoa and later Milan, continuing

their public demonstrations. Shortly thereafter, magnetisers, performers and self-styled magicians began filling Italian theatres, re-enacting the experiments of their French counterparts. Turin, once again, served as the entry point for these esoteric trends, which subsequently spread across the Italian peninsula.

Challenges, private exhibitions, and theatres

While mesmerism made its debut on Italian stages during the 1850s, themes of somnambulism and altered states of consciousness had already been present in Italian theatrical traditions for decades, particularly in melodramas. The attention paid to natural somnambulism, explored already in Ludovico Antonio Muratori's *Della forza della fantasia umana* (1745) and Domenico Pino's *Discorso sopra un sonnambulo meraviglioso* (1770), was shaped by the theories of Puységur, which circulated in Italy through the works of Francesco Orioli and Angelo Colò at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[14] These influences contributed to the portrayal of sleepwalkers in such theatrical works as Francesco Albergati Capacelli's *Il sonnambulo* (1783), Michele Carafa's melodramatic opera *Il sonnambulo* (1824), and Vincenzo Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, which premiered at Milan's Teatro Carcano in 1831.

Within this evolving cultural landscape, Francesco Guidi, who had worked on mesmeric theories and their therapeutic effects in his 1854 treatise, became one of the first Italian magnetisers to capitalise on the novelty introduced by the duo Lassaigne and Prudence and the enthusiasm their performances had generated. A relatively well-known librettist, who authored approximately twenty-four opera libretti between 1843 and 1883, Guidi fused lyric theatre with mesmerism, skillfully leveraging the cultural prominence of musical theatre to create a new form of spectacle. In these performances, the somnambulist's body became the focal point, while the magnetiser assumed the role of director.[15] The experience often revolved around religious-musical ecstasy, through which the somnambulist mediated the audience's connection to a transcendent dimension. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, Angelo Colò's treatise had already documented instances where magnetic therapy, combined with music, facilitated healing and induced musical ecstasy.[16] This deep interplay between

music, magnetism and theatre was a defining, by no means exclusive, feature of the Italian cultural context, and Guidi exemplified its synthesis, which would later play a fundamental role in the development of modern spiritualism.[17]

Guidi's performances began in 1851 during the carnival season at the Vauxhall in Turin, where he presented the somnambulist Amerigo. Subsequently, between 1852 and 1853, he held nine public sessions in Genoa with the sleepwalker Erminia. However, his greatest theatrical success came with the somnambulist Luisa (Fig. 3.1), who later became his wife, beginning in 1854. On 23 May 1856—just three days before his challenge with Zanardelli—Guidi conducted an experiment at the Filomagnetic Society, an organisation he had founded in 1855 alongside *La luce magnetica*, a weekly publication dedicated to promoting mesmerism.[18] These experiments were held to commemorate the 122nd anniversary of Mesmer's birth and were divided into three parts. The first two featured performances by two other pairs: Pier Paolo Serena with the somnambulist Damigella Teresa and Luigi Ferrero with 'Bindino'.

The third part showcased Guidi and Luisa performing several magnetic experiments, including an insensitivity test, musical ecstasy and clairvoyance with direct connection, "which involved perceiving everything related to a person's physical and mental state, temperament, character and especially past or present illnesses, based on their interaction with the magnetised subject".[19] Guidi's example quickly spread, inspiring pairs of amateurs to perform in high-society salons and theatres. Among these was Zanardelli, who began staging performances with his daughter, Elisa. Over time, the Zanardelli family became one of the most famous magnetising performers in Italy. Antonio's son, Domenico Zanardelli, together with his wife Emma, toured major cities such as Rome, Naples and Florence. Domenico also authored the widely circulated manual *La verità sull'ipnotismo* (1886), which included detailed illustrations.[20] Interestingly, unlike his father that was inconsistent in his position, Domenico always insisted that the phenomena he produced were genuine rather than illusions, highlighting the often-blurred boundary between magnetisers and illusionists.

Figure 3.1: Image from Francesco Guidi, Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della nature e principalmente diretto alla cura delle malattie, con notte ed un'appendice sull'ipnotismo, Francesco Sanvito, Milano, 1863, 371.

The key distinction between these two figures lays in the concept of "frame", which, according to Erving Goffman, refers to the way an individual perceives and interprets a situation.[21] Audiences understood events through a framework that shaped their experience: mesmeric performances were presented as authentic, aiming to replicate on stage the effects hypnosis produced in private settings, whereas magic illusions openly relied on artifice and deception. As Peter Lamont puts it, "the magician fabricates the effect but not the performance as a whole, while the pseudo-psychic fabricates not only the effect, but also the overall performance".[22] However, despite this fundamental difference, magic shows and magnetic experiments share similar terminology and imagery, making them difficult to distinguish. Both encourage audiences to adopt flexible and shifting interpretations of what they witness. In this

sense, Goffman's argument that certain situations enable the coexistence of multiple frames—or facilitate the transition from one interpretative frame to another—aptly applies to mesmerism.[23] This ambiguity is perfectly embodied by Antonio Zanardelli, who shifted frames over the years and even in the same performance, presenting himself alternately as a magnetiser or a magician. This hybrid identity helps explain why the medical faculty in Turin enlisted him in 1856 to expose Guidi as a fraud.

Originally from Venice, Antonio Zanardelli began conducting experiments with his daughter as early as 1847 in Padua and later in Brescia in 1849. During this period, as attested in an article published on *Il corriere del Lario*, he collaborated with the phrenologist Giovanni Pellizzari, whose book *La frenologia resa evidente dal magnetismo animale* (1851) documented experiments carried out on Elisa.[24] Before the famous 1856 challenge, Antonio Zanardelli had already gained recognition through two significant episodes: a private demonstration for Alessandro Manzoni, one of Italy's most prominent nineteenth-century novelists, and a successful tour in Florence, chronicled in a series of articles published in 1854 by the Florentine theatrical journal *Lo Scaramuccia.* In both the cases, Zanardelli left the frame unaddressed to create more interest and speculation in his performances.

During his stay in Lesa on Lake Maggiore between 1848 and 1850, Manzoni became increasingly intrigued by mesmerism, attending and observing magnetic performances. In 1885, Stefano Stampa, Manzoni's stepson, published an account that provides insights into the writer's fascination with the irrational and his direct involvement in mesmeric experiments.[25] According to Stampa, Manzoni, initially sceptical, carefully observed a series of experiments conducted by Dr Prejalmini on a local peasant woman. In one of these experiments, the woman repeatedly identified a magnetised coin placed in a separate room from a collection of otherwise identical coins. During his time in Lesa, Stampa himself conducted experiments, inducing a deep somnambulistic trance in a household servant, Linda Bianchi. Using magnetic passes from a distance, he triggered physical reactions such as contortions and sighs before eventually awakening her.[26] After carefully observing these phenomena and dismissing the possibility of fraud, Manzoni became convinced of their authenticity and even conducted his own experiments on household servants, exploring its potential as a healing practice.[27] In 1850, he invited the Zanardelli couple to his home, where they performed their

standard repertoire of magnetic experiments before a large and aristocratic audience.

The Zanardelli family further solidified their reputation during a tour in Florence, where they performed for several weeks at the Teatro Cocomero, earning widespread acclaim. Among those who took notice was writer Carlo Lorenzini—better known as Collodi, the author of *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1883)—who dedicated several articles to the couple. The first, "*Giuochi di prestigio*", humorously referred to the Zanardelli as "buskers", casting their performances in the realm of sleight-of-hand rather than genuine mesmeric phenomena.[28] The second article, "*Elisa Zanardelli al Teatro Cocomero*", is notable for two reasons.[29] First, it provides an account of the phenomena exhibited by the somnambulist, which in this case primarily involved psychological experiments in thought and will reading from the audience. This highlights her central role in the performance—an essential characteristic of mesmeric spectacles and practices. Second, Collodi explicitly linked magnetism to the observed phenomena, underscoring the blurred line between magnetism and illusionism.

This tension is further explored in the third article of the series, "*Il magnetismo a Firenze*", in which Collodi examines the city's polarised reactions to spectacles:

> Magnetism is raging more and more every day! The entire city is now divided into two factions—believers and sceptics. The believers swear by magnetism, while the sceptics argue that the responses of Sibilla Zanardelli are mere tricks and nothing more.[30]

The same ambiguity of 'frame' is proposed in "*Io e un altro. Dialogo in mezzo alla strada*", a fictional exchange that reflects public perceptions of the fine line between magnetism and illusionism.[31] Collodi and his colleague Celestino Bianchi further engaged with the topic by witnessing a private experiment conducted by Antonio Zanardelli on his daughter Elisa, published as "*Un esperimento di magnetismo sulla giovane Elisa Zanardelli*".[32] The same issue of *Lo Scaramuccia* featured a letter from a Professor Grimelli of Modena, who had previously analysed the Zanardelli's experiments. Grimelli suggested that an electrical-galvanic circuit between the magnetiser and the somnambulist could explain the observed fact, offering a scientific perspective on the debate.[33]

When the 1856 challenge took place, thus, Guidi and Zanardelli were the two most prominent figures in the Italian landscape of magnetic theatres. As a result, the event attracted significant attention and was extensively covered in numerous publications, particularly in periodicals and pamphlets. The challenge had consisted of four phases. First, Guidi had committed to demonstrating to the judges physical-magnetic phenomena such as insensitivity, rigidity and magnetic ecstasy, induced on his clairvoyant somnambulist, Luisa. In response, Zanardelli replicated the same phenomena on a non-magnetised person to compare the effects. Subsequently, Guidi attempted to prove clairvoyant abilities in Luisa, while Zanardelli tried to achieve similar results with his own daughter, Elisa, who was also subjected to magnetism in this case. The official account of the sessions, which remains the most detailed source of information, was published on 3 June 1856, in the daily *Il Risorgimento*, whose editor, Pier Carlo Boggio, served both as a witness requested by Zanardelli and as secretary to the presiding judge, Brofferio.[34] Later that year, Luigi Berruti—a physician and surgeon selected by Zanardelli as a juror—published a brief account titled *Il magnetismo e la medicina: riflessioni sopra una sfida di magnetizzatori*, which upheld the official version reported in *Il Risorgimento*, dismissing both sets of demonstrations as "mere tricks".[35]

By contrast, Eugenio Allix, a Turin-based magnetiser, president of the 'Società Filomagnetica di Torino', and author of *Guida elementare dello studente magnetizzatore* (1855)—a work integrating Swedenborgianism, mesmerism and phrenology—defended Guidi in an appendix to his *Verità sul magnetismo animale* (1856).[36] The debate extended beyond individual publications, finding a platform in periodicals such as *Il Trovatore*, which supported Zanardelli, and *Luce magnetica*, founded by Guidi, which defended his stance.[37] In 1860, Guidi himself revisited the event in his treatise *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura*, dedicating a chapter titled "*Antimagnetismo smacherato*" to refuting the challenge's outcome.[38] He claimed that his defeat had been orchestrated by the Piedmontese medical establishment, which, he argued, had unfairly sided with Zanardelli.[39]

Within this highly complex context, three distinct factions emerged, each with its own agenda and strategic approach. The first group consisted of staunch advocates of mesmerism, led by Guidi and a small contingent of physicians who endorsed its therapeutic applications. For them, the

challenge was an opportunity to legitimise magnetic therapy as a valid medical practice and to reinforce its perceived scientific credibility, but also to capitalise on the public's fascination with mesmerism by staging profitable spectacles. The second faction comprised performers and illusionists, such as Zanardelli and Della Rocca, whose interest in mesmerism was not rooted in medical theory but in its potential for spectacle and public fascination. The third faction was the official medical establishment, represented by the panel of physicians supporting Zanardelli. Their primary goal was to discredit mesmerism and reinforce conventional medical authority, in a city, Turin, that had become the Italian epicentre of this practice. Each group, therefore, sought to frame the event in a way that best served its own interests—whether by seeking scientific legitimacy, exploiting popular fascination, or reaffirming traditional medical dominance.

Conclusion

On 30 April 1872, at the Teatro Valle in Rome, Francesco Guidi once again took the stage, performing a series of magnetic experiments alongside Signora Luisa, now his wife, before a large audience. Despite two decades having passed since his theatrical debut, the structure of his performances remained unchanged: a sequence of physiological experiments followed by psychological demonstrations. By this time, theatrical magnetism had expanded well beyond Northern Italy, reaching all Italian regions. Within a decade, the phenomenon would reach its peak with the Italian tour of the renowned Belgian magnetiser Alfred D'Hont. Even as modern spiritualism gained traction and séances became increasingly popular, magnetism performances retained their distinct identity, continuing to fill theatres and generate extensive coverage in newspapers and magazines. In 1867, Guidi contributed to these discourses with the publication of *I misteri del moderno spiritismo e l'antidoto contro le superstizioni del secolo XIX*, in which he sought to differentiate mesmerism from spiritualism by emphasising its natural causes and physiological basis.

However, as this article showed, the 1850s served as a crucial laboratory for the popularisation of performative mesmerism in Italy, aligning with the broader trend of the "theatricalisation of science" that defined the second half of the nineteenth century.[40] Within this framework, Guidi

and Zanardelli emerge as two paradigmatic figures. Guidi, on the one hand, formulated theories on magnetism and sought natural explanations for its effects, while simultaneously adapting it for theatrical performance. Zanardelli, by contrast, was an itinerant performer who travelled across Northern Italy, staging magnetic experiments in theatres as well as in the private villas of prominent intellectuals. He skillfully adapted his approach depending on the setting, shifting the framing of his demonstrations to suit his audience. The rivalry between these two figures serves as a valuable litmus test for understanding the tensions between magnetisers and magicians, revealing not only their differences but also their underlying affinities and the fluid nature of these categories. The extensive body of published material documenting their rivalry, including pamphlets, newspapers articles and scientific debates, reflects how deep magnetism had embedded itself across different strata of Italian society as early as the mid-nineteenth century.

Notes

1 All translations from Italian are the author's. Francesco Guidi, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale* (Carlo Turati, 1854), 222.

2 The information regarding the challenge is taken from the official account published in the newspaper *Il Risorgimento*, 3 June 1856, no. 1604, year 5.

3 For an overview on magnetic spectacles in Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century see Clara Gallini, *La Sonnambula meravigliosa. Magnetismo e ipnotismo nell'Ottocento italiano* (Feltrinelli, 1983), which remains the most important work on Italian mesmerism from an anthropological perspective. Patrizia Guarnieri, "Teatro e laboratorio. Scienziati e medici davanti al magnetismo", *Belfagor* 40, no. 5 (1985): 561–575; Alessandra Violi, *Il teatro dei nervi. Fantasmi del moderno da Mesmer a Charcot* (Mondadori, 2004); Morena Corradi, "Staging the Uncanny: Phantasmagoria in Post-Unification Italy", *Image & Narrative* 13, no. 1 (2012): 3–20; Morena Corradi, *Spettri d'Italia. Scenari del fantastico nella pubblicistica postunitaria milanese* (Longo Editore, 2016).

4 On this see the fundamental work of Cecilia Gatto Trocchi, *Il Risorgimento esoterico* (Mondadori, 1996).

5 See Clara Gallini, *La Sonnambula meravigliosa*, 78–102.

6 On this, see David Armando, "'Scienza, demonolatria o impostura ereticale'? Il Sant'Uffizio romano e la questione del magnetismo animale", *Giornale di storia* 2 (2009); David Armando, "The 19th century debate on animal magnetism viewed from Rome: The Holy Office's decrees", *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 19 (2022).

7 See Clara Gallini, *La Sonnambula meravigliosa*, 55–60.

8 See David Armando, "Il magnetismo animale tra scienza, politica e religione", *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 2 (2005).

9 Amédée Doppet, *Traité théorique et pratique du magnétisme animal* (Gian Michele Briolo, 1784).
10 Sebastiano Giraud, *Lettre de m.r. Giraud, docteur en médicine de la faculté de Turin à monsieur le comte de NN à Cremone* (Turin, 1784).
11 Tommaso Mullatera, *Del magnetismo animale, e degli effetti ad esso attribuiti nella cura delle umane infermità* (Antonio Cajani, 1785).
12 Giacomo Nani, *Trattato teorico pratico sul magnetismo animale* (Tipografia Ferrero e Franco, 1850); Luigi Coddè's *Il magnetismo animale svelato* (Tipografia Corrado, 1851); Martino Tommasi, *Il magnetismo animale considerato sotto un nuovo punto di vista* (Cugini Pomba e C., 1851); Eugenio Allix, *Guida elementare dello studente magnetizzatore* (Stamperia dell'Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1855); Francesco Guidi, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale*.
13 Auguste Lassaigne, *Mémoires d'un magnétiseur contenant la biographie de la somnambule Prudence Bernard* (Germer Bailliere, 1851), 44–45.
14 Ludovico Antonio Muratori, *Della forza della fantasia umana* (Venice: Pasquali, 1745); Domenico Pino, *Discorso sopra un sonnambulo meraviglioso* (Milan, 1770); Angelo Colò, *Prodromo sull'azione salutare del magnetismo animale e della musica* (Tipografia di Giuseppe Lucchesini, 1815); Francesco Orioli, 'Lettere critiche sul mesmerismo', *Opuscoli scientifici* 1 (1817): 43–56, 117–140.
15 On the role of women in magnetic spectacles see Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland & Company, 2009).
16 Angelo Colò, *Prodromo sull'azione salutare del magnetismo animale e della musica*, 80–91.
17 On the intersection of music and science see David Trippett and Benjamin Walton, *Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Scientific Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). On music and hypnotism see Céline F. Manning, *Ce que la musique fait à l'hypnose: Une relation spectaculaire au XIXe siècle* (Le presses du reel, 2021). On the music in spiritualist performances see Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments. Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (Penn State University Press, 2016), 25–26.
18 The information about his performances and experiments are given by Guidi himself in his 1860 treatise.
19 Francesco Guidi, *Trattato teorico-pratico di magnetismo animale*, 403.
20 Domenico Zanardelli, *La verità sull'ipnotismo* (Tipografia Reggiani e soci, 1886).
21 Ervin Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1974). On this, see also Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 22–23.
22 Peter Lamont, "Magician as Conjuror. A Frame Analysis of Victorian Mediums", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4 (2006):24.
23 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.
24 *Il corriere del Lario*, 3 September 1856, no. 36, year 7. Giovanni Pellizzari, "La frenologia resa evidente dal magnetismo animale", in *La medicina politica* (F. Speranza Tipografo, 1851), 61–100.
25 Stefano Stampa, *Alessandro Manzoni. La sua famiglia, i suoi amici* (Hoepli, 1885). See also Ezio Flori, "Esperimenti di magnetismo in casa Manzoni", *Nuova Antologia* 279 (1935), 284–289.
26 Stefano Stampa, *Alessandro Manzoni. La sua famiglia, i suoi amici*, 150 et seq.
27 Cecilia Gatto Trocchi, *Il Risorgimento esoterico*, 33.
28 *Lo Scaramuccia*, 7 March 1854, no. 37.
29 *Lo Scaramuccia*, 14 March 1854, no. 39.
30 *Lo Scaramuccia*, 17 March 1854, no. 40.
31 *Lo Scaramuccia*, 21 March 1854, no. 41.
32 *Lo Scaramuccia*, 28 March 1854, no. 43.
33 Ibid.

34 *Il Risorgimento*, 3 June 1856, no. 1604, year 5.

35 Luigi Berruti, *Il magnetismo e la medicina: riflessioni sopra una sfida di magnetizzatori* (G. Biancardi, 1856); see also *Gazzetta medica italiana*, 16 June 1856, no. 25, year 7, 203.

36 Eugenio Allix, *Guida elementare dello studente magnetizzatore*; Eugenio Allix, *Verità sul magnetismo animale* (Tipografia Economica Diretta da Barera, 1856).

37 *Il Trovatore*, 28 May 1856, no. 87; *Il Trovatore*, 11 June 1856, no. 91; *Luce Magnetica*, 1856, no. 22.

38 Francesco Guidi, *Il magnetismo animale considerato secondo le leggi della natura* (Francesco Sanvito, 1860), 455–489.

39 See the "Biblioteca Magica del Popolo" by Mariano Tomatis, which includes more than 3000 items on magic, mesmerism and spiritualism: https://www.marianotomatis.it/?page=biblioteca. See also Mariano Tomatis, *Incantagioni. Storie di veggenti, sibille, somnambule e altre fantasmagoriche liberazioni* (Nero, 2022).

40 Francesca Montesperelli, *Flussi e scintille. L'immaginario elettromagnetico nella letteratura dell'Ottocento* (Liguori, 2002), 59. On this, see also Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman, *Science in the Marketplace. Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (University of Chicago Press, 2007); James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (The University of California Press, 2014).

CHAPTER 4

Under the sway of performance: The somnambulist stage of Prudence Bernard and Auguste Lassaigne[1]

Kurt Vanhoutte

"France, in the Middle Ages, was saved by a woman, an ecstatic, a somnambulist, Joan of Arc; France, in the nineteenth century, will be brought back to faith by a woman, an ecstatic, a somnambulist: Prudence."[2] In 1851, journalist and occultist Henri Delaage leaves no doubt that mesmeric trance was nothing short of a cultural revolution and that Prudence Bernard was one of its most prominent champions, if not martyrs.[3] Artificial sleep, induced through magnetism, fascinated Europe, transcending class and reinvigorating fields such as religion, science, and politics. A magnetiser, typically male, placed his subject—almost always female—into a dreamlike state of consciousness that granted heightened perception.

Prudence distinguished herself by performing these feats under very strict conditions. Blindfolded and bound, she could read thoughts, sense objects hidden in clothing, and beat opponents at card games. Moreover, she had a particularly dramatic trick up her sleeve, which solidified her reputation as an ecstatic performer and established her as an international reference. Her defining act saw her embodying historical figures as though she were visited by their spirits: Joan of Arc, "a gladiator fighting to the death", "a woman slowly and painfully succumbing to poison", or plainly "a malediction"[4]. Spectators vigorously engaged with the show, debating whether they witnessed theatrical illusion, a new law of nature, or a manifestation of the otherworldly. Performance was in many ways key to navigating these uncertainties. This article explores the intersection of theatre, science, and the occult in Prudence's career (c.1841–1854), which resonated in the press into the 1920s. She performed in venues as varied as theatres, academic halls, domestic salons, and fairgrounds, creating performative spaces of ambiguity where illusion held its mesmerising sway.

Press accounts, posters, and ephemera from Belgium, the Netherlands,

France, and the UK help reconstruct Prudence's repertoire and its reception. By weaving together these fragmented records, this chapter seeks to illuminate the complex interplay of performance, belief, and mesmerism's enduring appeal.[5]

Imaginary attitudes

From the very beginning, Prudence and her magnetiser advertised their show as "Oneiromantic Art".[6] Deriving from the Greek words for "dream" and "prophecy", it promised a fusion of exhibition and dream-based divination and the revelation of hidden truths. Broadsides also mentioned private consultations, blending science with therapeutic appeal. Yet, it was in the theatre that science and sensationalism truly converged. The performance began with thought transmissions, where Prudence, in a trance, accessed unseen texts written by spectators. The audience was invited on stage to verify the absence of fraud. Yet, anticipation peaked after the intermission. "Shortly after, Mademoiselle Prudence entered, attired in Druidical costume, a chaplet of oak leaves around her head, and a loose white dress, her arms bare, each adorned with two wide gold armlets, one at the wrists and the other at the upper part of the arm", the popular newspaper *The Sun* noted in 1847.[7] Victorian audiences, captivated by ancient Greece, undoubtedly recognised the reference to the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo. Unlike the Pythia, however, Prudence answered not to ritual participants but to London's Queen's Concert Rooms, a venue catering mainly to high society and the affluent middle class.

Amid the scent of perfume, she transported her audience into a realm where her body became a medium for the mind's more obscure visions. It was characters, not just effects, that people craved to see. The transformations were vividly detailed in the press and often intense, if not to say fierce: "a woman slowly and painfully dying after drinking poison", "Judith beheading Holofernes", "Cain murdering his brother", "Gladiator fighting to the death" and, not to be forgotten, "Joan of Arc burning at the stake". The range of historical figures enacted by one woman was impressive. Between dramatic scenes, Prudence would collapse, exhausted, into her Pythian tripod. For the performance to resonate, the "ecstatic" had to be gripped on stage by strong emotions, and so did the audience. After a performance in the Belgian city of Ghent, one journalist

ONEIROMANCIE ARTISTIQUE
or
MDLLE. ISA. PRUDENCE,
THE CELEBRATED ECSTATIC SOMNAMBULISE.
WHO HAS ALREADY EXCITED GENERAL ADMIRATION AND ASTONISHMENT.

ONEIROMANCIE ARTISTIQUE is the Performance of Historical, Mythological, Dramatic, and Characteristic Imaginary ATTITUDES; with many other most extraordinary and unprecedented Magnetic Phenomena, by the mere transmission of Ideas and Sensations through the agency of the Will, effected under the direction of MDLLE. HERMINIE LAURENT, in accordance with the wishes of the Ladies and Gentlemen who may be present.

Maddle. Herminie Laurent would esteem it a great favour on the part of the Public, to bring ready written, the description of the particular Figures, or Scenic Actions, they may desire to see performed.

THE REPRESENTATIONS WILL COMMENCE AT TWO O'CLOCK.
EVERY WEDNESDAY AND THURSDAY,
AT HANOVER SQUARE CONCERT ROOMS,
EVERY FRIDAY,
AT WILLIS'S ROOMS, KING STREET, ST. JAMES'S,
AND AT HALF-PAST EIGHT, EVERY SATURDAY EVENING,
AT THE CONCERT ROOMS, 71, MORTIMER STREET.

Families desirous of a Private Exhibition of Oneiromancie Artistique, or wish for Particular Consultation, can apply at 15, Harley Street, Cavendish Square.

J. G. Hornblower, Printer, 77, Myddelton Street, Clerkenwell.

Figure 4.1: Oneiromancie Artistique. Broadside (c. 1847), Author's collection.

reported early 1845, "Her limbs twist, her body curls inward, and her face contorted by suffering as Joan of Arc, inspires terror, making the spectator a witness to the torment itself."[8]

As remarkable as these performances seemed, they aligned with the era's expectations, where audiences valued entertainment for its pictorial quality. Nineteenth-century theatre thrived on melodrama, pictorialism, and a fascination with a glorious past, best expressed through the *tableau*, where actors struck expressive stances to crystallise a narrative.[9] Prudence's pantomimic expression likely also drew from mimoplastic art.[10] Public fascination with what Richard Altick termed "the living representation of a picture" persisted into the twentieth century.[11] The interplay between stillness and movement captivated audiences across visual media such as the magic lantern, the Zoetrope and the Phenakistoscope. The myth of Pygmalion became emblematic of the oft-

eerie tension between image and motion within an evolving media culture that would soon encompass photography and film.[12] An early precursor to photography emerged in an 1846 review of Prudence's "Oneiromancie magnétique" in Nîmes:

> One could say at this moment that Mlle Prudence is a true DAGUERREOTYPE PLATE (sic), reproducing, little by little, the mental expressions of the experimenter; and, to cite just one example: as she is about to take her last breath, the magnetiser raises his hands and eyes to the sky, and at that very instant, the face of the somnambulist, contorted by suffering, suddenly takes on an expression of happiness, delight, and ecstasy that is difficult to describe.[13]

Daguerreotypes, silver-coated images, were prized for their fine detail and mirror-like surface. Their mystical quality lay in how images seemed to materialise, capturing reflections as if past figures hovered beyond the metal. Likewise, Prudence became a reflective plate for the projection and inscription of her magnetiser's influence and the audience's imagination.

Dualities

Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a marked tendency to demystify phenomena once deemed inexplicable, particularly in performances that engaged with the occult. What once evoked demons and spirits was reframed as illusionism, reliant on sleight of hand, superstition or mental illness.[14] Yet, fascination with the mystical endured, if only to seek rational explanations. "What is this occult faculty granted to some, denied to others, set in motion and suspended by a foreign will? What is this sleep different from all other sleep, this clairvoyant sleep that leaves not the slightest trace for the one who experiences it!", a reporter wondered in 1846 after witnessing Prudence's performance in southern France.[15] Her gift made her both a subject of scientific curiosity and a captivating stage presence, striking a chord between belief in the occult and scholarly rigor.

Amy Lehman, in her outstanding study of women in Victorian trance theatre, highlights the parallels between the scientific approach to mesmerism and contemporary theories of acting through the concept of double consciousness. Several doctors observed that magnetised individuals in somnambulistic states induced by animal magnetism developed

a separate consciousness and memory during their magnetic sleep. When the trance ended, all that had occurred within it was erased, and ordinary life returned. If the trance state was reinduced, memories, feelings and impressions from that state would also reappear. This raised the question: what occurs in the altered state, where a secondary personality with its own separate memories emerged, distinct from the primary self?[16]

Mesmerism was contested territory between science and pseudoscience and many scientists were interested in the conditions of somnambulism.[17] One of them, at the leading edge of his profession, was the English physician and early mesmerism advocate Doctor John Elliotson. In *Human Physiology* (1840), published around the start of Prudence's public career, Elliotson described how nervous disorders or induced states like artificial somnambulism altered awareness, ranging from unresponsiveness to heightened abilities. He observed that magnetised individuals developed a separate personality with distinct memories during their trance. Upon waking, these often vanished, only to return if the trance was reinduced. The relative independence of both personalities within one body seemed thus "that they may be said to live in a state of divided or double consciousness".[18] This raised a key question: what unfolds in this double consciousness, where a secondary self emerges, distinct from the primary one?[19] Not surprisingly, Elliotson became a keen and early observer of Prudence's performances, approvingly testing her abilities while she was in a trance.[20]

A similar debate unfolded in theatre, where dual consciousness became key to acting theory. Nineteenth-century actors balanced experiencing emotions with self-awareness as performers. This mastery, rooted in Romantic psychology and self-exploration, allowed them to embody characters fully while maintaining technical control, projecting authenticity without losing themselves entirely. Diderot's *Paradox of Acting* (1830) remains a key expression of acting's psychophysiology. He argued that while passion fuels true acting, it should not overwhelm the performer on stage. Commenting on the *Paradox*, Joseph Roach noted in *The Player's Passion* that "(t)he great actor's extreme rarity stems from his highly unusual, even freakish capacity to detach himself from his bodily machine, to divide himself into two personalities in performance, and so to direct the outward motions of his passions by an inward mental force, itself unmoved, undistorted by the physiological effects it oversees."[21]

In 1847, a drama connoisseur praised this capacity with explicit refer-

ence to Prudence's mastery, stating that, indeed, "[t]he stage is commanded by those who, with a force of passion rivaling madness, can unite the opposing powers of Miss Cushman and Mrs Nisbett within one person".[22] The comparison was symbolic: Charlotte Cushman's androgynous intensity paralleled Prudence's portrayals of Marat and other male figures, while Mary Ann Nisbett embodied grace and charm in romantic roles. Prudence apparently knew how to fuse these extremes into an ideal stage presence, fierce yet composed, verging on "madness". This duality mesmerised audiences, as theatre transformed raw passion into controlled, symbolic expression while preserving its unyielding intensity.

Contemporary performance scholars may recognise these dialectics as essential to theatricality. According to performance scholar Josette Féral, theatrical performance fundamentally relies on a continuous movement between meaning and its disruption: "If the forces of the symbolic often prevail, they are nonetheless worked upon by the instinctive, which sometimes bursts forth in unexpected way."[23] The unique presence of the actors on stage is born from a tension that constantly places them at risk, in a state of perpetual imbalance. This in turn creates an ambivalence in the spectator's gaze, a friction between the levels of representation and presentation. The audience's pleasure and engagement with the performance "come precisely from this ongoing battle between mastery and the outbursts of disorder that stalk the actor."[24] In other words, the spectator's gaze is also dual: they see the performers both as the fictional character they portray and as individuals revealing traces of themselves, sometimes against their own control. "It is here,' Féral concludes, "that the spectator grasps the otherness in the actor—the actor as himself but also as other."[25]

This tension inherent in performance prompted one enthusiastic French observer of Prudence to exclaim that "(t)he somnambulist does not paint, does not imitate, as the actor does on stage, she feels, she experiences!"[26] In somnambulism, beneath its outer form, it was the fundamentally unknowable that breathed life into the performance, revealing the darker undertones of representation, or, in Prudence's case, the "appalling reality" with which she depicted the horror of Marat, stabbed to death in his bath. Here, terror overtook prudence. Displays of intense emotions or "outbursts of disorder that stalk the actor" (Féral) were attributed to the effects of mesmerism and stereotyped as inherently female; ultimately, this amounted to the same thing, as Prudence gener-

ally appeared on stage as young, sensitive, and delicate, only to then transform into vehement, grotesque figures.

Did contemporaries truly believe that Prudence was possessed? If we are to trust the newspapers, many were indeed convinced that something otherworldly was at work. Yet Prudence's impact cannot be attributed to naiveté solely. The intensity of her performance, combined with the spectators' captivated gaze, is perhaps even more elusive to us now than it was to those who observed her at the time. Through performance, something undeniably emerges, shifts, and transforms. But a qualitative difference remains between the experiences of a nineteenth-century theatre audience and those of a modern viewer.

Doubt

To understand duality in mesmerist performances, we must acknowledge that ambiguity does not necessarily imply incongruity or incompatibility. The duality in mesmeric performance did not involve a contradiction to be solved but rather an ambiguity to be sustained. Ambiguity here need not imply incoherence; instead, it might have been precisely what gave the performance its power. The undecidability of what was witnessed—whether natural or supernatural, genuine or contrived—may well have been its greatest attraction. As a reporter noted with satisfaction after Prudence's third London performance in 1847:

> If, as was asserted, the only means of communicating the knowledge of what the young lady was required to express, was by the mere act of volition on the part of the magnetiser, it was, indeed, most wonderful, and would go far to confirm the truth of all that has been claimed on behalf of the art. If, on the other hand, there was any deception, and we confess that we could not with the closest scrutiny detect anything that could be supposed to border on it, Mdlle. Prudence must be an actress of great and varied power, who would achieve a triumph in the higher branches of the drama. The most incredulous, however, were completely baffled.[27]

Even if the performance did not adhere strictly to the truth, it was at least well-executed, and that seemed to suffice. Prudence and her magnetiser aroused unrestrained curiosity; better still, the very speculations about

authenticity were the show. In this sense, the performance operated less as a demonstration of fixed truths than as what Erving Goffman described as a "presentation", where meaning arises through the negotiation between actor and audience.[28] The undecidability of trance—whether genuine or staged—became an essential part of the spectacle, exemplifying what Richard Schechner has theorised as the liminal space of performance.[29]

Figure 4.2: Professor Lassaigne and somnambulist Prudence. (c. 1850), Comune di Milano, all rights reserved – Raccolta delle Stampe "Achille Bertarelli," Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

One could even step back from the experience without undermining its legitimacy. This explains why mesmerist performances could so easily be paired with parody. In 1845, before her journey to England, Prudence shared the stage in Ghent with *Tronquette la Somnambule, ou le pouvoir du magnétisme*, a popular one-act play performed immediately after she had left the stage. The play satirised mesmerist craze, portraying it as so obsessive that even the main character, a magnetiser, was losing sleep over it at night. The narrative includes a woman being courted by two rival men, a treasure everyone is searching for, and other classic comedic elements. The highlight, however, is a mesmerist scene, a "burlesque imitation"[30], in which actors re-enacted everything Prudence and her

magnetiser had performed barely an hour earlier, dressed in identical costumes and imitating their rhetoric. The parody of Prudence's poses, in particular, provoked hilarity from both the audience and journalist alike. Yet, and this is the point, this did not diminish the reality effect of the somnambulist. Despite the humour, the very same journalist didn't hesitate to praise her "truth of the expressions", from "Judith beheading Holofernes" to "the death of Socrates" and "the last sigh of Christ". Séance and parody, rather than opposing forces, were intertwined.

Somnambulist performance was steeped in doubt. This doubt was instigated by the performers, amplified by the press, and sustained by the audience. All parties were acutely aware that people flocked to mesmeric theatre not in pursuit of truth, but to revel in ambiguity. For the duration of the performance, the audience sought to escape the rationalist dilemma, bypassing the restrictive binary between true and false. Questioning the reality of what they witnessed became a self-referential act, as natural and supernatural explanations seemed equally plausible—and equally unresolved. Mesmerists consequently understood that risk was not merely a part of their trade, but the very reason why audiences wanted to visit their shows.

Testing devices used live on stage turned into theatrical props and the controversy became dramaturgy. Disputes over blindfolding, far from resolving the question of authenticity, became spectacles, occasioning ever more elaborate devices meant to silence doubt. Most strikingly, it was reportedly Auguste Lassaigne himself, the then magnetiser of Prudence, who introduced a metal mask, moulded to Prudence's face and depriving her of sight, sound, and smell. Yet, despite this "formidable apparatus", Prudence still appeared clairvoyant, so that the very attempt to secure certainty only deepened the mystery.[31] Consequently, it seemed to be the audience's hesitation between belief and disbelief that animated the scene: their doubt was not dissolved but prolonged, making them co-producers of the theatrical tension that gave mesmeric performance its enduring fascination.

The ambiguity of play did not always manifest smoothly. In the mid-1840s, newspapers in France and the Netherlands *con gusto* recounted the unfortunate outcome of a bet accepted in London. Reportedly, a boxer from the audience declared that he could replicate Prudence's mentalist acts without the aid of her magnetiser, wagering 50 guineas. The boxer climbed the stage, blindfolded himself and merrily succeeded in his attempt. Understandably, the somnambulist performers recoiled. "But

here comes the Englishman, who takes off his coat, rolls up his sleeves, and, with his arms pronated and fists clenched, positions himself in front of Mr. Laurent in the stance of a boxer."[32] The crowd, hungry for blood, would not relent, and magnetiser Lassaigne was severely beaten up before the eyes of a roaring audience. The police had to intervene to stop the violence and disperse the mob.

It was with Auguste Lassaigne that Prudence shared the greater part of her career. This self-proclaimed magnetiser was typical of the time—a figure somewhere between a prestidigitator and a populariser of science. It is not a coincidence that Lassaigne and Prudence's careers thrived in the fairground circuit. After 1852, they performed almost exclusively under the banner of "Magic and Occult Sciences", collaborating with ventriloquists and acrobats. Lassaigne became infamous for balloon ascents, often beginning his magic act mid-air. In 1854, a Dutch newspaper still marvelled at Prudence's "plastic poses", including her striking portrayal of "Cleopatra welcoming the serpent's bite".[33] Showmen knew very well that debating authenticity was more thrilling than revealing the truth. This blend of rationalism and spectacle fed the public's dual craving for knowledge and novelty, inviting audiences to marvel at deception while questioning it. As Neil Harris noted in his study of P.T. Barnum's success, this "operational aesthetics" placed the mechanics of deception at the heart of the spectacle. Audiences relished doubt, even when aware of deception. "If in this case any deception is practiced, we must admire the skill of the deceivers, while we condemn their lack of principle", remarked a reporter in 1847 after witnessing Prudence perform.[34] "The poses produced were certainly very extraordinary, both for precision and effect; but for the present, we must leave our readers to speculate for themselves on the origin and authenticity of these singular phenomena," another journalist concluded, cleverly prompting his readers to see for themselves, luring them into the game of doubt and wonder.[35]

Afterlife

The fairground was Lassaigne's refuge, but also a forced homecoming. His move to carnivals and travelling shows followed a turning point in Geneva in 1851. Just before, he and Prudence had peaked at Paris's Salle Bonne-Nouvelle, where the emerging bourgeoisie embraced modernity through

a captivating mix of science and spectacle. This show marked the peak of the duo's career—at least, if we are to believe Lassaigne's own account in his autobiography.[36] In any case, the performance continued to thrive on controversy. "You cry out about trickery—not at all; it's a miracle!", the widely distributed magazine *L'Universelle* proclaimed in its commentary of the spectacle.[37] Yet within a year, despite their popularity in Paris, their fortunes began to decline. In Geneva, Lassaigne—evidently attempting to regain momentum —granted twelve doctors and seven professors full access to the stage for 300 francs. The debacle became infamous, after the men of science ultimately coerced Prudence into a confession. A series of contested performances followed in Paris's Galerie Jouffroy, but the disgraced magnetiser gradually and definitively withdrew from scholarly circles. The career of Auguste Lassaigne ended in 1883 at Toulouse's *Jardin Oriental*, a garden theatre that fed to the public's enduring appetite with fairy-like spectacle.[38] By then, Prudence had already left the stage.

Yet, it would be a misconception to assume that the increasingly critical gaze of scientists drove a permanent wedge between empiricism and the otherworldly. Lassaigne was sacrificed as a mere prestidigitator, a man of the theatre, condemned for having misused "that precious instrument called Prudence Bernard". [39] Yet, the charisma of the somnambulist remained intact. More than that, she was portrayed as a victim of anti-magnetic theories, and her failure was also framed as the ultimate proof of magnetism's power, though no longer in Lassaigne's hands:

> Can you see her surrounded by fifty strong-willed individuals forcefully asserting: 'You will not read; we do not want you to read because if you were to read, we would be compelled to acknowledge a truth we dispute.' Can you see her supported solely by her magnetiser, asserting: 'You will read . . .' Fifty against one! The defeat was inevitable. [40]

Prudence's legacy endured, not only in the press of magnetism's devoted believers but also in broader discourse, where even as late as 1918 and 1920, she remained a mesmeric martyr. Perhaps her most striking—and somewhat ghostly—reappearance occurred in 1886 at Charcot's legendary Salpêtrière hospital. While observing a patient whose muscles contracted under electrodes, the renowned Belgian doctor Joseph Delboeuf suddenly recognised the "tragic expression" of Prudence herself.[41] It was a moment of epiphany, one that shaped Delboeuf's understanding of hypnosis as

both a psychological and physiological phenomenon. It also reinforced Prudence's spectral presence in scientific discourse.

The crucial point here is that processes of disenchantment and deconstruction, though real on the scientific plane, not only failed to diminish the allure of the occult but even retroactively strengthened enchantment and magic. One could simultaneously inhabit two worlds—one objectively real, the other imaginary—without being troubled by cognitive dissonance. This is the quintessential truth of all performance. Whereas the "classical suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge) encourages audiences to suppress awareness of the fiction, performance, on the other hand, creates a multi-layered interaction where paradox is central: the audience remains aware of the fiction yet is still emotionally affected. Performance enables audiences to shift between different "truths" of the moment without fully abandoning one reality for another.[42] In a similar way, in *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann explores the persistence of occult beliefs, showing that processes of disenchantment and deconstruction, though significant in scientific terms, have no effect on the occult. Instead, they often retroactively reinforce enchantment and magic.[43] This reflects my finding that somnambulist performance, much like the occult, exists on separate yet interconnected planes, where the awareness of its artificiality does not weaken its impact but rather strengthens it, keeping distinct realities apart without fully merging them.

Conclusion

Prudence's ability to oscillate between ecstatic possession and theatrical craft made her a liminal figure, an actor and medium inhabiting the space between corporeal immediacy and spectral suggestion. Her performances resonated with broader nineteenth-century concerns about identity, psychology, and the nature of perception. Rather than seeking definitive truth, her audiences revelled in uncertainty, caught between belief and scepticism, illusion and revelation. This performative hesitation was central to her act, shaping the way mesmerism was experienced and interpreted. Ultimately, Prudence's iconic poses exemplified the power of performativity, offering a space where ambiguity thrived. Her legacy speaks to the enduring role of theatre as a site of transformation, tension, and a shared exploration of the ineffable.

Notes

1 An extended version of this article, emphasising the mystical dimension of Prudence Bernard's performances, appeared in the inaugural themed issue "Occult Interfaces: Performance, Media, and Cultural Exchange in the Nineteenth Century" of the journal *Advances in Nineteenth-Century Research, The Journal of the International Nineteenth-Century Studies Association* (Taylor & Francis, 2026). Online ISSN: 3066-5906.

2 Henri Delaage, "Introduction sur la magie magnétique," in Auguste Lassaigne, *Mémoires d'un magnétiseur* (G. Baillière, 1851), 15. Author's own translations unless otherwise stated.

3 Since Prudence Bernard was internationally recognised by her first name, a tendency undoubtedly linked to the performative implications of the name itself, which evoked sincerity and virtue—I will likewise refer to her by her stage name, Prudence, throughout this text.

4 "Premiere scéance d'oneiromancie magnétique", *Courrier du Gard*, 17 March 1846.

5 The following European digital libraries were consulted for this research: National Fairground and Circus Archive (Sheffield, UK), British Newspaper Archive, Belgicapress (Royal Library of Belgium), Gallica (Bibliothèque nationale de France), Delpher (Royal Library of the Netherlands), alongside more global digital libraries such as Archive.org, E-Periodica, HathiTrust and others.

6 When they first performed in England and Belgium around 1840, there is brief mention of Herminie Laurent; a female magnetiser was remarkable, but I have found no further information about her. Her place was soon taken by Lassaigne.

7 "Saturday Evening", *The Sun*, 24 April 1847.

8 "Théâtre", *Le Messager de Gand et des Pays-Bas*, 5 January 1945.

9 Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 4.

10 Prudence's transformations echoed the "poses plastiques" popularised by Lady Hamilton's "Attitudes" toward the end of the eighteenth century. Like Hamilton, Prudence favored Bacchic themes. See: Kirsten, Holström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion*, 1770–1815 (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967).

11 Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 345.

12 Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (Yale University Press, 2007); the author explores how, later in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this obsession with stasis and movement reflected societal anxieties and a fascination with death, memory, and the supernatural.

13 "Premiere scéance d'oneiromancie magnétique", *Courrier du Gard*, 17 March 1846.

14 Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Harvard University Press, 2002).

15 "Magnétisme et Oneiromancie", *L'indépendant: Journal du Midi*, 15 March 1846.

16 Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland, 2009), 55–62.

17 For an overview in Britain, see Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

18 John Elliotson, *Human Physiology* (A. Spottiswoode, 1840), 369.

19 Amy Lehman, in her study of Victorian trance theatre, draws extensive parallels between mesmerism and acting through double consciousness: *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland, 2009), 55–62.

20 "A New Feature of Mesmeric Experience", *The Clare Journal*, 8 April 1847.

21 Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (University of Delaware Press, 1985), 147–148.
22 "On the Art of Making Mad Men at Pleasure", *Reasoner and Theological Examiner*, 28 April 1847.
23 Josette Feral, "Foreword", *SubStance* 31, no. 2/3 (2002): 12.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 "Premiere séance d'oneiromancie magnétique", *Courrier du Gard*, 17 March 1846.
27 "Saturday Evening", *The Sun*, London, 24 April 1847.
28 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Doubleday, 1956).
29 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. ed. (Routledge, 2003).
30 "Théâtre", *Le Messager de Gand et des Pays-Bas*, 5 January 1945.
31 Dingwall gives a detailed account of the different masks that were employed in the case of Prudence and that added to her legendary status. See Eric Dingwall, *Abnormal Hypnotic Phenomena: A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Cases*, vol. 1 (London: J. & A. Churchill, 1967), 150–52.
32 *Journal des Hopitaux*, 4 February 1848. See also *Drentsche Courant*, 4 April 1845.
33 "Amsterdam", *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 August 1854.
34 "Exhibitions", *Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper* (Digest, 1847): 671.
35 "A New feature in Mesmerism", *The Royal Leamington Spa Courier and Warwickshire Standard*, 17 April 1847.
36 Auguste Lassaigne, *Mémoires d'un magnétiseur: contenant la biographie de la somnambule Prudence Bernard* (Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière, 1851), 71.
37 "Courrier de Paris", *L'Illustration, Journal Universel*, February 1850: 83–84.
38 Max Dif, *Histoire et évolution technique de la prestidigitation*, vol. 1 (Imprimerie Lathière et Pêcher, 1971), 412.
39 Jules Lovy, "Cronique du fluide", *L'Union Magnétique*, 10 June 1858. The Geneva debacle as a pivotal moment in the career of the duo is recounted during the months of February, May, and June 1858 in a serial story published in this pro-mesmerism journal. The journalist Jules Lovy condemns Lassaigne for indulging in the superficial entertainment of magicians and other "clowns", while leaving Prudence's sensitivity to magnetism unquestioned.
40 Jules Lovy, "Cronique du fluide", *L'Union Magnétique* (10 June 1858): 2.
41 Joseph Delboeuf, «Une visite à la Salpêtrière», *Revue de Belgique*, vol. 54 (Merzbach & Falk, 1886), 125.
42 See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*. A New Aesthetic (Routledge, 2008), 24–37. The author convincingly links this ontological dimension of performance to the Gestalt principle of figure-ground perception.
43 Luhrmann, T.M., *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 276.

PART 2
BELIEF & COSMOLOGY

CHAPTER 5

Magnetic musings: George Baldwin and the divine traveller in Egypt

Robert Rix

This chapter examines a series of pioneering experiments with "magnetic sleep", that is, the artificial induction of trance-like states. My focus is on George Baldwin (1744–1826), a British diplomat and writer who had a strong interest in animal magnetism, exploring it within a transnational context. His time as a diplomat in Egypt provided him a sanctuary for prolonged experimentation with inducing magnetic sleep. Before hypnotic states were understood, Baldwin interpreted altered states of mind as spiritual transcendence. His writings straddle two intellectual currents: they demonstrate how magnetism created new pathways for exploring the human psyche while simultaneously preserving traditional beliefs in a divine and mystical cosmos. However, the significance of this duality extends further, as this chapter proposes that Baldwin's experimental practices can be seen as an important forerunner for the cultural transformation that resulted in vigorous and widespread attention to spiritualist mediumship in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Baldwin approached magnetism with a notable display of eclecticism, combining psychosomatic healing with belief in divine poetic dictation, paranormal insights and prophetic dreaming. Despite his remarkable publications documenting such phenomena, Baldwin has not yet featured prominently in critical overviews of spiritualist magnetism.[1] By revisiting Baldwin's neglected works, the chapter aims to enhance our understanding of spiritual magnetism, how it was practised in a relatively early phase of its mystical appropriation and the sceptical reception it received in Britain.

Magnetic cultures and Egypt

George Baldwin travelled extensively as a young man. He joined the East India Company and undertook journeys to India, Constantinople, and Egypt. Baldwin published works relating to the political situation in areas of interest to the British, such as *Narrative of Facts Relating to the Plunder of the English Merchants by the Arabs* [. . .] *in 1779* (1780). When he returned to Britain in 1781, he made his entrance into London's social scene. This was with wife, Jane (*née* Maltass) (1763–1839), known as a society beauty, who was born in Smyrna (now Izmir, Turkey) to British parents. Jane Baldwin gained many admirers in London, as her beauty and "exotic" dress dazzled high society. This was a contributing reason why George Baldwin made inroads into these circles. One of the finest English portrait painters, Sir Joshua Reynolds, painted the young Jane, when she was only 19. In the painting, *Mrs Baldwin in Eastern Dress* (1782), Jane sits on a divan in a seductive pose, wearing an oriental dress and a silk turban. With her gaze transfixed upon an ancient coin from Smyrna, she seems to yearn to escape to some distant realm. The coin is a symbol of the financial significance of her native city and British commercial interest in the East (Fig. 5.1). The painting exemplifies European interest in Orientalist fantasy.

Figure 5.1: Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mrs Baldwin in Eastern Dress (1782). Oil on canvas. (Wikiart: https://www.wikiart.org/en/joshua-reynolds/portrait-of-mrs-baldwin-full-length-seated-on-a-red-divan)

In one of his works, Baldwin tells us that he began experimenting with magnetism in 1789.[2] At this time, there was much interest in the new art, which was being explored through various approaches and techniques. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Baldwin fell under the spell of Richard Cosway, the fashionable miniature painter attracted to Swedenborgian mysticism and deeply immersed in alchemy, the Cabala, and magnetism.[3]

Having already completed a portrait of the popular Jane Baldwin, Cosway later painted John Boniot de Mainauduc, who administered magnetic treatments at his fashionable salon in London's Bloomsbury Square (having studied under Franz Anton Mesmer's former colleague turned rival, Charles Deslon). Cosway took a keen interest in magnetism, but this was from a different mystical-occult branch that had evolved from Swedenborgian circles.[4] This paradigm was far removed from Mesmer's medical-mechanical view and purely therapeutic practices. Cosway was more aligned with branches of magnetisers who believed that the trance state of magnetised individuals opened a channel to the spirit world. It found an early articulation in the Stockholm Exegetic and Philanthropic Society's *Lettre sur la seule explication satisfaisante des phénomènes du magnétisme animal et du somnambulisme* (1788), where it was claimed that curative practices were dependent on the communication with the spirits Emanuel Swedenborg believed to exist beyond our material world.

Baldwin was appointed as Consul-General to Alexandria, Egypt, in 1786. Due to government dissatisfaction with his lack of progress with a treaty, he was dismissed in 1793, but the dismissal letter did not arrive until 1796. He finally left Egypt in 1798, first for Italy, only to return to Britain in May 1801. Perhaps Baldwin's observations of disease in foreign climes made him interested in examining various cures. In "An Essay on the Plague", written in 1791 and published in his *Political Recollections* (1801), he discusses at length his discovery that rubbing plague victims with olive oil was a miraculous cure for the bubonic plague. Baldwin also mentions that gout can be relieved by dipping the foot in the same substance.[5]

During his time in Egypt, Baldwin experimented with magnetic phenomena. Baldwin cured his Arab servant of both an eye inflammation and a rheumatic cough through magnetic healing.[6] However, the focus on curative practices was soon overtaken by a preoccupation with trance

states, as we shall see. Mesmer had noted the heightened consciousness that his patients experienced during the "crisis", but considered it irrelevant. However, purported supersensory abilities became an object of discovery for Marquis de Puységur, a French aristocrat who was first alerted to what he called "magnetic sleep" or somnambulism after having magnetised a twenty-three-year-old peasant in his employ. Many who adopted Puységur's principles ignored Mesmer's original theory regarding the magnetic fluid that flows through all living things, which the magnetiser manipulated. Instead, they focused on the psychological phenomena and unusual insights clients experienced while in trance sleep. As Adam Crabtree defines it, the legacy of Puységur was that he "opened a door to a new kind of exploration of the depths of the human psyche" and thereby initiated a "psychological turn" in Western thought.[7] The magnetised subjects often displayed clairvoyant abilities, reported hearing voices from other realms, or claimed to possess prophetic insights about the future. This interpretation of the "magnetic sleep" gained significant popularity among aristocratic and international circles, where it intertwined with Masonic and Swedenborgian influences and was reinterpreted as a pathway to mystical experiences.[8]

The temple in Egypt

Stationed in Alexandria, Baldwin began exploring magnetic trance states after encountering an itinerant Italian poet who went under the name of Cesare Avena de Valdiere. In a room repurposed as a "temple" in the large hall of the consular mansion, Baldwin would induce in Valdiere a state of waking somnambulism. The sessions began on 6 February 1795 and ended on 9 November 1797. Over a hundred sessions were conducted, and an account of them was later published in *La prima musa Clio* (1802).[9] The text describes how Valdiere had brought with him an "angelic harp", which he could not play until he was placed in a "magnetic sleep" for the first time. On the same occasion, he wrote an Italian poem by automatic writing, that is, producing writing while ostensibly unaware of it.[10] During his magnetic sleep in the many subsequent sessions, Valdiere wrote in an illegible hand that Baldwin nonetheless learned to decipher. Subsequently, Baldwin presented the British Museum with a copy of Valdiere's writing, transcribed from its original Italian. Over the years,

public interest in this work grew, leading to requests for a translation. In 1810, Baldwin therefore provided an English translation, which bore the added title: *The Divine Traveller; Exhibiting a series of writings obtained in the extasy of magnetic sleep*. The concept of a divine traveller suggests that the hypnotic trances were perceived as a mystical journey of the spirit, allowing Valdiere to connect with higher powers.

The first few sessions of automatic writing resulted in short contemplations on the wonders of magnetism. In the fourth session, Baldwin evaluates Valdiere's ability to interpret political prophecies through a form of clairvoyant prognostication. This was particularly pertinent, given Napoleon's interest in conquest not only across Europe but also in Egypt (culminating with the landing of 35,000 soldiers on 1 July 1798). Baldwin shows awareness of Pope Innocent XI's seventeenth-century Latin prophecy, one part of which was said to have predicted the French Revolution. Although other aspects of this prophecy remained obscure, Valdiere, while under magnetic influence, created a poetic interpretation of the text. Through six quatrains, he predicted that the British king would, at some future time, bring "[an] end to the mad crisis of the proud Gauls of their contentious factions" and "allay the horrors; and shall cause them to cease the horror".[11] If magnetisers sometimes recorded that patients in trance states could predict how their sickness would develop, the discoveries Baldwin made, using Valdiere as a medium, were more in line with traditional prophecy.

Another phenomenon observed by magnetic practitioners was patients' purportedly clairvoyant insights. In the fifth and sixth sessions, Baldwin tests his magnetised subject's ability to connect with a higher consciousness by inquiring about the unknown origin of Pompey's Pillar, a triumphal column in Alexandria. Unbeknownst to Baldwin, Valdiere's account of its origin is incorrect, as he fails to recognise that it was erected in honour of the Roman emperor Diocletian between 298 and 302 AD.

As the experiments became more regular, Valdiere developed a new mode of dream vision, travelling in spirit. This entailed, for example, being carried through space close to Saturn, where hundreds of angels are seen in celestial harmony. Most of the time, the visions take place in Elysian landscapes of peaceful valleys, groves and brooks. Here, nymphs and other lesser divinities are frolicking, and Valdiere would converse with a pantheon of various Olympian gods, such as Fortune and Minerva.

The magnetic journeys to Elysium often resemble whimsical literary fantasies. The gods even appear alongside Don Fastidio, a Harlequin-like character from the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* (e.g. Valdiere recounts his jocular banter with a goatherd). The sessions are sometimes connected, but there is no overarching plot. Several of the visions conclude with Valdiere's request: *svegliami* ("awaken me!"), which reminds the reader of the circumstances of "magnetic sleep" under which these Elysian fantasies were recorded.

To give a sense of the disjointed, choppy style of writing, as it looks in Baldwin's English rendering, we may take the beginning of the vision of the thirty-fourth session:

> NOTHING doth respire. I do see, at a great distance, the glimmering of a light; it is drawing near: what tranquillity! In the centre of that light (una) one, with a great chioma, [head of hair] in-tressed with gems, toward me, her steps doth hasten: here she is! What a capricious aspect! She, with five others, is toying; but with me, no. Now she doth discover her adorable bosom: what beauty! Now she doth speak: what an hope-inspiring voice! She doth say: 'Thy faithful Diva am I; who, into Elysium did thee guide! Seeing thee abandoned to thineself this night: to assist thee am I come: not as companion, but to counsel thee.'[12]

In this passage, as in several others, there is a sense that transcendent knowledge is being conveyed. Despite the sometimes bizarre or nonsensical scenes depicting Graeco-Roman figures in their Elysian fields, the idea that there is a more profound message to be understood remains ever-present.

Heavenly composition

Frequently, poetry is recited in the visions, and several sessions end with a god or another mythical character delivering a poetic octave as the culmination of the vision. The "Clio" in the title of Baldwin's publications from the sessions shared her name with one of the nine Muses in Greek mythology. She appears in Valdiere's visions as a wonderful child whose birth is witnessed in the second year of the sessions and subsequently appears as an infant "first muse".[13] The idea of connecting with a muse

is a theme that Baldwin takes up, citing the English poet John Milton's invocation of the "heavenly muse" in *Paradise Lost* (1667). Milton's muse is a source of divine knowledge and poetic inspiration, guiding the poet through the complexities of creation and the human condition. Similarly, in Valdiere's visions, the Greek Muses embody creative forces that transcend the earthly realm, positing the act of poetic creation in magnetic sleep as a dialogue with the otherworldly. Baldwin's sessions produced "three complete Operas for the Stage".[14] These were later published under the title *Tre Opere Drammatiche prese nelle visioni di Dafni* (William Bulmer & Co., 1811), which Baldwin presumably financed himself and which was circulated privately.[15]

Poetic composition related to magnetism is an under-researched area. As a sociological and art-historical phenomenon, magnetic poetry is significant for understanding later developments, such as the automatic writing of the surrealists. The practice of animal magnetism is also thematised in several nineteenth-century literary works. These include P.B. Shelley's manuscript poem "The Magnetic Lady to Her Patient" (*c.*1822), Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Great Keinplatz Experiment" (1885) and George Du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894). Yet, magnetic themes permeate many works from Alfred Lord Tennyson to Charles Baudelaire. The practice of writing while in a magnetic trance is more rarely represented. In Britain, magnetic somnambulists began to have Swedenborgian-style visions of visiting the beyond.[16] The occult links were pursued in several circles on both sides of the Atlantic. The mid-nineteenth century saw the appearance of several publications based on magnetic automatic writing—texts that authors asserted were produced under the direct guidance of spirits. Among these, we find the American Rev. Charles Hammond's *Light from the Spirit World: The Pilgrimage of Thomas Paine and Others to the Seventh Circle in the Spirit World* (1852). His fellow American Thomas Lane Harris published long poems written in a state of trance, such as *A Lyric of the Morning Land* (1854), *An Epic of the Starry Heaven* (1855) and *A Lyric of the Golden Age* (1856). The poems are said to be composed while Harris was "subject to the influence of Spirits [. . .] much like that of a person in an ordinary magnetic sleep".[17] In Britain, the most prominent proponent was J.J.G. Wilkison, a well-known Swedenborgian, who published a collection of poems guided by the divine Spirit under the title of *Improvisations from the Spirit* (1857).[18]

Baldwin's publication of Valdiere's magnetic visions was poorly received when reviewed in *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review.* The reviewer dismisses it as "nothing better than a collection of such rhapsodies as might be obtained by an accurate short-hand report of what transpires in the cells of Bedlam".[19] Baldwin's text is also used as a lightning rod for the spread of mystical magnetism, more generally. The reviewer lashes out at the multitude of votaries who now regularly make contact with spirits, ironising that Emanuel Swedenborg, the extraordinary spirit seer who had inspired such endeavours, now was reduced to "a simpleton in the intercourse of genii, spectres, divas, and superior intelligences which persons influenced by magnetising enjoy".[20]

Contact with the dead

A feature of the magnetic practices, as these were sifted through Swedenborgian circles, was communication with the spirits of the dead. Emanuel Swedenborg himself claimed to journey through otherworldly realms among these spirits. Egyptians who had lived many centuries ago appear. However, more importantly, in session fourteen, Valdiere makes contact with Baldwin's deceased partner, Agnes, for the first time. Agnes expresses her enduring love for the man she left behind on Earth and appears several times again in the following visions. This aspect of the magnetic practices presages the culture of spiritualism and preoccupation with the afterlife in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The emotional and romantic quality of Agnes' communication foreshadows the sentimental and highly personal nature of many later Victorian séances, often infused with themes of enduring love and the continuation of affection beyond the grave.

In Baldwin's interpretation of magnetism, the practical elements associated with Mesmer's therapy are seamlessly blended with the religious and spiritual mysticism that Mesmer would not have approved. The visions suggest cures for Valdiere's cold and rheum and Baldwin's loin pains. The distinction in Baldwin's session is that *spirits* give the therapeutic advice needed. In a vision of 25 November 1795, an Egyptian *sacerdote* (priest) from the year BC 2542 appears in answer to Baldwin's request for a cure that may alleviate kidney gravel. The regimen offered concerns the regulation of lifestyle choices, such as avoiding late nights

and "indul[gence] in such courses as do tend to incite desire of their [women's] caresses".[21] Furthermore, various liquids are prescribed for consumption, and grease should be applied to the liver area. In another session, Asclepius, the god of medicine in Greek mythology, provides ideas for remedying Valdiere's toothache.

Valdiere is best seen as an early medium, allegedly spiritually clear-sighted when in a trance and able to travel, in spirit, to otherworldly realms. There seems to be no information about Valdiere after Baldwin left Egypt. However, his credentials as a magnetised subject were questioned by a nineteenth-century reader who left a comment in the margin of the British Library's copy of Baldwin's book: "it should be known that he magnetised all the money out of Baldwin's pocket into his own".[22] When Baldwin's wife, Jane, died, the obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* concurred on this matter. Baldwin's credulity in magnetism is said to have made him "the easy dupe of an Italian Improvisatore [. . .] who contrived to turn the Consul's weakness in this particular to good account".[23]

Dreams and prophecy

After leaving Egypt, Baldwin continued his investigations of unusual states. The clearest manifestation of this is the *Book of Dreams 1811–1812–1813* (1813). In this text, a magnetiser (named only as "D." In the text) induces a magnetic sleep in a young woman ("A. B."). She is treated for "extreme deformity of body, and consequent pain in her side".[24] Her figure is described as "a good representation of the letter S. or as the curves or angles formed by the projection of the shoulder and hip were sharp, more like Z".[25] However, the magnetic treatments were successful, and the girl is said to have been helped in having her posture transformed. Her treatment began on 25 September 1811, and soon after, "the patient was visited by dreams, or visions!".[26] Twenty-eight dreams are recorded in the book, each followed by Baldwin's interpretation of its potential meaning. Baldwin's book is one of the earliest examples in Britain of how magnetism was linked with dreams and their interpretation, a subject discussed extensively during the nineteenth century.[27] Several treatises were published examining the veracity of dreams as transcendent experiences that may provide a gateway to wisdom beyond the human dreamer's own limited understanding. For example, in a treatise from

1866, the French author Bernardin de St Pierre is quoted as stating: "I have experienced more than once that dreams are warnings sent by a Power that takes an interest in us."[28]

The abstruse imagery and symbolism of A. B.'s dreams are sometimes interpreted to indicate personal significance and, other times, related to broader societal and political contexts beyond the dreamer's understanding. An example of the latter is found in the twenty-fourth dream, where the disappearance of a painting of the Prince Regent (George IV) from a picture hall is seen as "significant of our worldly theatre" and "prospective of an early fate portended of the prince".[29] To this prophetic dream, a note of caution is added: "The nature of dreams and the fallibility of divination will take the sting away from our conjecture."[30] Nonetheless, the potential associated with magnetic vision cannot be mistaken.

The notion that dreams may predict the future is illustrated again in connection with another interpretation of A. B.'s dreams. It is said to predict what is personally significant and therefore "confided exclusively to the keeping of our dreamer".[31] That is to say, only she will recognise it when it comes true. Prophecy was much discussed and derided in the media in the early years of the nineteenth century. Most prominently, the prophetess Joanna Southcott claimed that the Holy Spirit spoke through her about the imminent end of the world. She received much negative press attention and was exposed to widespread ridicule, with James Gillray, Isaac Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson drawing scathing caricatures of her.[32] Furthermore, the Church widely rejected her self-elected office as a Christian prophetess. Although Baldwin's interpretations of dreams were not to be compared with the intensity of vision claimed by Southcott, he perceived the scepticism of authorities as a barrier to exploring the possibilities of vision that magnetism could offer.

In the fifth session, A. B. dreams of walking with a companion in a beautiful garden with unripe damsons, which they cannot pick. She sees a person stalking about the garden with his arms folded. This person advises A. B. and her companion to attend church and then bids them goodbye. In the interpretation of the dream, it is seen to be about the inability to enjoy the fruits of vision, as "[t]he public spirit is already revolted from magnetism", and magnetism is understood to be against "the present discipline of the church".[33] Throughout *The Book of Dreams*, interpretations often make the scenarios about higher powers validate magnetism as a legitimate practice.

Vilified visions

Baldwin had already complained about the stigma surrounding magnetic vision a few years earlier in *Mr. Baldwin's Legacy to His Daughter, or The Divinity of Truth* (1811). The book acts as a guide for George and Jane Baldwin's only child, highlighting what is valuable in the world. Thus, Baldwin includes a section on the science of magnetism, presenting it as a time-honoured legacy. He points to Paracelsus and his followers as cognisant of the fact that magnetism was a communication with "the soul of the world" and "the informing spirit of the universe"; this was also known to the alchemists of the seventeenth century and only rediscovered by Mesmer in the late eighteenth century.[34] In this way, Baldwin suggests a long-standing connection between magnetism and mystical knowledge, with Mesmer as the latecomer who arrived with only a partial understanding of this ancient tradition.

Notably, the book includes a reprinting of Valdiere's magnetic dreams. However, the advertisement prefacing the book reveals Baldwin's struggle against the public distrust of magnetism. He recounts that he has tried to "break and cut a way through the dark forest of prejudices with which our road to the Truth has been for a length of time so encumbered". Still, he concludes defiantly: "I have been told that I shall be called a Visionary, and I am told by Scripture "That where there is no vision the people perish".[35] Baldwin's struggle against scepticism and ridicule is clearly felt. The preface includes an account of how his acquaintances had advised him to postpone the publication of his experiments with Valdiere because magnetism was "cried down" while "the friends and abettors of magnetism held up to derision [. . .] and considered as no better than fools".[36] It is clear that Baldwin became humbled and increasingly approached the subject of mystical trances with caution, anticipating negative responses from detractors.

Among Baldwin's contemporaries, the best-known practitioner of writing guided by otherworldly spirits was the poet and mystic William Blake. In a letter from 1803, Blake writes: "I have written this Poem [presumably, *Jerusalem*] from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will."[37] Whether Blake found himself in a magnetic trance is not known. However, it is evident that he saw himself and his poetic-pictorial visionary art as a sort of mental faith healing that would stimulate divine

revelation in the reader and bring about a new spiritual Jerusalem. He perceived this "healing" as a transformative power that the fear of societal backlash should not constrain. In a notebook poem, Blake distinguished himself from medical-mechanical magnetisers he saw as only concerned with physical cures:

> Cosway, Frazer & Baldwin of Egypts Lake
> Fear to Associate with Blake
> This Life is a Warfare against Evils
> They heal the sick he casts out Devils[38]

Cosway's mystico-magnetic pursuits have been mentioned above, but Blake believes he had forsaken the more spiritual aspects to become a simple therapist. "Frazer" is more difficult to identify, but the surname appears on a list of De Mainauduc's students.[39] As we see it all over Blake's books, he did not shy away from labelling his poetic writing as "prophetic". In contrast Baldwin increasingly articulated concerns about the reception of "visionary" writing (which had not been present in the publications from the sessions in Egypt), Blake seemingly thought that he strayed too far from his commitment to the spiritual dimension of magnetism.

The practices that Baldwin experimented with would later be used and transformed to explore psychological processes. A century later, automatism was cultivated among artists as a technique liberating artistic expression from conscious control.[40] André Breton and Philippe Soupault's work *Les Champs Magnétiques* (1919) highlights the cultural interest in exploring the unconscious dimensions of the human psyche. Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung further undertook this exploration in relation to systematising the interpretation of dreams. Baldwin's experiments on the subconscious are probably the best-documented explorations of these areas of interest in a British context from the early nineteenth century. The material discussed in this chapter is historically significant because it illustrates a stage of the so-called "psychological turn" in Western epistemology, during which unexplainable phenomena were primarily conceptualised through mystical frameworks of understanding the universe. During the nineteenth century, the medical profession gradually began to understand dreams and involuntary operations performed in hypnotic states as components of the human psyche without relying on otherworldly explanations.

Notes

1 See, for example, Adam Crabtree's seminal text *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (Yale University Press, 1994).
2 George Baldwin, *Mr. Baldwin's Legacy to His Daughter* (William Bulmer, 1811), xl.
3 J. Mew and Deborah Manley, "Baldwin, George (1744–1826), diplomat and writer", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/1165.
4 George C. Williams, *Richard Cosway* (George Bell and Sons, 1905), 57.
5 George Baldwin, *Political Recollections Relative to Egypt* (T. Cadell, 1801).
6 [George Baldwin,] *La prima musa Clio* ([1802]), 17.
7 Adam Crabtree, "1784: The Marquis de Puységur and the psychological turn in the West", *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 55, no. 3 (2019): 212.
8 Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts: The Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2013), 305–313.
9 A later edition exists, probably also published privately in London by Bulmer & Co., c.1805.
10 Ibid., 18.
11 [George Baldwin,] *La prima musa Clio, Translated from the Italian of Cesare Avena de Valdiere by George Baldwin; or, The Divine Traveller; exhibiting a series of writings obtained in the extasy of magnetic sleep* (G. Richards, 1810), 4.
12 *Divine Traveller*, 82.
13 Ibid., 2:77, 132.
14 Ibid., 1:x.
15 The works are titled *Il Trionfo di Melibeo, La Oipria Silene* and *La Ooronazione di Silen*.
16 For a discussion of spiritistic interpretations of magnetism, see Adam Crabtree, "Animal Magnetism and Mesmerism", in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Routledge, 2015), 192–193.
17 Thomas Lane Harris, *An Epic of the Starry Heaven*, 3rd ed. (Partridge and Brittan, 1855), vii.
18 For an analysis of Wilkinson's poems and practice, see Robert W. Rix, "Divine Improvisations: J.J.G. Wilkinson and Automatic Writing", *Religion & Literature* 51/52, no. 3/1 (2019–2020): 101–122.
19 Review of *The Divine Traveller*, in *The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review* 3, no. 3 (1819): 53.
20 Ibid., 54.
21 *Divine Traveller*, 148.
22 Cited in Anne DeLong, *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse: The Romantic Discourse of Spontaneous Creativity* (Lexington Books, 2012), 55.
23 *The Gentleman's Magazine* (December 1839): 658.
24 [George Baldwin,] *The Book of Dreams, 1811–1812–1813* (Printed by C. Richards, 1813), 30.
25 Ibid., 4.
26 Ibid., "Advertisement".
27 See, for example, Edwin Lee, *Animal Magnetism and Magnetic Lucid Somnambulism* (Longman, Green, & co., 1866).
28 Ibid., 181.
29 *Book of Dreams*, 122.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 150.
32 See Matthew Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in Late Georgian England: The Theology and Apocalyptic Vision of Joanna Southcott* (I. B. Tauris, 2015), 150–160.

33 *Book of Dreams*, 14.
34 George Baldwin, "Magnetism", in *Mr. Baldwin's Legacy to His Daughter*, v [the section has separate pagination].
35 *Mr. Baldwin's Legacy to His Daughter*, iii.
36 Ibid., i.
37 William Blake, letter to Butts, 25 April 1803, in *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman, rev. ed. (Doubleday, 1988), 728–729.
38 Ibid., 505.
39 See Marsha Keith Schuchard, "Blake's Healing Trio: Magnetism, Medicine, and Mania", *Blake Illustrated Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1989): 20–30.
40 For Surrealism's links and inspiration to occult backgrounds, see Tessel Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

CHAPTER 6

Mediums and magnetisers: The entanglement of spiritism and magnetism and its performative and religious effects in nineteenth-century Belgium

Hannah Welslau

In the small municipality of Chênée, near Liège, a group of devoted spiritists sat together one evening in February 1872, patiently awaiting the arrival of one specific spirit: Doctor Demeure. The spirit of Demeure acted as the group's primary advisor. Channelled by the present medium, Mr Laurent, Demeure related the following message to those present:

> Friends, through healing mediumship, you become dispensers of God's grace, for it is a priesthood, the priesthood of charity. Operate with calmness, gentleness, faith, and trust; we will always be there to support your weak arms and to give you the strength of the first apostles, who healed by touch.[1]

The group, *La Fraternelle*, was initiated with a specific focus on healing mediumship and was active during the 1870s, a decade that saw the general rise of spiritism in Belgium. The advice they obtained from Dr Demeure was published in *Le Messager*, the journal of the spiritist organisations of Liège, in a series of fifteen articles, spanning from September 1872 until May 1873. A few months later, in October 1873, the articles were bundled and republished in a small booklet with the title *Guide pratique du medium guérisseur*. (Fig. 6.1) In the foreword, the reader, presumably an aspiring medium, is encouraged to have faith in their "disembodied brothers". "Pray first, then call upon them so that they may assist you, they will never fail you". With these reassuring words, they could commence their pursuit of mediumistic knowledge.[2]

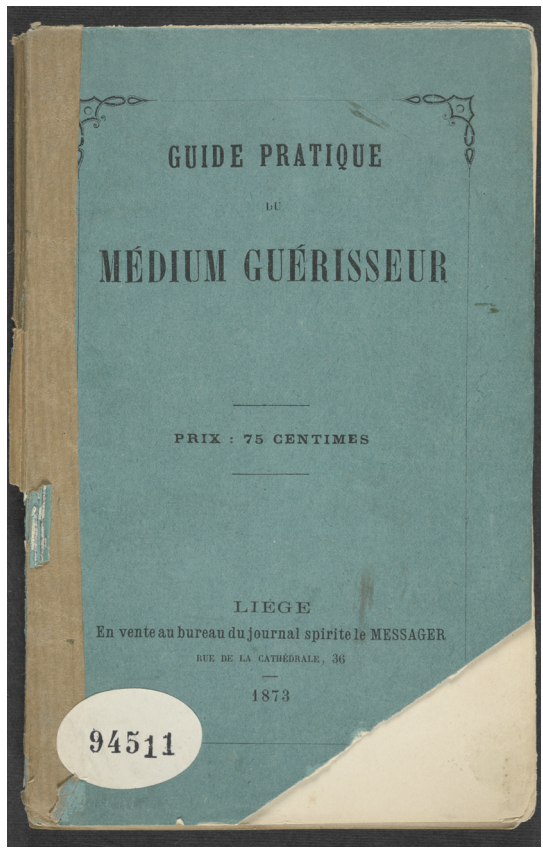


Figure 6.1: Cover Guide pratique du medium guérisseur, Le Messager, Liège, 1873. KU Leuven Libraries Artes University Library.

This chapter examines the intense engagement with magnetism of the early spiritist communities in the south of Belgium. In the 1870s, Belgian spiritist organisations began establishing themselves as stable undertakings after a few short-lived groupings and temporary publications in the 1860s. A close reading of the first decade of durable spiritist publications reveals the position of healing mediumship as one of the pillars of Belgian spiritism. However, these healing practices were not merely copied from magnetic precedents. As the example of Dr Demeure illustrates, healing mediumship was infused with religious motifs. In addressing various aspects of the magnetic beginnings of Belgian spiritism, on the one hand, this chapter will explore the religious undertones that resonated within

spiritist writings and practices, emphasising the importance of moral purity, prayer, and God. On the other hand, by examining the role of the healing medium and the interaction between spirits, medium, and audience, the chapter will consider the healing practices of these early spiritist communities as performative expressions of faith.

French influence on the Belgian context

The Belgian spiritist movement was deeply inspired by its French neighbours, leading Belgian groups to closely follow the doctrines of Allan Kardec, whom they addressed as *Maître*. In France—and consequently also in Belgium—magnetic thought and concepts were vital to (early) spiritist understandings. Magnetism became established as a popular practice in France following Franz Anton Mesmer's arrival in Paris in 1778. The rise of spiritism several decades later, in the 1850s, led to an intense exchange between spiritual and therapeutic facets of magnetic thought—based on the possibility of spirit intervention. Consequently, magnetism gave way to spiritism by the end of that decade.[3] Kardec's doctrine stemmed directly from his interest in spiritual magnetism and experimental séances held with specific magnetisers and somnambulists.[4]

Another point of relevance is Kardec's efforts to present spiritism in fundamentally Christian terms, with an emphasis on Christian morality and Christ's divinity as guiding principles. He even stated that his doctrine had particular affinity with Catholicism, providing a strong appeal for people of Catholic background.[5] This approach resonated greatly in Catholic Belgium as it reinforced religious ideas that were already widely accepted. In the accounts of the Chênée group, spirit-doctor Demeure praises Christ and the apostles as the purest healing mediums:

> Ah! What faith they [the apostles] also had; how a single good thought attracted pure effluents upon them, and how their Christian charity distributed them abundantly; it was the golden age of Christianity! Christ showed you the example; he was the first to reveal healing mediumship. Yes, the purest of the pure came to earth, not only to regenerate humanity but also to teach a law that has been ignored but will soon be the only mistress: the law of fluids, their substances, and their forces.[6]

Shortly after spiritism established itself in France, it started to gain a foothold in Belgian society.[7] The journals of spiritist societies offer the most detailed window into the thoughts and practices of Belgian groups.[8] Therefore, this chapter relies on a close reading of the first decade of publication of *Le Messager* (1872–1882), a bi-monthly journal based in Liège.

This city in the south of Belgium was arguably the most important centre of spiritism, bringing forth its own active groups as well as fulfilling a function as reference point for smaller spiritist communities in the Walloon region. Contrary to the pervasive image of spiritism being a mostly bourgeois pastime, these smaller groups comprised many persons of working-class background. These individuals were attracted to spiritism because it offered an alternative to their Catholic faith, with a profound message of hope, charity, brotherhood, and anti-materialism.[9] They experimented with healing mediumship, emphasised the importance of magnetism as spiritism's close ally and precursor and were devout spiritist believers.[10]

From a theoretical viewpoint, the entanglement of spiritism and magnetism was most profoundly articulated in Mesmer's idea of the universal fluid or fluidic body, which was reinterpreted in Kardec's writings as the *périsprit*. As detailed in his works *Le Livre des esprits* and *Le Livre des médiums*, in life, the perisprit was the link between body and soul, made up of universal fluid. Kardec acknowledged that this tripartite physiology was not new, but rather it was borrowed from magnetism.[11] In death, the perisprit enveloped the spirit and acted as its instrument, a semi-material connection between this world and the next. In combining their universal fluid with the animal fluid of the human medium, spirits could manipulate objects and make themselves known in the human world.[12] When it comes to practice, however, which is the primary concern of this chapter, the most outspoken connection between magnetism and spiritism can be found in the figures of the magnetiser and the healing medium.

Active and passive healing

Magnetism experienced a revitalisation through its incorporation into spiritism, which explicitly recognised the significance of magnetic healing practices.[13] Conversely, in its formative years, spiritism was able to build

upon the foundation of the older, well-established magnetic movement, strategically emphasising the tangible healing outcomes procured by healing mediums. "The means to promote the popularisation of spiritism constantly concerns us; at the moment, we only have two important ones: the newspaper and healing mediumship," *Le Messager* stated in 1874.[14] The act of healing was used to attract interest and convert new followers into committed believers. The early issues of the journal were brimming with favourable discussions and interpretations of magnetism, declaring opinions such as: "All educated spiritists are necessarily magnetists, and all have long appreciated and practiced magnetism under the aspect of its curative effects".[15] At the same time, it was necessary to assert clear distinctions between magnetic and mediumistic healing. The healing medium could not just be a magnetiser with a different name, even if, in practice, this was the case.

In various series of articles titled '*Magnétisme et Spiritisme*', '*Des Médiums*' and '*Les Guérisons Fluidiques*', *Le Messager* set out to define the boundaries between the two practices. Several articles stated that they were in fact quite similar and had the same goal, that is, "to do good". "Diversity of means, conformity of views", in summary.[16] The fundamental difference lay in the character of the fluids. While magnetisers used their own fluid, the healing mediums operated as conductors of *l'esprit docteur*, the spirits who cured the patient with their spiritual fluids. The difference in origin resulted directly in a difference in quality and effect. The fluid accessible to spirits was purer because it was not tainted by the moral and physical impurities of humans and was therefore more powerful, with more active properties, leading to quicker healing.[17] The intrinsic difference between the fluids was framed within a distinct moralising narrative inspired by Catholic discourse, in which the medium's moral state was directly linked to the possible healing results facilitated by the spirits.

> However, in passing through the intermediary of the incarnate, it [the fluid of spirits] can become altered like clear water passing through an impure vessel, as any remedy is altered if it has stayed in a dirty vessel, and lose in part its beneficial properties. Hence, for any true healing medium, there is the absolute necessity to work on their purification, that is, on their moral improvement, according to the common principle: clean the vessel before using it, if you wish to obtain something good.[18]

Even though the spiritual fluid was considered superior to the fluid accessible to magnetisers, it still had to pass through the human intermediary to have an effect on the afflicted subject. From the mediums' position, the "pure vessel" idea highlights their paradoxical relationship with the concept of agency and the position of their own body within the performance of healing. In spiritist writings, emphasis was placed on passivity: all bodily autonomy seemingly vanished as the medium let go and the spirit-doctors took over. The medium appeared to be a passive healer, their body was a conductor through which healing could take place, in contrast to the active role of the magnetisers, who used their own body to heal.

Continuing along this line of thought, the relationship between the active spirit and the passive mediums can be seen as mirroring the dynamic between the active magnetisers and their passive subjects. However, when the moralising dimension comes into play, this seemingly clear active-passive dichotomy cannot be maintained. The mediums—and their bodies—also play a significant role in both the course and outcome of the healing process. On the one hand, this works through their essential position as intermediary, and on the other, through the contribution of their personal moral state to the quality of the healing.

The passive role of mediums—most literally demonstrated through trance states—is often interpreted in contemporary research as a deliberate performative strategy.[19] Spiritist mediumship was indeed inherently performative—a live event for an audience, theatrically staged according to a certain script and built up to culminate in contact with the supernatural. In emphasising their passive state of oblivious trance, mediums created distance between themselves and the manifestations occurring, thereby fuelling the perception of authenticity. Spiritist believers had no problem accepting the idea of spirit possession and subsequent rejection of personal responsibility by the medium, because séances were deliberately framed to exclude ordinary explanations of the unfolding events. As historian Peter Lamont explains, spiritist phenomena depended on both the exclusion of trickery as well as the framing of the manifestations as supernatural, to establish their authenticity and give them meaning. A vital element in this frame was the alignment of the medium with the audience. Spectators were expected to actively take part in the séance, making the pursuit for spirit contact a shared experience between medium and participants, instead of an event controlled by the medium

and observed by the audience. This deliberate staging was further enhanced by the medium's act of self-erasure as they offered up their body to spirit intervention.[20]

Yet the moral dimension of these early spiritist healing practices placed the body right back at the centre of the performance and added a new layer of meaning. Mediums' bodies were not mere conductors, because they were inherently linked to their personal moral state, effecting the healing performed by spirits. When the medium was considered not pure enough, the spiritual fluid became tainted and the healing less effective. Rather than being a neutral conduit, the medium's body became a site where passivity and moral responsibility intersected, requiring careful balancing of both elements to arrive at an act of healing. Kardec's vessel metaphor appears only a handful of times in this specific context.[21] Furthermore, the notion that the state of the magnetiser's or medium's body and mind could influence the healing process was not a new concept. Both the medium and the magnetiser bore moral responsibilities towards their patients. However, in the case of the medium, this responsibility was heightened due to the involvement of spirits. In their role as mediums, their bodies had a direct effect on whether the patient received superior spiritual healing.

The role of the audience

The body of the medium and the actions of the spirit often take centre stage. There was, however, an important and collective third actor involved. Spiritist séances demanded an audience. The participatory nature of spiritism fostered a shared sense of community, belonging and direct involvement in the new faith. Attendees were encouraged to cultivate a harmonious atmosphere by holding hands, talking, singing, and praying together, as such conditions were considered necessary to attract benevolent spirits. In the context of magnetic-spiritist healing, this created the opportunity for all those present to feel that they had a hand in curing the afflicted subject, which for them was proven by visible healing results.

A most wondrous account appears in an article published on 15 August 1874 in *Le Messager*. It recounts the healing session of Mr Adolphe Stassin, head mechanic at a coal mine, who came to Brussels in the hope of finding

a cure for his long-term illness. Six people attended, including the hosting couple at whose house they gathered, Mr Stassin and his wife, and Mrs Lassabe (the medium) and her husband. After the customary prayer, everyone sat at the table and eagerly waited for a message:

> Be well recollected, have faith and trust. After the remedy for Mr Stassin's healing has been delivered by apport, the medium will fall asleep to explain to you how to use it, and a few magnetic passes will complete the healing of the sufferer. The apport will take place at the feet of the patient; all of you will be able to see and examine it.[22]

This excerpt describes a most curious blend of magnetic and spiritist practices. An 'apport' was a very common feature of the spiritist séance where spirits brought forth objects from an otherworldly source or transferred things from one place to another. In this case, the spirit would provide a tangible remedy by apport and command the medium into a trance to convey through her the correct method of its use, concluding the treatment with magnetic passes. With high expectations, the attendees looked around, but nothing was manifested. They decided to pray again, and indeed, "at the last word of the Our Father, which we had just recited with reverence, the table tilted in a peculiar way, and we were all surprised and deeply moved when we saw the materialisation".[23] There was little time for reflection:

> The medium, Mrs Lassabe, spontaneously fell into a trance state; a spiritual doctor took control of her, and he, after delivering a beautiful moral discourse, explained to us how to use the remedy, then administered magnetic passes to the patients himself [sic].[24]

The manifested remedy was described as a square cake, made up of hundreds of small pieces stuck together, gummy and covered in shiny herbs. Everyone tasted it, but no one could recognise the specific flavour. The account finishes by stating that the spirits had wished for this to be published, that everyone present was very happy with the magnificent results and they sincerely had thanked Almighty God for the favour they had received. A month later, *Le Messager* published a short update from Mr Stassin, stating that after four years of suffering, he was now nearly cured.[25]

Figure 6.2: Les secrets du magnétisme et de l'hypnotisme dévoilés, Garnier Frères, Paris, 1910, 273. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The religious elements of these magnetic-spiritist healings provided an immediate connection to the phenomena taking place. While the medium acted as the conduit, the other attendees were more than mere spectators, fulfilling a supporting role through their presence and prayer. At the height of the event, nervously anticipating the manifestation of a remedy as promised by the spirit-doctor, the audience directly participates, taking control of the event by starting to pray to aid and accelerate

the healing process. Their intervention was effective and the spirit-doctor finalised the healing séance by treating Mr Stassin with magnetic passes. The synergy of the spirit, medium, and audience resulted in a successful treatment.

Mr Stassin was also part of this audience, meaning that he had a part in his own healing. Within magnetic and somnambulist practices, patients could play a leading role in their own diagnosis and healing process, as explained elsewhere in this volume by Kaat Wils. In their somnambulistic state, they often exhibited heightened lucidity, enabling them to self-diagnose and suggest possible treatments. Within the religious-spiritist context described here, there is a different layer of connectedness added by involving the patient as well as the other attendees through prayer. *Le guide pratique* notes that praying even had an actual impact on the flow of beneficial fluids: "Prayer, being a thought, when fervent, ardent, made with faith, produces the effect of magnetisation, not only by calling upon the assistance of good Spirits, but also by directing a beneficial fluidic current towards the patient."[26]

Prayer served as the primary means through which the attendees connected most deeply to the unfolding events. Within the theatrically staged space of the séance and through ritualised acts, spiritist believers engaged in what anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann calls "real-making".[27] Prayer, rituals, and worship create the sense that gods and spirits were present, aware, and responsive. According to Luhrmann, faith endures through small, repeated acts that make these invisible entities real, despite the convictions of a world that seems to contradict this. Believers adopt a "faith frame" through which they interpret the world—a world where invisible spirits are real. In moments of prayer and rituals, they experience this reality most profoundly. Séances, set up to foster deep connection with spirits through both prayer and direct contact, can be seen as precisely such moments. They were sites of what Lynn Sharp calls "everyday miracles". For spiritist believers, spiritism was part of their daily lives, a lived religion through repeated contact with the other-worldly, which continuously reaffirmed the intertwinement of this world and the supernatural world as well as the realness of the invisible spirits.[28]

In this magnetic-spiritist context, prayer is an *act* of faith that impacts those who speak the words. Drawing on J.L. Austin's theory of "performative utterances", literary scholar Brian Cummings argues that prayer is a form of such utterances: "performative" sentences that do something

rather than merely say something.[29] They perform an action by the very act of being spoken, establishing a relationship between the individual, God, and/or the healing spirit, thus bringing a state of presence into being. In the context of illness, these prayers are filled with requests of therapeutic intervention. In one instance in 1876, described in *Le Messager*, a father prays to God to allow a good spirit to come and advise him about his sick son. A spirit arrives, gives him instructions—going against the prescriptions of the doctor the father had consulted earlier—and eight days later, the child is cured.[30] The prayers were uttered with the expectation of having an effect beyond the mere words. For the spiritist believers, the spirits and their magnetic cures were seen as responding to their call.

Conclusion

Everyone fulfilled their role in the performance of healing: the medium as a pure vessel, the spirit as the doctor and the audience—including the patient—as vital encouragement through prayer. The space of the séance was transgressive, theatrical and based on cultivating a profound, embodied experience, opening up the possibility of connecting with each other and with the otherworldly. As the magnetic-spiritist healing practices offered actual results in this world, in people's lives, on top of the extraordinary spirit contact, this must indeed have been a powerful experience, used to inspire conversions and continued faith.

Notes

1 "Dissertation spirite sur la médiumnité guérissante", *Le Messager*, no. 14, 15 January 1873, 108. All translations are the author's own.

2 *Guide pratique du medium guérisseur* ([s.n.], 1873), 4.

3 A detailed history of the dynamics between magnetism and spiritism in France can be found in the fundamental work of John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Cornell University Press, 2008).

4 Ibid., 99–102.

5 Ibid., 140–142.

6 *Guide pratique*, 56–57.

7 The precise introduction of spiritism in Belgium remains shrouded in uncertainty. It probably arrived in Belgium through individuals who were involved with magnetism; however, these

trajectories are extremely difficult to trace due to the limited available sources. Compared to France, there seem to have been few dominant figures who presented their own thoughts and theories, resulting in a lack of published works.

8 Spiritist journals offer a potential avenue for gaining insight into the Belgian context, also regarding magnetic thought, albeit filtered through a spiritist lens and heavily influenced by French thinkers such as Mesmer, Puységur, Du Potet, Deleuze, and Lafontaine. However, these sources are often highly fragmentary. Further research is needed into these magnetic and spiritist circles, their overlap and mutual influences, but at present this remains largely absent from Belgian historiography. For magnetism in relation to the medical establishment and to stage magic, see the work of Kaat Wils.

9 For more on spiritism in Belgium see Michel Meeus, «Naissance et Croissance Du Spiritisme et de l'Antoinisme Dans Le Diocèse de Belgique», *Leodium* 95 (2010): 19–44; Christian Landresse, «Un Siècle de Renouveau de l'occulte (1847–1940): Spiritisme, Théosophie et Antoinisme En Belgique», Master's thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1998.

10 A standard work on spiritism within the working class is Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850–1910* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

11 Guillaume Cuchet, "Le retour des esprits, ou la naissance du spiritisme sous le Second Empire", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54, no. 2 (2007): 81.

12 Allan Kardec, *Le Livre des esprits*, second year (Union Spirite Française et Francophone, 1998 [1860]), 9; Allan Kardec, *Le Livre des médiums*, eleventh year (Encyclopédie Spirite: Le Mouvement Spirite Francophone, 2006 [1869]), 51–64.

13 Marijke De Sadeleer wrote an excellent thesis on magnetic healing in Belgium and this is one of her main arguments: Marijke De Sadeleer, «De Kracht Van Genezing: De Keuze Voor Een Magnetische Behandeling in België», Master's thesis, KU Leuven, 2013.

14 "Chronique Spirite", *Le Messager*, no. 20, 15 April 1874, 154.

15 "Magnétisme et Spiritisme", *Le Messager*, no. 4, 15 August 1875, 30.

16 "Magnétisme et Spiritisme", *Le Messager*, no. 5, 1 September 1872, 36.

17 *Guide pratique*, 62–63.

18 Ibid. This text was originally published in *Le Revue spirite*, no. 9, September 1865, 260.

19 See for example: Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, 1989); Simone Natale, "The Medium on the Stage: Trance and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9, no. 3 (2011): 239–255; Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland & Company, 2009).

20 Peter Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 126–139.

21 As historian Lynn Sharp notes, healing was not a primary concern for Kardec. See Lynn L. Sharp, "Popular Healing in a Rational Age: Spiritism as Folklore and Medicine", *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 33 (2005): 313.

22 "Guérisons médianimiques", *Le Messager*, no. 4, 15 August 1874, 27.

23 Ibid., 28.

24 Ibid.

25 "Correspondance", *Le Messager*, no. 10, 15 November 1874, 50.

26 *Guide pratique*, 66.

27 Tanya Luhrmann, *How Gods Become Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton University Press, 2020): preface.

28 Lynn L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lexington Books, 2006), xvii.

29 Brian Cummings, "Prayer, Bodily Ritual and Performative Utterance: Bucer, Calvin and the Book of Common Prayer", in *Prayer and Performance in Early Modern English Literature*, ed. Joseph Sterrett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 18–19.

30 "Assemblée générale", *Le Messager*, no. 7, 1 October 1876, 53.

CHAPTER 7

Magnetism and spiritism in the Ottoman Empire (1850s–1870s)

Özgür Türesay

The history of magnetism in the Ottoman Empire is intertwined with that of Anglo-American spiritualism and continental spiritism. This complex history of cultural transfer in a multi-religious empire is divided into three periods: the introduction and dissemination of magnetism, spiritualism, and spiritism in cosmopolitan Levantine, European, and non-Muslim circles in the Ottoman Empire circa 1854–1870s; the emerging interest in Muslim circles from the second half of the 1870s; and the Young Turk period, which began in 1908 and saw an explosion of publications on magnetism, spiritualism, and spiritism around 1910. In what follows, I confine myself to the first period.[1]

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the many Europeans who flocked to Istanbul because of the Crimean War were instrumental in bringing these cultural forces to the Ottoman Empire in the early 1850s. With the outbreak of the war, Istanbul was transformed into a European city, with tens of thousands of journalists, officers, diplomats, doctors, and nurses arriving from Europe. In other words, because of this war, Ottoman society, and Istanbul in particular, grew culturally closer to Europe—especially to France, Britain, and the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia: the allies of the Ottoman Empire in the war—at the very time when spiritualism reached Europe from America.

As for spiritualism: according to available evidence, some table-turning séances occurred in Istanbul as early as 1854. A British merchant named Lenox Horne, who had come to Istanbul on business, attended many séances via his "Turkish" colleagues, some of which took place in the house of Orsini, a Levantine of Italian origin. Orsini lived in a mansion on the Bosphorus. During the séances, tables and other objects rotated and hovered, a pencil rose and fell on the table and began to write of its own accord. A boy floated. All this took place in the presence of one

of three sisters who were well known in town for their mediumistic skills. During one of these séances the English merchant learned that séances had become one of the most important forms of entertainment in the palace harem. Horne visited Orsini and a merchant living in Athens. This suggests that "Turkish" here may not be an ethnic or religious reference (that is, Muslim). It is important to note that these names do not definitively indicate whether Europeans and/or Levantines introduced spiritualism to Istanbul. If there were Muslims who were aware of and interested in spiritualism, it seems that Horne was not in contact with them. According to this source, a Dutch merchant named Riko attended séances with Repos, a well-known lawyer in Constantinople, P. Vallauri, Montani, and Paul Lombardo. There he met two spirits, Sophie and Angelica. In one séance, Angelica contacted Giuseppe Garibaldi and dictated a song in praise of the Italian republican.[2] Ottoman sources often use spiritualism and spiritism interchangeably; in what follows I will stick to "spiritism".

Magnetism and spiritism in Istanbul cosmopolitan circles

Hezâr Esrâr (*A thousand mysteries*, published in 1862), an important Turkish book that synthesises folk and modern medicine, contains only a very brief reference to magnetism, in a discussion about the power of the gaze called *magnamizmu* and *seyyâle-i mıknâtısiyye*, that is, magnetic fluid.[3] It is therefore reasonable to assume that Mesmer's theories had reached Istanbul early.

An analysis of the French spiritist periodical press of the period shows that spiritism spread rapidly through the European and Levantine communities in Istanbul. In the 1860s, *La Revue spirite*, *La Vérité, Journal du spiritisme* (Lyon), *Le Sauveur des peuples. Journal du spiritisme. Propagateur de l'unité fraternelle* (Bordeaux) or *L'Avenir. Moniteur du spiritisme* (Marseille), and the *Journal de Constantinople*, the influential European and Levantine communities' newspaper in the imperial capital, published several articles on magnetism and spiritism in Istanbul. As the French accounts are similar, I will focus on two references.

In 1861, a letter from Istanbul in *La Revue spirite*, the main journal of the spiritist movement under Allan Kardec, claimed that spiritism had spread in Istanbul because of the efforts of two sisters, Sophie and

Angelica. The author was a man called Repos. The sisters called their new religion "spiritualism" and they hoped for quick expansion. Repos saw a table weighing a hundred kilos rise during séances; spirits made their presence known by tapping on the table. Despite their promises, no one saw any spirits. Among the disciples were unskilled medium writers and painters, composers who could not read music, and pianists who communicated with spirits when in trance. The two sisters used magnetism through spirits to cure all kinds of ailments. Repos's new religion, "called spiritism or spiritualism", accepted everyone and proved that everyone, equally, is a child of God.[4]

In late 1863, French newspapers again discussed the sisters Sophie and Angelica, revealing their true nature. *La Vérité* published an excerpt of a letter from Istanbul dated 23 September 1863, again written by Repos, praising two paintings of mediumship. These paintings depict Sophie Callionte and Angelica Sélionte as a spirit and an angel. *La Vérité* says these paintings, representing "universal harmony", were painted by Repos, even if he was not an experienced painter. Sophie appeared to Repos and Angelica to Repos' friend Montani. While Repos and Montani were asking themselves where these two beautiful spirits came from, whose spirits they were, and what wisdom they hid in their names, an acquaintance gave them a work by the French theologian Jacques Matter (1791–1864): *Swedenborg, sa vie, ses écrits et sa doctrine*, published in 1863. Reading it, they realised that the two spirits who appeared to them were the same spirits that had appeared to two female fortune tellers in the 1680s and 1690s.[5]

It is worth mentioning here that Pietro Montani (1829–1887), a well-known Levantine spiritist in Istanbul, had published a book called *L'harmonie des sphères* in 1865.[6] André Pezzani (1818–1877), a famous spiritist writer, wrote a long and detailed introduction to Montani's book, published in *La Vérité, Journal du spiritisme*.[7] Originally from Piedmont-Sardinia, Montani came to Istanbul as a three-year-old when his family moved there. He grew up there and returned after studying architecture in France. A Freemason with close ties to the Ottoman court, he was for many years president of the *Società Operaia*, the Italian philanthropic society of Pera. This society was founded in the context of Garibaldian revolutionary mysticism. It combined revolutionary utopian tendencies with esotericism, occultism, and Freemasonry.[8]

The newspaper's emphasis on the "universal harmony" in the

mediumistic portraits is pivotal. This was a direct reference to an occult theologian's book on Swedenborg and his thought. The quest for "universal harmony", such a persistent idea in the nineteenth century, clearly points to the common source of the intellectual origins of magnetism and spiritism.[9] The idea of harmony of the spheres was first developed in ancient Greece by Pythagoras. It was taken further in Swedenborg's mystical doctrine and in mesmerism. However, this shared origin did not stop tensions between magnetisers and spiritists in Europe.[10] This was also true in the Ottoman Empire. A polemic in the *Journal de Constantinople* captures the tension between magnetisers and spiritists in Istanbul.

The *Journal de Constantinople*, one of the city's main newspapers appearing under various names since 1844, published three critical articles on spiritism in February and March 1864.[11] The author mocked the spiritists, saying that one Catholic author explained the phenomena as magic and witchcraft, another author as the universal fluid of magnetism. Spiritists would explain the same phenomena as the intervention of spirits. According to the author, all three interpretations were far from the truth. From the details given in the first article, and especially from the sarcastic tone, we can conclude that the spiritists were certainly and controversially present in the capital. A short reply to this first article, written by Repos on behalf of the Istanbul spiritists, was published in the same journal in early March 1864. In contrast to the sarcastic tone of the first article, the reply was objective, detached, and cold-blooded. Repos stated that the article's author had no knowledge of spiritism, and he was reminded that it had many adherents and believers in many parts of Europe.[12]

Ten days later, the newspaper published a defence of magnetism. The author said he learned magnetism from a female magnetiser who came to Istanbul a few years earlier. After working with her for a long time, one day he succeeded in using his mind to move a table away from her. He learnt to control his new ability and began to perform in sessions with relatives and friends. Although the beginning medium believed the table moved because of magnetic energy, he described how others thought it was the work of spirits. When the spirits' answers to the medium's questions did not satisfy his spiritist friends, the medium told them there are no spirits and that what happened was magnetism. His friends started to argue with the spirits and even swore at them. The medium said that many people like him practiced mediumship, but they all attributed the

phenomena to the influence of spirits and that he was completely in the minority. The medium did not understand how he moved the table, but he was convinced there was a natural explanation. Unlike spiritists, he was sure the spirits did not come down from above to answer random questions from "dreamers of this mortal world" (*les rêveurs de ce bas monde*). He ended his article by saying he is not guilty of witchcraft or working with spirits.[13]

This article is significant because it illustrates the tensions that emerged in the 1850s and 1860s in Istanbul between some magnetisers and spiritists. As in Europe, magnetisers' relative monopoly in the field of supernatural phenomena was seriously threatened by the development and spread of spiritism. As elsewhere, the religious and mystical tone of the Istanbul spiritists disturbed the magnetisers, who claimed to have a scientific explanation for certain supernatural phenomena.

Outside of the European and Levantine circles in Istanbul, we do have some, albeit very limited, information about the interest of members of the Ottoman Greeks in spiritism. The Scalieri incident will not be addressed here in detail. Scalieri (1833–1892) was a Stamboulian Greek spiritist and a friend of the deposed Sultan Murad V (r. 1876). In 1876 he persuaded Duneau, a famous French medium and healer, to hold therapy sessions with Murad V. The sultan was deposed and locked up under strict surveillance in a palace on the Bosphorus. This episode has been analysed in detail by Edhem Eldem.[14] It will simply be pointed out that in the 1870s, several spiritist classics were translated into Greek. Angelos Nikolaidis, a writer and publisher from Istanbul, editor of the magazines *Philergos* (1877–1878) and *Chara* (1878), translated three books by Allen Kardec into Greek in 1876–77. He published them in his Istanbul printing house: *Τι εστίν ο Πνευματισμός* (*What is Spiritism?*), *Το βιβλίον των Πνευμάτων* (*Spirits' book*), and *Το βιβλίον των Πνευματομυστών* (*Mediums's book*). The General Catalogue of Greek books printed in the nineteenth century mentions a second edition of *What is Spiritism?* in 1894.[15]

Magnetism and spiritism in Izmir: Kalusd Gostandian (1840–1898) and Edmondo Rossi de Guistiniani (1840–1909)

Having surveyed the activities of magnetisers and spiritists in the imperial capital, all of whom were either Europeans who had settled in the city or Levantines connected to Ottoman non-Muslims through matrimonial relationships, this section turns to Izmir, where two interesting intellectual figures merit our attention.

James Martin Peebles (1822–1922), American consul in Trabzon in 1869, mentioned that spiritist activities existed not only in Istanbul and Izmir, but also in Damascus and Beirut. Peebles' testimony further reveals that Levantines of French and Italian origin participated in these activities, along with two Ottoman officers of Polish origin. Peebles, who brought some correspondence from Paris to Istanbul for the lawyer Repos, wrote that two men, Constant and Edmondo Rossi de Guistiniani, introduced him to Izmir's spiritist circles. After Turkish coffee and fruit in the garden of Constant's mansion, which was abundant in fig, lemon, and orange trees, the host proceeded to play his guests a piece of music he had composed inspired by spirits.[16]

The person in question was Kalusd Gostandian (1840–1898), a Catholic Armenian from Izmir who was known in French as Calouste Constant. Izmir was home to an Armenian community of between six and seven thousand people in the nineteenth century. Compared to the enormous growth of Turkish and Greek populations, this Armenian community which comprised people coming from Iran, Ankara and Western Armenia was a small demography and by no means homogeneous.[17]

Gostandian pursued his studies at the St Mesrop school, founded in 1799 by Father Hovnan Vanantétzi, the only institution of its kind at the time. Over time and with donations from wealthy Armenian families, it grew, and consequently the Armenians in Izmir became the most educated and dynamic Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire.[18] According to the introduction of his articles published in French, Gostandian was a member of some of the most prestigious scientific societies in Paris, the *Société asiatique* and the *Société française de magnétisme*. He wrote in *Le Magnétiseur. Journal du magnétisme animal*, the Swiss institutional journal of the magnetism movement. In the early 1860s he wrote articles about protective or healing objects from the evil eye, such as snake beads and amulets in Anatolia. With these articles,

he asserted that conventional healing practices represented the ultimate manifestation of magnetism itself.[19]

The most substantial article contains a great deal of information about the author. In 1858 Gostandian published a fourteen-page booklet in Armenian in which he compared European magnetism science with Oriental magic. *Mesmerism* was the thirteenth in his series of pocket-books. After providing a concise overview of the historical development of mesmerism and magnetism, and a detailed exposition of cases of sleepwalking, Gostandian touched upon the practices of table turning and rotation. This practice reached Europe only a few years earlier but had become very popular and was not yet known as "spiritism".[20]

In a footnote in an article from 1863, Gostandian argued that mesmerism and magnetism were merely practices known as *agothèle* ('to invoke') among Armenians and *okutmak* ('to invoke') among Turks. This was not a new claim. Gostandian had made it before in his 1858 booklet on mesmerism, and again in articles in the 1860s. The earliest claim was made in an 1847 Armenian book by Mesrob Taghitiantz, published in Calcutta. Mesrop Taghitiantz (1803–1858) was born in Yerevan and studied at Bishop's College, which was founded by Anglican missionaries in Calcutta in 1820. He became a lecturer at the same institution, lived in Persia, and came to Istanbul in 1838. Mesrop Taghitiantz was a prolific author, producing some of the earliest Armenian novels and works on the history of India and Persia.[21] Writing about Taghitiantz, Hirant Thorossian also wrote about Gostandian:

> After completing his studies in philosophy and physical sciences, he intended to become a popular writer in these fields. As a proponent of Auguste Comte's positivist doctrine, he published, among other works, *On Method* (1878) and *Progress by Science*, in which he advanced the argument that progress was contingent upon the utilisation of experimental methods. When his fellow countrymen reproached him for his materialist tendencies, he resented this and, believing that his readership was not mature enough to understand the issues he addressed, he stopped writing in Armenian and began to write only in French.[22]

Thorossian's depiction of Gostandian is that of a conventional magnetiser or spiritist. He shows a familiarity with the physical sciences, a predisposition to overarching cosmological doctrines, a materialist worldview, a

love of science shaped around the idea of progress, and a commitment to experimental methods. As elucidated in the letter quoted by Peebles, Gostandian's shift from magnetism to spiritism exemplifies a trend in the annals of magnetism, marked by the advent and ascendance of spiritism.

Gostandian's book *On Method*, published in 1878, was banned by the Catholic Church because it strongly defended a materialistic, scientific, and atheistic worldview—it also referred to Karl Marx's *Capital*. After his death, the manuscript notes of the book's second volume were collected and burned. Faced with such opposition, the French positivist and renowned lexicographer Emile Littré supported Gostandian in an article he wrote in *La Philosophie positive*, the leading journal of positivism. Gostandian introduced his book in the same journal as the first work in his newly established series of popular science books. This book led to accusations of atheism.[23]

From Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis's detailed book on nineteenth-century Izmir, we learn that an Ottoman named Grégoire Constant, who became a Russian citizen in 1840, moved with his family to Switzerland in 1864 because of problems he had with the Russian consul in Izmir at the time, bought a property there and became a Swiss citizen. The family later returned to Izmir and lived under the protection of the French consul, as did other Izmir residents of Swiss nationality.[24] The person Smyrnelis is talking about is Gostandian's father.

A brief examination of two articles published by Gostandian is revealing in this regard. The ninth issue of *Le Magnétiseur. Journal du magnétisme animal*, dated 15 December 1862, contained the short article "Enraptured Women from Amasya". The article recounts the case of an Armenian woman who, before a ceremony in which she was to become a godmother, experienced enrapture during prayer in a church in Amasya. In this moment, she saw Christ. She realised that the schism in Amasya's Christian community into three groups caused Jesus much pain. The city itself suffered a big fire in 1854 and a terrible hurricane in 1862. Those who found the woman in a coma at the church quickly took her home. After the priest administered the sacraments, he drank a small amount of alcohol. She woke up from her coma a few hours later and told him Jesus was upset that the priest had consumed alcohol. After this, the church officials made two important decisions: 1) all Armenians in Amasya would fast for eight days and go to church every evening; 2) women were prohibited from wearing European-style shoes, having to

wear yellow leather shoes instead, and from walking around with their hair uncovered. In the aftermath of these decisions six more women went into ecstasy.[25]

The journal's editor introduced Gostandian's letter alongside a recent example of mass hysteria: the 1857 events in the French town of Morzine.[26] In the editor's view, Gostandian showed how cases of possession were not only seen in France: the clergy and the Church caused such problems all over the world with their absurdities, rather than trying to explain the causes scientifically. Gostandian likely saw the event as a good example of how the Church and organised religion were bad for society.

Gostandian's other article is very long. In it, he expressed an opinion that was later often read in the writings of Ottoman spiritists: the animal magnetism that people in the West hailed as a new scientific discovery was an amalgam of traditional Oriental healing practices that were centuries old. Gostandian gave the example of the "evil eye" (*Keutu-nazar*, i.e., "bad eye" in the original Turkish). With pictures he explained what an Armenian woman in Izmir did to protect people from the evil eye and to remove it. Interestingly, the text uses Turkish words such as "invoke, thaumaturge, good faith" (*okutmak*, *eli sebebli*, *sıdk*).[27]

The second person mentioned by Peebles, Edmondo Guistiniani, belonged to a prominent Levantine family with roots in the ancient colonies of Genoa, settled first on the island of Chios.[28] In Izmir, Guistiniani, another polyglot with a firm command of both ancient and modern Greek, published two French books on ancient Greek culture and philosophy in 1875 and 1877.[29] At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Levantines of Italian origin struggled against French influence and underwent a process of Italianisation, Guistiniani, who bore the title of Marquise, assumed the presidency of the Italian Missionary Charity Society.[30]

In the 1860s, Guistiniani, like Gostandian, dabbled in magnetism. He organised séances in Izmir and wrote articles on magnetism in French journals. And like Gostandian, he gradually turned away from magnetism and joined spiritism before 1868. Until the late 1880s, he wrote many articles in *La Revue spirite*. He was the author of the important *Le spiritualisme dans l'histoire*, published in Paris in 1881 by La librairie des sciences psychologiques. In 1888 he attended the World Congress of Spiritism in Barcelona.[31]

Conclusion

If we recall that the satirical articles published in the *Journal de Constantinople* also made direct reference to French literature on magnetism and spiritism, it becomes clear that what happened in Istanbul cannot be considered in isolation from the rest of the world. The history of magnetism, spiritualism and spiritism must be considered in conjunction with other cultural phenomena, such as a burgeoning popular press and technological changes in the 1850s and 1860s. Those who picked up European newspapers in Istanbul to read what war correspondents wrote in the Crimean War must have read on those same pages that the tables were turning in Europe—literally. This is more than conjecture; it is a serious possibility.

Most of the first spiritists in the Ottoman Empire that we know of were of Piedmont-Sardinian origin; the earliest testimonies of the spread of spiritism in Ottoman society are found in the French press and in English sources; the common language of Levantines and Europeans in Istanbul in the nineteenth century was French; and the European population's rapid growth in Istanbul was dominated by the English, French, and Piedmont-Sardinians. All this suggests a close link between the astonishing speed with which spiritism penetrated Ottoman society and the Crimean War.

Furthermore, it is understood that as in Europe, spiritism in its early years in Ottoman society existed in a complex dynamic with magnetism. It would soon become the dominant doctrine of supernatural phenomena, marginalising or at least overshadowing magnetic practices. Another complex relationship, which I cannot go into here for lack of space, is that between Freemasonry, magnetism, and spiritism. Freemasonry and magnetism shared respect for Pythagorean thought; both were committed to Pythagoras's idea of universal harmony. It would be reductionist and therefore incorrect to see the first Ottoman magnetisers and spiritists in Istanbul or Izmir as passive transmitters of the doctrines of magnetism and spiritism, imported from Europe into Ottoman society. What distinguishes them from their colleagues in Europe is that they consistently drew parallels with traditional indigenous practices.

Montani's and Guistiniani's books in French and their repercussions in the French press; Guistiniani's and Gostandian's articles in French in the most important magnetic and spiritist publications of the period; the

mediumistic drawings of the Istanbul spiritists and the attention for them in the French press, as well as Montani's and Repos' letters in French spiritist periodicals: these elements all show that the Ottoman spiritists in Istanbul and Izmir played an active, albeit modest, role in the construction and dissemination of magnetic and spiritist movement. Future studies of the intellectual and religious life of the Levantine, Greek, and Armenian communities from the 1850s onwards will no doubt provide more detailed information on this subject.

Notes

1 See also Özgür Türesay, "Between Science and Religion: Spiritism in the Ottoman Empire (1850s–1910s)", *Studia Islamica* 113, no. 2 (2018): 166–200 and Özgür Türesay, *Osmanlı'da Ruh Çağırma. 1850'lerden 1910'lara Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Manyetizmacılık ve İspiritizmacılık* (FOL, 2024).

2 Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth century miracles; or, spirits and their work in every country of the earth. A complete historical compendium of the great movement known as "modern spiritualism"* (Lovell & Co., 1884), 421–424.

3 Alper Yalçınkaya, *Learned patriots. Debating science, state, and society in the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 31. The text of this passage can be found in Fırat Tuna, "Hezâr Esrâr Adlı Tıp Kitabının Latin Harflerine Aktarılması ve Tasnif çalışması" (Master's thesis, Kocaeli Üniversitesi, 2016), 173.

4 *La Revue spirite* 4, no. 7 (July 1861): 206–207.

5 *La Vérité, Journal du spiritisme*, no. 34 (11 October 1863): 6–7. See also "Le spiritisme en Orient", *Le Sauveur des peuples. Journal du spiritisme. Propagateur de l'unité fraternelle*, no. 40 (30 October 1864): 2–3.

6 Pierre Montani, *L'harmonie des sphères* (Didier, 1865). For the book's presentation, see *Le Sauveur des peuples, Journal du spiritisme. Propagateur de l'unité fraternelle*, no. 13 (30 April 1865): 4. For some information on Montani, see my *Osmanlı'da Ruh Çağırma*, 88–92; Paolo Girardelli, "Pietro Montani e il concetto di 'stile ottomano' nella seconda meta dell' Ottocento", in *«Architettura e architetti italiani ad Istanbul tra il XIX e il XX secolo», Mimar Sinan Üniversitesi Mimarlık Fakültesi'nde 27–28 Kasım 1995'te Düzenlenen Sempozyum Tebliğleri* (İtalyan Kültür Merkezi Yayınları, 2005), 79–86; Ahmet A. Ersoy, *Architecture and the late Ottoman historical imaginary. Reconfiguring the architectural past in a modernizing empire* (Ashgate, 2015), 17, 48, 97–100, 118–124, 162–173 and 180.

7 André Pezzani, "Etude Spirite. L'Harmonie des sphères", *L'Avenir. Moniteur du spiritisme*, no. 79 (4 January 1866): 1–2.

8 Paolo Girardelli, "Una citta nella citta. La Societa Operaia e Ie architetture della comunita italiana di Istanbul", in *Gli Italiani di Istanbul. Figure, Comunita et Istituzioni dalle Riforme alla Repubblica 1839–1923*, eds Attilio De Gaspiris and Roberta Ferrazza (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2007), 207–221.

9 Philippe Muray, *Le XIXe siècle à travers les âges* (Denoël, 1984). David Armando, Bruno Belhoste, Jean-Luc Chappey, and Claire Gantet, "L'harmonie au prisme du mesmérisme: recompositions

scientifiques, politiques et morales au tournant des xviiie et xixe siècles", *La Révolution française* 24 (2023), http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/7470. https://doi.org/10.4000/lrf.7470.

10 John Warne Monroe, *Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Cornell University Press, 2008), 64–94. On the Ottoman case, see Alexandre Toumarkine, *Le spiritisme, un ésotérisme sécularisé dans L'Empire ottoman et en Turquie. Des hommes, des esprits et des livres entre Orient et Occident* (Habilitation Thesis, EHESS, 2016), 50–67.

11 "Le spiritisme à Constantinople I", *Journal de Constantinople*, no. 5515 (18 February 1864): 2–3; "Le spiritisme à Constantinople II", *Journal de Constantinople*, no. 5551 (8 March 1864): 3; "Le spiritisme à Constantinople III (Suite et fin)", *Journal de Constantinople*, no. 5554 (12 March 1864): 3.

12 *Journal de Constantinople*, no. 5551 (8 March 1864): 2.

13 "Magnétisme animal (spiritisme) par un médium", *Journal de Constantinople*, no. 5541 (21 March 1864): 3. The next day, the newspaper published a response to the anti-spiritist articles, signed by the Istanbul spiritists: "Le vrai spiritisme à Constantinople", *Journal de Constantinople*, no. 5542 (22 March 1864): 3.

14 Edhem Eldem, "Magic at the Imperial Palace, 1876–8", *Aca'ib. Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*, no. 3 (2022): 67–112; Edhem Eldem, *V. Murad'ın Oğlu Selahaddin Efendi'nin Evrak ve Yazıları. I–V. Murad ile Cléanthi Scalieri* (İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019), 23–78.

15 https://oldwww.benaki.gr/bibliology/search_simple.asp

16 Hudson Tuttle & J. M. Peebles, *The year-book of spiritualism for 1871* (William White and Company, 1871), 136–137.

17 Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, "Les Arméniens catholiques aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles", in Marie Carmen-Smyrnelis, *Une ville ottomane plurielle: Smyrne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (İsis, 2006), 95–114.

18 Anahide Ter Minassian, "Les Arméniens: le dynamisme d'une petite communauté", in *Smyrne, une ville oubliée? Mémoires d'un grand port ottoman, 1830–1930*, ed. Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis (Editions Autrement, 2006), 79–91.

19 Calouste Constant, "L'Orient du nazar et ses prophylactiques", *Le Magnétiseur. Journal du magnétisme animal*, no. 4 (15 July 1862): 58–62; Calouste Constant, "Les extatiques d'Amassia (Turquie)", *Le Magnétiseur. Journal du magnétisme animal*, no. 9 (15 December 1862): 130–133; Calouste Constant, "Le magnétisme en Turquie. L'okoudmak et l'agothèle", *Le Magnétiseur. Journal du magnétisme animal*, no. 11 (15 February 1863): 162–171; Calouste Constant, "Le magnétisme à Constantinople", *Le Magnétiseur. Journal du magnétisme animal*, no. 1 (January 1870): 19. See Thierry Zarcone, "Occultism in an Islamic Context. The Case of Modern Turkey from the Nineteenth Century to the Present Time", in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, eds. Henrik Bogdan & Gordan Djurdjevic (Acumen Publishing, 2013), 158–159; Thierry Zarcone, "Reconnaissance et réinterprétation de l'ésotérisme occidental en Turquie au XIXe et au XXe siècle", *Politica Hermetica*, no. 27 (2013): 110–112.

20 Գալուստ Կոստանեան, Մէսմէրաբանութիւն, Հասարակաց Թանգարան (*Mesmérisme. Magnétisme animal*) (Հատոր ԺԳ, Զմիւռնիա, Եղբարց Տէտէեան, 1858). I want to express my gratitude to Can Erzurumluoğlu for granting me access to this book and to Nazlı Temir Beyleryan, a lecturer at the French National Institute of Oriental Languages and Cultures (Inalco), who diligently examined the booklet and shared with me invaluable insights into its contents.

21 Hirant Thorossian, *Histoire de la littérature arménienne, des origines jusqu'à nos jours* (Librairie des Cinq Continents, 1951), 255.

22 *Ibid.*, 288.

23 Can Erzurumluoğlu, "Osmanlı'da İki Pozitivist Ermeni Filozof: Kalusd Gosdantyan ve Yeğya

Demircibaşyan", *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 355 (November 2021): 50–56. See Calouste Constant, "Un progrès par la science", *La Philosophie positive*, no. 21 (September-December 1878): 304–306; Emile Littré, "Auguste Comte à Smyrne", *La Philosophie positive*, no. 22 (January-June 1879): 313–317.

24 Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, *Une société hors de soi. Identités et relations sociales à Smyrne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Peeters, 2006), 107.

25 Calouste Constant, "Les extatiques d'Amassia (Turquie)".

26 Catherine-Laurence Maire, *Les possédées de Morzine* (1857–1873) (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1981).

27 Calouste Constant, "Le magnétisme en Turquie. L'okoudmak et l'agothèle".

28 Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Les Levantins. Cadres de vie et identités d'un groupe ethno-confessionnel de l'Empire ottoman au "long" 19e siècle*, trans. Jean-François de Andria (İsis, 2007), 137–138, 143, 154, 189, 261–265, 268, 293, 364.

29 E. Rossi de Giustiniani, *Les astronomes grecs devant la science moderne* (Imprimerie Vidori Frères, 1875); E. Rossi de Giustiniani, *Le Démon de Socrate* (Tipographie Ant. Damianon, 1877).

30 Schmitt, *Les Levantins*, 382–383; Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, "Les Italiens aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles", in Marie Carmen-Smyrnelis, *Une ville ottomane plurielle: Smyrne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (İsis, 2006), 83.

31 On Guistiniani: Toumarkine, *Le spiritisme*, 65–71.

CHAPTER 8

Magnetism, mysticism, and the devil

Kristof Smeyers

Centre stage in magnetic performance: a body, entranced. It moved, or instead remained strikingly unmoved, not at the will of its owner but that of the magnetiser.[1] Meanwhile, across the nineteenth-century Christian world ecstasies, convulsions and stigmata drew audiences.

This chapter is about how these two groups of phenomena interlinked, and about the intents and effects of their entanglement in the decades before spiritualism recalibrated the relation between mysticism and the occult. The act of entangling served a purpose. I suggest that this—enacted, normative—linkage between magnetism and Christian mysticism affected the ways that magnetic practitioners and their audiences valued the mystical, mediated, and performative nature of magnetism. Moving away from magnetism's founding figures and its most famous performers, I discuss the performances of magnetisers and magnetised; the spotlight is also on the observers who staged and curated their position towards both magnetism and mysticism by linking the two (or, instead, by prising them apart). Crucially, mystico-magnetic dynamics between magnetisers, magnetised, and audience affected rhetoric, practice, and body.

Mystic repute, magnetic force

Physical similarities between magnetic and mystical phenomena were widely noted in the mid-nineteenth century. Advertisements for mesmeric soirées in Europe's cities capitalised on them. To some observers, the likeness jolted confusion or justified comparison; to others, the magnetic convulsions on stage captured a religious experience. Descriptions of magnetic healing practices as quasi miraculous regularly abounded in a fledgling tabloid press and in sensational reporting.[2] In 1844, for example, a certain Irys Herfner wrote in *Dublin University Magazine* about the "mystic repute" of the "vast and infinitely modified manifestation of the

magnetic force".[3] Critics also centred the body to link magnetism and mysticism. The well-known doctor Samuel Hibbert of the Royal Medical Society in Edinburgh dismissed the convulsions of contemporary clairvoyants and the phenomena of saints such as Teresa of Ávila as "phantasies of [. . .] diseased imagination" that originated in "disorders of the blood, brain, or nervous system".[4] From this spell in print the entanglement of magnetic and mystical bodies entered literature. For example, Balzac's novel *Ursula Mirouët* (1844) includes a passage that roots magnetism in Christianity and links magnetic phenomena to miracles and religious ecstasy. This linkage sets the stage for the conversion of the sceptical Encyclopédist Dr Minoret to Catholicism after a mesmeric demonstration. Magnetic phenomena and Christian mysticism, then, intersected in myriad ways in the burgeoning sphere of the mid-nineteenth century: in literary and artistic representations, in rhetoric and discourse, in magnetic practice, and on the bodies of the magnetised.

From its conception, animal magnetism occupied a fuzzy metaphysical field. Bodily magnetic phenomena were spectacular expressions of the porosity of cultural categories of religion, magic, and science—categories between which stage magnetisers also moved freely, depending on changing tastes.[5] In this fuzziness, magnetised bodies invited interpretations of supernatural intercession. In 1778 for instance, the Exegetic Society of Stockholm ascribed the physical effects of mesmeric practice to a "super-sensuous agency of angels and other spirits", thus connecting mesmerism to Swedenborgian notions of divine truth and angelic communications.[6] By the mid-nineteenth century, public invocations of mysticism and the supernatural were commonplace among proponents and detractors of magnetism; they could respectively elevate and make suspect embodied magnetic performance.

We should read such invocations in the context of public religion at the time. To advertise as "ecstatics" somnambulist performers such as Prudence Bernard, discussed in Kurt Vanhoutte's contribution in this book, placed them—often self-consciously—alongside internationally known mystics of the 1830s and 1840s. They were also almost always young women, such as the "Ecstatic of Vosges" or the "Estatica of Caldaro", and they provided crowds with an embodied form of religious theatre.[7] Meanwhile and inversely, observers endowed Christian mystics with mesmeric powers, either to explain or to explain *away* the seemingly miraculous phenomena on display. Newspapers in the English-speaking

world referred to the ecstatics in continental Europe as "mesmeric miracles".[8] Magnetism and mysticism cross-pollinated in rhetoric and representation.

With the exception of Hervé Guillemain's *histoire comparé* of therapeutic practice and religion, animal magnetism's relationship with Christianity has primarily been studied in terms of the response of the Catholic Church to Mesmer's theory and its possible theological implications.[9] David Armando, for example, captures the unhappy buzz about magnetism's metaphysics that spurred the Roman Curia and the Inquisition into action. The similarities between magnetic and mystical bodily phenomena may have contributed to the papal encyclical of 1856 that condemned magnetism as superstitious abuse.[10] After all, magnetisers' claims to the human body were potent—and potentially blasphemous. Some Catholics, including clerics, saw in magnetised bodies a substantiation of the existence of an immortal soul. Even inside the Vatican some theologians considered magnetic ideas about the soul compatible with Catholic doctrine. Some Catholics went further still. They marshalled spectacular magneto-mystical (or mystico-magnetic?) bodies as evidence that "the hand of God is not shortened, that He can still alter and suspend the laws of nature", as one eyewitness wrote in 1841 about the ecstasies, stigmata, and visions of the "Estatica" Maria von Mörl, who drew large crowds in a village in the Alps.[11] Such claims were always contested. Magnetic and mystical phenomena could provide a "life-line [. . .] to true faith in an age of infidelity" and materialism.[12] More often, however, they embodied this much-maligned materialism; their mise-en-scene raised suspicions about the authenticity of the "performance".

Demystification and anti-Catholicism

Magnetism's move into the realms of mysticism and miracle caused division among Catholics. It bolstered supernatural claims, but because by the 1830s magnetism came to serve as a popular explanatory agent for all manner of unusual physical phenomena it could also undermine those claims. The ecstatic in the Alps who in 1841 was living evidence to some that God's hand was "not shortened" for others proved the strength of mesmeric suggestion and the restorative power of her trance-like state, rather than divine power.[13] Magnetism demystified miracle.

Writing about the convulsions of contemporary mystics in 1862, for instance, the American reverend James McCosh found magnetism to be a "power of nature" that is "capable of explaining all these occurrences we represent as miraculous".[14] Such takes paved the way for later scientific experiments with mesmerism and hypnosis to diagnose physical phenomena in Catholicism such as, for example, Jean-Martin Charcot's in the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, as Eleonora Paklons writes in this book.[15] Catholics in whose opinion the newfound popularity of bodily mysticism endangered the position of the Church after the Enlightenment also adopted magnetic explanations of mysticism; attempts to present modern Catholicism as a rational religion "matured" from the supernatural found in magnetism a useful repository for contemporary mystical phenomena.

The label of magnetism could, however, also serve as an indictment of figures with religious, mystical authority. In 1842, doctor Richard Barter, the head of St Ann's Hydropathic Establishment in County Cork, Ireland, accused the celebrity priest Theobald Mathew of being a magnetiser after he performed several allegedly miraculous healings in front of large crowds.[16] As late as the 1880s, long after magnetism's heyday, Christian mystics whose spiritual authority hinged on their own bodies and the control over others' bodies, like the English millenarian cult leader Mary Ann Girling, were publicly suspected of mesmerism.[17] Inversely, calling miracles magnetic could be a strategy to elevate one's own magnetic practices in a crowded occult marketplace, as the American clairvoyant performer Andrew Jackson Davis (the "Poughkeepsie Seer") did in 1847. Davis read the Gospels as proof that Christ, with his "great physical soothing power over the disordered or disconcerted forces of the human system", was a mesmerist rather than a miracle-worker.[18] As such Davis encouraged his audiences to compare him to Christ; it gave his performances a religious veneer. But in effect these interpretations also made of magnetism a disenchanting force for the Christian supernatural, whether scriptural or contemporary.

Consider the historical momentum of England in the 1830s and 1840s. Legal emancipation of the Catholic minority in 1829 led to virulent expressions of anti-Catholicism in the public sphere, supercharged by Catholics' fascination with spectacular forms of affective, bodily mysticism. Reinvigorated anti-Catholicism also coincided with the fast-rising popularity of magnetism, especially after the arrival in London of the

French mesmerist "Baron" du Potet de Sennevoy in 1837. The performed body was key in anti-Catholic rhetoric that linked mystics to magnetism. Most controversially at the time was the public interest of high-profile English Catholics in women like Maria von Mörl, whose ecstasies and stigmata embodied Catholic (supernatural) rejuvenation and the hope for English reconversion.[19] Such charged symbolism fuelled the flurry of publications that cast suspicions of fraudulence and make-believe over mystical spectacle: suspicions in which the connotation with magnetic performance undermined supernatural, spiritual authenticity—and, consequentially, emphasised the "superstitions of Romanism".[20] There were good reasons for this. Even defenders of physical mysticism used the language of magnetism, for instance to describe the "mysterious influence exercised over Maria von Mörl by her confessor", or to describe the crucified Christ as religion's "moral magnet".[21] And the thespian spectacle of a celebrity mystic—the body frozen in ecstasy, the dimmed lights, the hushed voices—conjured up images of stage magnetism and somnambulism: entertaining deceptions, no more.

The devil is a magnetiser

But if the phenomena on stage were crafty deceit and delusion, as some magnetisers themselves boasted, was the "Father of Lies" not behind it?[22] When comparing mesmeric women to Catholic mystics like Mörl, critics emphasised that their bodily phenomena were rooted in a "peculiar and inexplicable derangement [that made women] vulnerable to supernatural evil".[23] Taking the opportunity to paint the Church of Rome as satanic, anti-Catholics in the 1840s noted how popery, magnetism, and the devil formed a "great anti-Christian league".[24]

More directly, the magnetic current, "freely pervading all bodies", flowed in ways that were suspiciously familiar to those acquainted with the workings of the devil.[25] As early as the sixteenth century, when demonology was established as an autonomous discipline, its scholars suspected that Satan knows how to alter the course of bodily fluids, causing blockages and leaks at will.[26] Although the extent to which such ideas resonated in early modern popular culture is contentious, by the nineteenth century bodily malfunctions—uncontrolled weeping or being unable to shed a single tear; excessive diarrhoea or severe constipation—

were considered primary symptoms of demonic possession. Even if the Vatican's condemnation of magnetism in the 1856 encyclical avoided any mention of Satan, vernacular knowledge about what the devil was physically capable of fuelled the belief among Catholics that he might be behind magnetic convulsions and trances. After all, anti-magnetic Christians keenly reminded others, was "the discoverer of mesmerism [not] accused of selling his soul to the Devil?"[27]

As early as 1788, Hannah More, who founded the Religious Tract Society in Britain, wrote to the Whig writer Horace Walpole about the "demoniacal mummeries" of the popular magnetiser John Bonnoit de Mainadac in Bristol.[28] By the 1840s, a lively anti-magnetic pamphlet culture encouraged the association of magnetised bodies with Satan and sorcery. The American Congregationalist minister Henry Jones—somewhat of a performer himself in his public lectures on the Apocalypse—published an influential pamphlet in 1846, for instance, in which he repudiated magnetism as the sin of witchcraft and "the mysterious works of 'unclean spirits', or the spirit of Satan the false prophet".[29] Magnetism provided the devil with a new tool to work his evil, much like he had found new tools throughout history. Decrying the "necromancy" of magnetism and spiritualism in 1853, the English physician William Holt Yates claimed that Satan was "well aware that in order to obtain credence in the present age, at least with the learned, all such superstitions must be rendered attractive and fashionable: they must be introduced [. . .] in a manner suited to the prevailing taste of the times".[30] Yates and others condemned magnetism by relating it to "Astrology, Necromancy, Witchcraft and Magic": a family of diabolic occultism in which magnetism was the youngest child.[31] Yates was right. As people "bec[a]me very knowing, and very sceptical", the devil tried a different tack; from the 1850s magnetic anxieties about evil sorcery moved to spiritualism.[32]

Furthermore, those who, like Hannah More in Bristol, called staged magnetic phenomena diabolic or demoniacal recast Mesmer's *fluidum* as a hellish, evil current capable of subjugating bodies—and, by extension, as a form of *maleficium*: witchcraft. Burckhart Brückner writes, for instance, how the German salesman Friedrich Krauß blamed bad business, sleeplessness, illness, and eventual madness during his stay in Antwerp in 1816 on his "enemies": a local family who, Krauß claimed, had magnetised him.[33] Nils Freytag describes how, in Koblenz in 1837, people insisted the somnambulist visions of a ten-year-old were satanic

sorcery in spite of clerical and medical opinion.[34] To be magnetised was to be bewitched.

Or to be possessed. If the devil could be behind magnetic forces, the flailing limbs of the magnetised resembled the erratic shamble of the demoniac. Acting out of control, even outside of the boundaries of natural law, the magnetised body sometimes appeared possessed; particularly in the eyes and rhetoric of antimagnetic Catholics this association made magnetisers into henchmen of Hell. Alternatively, magnetism could provide a naturalistic explanation of cases of demonic possession as it did for mystical phenomena. This presumed dislocation turned magnetisers into modern exorcists. Had mesmerism not superseded Catholic exorcism?[35] Magnetism was since its beginnings simultaneously presented as a conduit for demons (Fig. 8.1) and, because of its healing faculties, as a treatment for possession.

Figure 8.1: Le Mesmerisme a tous les Diables: [estampe], [Le Baquet de Mesmer]. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Indeed, Catholic exorcism in the nineteenth century, with its capacity to "aggravate the symptoms of possession, accentuate its theatrical elements, and attract a public audience", and with priests posing as performers, outwardly resembled magnetic healing practices.[36] Magnetism

and exorcism met and mixed in the magical-medical marketplace, though never without controversy. Take Jean-Baptiste Cotteleer, a sorcerer of some repute in Brussels who offered his customers "bewitchment, exorcism, and magnetism". In 1862, this blend of services led to a five-year prison sentence on fraud charges. Press coverage of the court case emphasised Cotteleer's transgressions: the scale of his operations, the spectacle of his performances, and the "unholy" mix of magnetic methods and Catholic rite.[37] Cotteleer was not an exception in mid-century Europe, or even in Brussels.[38] For cunning folk like him, magnetic healing and exorcism were complementary commodities in a magical service economy. In turn, some priests incorporated magnetism into their exorcisms, in part as a response to growing social expectations of spectacle. Consequently, some clergymen became celebrity magnetisers, like the exorcist *abbé* José-Custódio de Faria who had come from Goa to revolutionary Europe and in 1815 began to draw large crowds with magnetic shows in Paris. Accusations of sorcery and devil-craft followed de Faria on his tour, making him an ideal target for anti-Catholics and critics of magnetism alike, while French Catholics tried to disconnect his performances from the Church.[39]

Exit stage

The "artificial miracle" of the entranced body drove the reception of magnetic performance.[40] The convergence of stage magnetisers enchanting audiences, reenergised anti-Catholicism, and the popularity of a "new type of mystic" created a historical moment in the early nineteenth century in which that body—and the extraordinary phenomena it displayed—pushed against categorical boundaries and cultural scripts.[41] Ideas about how magnetism and mysticism tangled around the body steered rhetoric, influenced practices, and heightened the tension between act and spectacle.[42]

From this tangle has emerged a range of actors. Magnetisers and magnetised appeared as mystics, healers, demoniacs, and exorcists. Catholics turned to lay magnetisers for exorcisms at a time when the Church was increasingly reluctant to perform the rite. The spectacle of mystics invited magnetic explanations. Sceptics who aimed to discredit magnetism by linking it to popery and the devil also popularised notions

of satanic interference. These dynamics suggest a complex relationship between magnetism and mysticism. They unsettle, for example, the notion that magnetism disenchanted, dislocated, reframed, or replaced exorcism; rather, the dynamic between the two phenomena was determined by changing cultural expectations—also about bodily performance. If anything, clerical engagement with magnetic practice and magnetisers' dealings with demons added to magnetism's mystical flair even as, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the focus came to rest on its medical applicability.

Notes

1 Sarah Hibberd, "Magnetism, Muteness, Magic: Spectacle and the Parisian Lyrical Stage c.1830" (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 1998), 85–86.

2 Philippe Murray, *Le 19e siècle à travers les âges* (Denoel, 1984), discussed in Stephen Bann, "Romanticism in France", in *Romanticism in National Context*, eds Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 240–259.

3 Irys Herfner, "Mesmerism", *Dublin University Magazine* 23, no. 133 (1844): 37. Herfner was likely a pseudonym: Jacques Chuto, "Mangan and the 'Irys Herfner' articles in the *Dublin University Magazine*", *Hermathena* 111 (1971): 55–57.

4 Samuel Hibbert, *Sketches of the philosophy of apparitions* (Oliver & Boyd, 1824), 111.

5 A good example is Julia Hanington's transformation from "Mysterious Lady" to "Prophetic Lady" around 1850: Peter Brunning, "The mysterious ladies; or, an investigation into three early mindreaders", *Ye Olde Magic Mag*, 5, no. 3 (2019): 116–126. On categorical porosity in relation to magnetism and the occult: Terry M. Parssinen, "Mesmeric Performers", *Victorian Studies*, 21, no. 1 (1977): 100; Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); Jason Ā Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 11 et passim; the contributions in Bernard Lightman, ed., *Rethinking History, Science, and Religion: an Exploration of Conflict and the Complexity Principle* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

6 Al Gabay, "The Stockholm Exegetic and Philanthropic Society and Spiritism", *The New Philosophy* (2007): 220–221. For Swedenborg and magnetism: Robert Rix, "Healing the spirit: William Blake and magnetic religion", *Romanticism on the net* 25 (February 2002). https://doi.org/10.7202/006011ar

7 For the ecstatic of Vosges: Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, *On hallucinations: a history and explanation of apparitions, visions, dreams, ecstasy, magnetism, and somnambulism*, trans. Robert T. Hulme (Joseph H. Riley, 1860), 199. I borrow "religious theatre" from Brian Levack, who coined the term to describe the cultural script of exorcism: *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (Yale University Press, 2013), 139.

8 "Mesmeric miracles in the Tyrol", *Weekly Chronicle*, 16 July 1842, 2.

9 Hervé Guillemain, *Diriger les consciences, guérir les âmes. Une histoire comparé des pratiques thérapeutiques et religieuses* (1830–1939) (La Découverte, 2006).

10 David Armando, "The 19th-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism Viewed from Rome: the Holy Office's Decrees", *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 19 (2022): 7.

11 John Talbot, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury, *Letter from the Earl of Shrewsbury to Ambrose Lisle Phillip[p]s Esq, descriptive of the Estatica of Caldaro and the Addolorata of Capriana* (Dolman, 1841), 42.
12 Robert Cecil, *Cults in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Institute for Cultural Research, 1988), 16.
13 Edward Binns, *The anatomy of sleep, or, the art of procuring sound and refreshing slumber at will* (John Churchill, 1842), 160.
14 James McCosh, *The supernatural in relation to religion* (Robert Carter and brothers, 1862), 114.
15 For instance: the tests of mesmeric suggestion on ecstatics in Brighton in 1882, for the Committee on Mesmerism of the Society for Psychical Research in Britain. Edmund Gurney and Frederic W. H. Myers, "Report on thought-transference", *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (1882–1883): 70–78.
16 John Francis Maguire, *Father Mathew: a biography* (Longman et al, 1863), 530. A detailed account of Mathew's healings: Rome, Venerable Irish College, KIR/1836-1861/67.
17 Andrew Thomas Thurton Peterson, *Essays from the unseen, delivered through the mouth of W.L., a sensitive, and recorded by A.T.T.P.* (A.T.T. Peterson, 1885), 5–7. On millenarianism and magnetism: Kristof Smeyers, *Supernatural Bodies: Stigmata in Modern Britain and Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2024), ch. 4.
18 Andrew Jackson Davis, *The principles of nature, her divine revelations, and a voice to mankind* (Lyon and Fishbough, 1847), 562. See also [Warren Chase], *The life-line of the lone one; or, auto-biography of the world's child,* 3rd ed. (Bela Marsh, 1861), 167.
19 Kristof Smeyers and Leonardo Rossi, "Tyrolean stigmata in England: the cross-cultural voyage of the Catholic supernatural, 1841–1848", *British Catholic History* 34, no. 3 (2019): 619–642.
20 Edward Tottenham, *Popery on the Continent in the nineteenth century: a warning to the Protestants of England, being a lecture delivered before the Islington Protestant Institution* (J. H. Jackson, 1847), 24.
21 *Weekly Chronicle*, 11 December 1841, 12; Hugh Stowell, *Sermons preached in Christ Church, Salford* (London, 1866), 316.
22 Ogden, *Credulity*, 17.
23 *Christian Remembrancer: a monthly magazine and review* 3 (1842): 66–67.
24 Brian Griffin, "Anti-Catholicism in Bath from 1820 to 1870", *British Catholic History* 31, no. 4 (2015): footnote 106.
25 Irys Herfner, "Mesmerism. (Second article)", *Dublin University Magazine* 23, no. 135 (1844): 287.
26 The first work to attribute this skill to Satan was Girolamo Menghi's famous exorcism manual, *Flagellum daemonum exorcismos terribiles, potentissimos et efficaces, remediaque probatissima ac doctrinam singularem ad malignos spiritus expellendos* (Pierre Landry, 1604).
27 London, Wellcome WT/D/1/20/53/35, "The discoverer of mesmerism."
28 Ibid.
29 Henry Jones, *Animal magnetism repudiated as sorcery, not a science* (J. S. Redfield, 1846), 3.
30 London, Wellcome MS5100, William Holt Yates, *Essay on superstition* (1853), 6.
31 Ibid.
32 "Satan has found out how to bait his hooks", *Hampshire Telegraph*, 11 May 1889, 5.
33 Burckhart Brückner, "Animal Magnetism, Psychiatry and Subjective Experience in Nineteenth-Century Germany: Friedrich Krauß and his *Notschrei*", *Medical History* 60, no. 12 (2016): 19–36.
34 Nils Freytag, "Witchcraft, Witch Doctors and the Fight Against 'Superstition' in Nineteenth-Century Germany", in *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*, eds Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (Manchester University Press, 2004), 32–33.

35 Stephan Gregory, "Media in Action: From Exorcism to Mesmerism", *communication* +1 4, no. 1 (2015): 1–30. The idea that magnetism was a natural, linear progression from 'premodern' exorcism, though historically flawed, returns on occasion in psychological scholarship. See, most explicitly: Nicholas Spanos and Jack Gottlieb, "Demonic Possession, Mesmerism, and Hysteria: a Social Psychological Perspective on Their Historical Relation", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 88, no. 5 (1979): 527–546.

36 Levack, *The Devil Within*, 217.

37 "Chronique judiciaire," *Journal de Bruxelles*, 10 June 1862, 1.

38 Kaat Wils, "Tussen wetenschap en spektakel. Hypnose op de Belgische theaterscène, 1875–1900", *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 20, no. 2 (2017): 58.

39 Fernando Portelo Câmara, "Pré-história da psicoterapia brasileira: a chegada do magnetismo animal no Brasil, 1823–1887", *Debates em Psiquiatria* 3, no. 3 (2013): 34–38.

40 An "artificial miracle" is a "device that inspired wonder and whose audience did not know how it worked": Tommaso Campanella, *Magia e grazia, Inediti. Theologicorum liber XIV*, ed. Romano Americo (Bocca, 1957), 178. Cited in Anthony Grafton, *Magus: the Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa* (Harvard University Press, 2023), 219.

41 Nicole Priesching, "Mystikerinnen des 19. Jahrhundert – ein neuer Typus?", in *Zwisschen Himmel und Erde. Körperliche Zeichen der Heiligkeit*, ed. Waltraud Pulz (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 79–97.

42 Sigal Gooldin, "Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists: Spectacles of Body and Miracles at the Turn of a Century", *Body and Society* 9, no. 2 (2003): 32.

PART 3
IDENTITY & AFFECT

CHAPTER 9

The embodied self: Automatism, power, and gendered autonomy

Stéphanie Peel

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the body became a key issue for new knowledge that blurred the boundaries between science, medicine, and the occult. Practices such as magnetism, somnambulism, and later spiritism placed the female body under scrutiny.[1] However, it also created spaces where women's voices, gestures, and performances gained visibility, challenging established medical and epistemological hierarchies. In fact, as the historian Jacqueline Carroy points out, "somnambulism and ecstasy are merely variants or complications of catalepsy, which seems to be a female prerogative, since the observations concern only women".[2] By focusing on the somatic aspect of somnambulistic trance and mediumship, scientists, and especially alienists, tended to essentialise and pathologise psychic abilities to distance themselves from these women who, through their words, actions and writings, transgressed the social and moral norms to which men had assigned them. These phenomena gave rise to studies on hysteria, split personalities, the question of automatism, and the discovery of the unconscious, which would later lead to contemporary psychiatry.[3]

In turn, hysterics, mediums, somnambulists, and other female subjects of the occult were subjected to a dominant—and often masculine—force whether that of magnetisers, spiritualists, the spirits they claimed to contact, or scientists. It is interesting to study this instrumentalisation from both a historical and sociological perspective. By focusing on the notion of autonomy, this chapter examines how magnetism and somnambulism shaped women's bodies into sites of both scientific inquiry and performative demonstration. Rather than being passive casualties of experimentation, women played an active role in the construction of knowledge, even as they remained subject to external authority. Their subjection—both in the sense of being subordinated to power and in the

process of becoming subjects—raises a fundamental question: could the constraints imposed by these practices paradoxically open a space for self-expression and agency? From the somnambulist who, through magnetic sleep, explored her own body and prescribed remedies that challenged medical authority, to the medium-somnambulist who positioned herself as an intermediary between the living and the dead, their performances reveal a complex negotiation between submission, visibility, and empowerment. Thanks to their own powers, much of which resided in their bodies, they both fascinated and alarmed the scientific community and public opinion in general.

By turning away from a certain male gaze, I attempt to change the way we look at the dynamic and focus on what is known as a history from below or a "herstory", which allows us to analyse the power of these women to act in a particular context. The researcher Lila Abu-Lughod has cautions against interpreting resistance too systematically as an emancipatory narrative, a notion she terms the "romance of resistance".[4] She emphasised that certain forms of negotiation with structures of power can simultaneously reflect agency and sustain existing power dynamics. From this perspective, this article considers how somnambulist women not only turned the domination they endured to their advantage but also navigated these power relations by employing strategies of accommodation, diversion, or appropriation. This approach helps to avoid an overly rigid opposition between submission and revolt and better accounts for the complexity of the dynamics at play in the reclaiming of their individuality.

Animal magnetism: the body on stage

In 1778, the famous Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) moved to Paris to pursue more freely the experiments associated with his new discovery, what he called animal magnetism, later known as mesmerism. In his book *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* (1779), he argued for the existence of a universal fluid that connected all beings and all worlds, and that could be influenced by so-called magnetic passes for the purpose of healing. Once established in the capital, his clientele grew and his doctrine enjoyed real success, which began to worry the scientific community. In 1785, a commission of inquiry

was set up to determine the validity of magnetism and Mesmer was forced to leave Paris for England. The historian Nicole Edelman examines the gradual discrediting of a body of knowledge that was initially considered promising. Among the various hypotheses she explores, one particularly relevant to our analysis is the association of Mesmer's doctrine with the occult and the irrational.[5]

In fact, magnetised people were placed in an altered state of consciousness reminiscent of the ecstatic or possessed states experienced by Catholic mystics, evoking memories of a long religious tradition and older clairvoyant phenomena. It is important to recall that Mesmer originally developed his theory in opposition to the practices of Johann Joseph Gassner (1727–1779), a German priest known for his miraculous cures, which he attributed to exorcisms. These phenomena, considered supernatural, were controversial in the Age of Enlightenment and a Bavarian commission consulted Mesmer. Mesmer interpreted the healings as the effect of magnetic fluids, with no divine or diabolical dimension. Discredited, Gassner ended his life in obscurity. And yet, despite its kinship with the irrational, mesmerism sought to deconstruct the supernatural and use science to explain phenomena that Christianity had hitherto attributed to divine or evil forces. Mesmerism offered a very simple and rational vision of the body and disease: the theory of fluid explained everything, and its imbalance led to all diseases. As the aphorism of one of Mesmer's patients reminds us: there is only one disease, one remedy, and one cure.[6] Ultimately, these explanations aimed to account for the laws of nature without necessarily invoking divine intervention. This perspective encouraged individuals to seek the keys to healing within themselves and their own bodies.

At the dawn of the French Revolution, bodily dysfunction and its redress through magnetism became a veritable social phenomenon and a thriving business. Mesmer's discovery paid particular attention to the reactions of the magnetised body. For him, the effects of convulsions were of little importance. What mattered were the physical convulsions themselves, the salutary convulsions that proved the existence of this universal fluid. The body thus became the object of all his attention, and the female body in particular. Given the mixed nature of his clientele, the peculiar state into which he put his patients did not fail to disturb the society of the time. Mesmer fled Vienna after a scandal involving his patient, Marie-Theresa de Paradis, a blind pianist he was

accused of seducing. Known for his personal magnetism, he was often under suspicion due to the ambiguity in his cures, which some equated with debauchery. Indeed, the convulsions were a suggestive and somewhat unusual sight for the wealthy clientele who frequented his salon. As the historian Nicole Edelman recalls, it was not uncommon for "the corsets of fainting women to be unbuckled before being carried into the padded room provided for the purpose".[7]

These scenes are reminiscent of Jean-Martin Charcot's famous public demonstrations at the Salpêtrière hospital half a century later, where techniques derived from magnetism—reconceptualised as hypnosis after 1830—were used to elicit and display the hysterical symptoms of his patients. The spectacular and sometimes overtly erotic nature of these sessions played a crucial role in their public appeal. While these performances reinforced the omnipotence of male authority over a passive and inert female body, they also carried a certain ambivalence: by making visible the suffering of women, they inadvertently opened a space for questioning medical power and gendered dynamics in the representation of illness. For Mesmer, and later for Charcot, convulsions were a necessary step on the road to recovery; the somatic imprint made it possible to identify the disease and thus prove their scientific theory.

Automaton or autonomous?

Mesmer's revolution was primarily epistemological. In Mesmer's theory, the fluid becomes a "general agent" that can manifest itself in various ways: magnetism, electricity, animal magnetism, and so forth. It could be channeled and stored to provoke these healing crises. The therapeutic power, however, lies in the healer himself: by exerting his influence on a subject and destroying his will, the magnetiser becomes an omnipotent being with specific "gifts" and almost secret knowledge—Mesmer initiated a few disciples into his *Société de l'Harmonie*, but this initiation was limited because it was expensive. The magnetiser, who is active, puts the magnetised, who is passive, to sleep to act on her body alone, deliberately provoking convulsions and having complete power over his subject. In this way, magnetism gave rise to the theory of automatism, which was later adopted by the alienists at the end of the nineteenth century to

explain certain pathological states. Théodule Ribot, reflecting this perspective, described hypnosis as a condition in which "the hypnotised person is an automaton that can be played with according to the nature of his organisation. There is an absolute annihilation of the will, the conscious personality is reduced to a single state that is neither chosen nor rejected but suffered and imposed."[8] This view reinforced the idea that hypnosis entailed a complete submission of the subject to external authority, aligning with broader medical discourses on the loss of agency in altered states of consciousness.

However, as Carroy has shown, the term automaton carried an inherent ambiguity: some scholars understood it as moved by one's own nature, while others saw it as moved by external forces. This duality underscores the paradox of automatism, which does not necessarily equate to autonomy. Rather, it reveals a tension between self-determination and internal constraints. Animal magnetism, by annihilating the patients' will and subjecting them to external control, reinforced this ambiguity, particularly in the case of female patients. Often depicted as especially receptive to magnetic forces, women were both ideal subjects of experimentation and symbols of passive suffering. Positioned as those who suffer—etymologically *patiens*—they were relegated to the status of passive bodies in the healing process. For Mesmer, it was not verbal silence but physical silence that needed to be overcome.

From body to speech

One man, however, was interested in this verbal silence, or rather its absence, and it was thanks to him that French magnetism enjoyed a revival under the Empire and the Restoration. This man was Amand-Marcs-Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825), a student of Mesmer and a lieutenant-general of artillery, who discovered magnetism at the *Société de l'Harmonie*. He was the first to give priority to what the patient had to say, over and above the simple physical spasms provoked by convulsions. Rejecting any commercial approach, he attracted mainly those around him at his estate in Buzancy: his friends, servants and sick peasants. His reputation soon spread beyond his estate, and he was overwhelmed by requests for healing. So, he decided to magnetise a tree on his estate so that anyone could be cured without his

direct help.[9] His activity was interrupted by the Revolution and then resumed, more discreetly, until the end of his life.

During one session, Puységur made an important discovery when he magnetised Victor Race, a farm labourer. In this state of magnetic sleep, as he called it at the time, Victor became clairvoyant: he saw inside his body, described his illness and suggested treatments, speaking in impeccable French, although he was illiterate and usually spoke in dialect. Puységur was amazed and wrote:

> I don't need to talk to him; I think in front of him, and he hears me and answers me [. . .]. When he is in crisis, I know of nothing more profound, more prudent and more clear-sighted. This man is my intelligence.[10]

This particular state of semi-clouded sleep seemed to be like that observed in somnambulists, so the Marquis de Puységur announced his discovery in May 1784 under the name of "magnetic or provoked somnambulism" and published his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire et à l'établissement du magnétisme animal* in the same year, adding a description of his first cures in 1809. Magnetised people were henceforth called somnambulists, and their particular powers in a trance state gradually began to interest the scientific community. Moving away from the spectacular attacks of animal magnetism, Puységur discovered a quieter form of somnambulism in which the subject experienced what appeared to be an exit from the body.

From magnetic fluid to active will

On closer inspection, these subjects are not so much asleep as they are in a state of hyper-awareness or hyper-presence, allowing them to access a form of subjectivity. This heightened state enables them to observe themselves and their bodies in a reflective way, positioning them as active participants in a broader history of the quest for autonomy. For Puységur, what mattered most was the idea of a transmissible will and agency inherent within his patients, rather than an external magnetic fluid. He also believed in the persistence of a magnetic personality from session to session, suggesting that this particular state of consciousness was not merely passive but rather a condition through which individuals

could articulate a form of selfhood. In this sense, the relationship between body and speech becomes central: while mesmerism initially appears to reinforce bodily submission, it simultaneously opens new spaces for expression and self-perception, complicating the opposition between passivity and agency. In other words, "the somnambulist opens up to an intimate part of himself that liberates, verbalises and reappropriates the buried non-verbal".[11]

During these experiments the magnetiser portrayed himself as a benevolent guide, capable of inducing trance states at will, during which the subject not only expressed themselves but also provided a diagnosis of their own illness. For Puységur, this phenomenon was the result of "the dynamic action of a transmissible, tonic and constitutive will", reinforcing the idea that the magnetiser's role was not merely to impose an external force but to facilitate a process rooted in interaction and trust.[12] He insisted on the necessity of creating a relationship of confidence between the agent and the subject and, above all, establishing a supportive space for expression. As he put it, "in this state, the subject can speak freely and, above all, be listened to".[13] In other words, what Puységur conceptualised was "a therapy based *from speech and on speech*, a therapy consisting of the subject's own speech, insofar as it is accompanied by *listening* that helps the person to become autonomous".[14]

The power within

From mesmerism to somnambulism, there was an axiological shift from body to speech, from object to subject, and from passive to active. In addition to the emergence of new knowledge, these changes challenged class and gender relations of power and domination. While Mesmer's clientele was mixed and tended to come from the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie, Puységur attracted servants or people of more modest means. In addition to these social differences, there was a major change in practice around 1830: it was at this time that the figure of the "Prevost's clairvoyant", Frédérique Hauffe (1801–1829), studied by the doctor Justinus Kerner between 1826 and 1829, appeared. The daughter of a forest ranger, Hauffe claimed to hear voices and luminous apparitions and began to predict events. Rather than performing simple demonstrations or tricks, Kerner subjected her to a series of magnetic

experiments and published his observations in 1829 under the title *La voyante de Prévost*, which became a bestseller. The novelty lay not in the presence of female subject—since Mesmer had already shown a particular interest in women's bodies—but rather in the way this case inverted established dynamics: from that moment on, men were no longer at the centre of the stage. As Michel Pierssens points out, "the time of the Victor was over".[15]

Unlike Mesmer's female patients, often passive cases of experimentation, Hauffe actively produced knowledge through her visions and speech. This perspective signalled a broader transformation in authority, reinforcing the medicalisation of so-called "spiritual" phenomena while bringing female bodies and figures to the forefront of these new scientific inquiries. This period marked a reconfiguration of authority, with a shift in focus from the masculine to the feminine in terms of subjectivity, and from religious to medical interpretations in terms of institutional legitimacy. While Mesmer had already contributed to the medicalisation of such phenomena, the increasing visibility of female figures like Hauffe further challenged existing scientific frameworks. Women, long considered passive subjects of study, began to attract the attention of scholars as active participants in shaping knowledge. This shift, however, was neither immediate nor absolute. Kerner himself seems to have been surprised by this, stating in the preface to the book:

> It is certainly hard, and we cannot be surprised at the repugnance provoked, to find that a weak and simple woman is upsetting the systems accepted by scientists and reviving the convictions that wise men among men have long been striving to establish.[16]

This extract is revealing of the change in magnetic practices and the importance that the figure of the somnambulist clairvoyant would gradually assume. What is more, far from being a simple piece of news, this publication aroused a new interest in women and their words: "From then on, the words of the clairvoyant received by right the sanction of the written word. Vaticination becomes *discourse*, before returning to delirium when the enchantment of psychic miracles and oracular speech is exhausted."[17]

This fate is reminiscent of that of Henriette Couédon [1867–1941], known as "the clairvoyant of the Rue Paradis".[18] She is said to have

predicted the fire in the Charité bazaar and to have had her moment of fame in Paris before being locked up for insanity in Saint-Anne.[19] There is thus a real continuity between the figures of the clairvoyant, the ecstatic and the somnambulist. Each embodies a form of heightened receptivity and alternate consciousness, often interpreted as a channel for supernatural, mystical, or magnetic forces. Their credibility, however, is contingent upon external validation, whether by religious, scientific, or literary authorities. Likewise, the somnambulist, whose insights were first framed within mesmerist medicine, gradually saw her discourse medicalised and psychiatrised. What unites these figures, therefore, is not only their claim to extraordinary perception but also the precarious status of their speech, constantly shifting between legitimacy and dismissal depending on the socio-historical context.

Somnambulists had a relative freedom of speech that was acknowledged and valued, regardless of their social status or gender. As John Warne Monroe noted, they were often women or men from lower social classes, with less education than the typically bourgeois or aristocratic, self-taught magnetiser.[20] This social and gender disparity mirrored the broader inequalities of the time; indeed, "this division between the man who magnetised and the woman who was magnetised respected the dominant representation of an active man and a passive woman".[21] This hierarchical relationship seemed all the stronger in animal magnetism, where, as we have seen, the voice of the person being magnetised was ignored in favour of a body at the mercy of an external force. Mesmer's doctrine can therefore be seen as a new form of domination over the women who attended his cures, annihilating their own will in favour of an all-powerful fluid magnetiser. According to Monroe, "[t]he *magnétiseur* served as manipulator of fluid, objective observer, poser of questions, and documenter of answers, while the *somnambule* became the instrument on which the *magnétiseur* acted".[22]

In Puységur's magnetic somnambulism, the hierarchical relationship between the magnetiser and the somnambulist was not simply overturned but rather reconfigured. While the magnetiser retained a guiding role, the somnambulist, in her trance state, became an active participant in shaping knowledge and diagnosing ailments, thus complicating the traditional dynamic of authority. The magnetiser became the channel through which the sleepwalker could transcend his physical limitations and reach a state of extraordinary lucidity. There was a paradigm shift

in the extraordinary possibilities of the human body and medical authority. In a state of trance, sleepwalkers explored their own bodies, discussed anatomical, philosophical and scientific issues, prescribed remedies, and generated new knowledge. This epistemological revolution still raises questions today about medical knowledge and its hierarchical aspect. What place is given to the patient's voice and, more fundamentally, who is recognised as the legitimate holder of knowledge?

Power and knowledge

This pursuit of autonomy also led to a different practice, as somnambulists began to magnetise themselves more frequently, gradually freeing themselves from the magnetiser's influence. For example, the very young cataleptic Estelle, eleven years old at the time, initially agreed to be magnetised by Dr Antoine Despine (1777–1852), who studied her around 1837, before expressing some reservations for fear of becoming an automaton, a decision that, also according to Edelman, demonstrated "a critical capacity and exceptional maturity".[23] It became possible to act magnetically on oneself. Likewise, in *La Vie vécue d'un médium spirite*, Mrs Agullana explains why she abandoned her magnetiser. Initially put into a trance by a magnetiser, she served as a medium for a spirit-doctor. But as the number of patients grew and relying on magnetisers became troublesome, she began using prayer to enter the trance state on her own.[24] At the beginning of the nineteenth century, somnambulists increasingly began to put themselves into trance to operate on their own bodies and to use this state both to treat and to predict the future. While asleep, some became clairvoyants and began to make extraordinary predictions and revelations. More than mere clairvoyance, some women proclaimed themselves prophetesses[25]

After 1840, according to historian John Warne Monroe, an "ideological shift" took place under the impetus of such mystical Freemasons as Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and Martinès de Pasqually.[26] The therapeutic use of magnetism gave way to a more mystical practice that allowed the soul to communicate with the dead, angels, or saints. According to Nicole Edelman, "somnambulism and somnambulists became a strange theological tool, a means of exploring extraterrestrial worlds, a machine for answering metaphysical questions".[27] A striking example is Adèle Maginot,

the daughter of a winegrower, who was magnetised in 1843 by Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet, a Swedenborgian necromancer. Described by Cahagnet as a "natural somnambulist", she excelled in psychology and medicine, but was described as a "simple", uneducated woman. Beginning in 1848, her magnetic ecstasy became necromantic, making her a channel for communicating with spirits and finding the dead. As Cahagnet put it: "The somnambulist surpasses the waking woman [. . .] she is the agent of God."[28] Adèle's prophecies and communications were carefully transcribed by Cahagnet in his successful book *Arcanes de la vie future dévoilés* (1848).

Later, the figure of the somnambulist prophet was not only recognised but also integrated into various social and economic structures. The practice became more widespread and systematised. Under the Second Empire, these women were not merely tolerated but often sought after by a clientele that ranged from the aristocracy to the emerging bourgeoisie. Their activities were also monetised, as séance and private consultations turned into lucrative enterprises even sanctioned by the power, demonstrating the success of this new, almost exclusively female profession. Magnetism thus shifted from a primarily spiritual practice to a fully realised performance, showcasing not only the female body but also the power of women's voices.

Conclusion

Some women remained attached to the therapeutic principles of early magnetism and became healers, operating on the fringes of institutional medicine and challenging emerging scientific norms. The prominence of female somnambulists, mediums and clairvoyants unsettled a society built on rigid hierarchies, contributing to the growing discredit of magnetism despite its initial scientific appeal. By dismissing the phenomena of somnambulism, scientists also undermined the authority and voices of the women who embodied them.

As Nicole Edelman suggests, had magnetism been fully explored, it might have reshaped notions of individual freedom by emphasising personal knowledge and self-governance over external authority. But rather than a linear shift from subjugation to autonomy, the trajectories of these women reveal a complex interplay between constraint, negotiation,

and self-assertion. Their performances—both bodily and discursive—did not simply challenge dominant structures but functioned as a space of mediation, where authority was enacted, questioned and redefined through the very act of performance. The somnambulists and mediums thus navigated a shifting terrain, in which their gestures, voices and embodied experiences became sites of both subjugation and self-assertion. This complex interplay between performance, knowledge and power underscores the plurality of ways in which these women inhabited and redefined their roles, challenging any singular narrative of emancipation.

Notes

1 Indeed, most sleepwalkers and mediums were women. This is the thesis put forward by Nicole Edelman in her book: *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France* (1785–1914) (Albin Michel, 1995).

2 Jacqueline Carroy, «Votre toute dévouée et reconnaissante cataleptique», *Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle* 38 (2009): 81.

3 Alexandra Katerina Bacopoulos-Viau, *Scripting the Mind: Automatic Writing in France, 1857–1930* (University of Cambridge, 2013).

4 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (University of California Press, 1986).

5 Nicole Edelman, «Un savoir occulté ou pourquoi le magnétisme animal ne fut-il pas pensé 'comme une branche très curieuse de psychologie et d'histoire naturelle?'», *Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle* 38 (2009): 115–132. Other hypotheses put forward include the sulphureous aspect of these mixed sessions, which were a moral hazard for women. Another reason is Mesmer's Austrian origins, which would have been particularly frowned upon on the eve of the Revolution.

6 Père Charles Hervier, *Lettre sur la découverte du magnétisme animal à M. Court de Gebelin* (Couturier, 1784), 14.

7 Edelman, "Un savoir occulté": 120.

8 Théodule-Armand Ribot, *Les maladies de la volonté* (Félix Alcan, 1888), 14.

9 Hector Durville, *Traité expérimental de magnétisme* (Librairie du magnétisme, 1898), 138.

10 Michel Pierssens, «Le merveilleux psychiques au XIXe siècle», *Ethnologie française* 23, no. 2 (1992): 359.

11 Jean-Pierre Peter, «De Mesmer à Puységur. Magnétisme animal et trance somnambulique, à l'origine des thérapies psychiques», *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 38, no. 1 (2009): 26.

12 Peter, «De Mesmer à Puységur»: 34.

13 Ibid., 27.

14 Ibid.

15 Michel Pierssens, «Le merveilleux psychiques au XIXe siècle», *Ethnologie française* 23, no. 2 (1992): 355.

16 Quoted in the French translation given by Dr Dusart of the English adaptation (by Mrs Crowe) of Kerner's book, under the title *La Voyante de Prévorst* (Chamuel, 1900).

17 Pierssens, "Le merveilleux psychiques": 356.

18 Gaston Méry, *La Voyante de la Rue de Paradis* (Dentu, 1896).
19 Pascal Le Maléfan and Stéphane Gumpper, "La véritable fin de la voyante Henriette Couëdon (1867–1941): itinérance asilaire d'une 'médium délirante'", *L'Évolution Psychiatrique* 86, no. 3 (2021): 627–643.
20 John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Cornell University Press, 2008), 69.
21 Nicole Edelman, "Le somnambulisme magnétique: les enjeux d'une mise à la marge (première moitié du XIXe siècle en France)", *L'Homme et la Société* 1 (2008): 98–99.
22 Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 69.
23 Edelman, "Le Somnambulisme magnétique: les enjeux de la mise en marge": 89.
24 Mme Angullana, *La Vie vécue d'un médium spirite* (Féret et frères, 1923), 33.
25 On this subject, see the chapter "The blossoming of visionary somnambulism" in Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires*, 59–74.
26 Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 70.
27 Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires*, 19.
28 Pierssens, «Le merveilleux psychique»: 362.

CHAPTER 10

Entertaining, healing, and fighting death: Madame Plainchant's magnetic diary (1851–1854)

Thibaut Rioult

Today, historical research into the performance of animal magnetism is based mainly on theoretical works and journals published by its main protagonists (Mesmer, Puységur, du Potet, Cahagnet) or by their detractors. There are few first-hand accounts that give us access to the individual lives of magnetisers, particularly amateurs and their actual practice, far removed from the great intellectual controversies. The discovery of the personal diary of an amateur magnetiser gives us a new insight into the reality of practices in the bourgeoisie. Written over a short period by Madame Plainchant, the unpublished manuscript of *Notes sur le magnétisme*, written between December 1851 and July 1854, combines summaries of Baron du Potet's sessions, documentary extracts, personal reflections, and diaries of cures.[1] It follows a woman's magnetic journey from her initiation, through her cures with their successes and failures, to what seems to be her final abandonment of magnetism. This document is an important contribution to the study of the reception of magnetism in nineteenth-century society as it tells the story of a direct participant, a curious practitioner, but not a partisan, of therapeutic magnetism. Two short plays written by Plainchant shortly after the *Notes* also shed light on her thinking.[2]

This short study will first outline Madame Plainchant's socio-cultural context, then analyse the three main applications of her practice of magnetism: entertaining (and experimenting), healing, and fighting death. Throughout, I will show how her account provides access to the profound epistemological issues surrounding magnetism, in which political, medical, and scientific positions crystallise.

Saint-Simonism and Fourierism, the socio-political context of the Notes

Although it bears no author's name, exhaustive analysis of the manuscript has enabled me to attribute it with certainty to Madame Claudine "Hébé" Plainchant, born Delaire (1801–1861). Through her mother, Claudine Trésaguet de L'Isle (1761–1815), she came from an illustrious family of engineers. In 1824, she married the polytechnician Juste Bouchot-Plainchant (1793–1861).

Saint-Simonism, a social, political, and religious doctrine of social harmony and fraternity, which relied heavily on engineers, began to take shape in France around this time, following the death of the Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). The polytechnician Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin (1796–1864) established himself as one of the main leaders of Saint-Simonism. Juste Plainchant was a member of the same class at the École Polytechnique.[3] The Plainchant couple adopted Saint-Simonism around 1831.[4] Like many Saint-Simonians, they also drew closer to the socialism of Charles Fourier (1772–1837). These two movements also shared a strong feminist tendency.[5] In 1837, having just given birth to her daughter Hortense-Marie, Hébé Plainchant wrote to *La Phalange* pledging 200 francs in support on behalf of her daughter.[6] In her town of Decize, she organised Fourierist banquets. In 1846, she received her cousin Claude Théodore Faullain de Banville (father of the writer Théodore de Banville).[7] The revolution of February 1848 raised the couple's hopes of a profound social transformation. A few days later, on 29 February 1848, Mr Plainchant wrote to the Saint-Simonian and Fourierist Boissy: "Here we are, more certain than ever of the realisation of our magnificent utopia."[8]

Unfortunately, tragedy befell the Plainchant family. On 21 March 1851, in Moulins, Marie died aged 14. Her death plunged her mother into deep despair.[9] As proof of the Plainchant family's involvement in the movement, the Fourierist newspaper *Démocratie pacifique* (which had succeeded *La Phalange* in 1843) published a long obituary written by Marius Clairefond (1811–1885), a member of the Fourierist Society in Moulins, which described the peaceful end of this young child, "devoted from birth to Fourier's ideas".[10] Madame Plainchant's life was turned upside down, and she remained haunted by this death. A few months later, back in Paris for the winter, she attended the classes given by Jules

du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881) from 24 December 1851.[11] Nicole Edelman has already pointed out the strong link between magnetism and spiritualism, Fourierism, and feminism.[12] Madame Plainchant is an embodiment of this connection.

Entertaining: becoming an actor of magnetism in private space

The French Académie de Médecine's decision to stop discussing animal magnetism (15 June 1842) pushed this discipline to the margins of official science.[13] In response, the Société du mesmérisme de Paris was founded in 1844 and du Potet launched his *Journal du magnétisme* the following year. Marked by an anti-academic stance, new forms of magnetic sociability were established.


L'entrée est gratuite, mais non publique. — Nul n'est admis sans billet.

SOCIÉTÉ DU MESMÉRISME,

fondée en 1844,

SOUS LA PRÉSIDENCE HONORAIRE

DE M. LE BARON DU POTET.

Salon du Waux-Hall, rue de la Douane, 18.

(DERRIÈRE LE CHATEAU D'EAU).

Entrée pour UNE personne

A la Séance expérimentale du JEUDI 1852.

Délivré par M.

Ce billet pourra être reçu à l'une des Séances suivantes.

Les portes seront ouvertes à 7 heures et demie.

La séance commencera à 8 heures précises.

Impr. de Pommeret et Moreau, q. des Augustins, 17.

Figure 10.1: Ticket from the Société du mesmérisme for an "experimental session" at the Salon du Waux-Hall, in Société du mesmérisme de Paris: liste des membres au 1er Juin 1852 (Paris: Imprimerie de Pommeret et Moreau, 1852), 8. (Paris, BnF, 8-T7-519, courtesy of Gallica/BnF).

Madame Plainchant's *Notes sur le magnétisme* shed light on the various places and modes of magnetic sociability at the intersection of the medical and the recreational. Held at the headquarters of the *Journal du magnétisme*, du Potet's lecture was an introduction to magnetic theory, which introduced Plainchant more widely to this world of thought. During his lectures, du Potet distributed invitations to the larger meeting at the Salon du Waux-Hall and his Thursday "experimental session".[14] (Fig. 10.1) André-Saturnin Morin reported that "these sessions attracted huge crowds, so much so that each evening many people with tickets were unable to get into the hall". In this large hall, which could hold around 1,000 people, spectators attended a series of demonstrations akin to a modern-day hypnosis show.[15] Madame Plainchant declared herself "quite satisfied with the intelligent order that reigned at these numerous meetings, where everything was done with decency".[16]

Decisively for our understanding of magnetic sociability, Madame Plainchant explained that after attending du Potet's public session on Sunday, 14 March 1852, the evening ended for a small group at a private home. In this intermediate space, the fixed distinction between the magnetiser and the magnetised was abolished: "Everything was done there as if in a family, everyone had the right to magnetise those who were willing to allow it; from being a spectator at Mr du Potet's house, one became an actor at Mr Hubault's."[17] Hubault developed a cordial relationship with the Plainchants. He took them to see the great anatomist Louis Auzoux and magnetised Madame Plainchant. Relieved both mentally and physically by his magnetic passes, she asked him to become her personal magnetiser.

In the intimacy of the home, Plainchant's doubts about the reality of magnetism dissipated: "I see on myself facts of attraction that I had only seen in Mr du Potet (but which seemed suspicious to me), I can no longer doubt now."[18] The intimate space of the salon—far removed from show business—appears to be a place of unveiling and authenticity. Cultural historian Jennifer Ronyak highlights the paradoxical way in which intimacy in the nineteenth century was expressed through performances in the salon.[19] In a socially and scientifically rigid and constrained world, magnetism provided access to the inner world (physical or spiritual) and unleashed the subversive powers of intimacy. Consequently, it is easier to see now how this art enabled women—from the intimate spaces traditionally reserved for them—to give their practices a wider scope, in the broader context of universal harmony and social progress. The re-appropriation of social issues by the intimate enabled the renewal of the traditional theme of the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm.

Both magnetised and magnetising (she had been magnetising her husband since 24 January 1852), Madame Plainchant gradually made magnetism her own. In her opinion, observing and experimenting in Mr Hubault's practice was much more formative than du Potet's course, "where you learn only what you need to know to be able to do a lot of harm and very little good". [20]

Through her democratic and utilitarian magnetism, this nineteenth-century *maîtresse femme*, with her imposing personality but very attentive to propriety, found an opportunity to construct the figure of a model mother, a woman of action and will, explicitly breaking with du Potet's misogynistic teaching:

> Instead of highlighting all the benefits that good mothers can take to direct the education of their children, looking after their health, securing a husband and keeping the peace of the household, Mr du Potet only mentions the advantage that men can take of magnetism to impose their will and desire on unfortunate defenceless women.[21]

The provinces, where—unlike in Paris—she was a notable woman, were the perfect place for demonstrations of the wonders of this new and unknown science. Every amateur became its propagator. In a small group, she numbed the doctor of Decize and stiffened his arms, "which could no longer move down except at my will".[22] A session was then requested for a large audience. The choice of venue revealed the social and political stakes involved. Madame Plainchant refused the courtroom so as not to be taken "for mountbanks" and chose "a large room, in a private house, with a mixed position, so that guests from different classes could meet without embarrassment".[23] In fact, as J.-P. Brissot observed, right from the start, "mesmerism [was] a way to bring social classes closer together".[24] As the historian Terry M. Parssinen points out, mesmerist performances were a "rare opportunity for a mixed audience to attend an event that was not only entertaining but also 'self-improving'".[25]

Although she defended medical and utilitarian magnetism above all (against some of du Potet's inclinations), Madame Plainchant could not resist playing the game of fighting with a sceptical and recalcitrant subject, whom she ended up magnetising by surprise: "Without putting my subject to sleep, I made him feel so suffocated that he admitted defeat and thought only of asking for mercy. My triumph over him was complete."[26] The question of the social game (and its agonic dimension) is a constant theme in magnetism. Madame Plainchant reverses the roles: a woman magnetises a man and imposes her will on him. Performing magnetism is a form of empowerment. In one of her plays, she staged a similar reversal: the young man had his cards drawn (fortune-telling was considered a typically female activity in the nineteenth century) and the young girl kidnapped her lover![27]

Healing: pragmatic and maternal magnetism at the service of society

For Plainchant, the mother was the family's first doctor. More broadly, against a backdrop of Saint-Simonism and Fourierism, she argued more generally for what might be called a magnetic maternalism (family and social). As we have seen, Plainchant first used magnetism to heal her husband. Although magnetisers seem to have been exclusively male during the first half of the nineteenth century, Plainchant's practice is proof that things were changing in the 1850s. In 1856, the magnetiser M.J.C. Baesens also described the need for magnetic mutual aid within a married couple and offered his reader a unique illustration of a woman magnetising her husband.[28] (Fig. 10.2) However, magnetism is a philosophy of social solidarity. Magnetic cures could not be restricted to family use but extended to society. Spending the summer in Decize in central France, Plainchant took the opportunity to magnetise and treat "her" peasants.

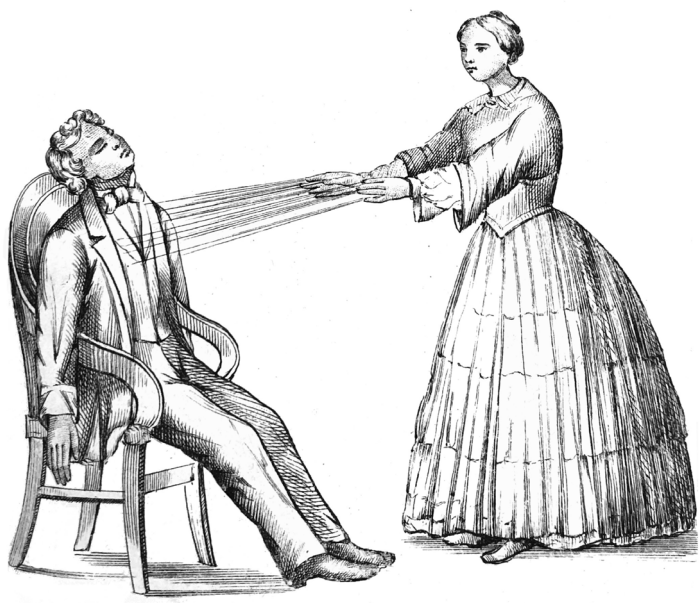


Figure 10.2: Wife magnetising her husband, engraving, lith. C. Messens (Antwerp), in M.J.C. Baesens, Universellisme, ou méthode naturelle universelle pour soulager ses semblables et les préserver de maladies (Bruxelles: Imprimerie de J.-H. Dehou, 1856). (Private coll.).

Through magnetism, Madame Plainchant was asserting natural therapeutics against academic medicine. In the introduction to his foundational *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal*, Mesmer stated that "nature offers a universal means of healing".[29] This intuition was widely accepted and permeated the magnetic corpus.[30] By placing the emphasis not on instituted knowledge but on *instinctive* practice, magnetism made it possible to democratise medical practice. Du Potet asserted that he wanted to write "the gospel of the people": from now on, anyone was capable of relieving their loved ones.[31] Plainchant, who hated doctors (probably because they failed to save her daughter), praised this "natural medicine that instinct teaches everyone".[32] This idea was reinforced by the opposition she saw between town and countryside, a subject to which she would devote a play.[33] She suspected the Parisian scientists—du Potet first and foremost—of being insincere, and preferred the magnetiser and pedicurist M. Hubault. Hubault was raw and rustic, but also instinctive, helpful and authentic. He "does not know what is taught in colleges but on the other hand [. . .] [he] knows what cannot be learned, which is a gift of nature".[34] For her, magnetism was the key to explaining the effectiveness of remedies discovered by "some *bonne femme* [wise or good woman] whom these gentlemen [doctors and scientists] only know how to make fun of", and constituted knowledge that "Mr du Potet [. . .] does not know".[35] Although less marked than the Hungarian cases described by Kornélia Deres in this book, which integrated folk healing techniques into medical practices, this interest in folk remedies reveals an important component of magnetism. Indeed, Plainchant's positions were based on a social, medical, political, and philosophical valorisation of nature, which overdetermined other structural oppositions such as that between town and country, artificial life and healthy life, erudition and instinct, scholar and *bonne femme*, official and popular knowledge, each embodied respectively by du Potet and Hubault.[36]

In Plainchant's diary of cures, magnetism appears to be an instinctive practice that can be used in any situation. This is evidenced by some truculent accounts, in which Madame Plainchant portrays herself as a *thaumaturge chatelaine,* healing a ploughman kneeling beside her bed while she is bedridden.[37] The magnetising woman—maternal and beneficent—is halfway between the imaginary Marian cult that developed in the nineteenth century and that of Michelet's witch, "priestess of Nature" and "the people's only doctor".[38]

However, for Madame Plainchant magnetism was not a standalone therapy but a tool in a bigger therapeutic package, consisting mainly of the Raspail method that offered popular health education. Plainchant was above all a pragmatist: anything goes (but without doctors)! The *Notes* contain several accounts of impromptu cures (crushed foot, panaritis, infections, extreme fatigue, a foreign body in the eye) resulting from the combination of magnetism and the Raspail method. Based on hygiene, self-medication and the use of camphor, the Raspail method rejected both Hippocratic expecting medicine (following the course of nature) and poisonous chemical therapy (arsenic, mercury).[39] It is important to emphasise that Raspail's "popular science" was not a popularised official science, but an *alter*-science in its own right.[40] The deputy François-Vincent Raspail (1794–1878) never ceased to attempt to unite science, medicine and politics while developing a unitary conception of science based on the unity of nature. In a break with the medicine of his time, Raspail "inaugurated a new social critique of modern medicine based on the empowerment of patients in their treatment".[41] This empowerment was also that of magnetism, which allowed every individual to play an active role in the cure. Breaking with academic medicine, magnetism enabled a new alliance between humanity, nature and society by re-articulating will, imagination, social relationships, and natural fluids within an effective practice. Indeed, magnetism was always practical before theoretical. It should be remembered that admission to the Société du mesmérisme de Paris as a "trainee member" was subject only to a practical examination; it was only when the application was to become a "full member" that a theoretical examination was required.[42]

Fighting death: magnetism at the moment of truth

Maternalism is central to Plainchant. It is also, in a way, a maternalism of substitution. Indeed, the *Notes sur le magnétisme* are framed by two tragic events that shed light on their meaning. The first was the death of Hortense-Marie Plainchant at the age of thirteen (†21/03/1851). The second one was the death of a thirteen-year-old girl from Decize (†27/09/1854).

The death of Plainchant's only daughter occurred a few months before her first course in magnetism. It forms the infra-text of the *Notes*. In retrospect, then, magnetism was for her—but unfortunately too late—a

way of saving her child.[43] For her, somnambulism was also a hope of seeing her daughter again. In 1852, on the anniversary of Hortense-Marie's death, she exclaimed in her diary: "My God, make me somnambulist, please let me see her again!"[44] This testimony is decisive for understanding the period of transition between magnetism and spiritualism (introduced in France in 1852–1853, but which Plainchant never mentioned), because it clearly shows a pre-spiritualist use of somnambulism, which could give access to visions of the dead.[45]

Finally, the *Notes* come to a close with a long account of the attempt to cure the young Francine Vallet, "a charming thirteen-year-old child", written in the heat of the moment. The parallels with Plainchant's deceased daughter are obvious. We witness in detail the mobilisation of the entire community of "children [. . .] parents or friends" against the disease, who magnetised the patient "relentlessly": "their role was simply to hold the patient's feet in their hands" under the supervision of Madame Plainchant. The operation was successful: Francine "was half resuscitated".[46] But a few lines later, the story breaks off mid-sentence. Why does this happen? The answer lies in the civil register.[47] This great collective battle against death was lost. Back home, confident, writing down the day's events, Madame Plainchant was surprised by the tragic news. She did not go back to her unfinished notes.

Performing magnetism also means testing its validity against reality. Faced with this failure, which took her back to her initial trauma, Madame Plainchant's exploration of therapeutic magnetism ended.

Conclusion

Madame Plainchant's *Notes sur le magnétisme* is a unique document that poses a thorny and insoluble epistemological problem: can it be considered representative of the voice of the forgotten magnetisers, or, on the contrary, is it a pure singularity in terms of the reception of magnetism in France? This manuscript shows a personal appropriation of magnetism on the fringes of all the "official" institutions (Société du mesmérisme, *Journal du magnétisme*, etc.). Plainchant's experience sheds light on a possible performative configuration at the crossroads of the social, the political, popular medicine, and entertainment.

This free, direct and critical account by a practitioner concerned with

efficiency teaches us how magnetism could be intensely experienced. In line with the Saint-Simonian and Fourierist emancipation of women, it bears witness to the affirmation of women as active subjects who put this art at the service of progress and social well-being. Madame Plainchant combines emotion and reason. Her exalted commitment to the service of the sick never abolishes her critical spirit. Unfortunately, this story—written primarily *for*, but also *about* herself—ultimately proves to be one of lost illusions.

Notes

1 [Madame Plainchant], *Notes sur le magnétisme – 1851 [-1854]*, two notebooks, 130 pp. (collection of Thibaut Rioult). The full notebooks has been published in Thibaut Rioult, *Féminisme et magnétisme animal: Hébé Plainchant et la contre-culture magnétique du XIX*e *siècle* (Lugano: Agorà & Co., 2026). Unless otherwise indicated, translations from French are by the author.

2 Mme Plainchant, *La ville et la campagne: comédie en 2 actes et en prose* (Tresse, successeur de Barba, éditeur, au Palais-Royal, 1854). See also Raymond Lacroix, *Théodore de Banville: une famille pour un poète* (Imprimerie Pottier, 1990), 246.

3 Ambroise Fourcy, *Histoire de l'Ecole Polytechnique* (Chez l'auteur, 1828), 448.

4 Guy Thuillier, "Les saint-simoniens à Nevers en 1831–1832", in *Actes du quatre-vingt-onzième congrès national des Sociétés savantes, Rennes, 1966: Section d'histoire moderne et contemporaine. De la Restauration à la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Bibliothèque nationale, 1969), 145.

5 Christine Planté, "Les féministes saint-simoniennes", in *Regards sur le Saint-Simonisme et les Saint-Simoniens*, ed. Jean-René Derré (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1986), 73–102, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pul.1412.

6 Letter from Mme Plainchant (Levange) to *La Phalange* (Paris), 15 July 1837. Paris, Archives Nationales (AN), 10AS-41 / I AB XIX (8).

7 Lacroix, *Théodore de Banville*, 206.

8 Letter from Mr Plainchant (Moulins) to Mr Boissy (Paris), 29 February 1848. Paris, AN, 10AS-41 / I AB XIX (8).

9 Yzeure, Departmental archives of Allier, inv. 2 Mi EC 196 86, Moulins, D, 1847–1851, 1851, no. 111.

10 Marius Clairefond, "Nécrologie [de Mlle Marie Plainchant de Levange]", *Démocratie pacifique* 13, no. 36, 6 April 1851, [7].

11 On du Potet, see Anne Jeanson, "De la thérapeutique au spiritualisme: le baron du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), prophète du magnétisme à Paris", *La Révolution française: Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française*, no. 24 (31 March 2023), https://doi.org/10.4000/lrf.7359.

12 Nicole Edelman, "Les rapports ambigus des somnambules magnétiques, des médiums spirites et du fouriérisme au XIXe siècle en France", *Cahiers Charles Fourier*, no. 20 (2009): 51–62; Henri Lovancour, *De Henri de Saint-Simon à Charles Fourier: Étude Sur Le Socialisme Romantique Français de 1830* (Imprimerie Durand, 1913).

13 Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité. 1: Le défi du magnétisme animal*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond (Le Plessis Robinson: Institut Synthélabo, 1999), 452.

14 *Notes*, I, 37.

15 André-Saturnin Morin, *Du magnétisme et des sciences occultes* (Baillière, 1860), 14 ff.
16 Notes, I, 37.
17 Ibid., 37–38.
18 Ibid., I, 42.
19 Jennifer Ronyak, *Intimacy, Performance, and the Lied in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 6.
20 *Notes*, I, 81, 70.
21 Ibid., 69–70.
22 Ibid., 59.
23 Ibid., 60–61.
24 [Jacques-Pierre Brissot], *Un mot à l'oreille des académiciens de Paris* (s.n., [c.1786]), 20 in Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Harvard University Press, 1968), 97.
25 Terry M. Parssinen, "Mesmeric performers", *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 1 (1977): 102.
26 *Notes*, I, 74.
27 Mme Plainchant de Levange, *On ne prévoit jamais tout: comédie en un acte et en prose* (Tresse, successeur de Barba, éditeur, au Palais-Royal, 1855).
28 M.J.C. Baesens, *Universellisme, ou méthode naturelle universelle pour soulager ses semblables et les préserver de maladies* (Imprimerie de J.-H. Dehou, 1856), 49.
29 Franz Anton Mesmer, *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* (Chez P. Fr. Didot le jeune, 1779), vi.
30 François Azouvi, "La polémique du magnétisme animal", in Charles de Villers, *Le magnétiseur amoureux*, 2nd ed., Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques (J. Vrin, 2006), 70.
31 Jeanson, "De la thérapeutique au spiritualisme".
32 *Notes*, I, 27.
33 Plainchant, *La Ville et la campagne*.
34 *Notes*, I, 53.
35 Ibid., 29–30, 27–29.
36 Plainchant, *La Ville et la campagne*.
37 *Notes*, II, 8.
38 Brigitte Waché, "L'entrée de la piété mariale dans la liturgie: Exemple du XIXe siècle", *Transversalités* 122, no. 2 (2012): 201–219, https://doi.org/10.3917/trans.122.0201. Jules Michelet, *La sorcière*, Collection Hetzel (E. Dentu, 1862), viii. See also Philippe Régnier, "Sciences naturelles et médecine dans *La Sorcière* de Michelet", in *Le Partage des savoirs XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*, ed. Lise Andries (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2003), 203–224, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pul.6612.
39 Jacques Poirier and Claude Langlois, eds. *Raspail et la vulgarisation médicale*, Sciences en situation (J. Vrin, 1988); Jonathan Barbier and Ludovic Frobert, eds. *Une imagination républicaine: François-Vincent Raspail, 1794–1878*, Les cahiers de la MSHE Ledoux, no. 4 (Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2017).
40 Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, "Raspail et la science populaire", in *Une imagination républicaine*, 27–38, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pufc.20717.
41 Hervé Guillemain, "Principes pour une réappropriation globale de la santé au XIXe siècle: les combats de Raspail contre la médecine de son temps", in *Une imagination républicaine*, 63–79, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pufc.20737.
42 "Statuts de la Société du mesmérisme de Paris", *Journal du magnétisme* 5, no. 49 (10 July 1847): 1–9.

43 *Notes*, I, 13.

44 Ibid., 43.

45 On the complex period preceding the appearance of the word "*spiritisme*" (1857) in France, see Guillaume Cuchet, *Les voix d'outre-tombe: tables tournantes, spiritisme et société* (Éditions du Seuil, 2012). See the seminal article by Auguste Viatte, "Les origines françaises du spiritisme", *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 21, no. 90 (1935): 35–58. Du Potet remains very circumspect about the practice of evoking the dead: Jules du Potet, *La magie dévoilée, ou principes de science occulte* (Imprimerie de Pommeret et Moreau, 1852), 211–212.

46 *Notes*, II, 26.

47 Nevers, Departmental archives of the Nièvre, *Decize: actes d'état civil*, 5Mi2 139, année 1854, no. 68.

CHAPTER 11

Performing magnetism in Charles de Villers' *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* (1787)

Alessandra Aloisi

Charles de Villers (1765–1815), best known for his contribution to the translation and dissemination of Kant's philosophy in France, was also the author of a strange philosophical novel, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, first published in Besançon in 1787 and immediately removed from circulation shortly afterward.[1] Through an entertaining dialogue among several characters—including an *abbé*, a doctor and a couple of wealthy parents who moved to the countryside to attend to their daughter's education—the novel introduces the theory of animal magnetism against the backdrop of the love story between Valcourt, a young partisan of this doctrine, and Caroline de Sainville, whose education he has been entrusted with.

Historians of animal magnetism have widely recognised the importance of this novel, whose ideas have been regarded as highly innovative and advanced for its time. Villers, originally from Lorraine, was introduced to animal magnetism during his military service in Strasbourg, where he joined the *Société Harmonique des Amis réunis*.[2] Rejecting the theory of the magnetic fluid and criticising the excesses of a certain spectacularisation in magnetic sessions, in this text Villers emphasises the importance of imagination, desire and belief in establishing the "*mise en rapport*" between the magnetiser and the magnetised subject and between different subjects at distance. Anticipating in many ways Alexandre Bertrand (1795–1831)—who would later attribute all the effects of magnetic somnambulism to the power of imagination—Villers thus reclaims, in support of animal magnetism, an argument that was notoriously used to discredit it.[3]

While the significance of Villers' ideas in this novel has been broadly acknowledged, the literary form has received far less attention. After exploring the key aspects of Villers' vision of animal magnetism as well as the fortunes and misfortunes of his novel, in this chapter, I argue that

the literary form is central to the ways in which this text not only conveys but also performs specific ideas about animal magnetism. By emphasising the role of the narrator in presenting the story and guiding the reader's attention, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* deliberately creates a magnetic interplay between the narrator and the reader, mirroring the relationship between the magnetiser and the magnetised subject.

Fortunes and misfortunes of a novel

Immediately seized by the police shortly after its publication, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* had very limited circulation. Most copies were destroyed and just a few years later, in 1792, with the radicalisation of the Revolution, Villers was forced to flee France. While the reasons for this censorship were never explained, the severity of this repressive measure is revealing of the perceived threat posed by a novel whose title misleadingly suggested scandalous content.[4]

According to Joseph Deleuze (1753–1835), one of the most notable magnetisers of the Restoration period, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* was among the best treatises ever written on animal magnetism.[5] Although its title might suggest a "frivolous work"—if not "a joke"—this novel was, in fact, a profound "book of metaphysics".[6] The Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825), founder of the *Société Harmonique des Amis réunis* of Strasbourg and a close friend of Charles de Villers, manifestly shared Deleuze's opinion, as he republished *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* in 1824, albeit with significant revisions and additions.[7] Scholars of animal magnetism have not failed to recognise the significance of this novel, which was rediscovered and brought back into circulation in 1978 thanks to the modern edition by François Azouvi. Its philosophical and medical implications have been discussed with special reference to the "vitalism" of the Montpellier school, the development of hypnosis and the history of psychology and psychoanalysis.[8]

One of the most innovative aspects of this novel is its emphasis on the power of imagination, desire and belief rather than on the action of the magnetic fluid, whose material influence Villers seeks to discard. Furthermore, through Valcourt's words, Villers critiques the excesses of certain magnetic sessions, where spectacle often takes precedence over science to captivate and entertain the audience:

> Spectators rushed to the *baquets* to amuse their eyes for a moment; the pantomime of the initiates greatly entertained them. And what effect do you expect that these sick people, surrounded by ropes and irons, would have on the spectators' minds? Can you blame a self-controlled person for seeing nothing but charlatanism in it?[9]

At the same time, Villers acknowledges the crucial role of the setting or scenic apparatus and other specific *techniques* in directing attention, influencing imagination and establishing a *rapport* between the magnetiser and the magnetised subject and between different subjects:

> If the idea of magnetism was not already present in the patient, and if, without being prepared, they were surrounded by the rope of the tree or the *baquet*, the effects would be insignificant. But I believe it is very wise to strike the patient's imagination with an imposing apparatus, so that, captivated by it, the magnetiser can more easily obtain the necessary influence.[10]

As Valcourt further explains, these methods are indeed essential not only for the patient but also for the magnetiser, whose healing action is all the more effective as the magnetiser employs them to focus attention and reinforce their own belief:

> Here is how I magnetise myself. My goal is to use in the patient that part of my soul which has the ability to project its effects outward through the power of thought. I begin by directing toward the patient all the senses that might otherwise distract my attention: I touch them and look at them. I then hurl my soul onto them with all the strength I am capable of. To better concentrate, I imagine my soul in the form that seems to me the least material—such as an infinitely subtle fluid, for example. [. . .] In my imagination, I let this fluid travel throughout the body of the person I am touching; I express this movement through a physical gesture, running my hands over them, which helps me to achieve an even greater degree of focus.[11]

As a "moral agent", imagination plays the most important role in animal magnetism and the "magnetisers who believe in the fluid can achieve greater effects".[12] Furthermore, since animal magnetism, as Villers

understands it, is nothing but the mutual encounter of two imaginations and desires, it follows that "the *rapport* can be established at any distance whatsoever".[13] Physical contact (*l'attouchement*), as represented in Figure 11.1, whose utility is for Villers entirely subordinate to the focus of attention, can thus no longer be considered strictly necessary.[14]

Figure 11.1: Experiment in Animal Magnetism by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) in 1784 (engraving) (b/w photo), French School, (18th century) / Ordre National des Pharmaciens, Paris, France / © Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images.

While the novelty and importance of Villers' ideas in *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* have been widely acknowledged, its literary form—when not openly dismissed—has received far less attention. According to Joseph Deleuze, the book's fictional elements overshadowed its philosophical significance; the literary form was a mere superfluous ornament, adopted by a young and still inexperienced author only to "attract attention". In his view, it would have been preferable to "separate the philosophical part from the fictional part, which, despite the elegance of the style, does not offer great interest".[15]

Deleuze's stance should come as no surprise. His criticism of the literary form not only echoes a long-standing prejudice against novels but also aligns with his understanding of animal magnetism, which prioritised the action of the will and the reality of the fluid rather than the power of imagination. It was precisely on this crucial point that Deleuze clashed bitterly with his contemporary Alexandre Bertrand.[16] Despite his enthusiasm for Villers' book, Deleuze could not but dismiss its literary form, as recognising its significance would have meant, more broadly, acknowledging the central and performative role of imagination in animal magnetism.

Although for different reasons, later scholars have continued to disregard the literary form, viewing it as a secondary, if not distracting, element in relation to the relevance of Villers' ideas. Echoing Deleuze's prejudice, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Louis Wittmer, the author of one of the first extensive studies on Charles de Villers, argued that, despite all appearances, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* "is not a novel": "a glance at the table of contents is enough to see that the fictional aspect is merely a secondary part of the work".[17] In his view, the literary form, which he regarded as mediocre, was adopted just to appeal to the audience and make its scientific content more accessible.

In recent years, the literary form has started to receive scholarly interest, yet still in a way that often prioritises the novel's representation of science rather than the formal or stylistic aspects of the text. *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* has been read as part of the well-established tradition of the philosophical and libertine novel, which employs dialogue and the literary form as crucial didactic tools for the popularisation and dissemination of specific ideas. Following this tradition, Villers uses the novelistic form to restore the reputation of animal magnetism at a time when its scientific credibility was under attack and the figure of the magnetiser had become a frequent subject of satire and literary caricature. While recognising the fundamental link between magnetism and desire (also hinted at in its title), *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* intends to challenge the stereotype of the magnetiser as a libidinous charlatan. Against all expectations, Valcourt does not exploit magnetism to seduce his beloved; instead, it is Caroline—portrayed as a lively and intelligent young woman—who puts his teachings into practice, using animal magnetism to cure her mother, Madame de Sainville, of a headache.[18]

Magnetic interplays: from content to literary form

The strictly formal aspects of this novel, however, have not yet received adequate attention. According to the literary scholar Nicolas Brucker, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* not only disseminates new ideas about animal magnetism but also innovates the novel form itself: this text "begins as a libertine novel and finishes as a sentimental one", just to reject both forms in the end, as possibly suggested by its parodic conclusion.[19] Likewise, as the eighteenth-century specialist Francesca Pagani has pointed out, in this novel, Villers skilfully intertwines not only different genres but also different levels of discourse, one belonging to fiction and the other to the reality beyond the text.[20] Suffice it to consider the extensive footnotes, where the author, writing in the first person, recounts his own experiences with animal magnetism. These notes serve not only a philosophical but also a literary purpose, creating an intriguing overlapping between the character of the magnetiser (Valcourt) and the author of the paratext, who at times seems to coincide with the narrator. It is no coincidence that, at the end of the brief, playful preface, the author signs "The Magnetiser"—perhaps implying that the magnetiser is the author of this text, just as the author/narrator, in turn, assumes the role of the magnetiser.[21]

Building on these interpretations, I argue that the Villers' distinctive vision of animal magnetism is not only expressed in his novel but also performed through a strategic use of the literary form. A magnetiser himself and, like his teacher Puységur, the author of a manual for aspiring magnetisers, Villers transposes his vision and practice of animal magnetism into the very writing of his novel.[22] His magnetic theories are not only explicitly discussed by the characters but also implicitly employed within the novel itself.[23] I will show this by looking at three aspects in particular: the theatrical dimension of the text, which puts emphasis on the arrangement and construction of the setting; the role of the narrator, whose frequent interventions aim at disposing and guiding the reader's imagination and attention; and the complex interplay between the narrator and the reader, which mirrors the relationship between the magnetiser and the magnetised subject.

Already in the first chapter—significantly titled *"Où l'on entre en scène"* (*"*Where we enter the scene")—the extradiegetic narrator visibly manifests his presence and speaks in the first person, selecting information, framing events and guiding the reader. While Valcourt and the other

characters are involved in uninteresting conversations, the narrator takes the opportunity "to inform the reader about the setting, the scene, and the actors".[24] Introducing the characters as if they were on a stage, with the reader observing them from a distance, the text immediately draws attention to the scenic apparatus and the theatricality of the scene as well as to the narrator's control over the story and the narration.[25]

These sorts of narratorial interventions are not limited to the opening of the text. For example, in chapter VII, taking advantage of another moment of dullness in the story, the narrator steps in to redirect the reader's attention elsewhere: "The conversation became general again—that is to say, boring. We will resume it tomorrow, when Madame de Sainville allows magnetism to appear again."[26] Similarly, at the end of chapter V:

> Everyone, except for them [Caroline and Valcourt], was bored; and since we are not in love, boredom would affect us too if we lingered too long in observing them. So, let us move to the next day, after dinner, at Madame de Sainville's, where our usual actors are gathered.[27]

To a certain extent, these techniques are also widely employed by other authors and texts.[28] Narratorial intrusions like the ones mentioned above can be regarded as simple narrative strategies aimed at facilitating or accelerating the transition from one scene to another. In other cases, they seem to serve—as in the case of Diderot—a precise parodic intention with regard to the novel and its conventions.[29] Indeed, much like Diderot, Villers stages a self-conscious narration in which the narrator, reflecting on the very act of telling the story, makes the reader aware of his own choices and constraints. For instance, in chapter XII:

> It would be a *shocking* peculiarity to recount a love story without a walk in a grove [. . .]. Fortunately, this circumstance has occurred for these characters. I shall therefore be careful not to neglect such a well-established convention, and it is in the *abbé*'s grove that they shall lose their way [italics in original].[30]

Or again in chapter XXV:

> Valcourt finds the countryside very dull; so, since it is from him that I have learned everything I am writing, I shall remain silent and deprive myself

> of the pleasure of pouring out my heart over the beauties of nature. It is truly frustrating to write a true story.[31]

The boldness and posture of Villers' narrator closely resemble those of Diderot's narrator in *Jacques le fataliste*, for instance in the following passage, where the narrator teases the reader and playfully engages with them in a familiar tone:

> I will not paint a portrait of the beautiful Caroline; instead, I will ask the lovely woman reading me to picture the one she most cordially detests, and that will be my heroine. Let a man imagine his mistress, and she will be her as well.[32]

At the same time, Villers skilfully adapts these techniques to his own specific purposes. By ingeniously employing these literary devices in a novel about animal magnetism, Villers extends the magnetic performance into the text itself, implicitly inviting his reader to draw a clear parallel between the role of the magnetiser and that of the author/narrator—a parallel, in other words, between the practice of animal magnetism and the literary act of telling a story, both of which rely on directing attention and engaging the imagination, desire and belief of the patient or the reader.

By revealing, through the theatricalisation of the scene, the constructed nature of the story, Villers allows the reader to perceive the similarity between a magnetic session (which relies on a carefully arranged setting or scenic apparatus) and the novel itself (whose setting and framework are deliberately crafted to capture the reader's attention and to predispose and influence their imagination and belief). Likewise, through his numerous intrusions, interventions and anticipations—such as when he fuels the reader's passions and desire in picturing the characters, or when he excites their attention and curiosity by promising a happy ending—the narrator seeks to establish a magnetic contact or *rapport* with his reader, in the specific technical sense that this term holds in the magnetic theory exposed in the novel, where imagination and desire become more important than physical contact.[33]

Furthermore, just like the magnetiser—who, according to Villers, is influenced by his own imagination and belief as much as the magnetised subject—the narrator in the novel asserts his authority over the story

while simultaneously undermining it. At times, the extradiegetic narrator playfully challenges his own omniscience and confines himself to the same space and temporality as the characters, thus collapsing the difference between story and narration—for instance, when Valcourt runs away too fast for the narrator to follow him.[34] Or when the narrator renounces his ubiquity to follow just one character: "[S]ince we cannot be in different places at the same time, let's content ourselves with following Caroline."[35] Intrusions like these serve to reveal that the narrator, like the magnetiser, is caught within the very framework that, in other ways, he constructs and directs.

In so doing, Villers gestures toward the intrinsically magnetic nature of any literary text, perhaps suggesting that—like a magnetic session—a novel too can be performative: it holds the creative capacity to bring things into being, to produce effects on the reader and ultimately to transform reality through the power of desire and imagination. This is perhaps what Valcourt himself alludes to at the beginning of the novel, when, in response to Madame de Sainville's invitation to introduce everyone to the doctrine of animal magnetism, he replies: "I shall obey you, Madame; but in truth, you would do far better to confine yourself to reading. I would only reserve the right to point out a few works that stand out amid the incredible number of pamphlets."[36]

Notes

1 See in particular Charles de Villers, *Philosophie de Kant ou Principes fondamentaux de la philosophie transcendantale* (Collignon, 1801). For Villers' role in the dissemination of German culture in France and in the mediation between France and Germany, see Louis Wittmer, *Charles de Villers, un intermédiaire entre la France et l'Allemagne, et un précurseur de Mme de Staël* (Hachette, 1908); *Un homme deux cultures. Charles de Villers entre France et Allemagne* (1765–1825), ed. N. Brucker and F. Meier (Classiques Garnier, 2019); Charles de Villers, *Correspondance. 1797–1815. La médiation faite œuvre*, ed. M. Bernard and N. Brucker (Honoré Champion, coll. Bibliothèque des correspondances, mémoire et journaux, 2020).

2 For more detailed information on Villers' biography, military career with the Artillery of Metz (commanded by the Marquis de Puységur) and interest in animal magnetism, see Amand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur, "Notice sur Charles de Villers, auteur premier du *Magnétiseur amoureux*", *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* 1 (Dentu, 1824), 241–260; François Azouvi's "Note biographique", in Charles de Villers, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, ed. F. Azouvi (Vrin, 1978; second expanded edition, 2006), 15–23.

3 On the controversy surrounding animal magnetism, disqualified by the report of the Royal Commission, and the role of imagination, see Azouvi's essay "Dix années d'affrontements", in

Villers, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 51–54; Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 1968); François Azouvi, "Mesmérisme", in *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, ed. M. Delon (Quadrige/PUF, 2007), 806–808.

4 See François Azouvi, "Les éditions du *Magnétiseur amoureux*" and "Dix années d'affrontements", in Villers, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 25–77.

5 I refer to the periodisation proposed by Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, vol. 1, *Le défi du magnétisme. 1784–1840*. Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond (Le Plessis-Robinson, Institut Synthélabo pour le progrès de la connaissance, 1999).

6 Joseph Deleuze, *Histoire critique du magnétisme animal*, vol. 2 (Mame, 1813), 102. All translations into English by the author.

7 For a discussion of Puységur's edition, including his changes and additions, see Nicolas Brucker, "Charles de Villers et le magnétisme animal", *Mémoires de l'Académie nationale de Metz* 26 (2013): 195–206; Marie-Claire Latry, "Le Magnétiseur amoureux, une écriture à quatre mains?", *Eidôlon* (Lapril, Université de Bordeaux III), no. 55 (2000): 247–265; Francesca Pagani, "Un roman pour servir à l'histoire du magnétisme. *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* de Villers à Puységur", *Cahiers de littérature française*, no. 17 (2018), special issue on "Littérature et magnétisme": 25–43.

8 Besides Azouvi's essay "Dix années d'affrontements", in Villers, *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, see also Leon Chertok and Raymond de Saussure, *The Therapeutic Revolution, from Mesmer to Freud*, trans. R. H. Ahrenfeldt (Brunner/Mazel, 1979); Jacqueline Carroy, Hypnose, *suggestion et psychologie. L'invention de sujets* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1991); Jean-Pierre Peter, "De Mesmer à Puységur. Magnétisme animal et transe somnambulique, à l'origine des thérapies psychiques", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 38 (2009): 19–40; Andrea Cavalletti, *Suggestions. Potenza e limiti del fascino politico* (Bollati, 2011).

9 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 161.

10 Ibid., 158.

11 Ibid., 139.

12 Ibid., 158, 140.

13 Ibid., 167. As Azouvi points out in his critical edition (n. 78, p. 239), usually the word "rapport" indicates "the relationship between the magnetiser and the magnetised subject". Villers introduces a slightly different nuance to this term, which also includes the relationship between different subjects at distance.

14 Ibid., 138.

15 Deleuze, *Histoire critique*, vol. 2, 103. Advocating for a new edition of this text, Deleuze suggests not only incorporating updates to reflect more recent discoveries in the field of animal magnetism but also revising the fictional part (108–109). As already mentioned, it will not be Villers, but rather Puységur who will take charge of this new edition. Far from reducing the novelistic part, Puységur will expand it, adding new chapters and making the plot more complex. Here is what the physician Pierre Froissac wrote, commenting on this new edition in his *Rapports et discussions de l'Académie Royale de Médecine sur le magnétisme animal recueillis par un sténographe, et publiés, avec des notes explicatives* (1833), 243: "In 1824, Puységur published a revised and expanded edition of *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* by Charles de Villers, which originally appeared in 1787 [. . .]. M. de Puységur would have done a valuable job had he merely confined himself to separating the philosophical part of the work from the frivolous fictional frame which ruins it."

16 See Carroy, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie*, 143–144.

17 Wittmer, *Charles de Villers*, 4.

18 See Daniela Gallingani, *Miti macchine magie: Intrecci letterari e ipotesi scientifiche nell'età dei Lumi*

(Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 1996), 94–102; Joël Castonguay-Bélanger, *Les écarts de l'imagination. Pratiques et représentations de la science dans le roman au tournant des Lumières* (Presses universitaires de Montréal, 2008), 150–169; Pagani, "Un roman pour servir à l'histoire du magnétisme".

19 Brucker, "Charles de Villers et le magnétisme animal", 200–202. The conclusion reads: "The two lovers received, along with the sacrament, the courage to love each other for life [. . .]. Through their behaviour, Caroline and Valcourt satirize the morals of their century: they have been married for a whole three months, and they still love each other as they did on the first day" (*Le Magnétiseur amoureux:* 196–197).

20 Pagani, "Un roman pour servir à l'histoire du magnétisme", 32.

21 A preface that is, in fact, an anti-preface and playfully shows the uselessness of any prefaces. See also the author's footnote on p. 148: "No one forgives an author for being boring. It is this relentless wrath of the reader that gave birth to prefaces, epistles, and other pieces meant to obtain indulgence". On the role of Villers' preface and footnotes see also Gallingani, *Miti macchine magie*, 94–95.

22 See Azouvi's edition, 201–207: *Essai d'instruction pour apprendre à magnétiser*.

23 Several studies have explored the ways in which magnetic theories and imagery were assimilated into the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novel, influencing their themes, vocabulary and metaphors: see in particular Maria Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne, eds., *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* (Rodopi, 2006); Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); and the special issue of *Cahiers de littérature française*, no. 17 (2018) on "Littérature et magnétisme", ed. F. Pagani. Very few, however, have focused on the literary transposition of the magnetic techniques on a narrative, formal, and textual level, for which see, for instance, Göran Blix, "The occult roots of realism: Balzac, Mesmer, and second sight", *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 36 (2007): 261–280. Blix shows how animal magnetism shapes Balzac's representational practices and literary method (what he calls Balzac's "magnetic realism").

24 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 85.

25 On Villers's theatrical culture and production around the same years, see Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval, "Villers dramaturge. Entre théâtre de société et premiers essais dramatiques", in *Charles de Villers. Un homme deux cultures*, 181–194.

26 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 111.

27 Ibid., 103.

28 Besides Diderot, which I briefly discuss here, other examples of similar narratorial intrusions could be found in Cervantes, Scarron, Fielding, Sade or Balzac, among others. For a general discussion of this technique see Gérard Genette, "Frontiers of narratives", in *Figures of literary discourse*, trans. A. Scheridan (Columbia University Press, 1982), 127–144; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1997; second edition 2011), 84–94.

29 For the wider philosophical and literary significance of Diderot's work for the authors of this period, see Caroline Warman, *The Atheist's Bible. Diderot and the "Éléments de physiologie"* (Open Book Publishers, 2020), which also discusses the complex circulation of his works at the end of the eighteenth century.

30 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 127.

31 Ibid., 177.

32 Ibid., 85. See also 96.
33 Ibid., 86.
34 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 194.
35 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 95.
36 *Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, 91.

PART 4
MEDIA & THE SENSES

CHAPTER 12

Music and magnetism from Mesmer to the rise of hypnosis

Olivier Verhaegen

Sound—making music and listening to it—was essential to the performance of animal magnetism. The use of music can be traced back to the very earliest practices of magnetic therapy by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer.

Although only few analyses have explored the musical foundations of mesmerism in the late eighteenth century, the connection between early magnetism and music has recently gained scholarly attention.[1] Studies have also shed new light on the role of performance in the rise of hypnosis in the later nineteenth century. Much more research is needed, however, for the period between Mesmer's own time and the mid-nineteenth century, when magnetism underwent several revivals that reshaped the relationship between body and therapy. This reshaping altered the performativity of magnetic therapy. Discussions on magnetism in this period produced new conceptions of the body and the psyche.

This chapter examines the role of music in the formation of a specific and evolving relationship between magnetisers and patients, from when Mesmer developed his theory until the emergence of hypnosis. It builds on musical pieces and written sources such as press articles, reports from magnetisers, and various theoretical and critical texts on magnetism. Sources such as essays, pamphlets, medical theses and iconographic materials are not discussed here, but they could also provide a more nuanced and sensory understanding of music in magnetic practice.

Mesmer's link between music and animal magnetism fascinated his contemporaries and still intrigues us today. He used music in therapy, drawing on scientific ideas about harmony and playing instruments. In turn, his approach sparked new scientific and medical outlooks on the relationship between practitioners and patients' bodies and minds; it also captured the interest of artists. Experiments in animal magnetism

revealed dynamics between magnetisers and patients, and they steered musical compositions. By the turn of the nineteenth century, music had become central to stories of magnetic healing performances even before they reached the salons of the bourgeoisie and the stages of concert halls.

Franz Anton Mesmer, music and a famous instrument

Few studies have explored the role of music in Mesmer's practice, from his dissertation in 1766 to his departure from Paris in 1785.[2] Mesmeric theory was not initially based on music. However, Mesmer's intellectual interest and cultural practice can explain why music was significant in magnetic therapy. His dissertation at the University of Vienna explored the harmony of the spheres, which would inform mesmeric theory. The notion of the harmony of spheres gained wider recognition from the philosophical, scholarly and medical influences on Mesmer's reflections.[3] The harmony of spheres also underpinned the connection between music and Mesmer's concept of a subtle universal fluid. The broader cultural context, especially the music scene in Vienna, is also crucial for understanding how the German physician used music in therapeutic practice. Mesmer became a close friend of the Mozart family, and there is evidence that he produced Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's first opera, "Bastien and Bastienne", in his garden in Vienna.[4] Mesmer played the cello and the clavichord – and, above all, the glass harmonica. Over the years, Mesmer honed his skills on the harmonica, performing and gaining a reputation as a talented player, according to Leopold Mozart. Mesmer also inspired Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to compose several significant works for harmonica. After Benjamin Franklin's mechanical innovations in 1761 reinvigorated the instrument's popularity, several composers employed the glass harmonica: with the glasses arranged concentrically around a revolving crank operated by a pedal, it made sustained vibrations inside the musical glasses.[5]

After he moved to Paris in 1778, Mesmer improved his use of music in magnetic cures. In this he was helped by the German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck, who likely admired Mesmer's musical talents. Gluck encouraged him to explore his improvisations on the harmonica and the piano, instruments with which Mesmer could express specific emotions in his compositions. Music played an essential part in his

therapy, especially as he didn't only practise on individual patients but also on groups. In Paris, mesmeric music was performed in elegant surroundings: while Mesmer set the scene in profound silence, in a room with curtained walls, the soft music of wind instruments, piano and harmonica helped to immerse the patients in musical magnetism. Mesmer used music not only to soothe his patients when necessary but also to stimulate and unsettle them when he deemed it essential to induce a critical state, which he called a "crisis".[6]

With Mesmer's condemnation by the Royal Commissions in 1784, magnetic therapy was discredited in Paris. But magnetic controversy persisted in multiple essays and articles in France and Europe. Many aspects of mesmeric therapy faced criticism, but the use of music was mostly spared. Some disciples further enhanced the therapeutic role of instruments in pamphlets.[7] However, drawings and caricatures showed Mesmer with his musical instruments, thus turning them into the props of a quack.[8] (Fig. 12.1)

Figure 12.1: Image from Jean-Jacques Paulet, L'antimagnétisme ou Origine, progrès, décadence, renouvellement et réfutation du magnétisme animal, Londres, 1784. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Later, when Mesmer formalised his presentation of the theory of mesmerism, it included a few elements about the role of music. In 1799, he linked the harmony of instruments to various parts of the nervous system. Above all, he portrayed music as a vital element of the air fluid that effectively circulates the magnetic fluid. For Mesmer, sound represented an element of fluidity. The physical theory of air as a fluid resonated closely with harmony theory: air encompassed "all the vibrational movements that can produce sound, harmony, and its modulations".[9] The significance of music in therapy and pain relief was acknowledged long before Mesmer sought a perfect chord that resonated with the body; music's healing potential was already discussed in antiquity.[10] From the mid-eighteenth century, numerous essays deepened the understanding of music's capacity to relieve pain.

New magnetic interpretations and a fresh relationship with music

After 1784, various new interpretations and adaptations of Mesmer's theory emerged and spread throughout Europe. These interpretations were physical theories that progressively linked music with the subtle vital fluids circulating between the body and the psyche. Although Mesmer's theory was officially condemned, the publication of letters on animal magnetism by Amand Marie Jacques de Chastenet de Puységur (1751–1825) had a significant influence.[11] The Marquis de Puységur had attended lessons with Mesmer in Paris in 1783 but was sceptical about his methods. Upon returning to his estate in Buzancy, Puységur observed how his servants and the villagers engaged in "magnetic somnambulism". They entered a trance, during which they disclosed their ailments and potential remedies for their recovery. Puységur briefly referred to music in his experiments. He described somnambulism more eloquently than Mesmer, but music was not his focus. Music was, however, present in the noble family: the brother of the Marquis, Antoine-Hyacinthe de Chastenet de Puységur (1752–1809), practised magnetism on the Caribbean Island of Santo Domingo and played a modern instrument—the pianoforte.[12]

In the physiological reflections on somnambulism in his 1811 essay, Puységur did not mention music. The essay was meant as a comparison with Mesmer's theory.[13] But the impact of Puységur's orchestrated

intellectual and scholarly displacement is nevertheless crucial to understand music's evolving role in somnambulism. Disturbed by the violence of the convulsions in Mesmer's therapy, Puységur aimed to assuage the practice through the magnetiser's dialogue and speech. Whereas Mesmer concentrated on ensuring the proper circulation of magnetic fluid in the body, Puységur focussed on the words exchanged between the magnetiser and the magnetised patient. Also outside of therapeutic practice, this focus provoked an eagerness to explore the mystery of an immaterial and intangible connection between the bodies of the magnetiser and the magnetised. Paradoxically, this new dynamic altered magnetism's relationship to music. In Puységur's personal interpretation, music appeared to complement the ethereal quality of magnetic fluid during sleepwalking.

Possibly influenced by somnambulist concepts, reflections stemming from animal magnetism introduced additional scientific theories of immaterial musical essence. In Germany, the scientific debate on vital forces (*Lebenskraft*) was significant at the end of the eighteenth century. Particularly in the scientific and academic circles of Jena, the advancement of scientific research refuelled interest in Mesmer's theory. This interest extended across the fields of physical sciences, chemistry, medicine and philosophy. It reframed Mesmer's ideas in the broader context of the philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*).[14] These scientific discoveries found their way into a new musical discourse. Incorporating physical theories, this discourse birthed fictional characters in the arts: magnetisers, somnambulists, patients. Notably, the influence of the German physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter (1776–1810) grew, particularly in the aftermath of the rediscovery of Mesmer in 1809 by physicians in Berlin, and again after Mesmer's death in 1815. Ritter provided a scientific rationale for the connection between music and the spirit realm. In accordance with the principles of animal magnetism, he theorised that music flowed through the bloodstream. He asserted that music had a consciousness of its own and served as a creative life force that circulated in human blood.[15] Ritter's scientific theory influenced E. T. A. Hoffmann's descriptions of music flowing through the bloodstream. The *Kreisleriana* texts (1810–1814) and the fragmentary Kreisler biography in *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* (1819–1821), emphasise the recurring Romantic notion that music exists beyond the tangible.

All these theories and reconfigurations of the relationship between music and magnetism probably prompted a new medical consideration

of sound. In 1822, when scholars in German-speaking regions found a new fascination for magnetism, the German physician Dietrich Georg Kieser (1779–1862) published a synthesis of magnetism in which he conveyed his own understanding of Mesmer's discovery.[16] His brief remarks on music stem from scientific research in Jena and the phenomenon of somnambulism. Kieser highlighted the importance of sound quality in enhancing magnetic therapy.[17] However, the specificity of the music remained unclear. Kieser believed that research should be conducted to understand how and why music had certain effects:

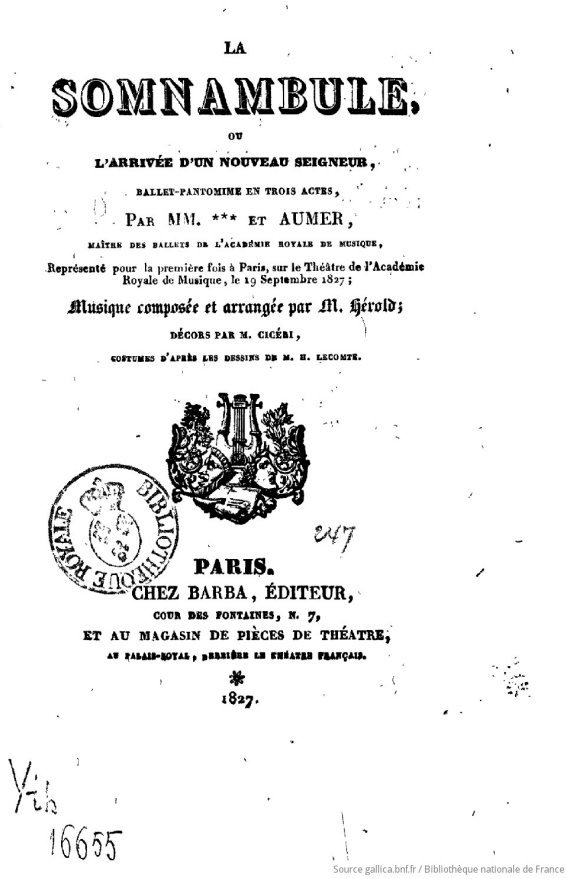
> Experience has not adequately determined whether and to what extent particular tones and music amplify the magnetic action. According to theoretical views [. . .] regarding the keys of the will, the telluric pole must also support the telluric action alongside the often-lauded effect of music in medicine. This may be explained by their magnetic effect in enhancing human emotional activity. Additionally, humanity's guiding instinct has contributed to this understanding, facilitating mellow, soft music in magnetic treatment.[18]

Puységur's somnambulism and the emerging scientific theories in Germany prompted a re-evaluation of the connection between music and magnetism. From the field of music studies, the historian Peter Pesic has described this a pivotal moment to assess this complex relationship.[19] Pesic suggests that the foundational role of music in mesmeric practice might signify a 'sonic turn' in medicine throughout the nineteenth century. Scholarship traditionally studied how science influenced music; Pesic examined this dynamic in the other direction. Music was thought to precede and shape scientific thought. As physicians sought to extend the medical gaze beyond the visible signs of disease, sound and music granted them new insights into the body's interior.[20] Furthermore, music could impact the psyche in ways that bypass rational thought. Mesmer thus managed his patients' crises in ways that relied on his favoured musical instruments—particularly the glass harmonica—and drew from the dramatic structure of classical music itself.

Magnetism and somnambulism: new themes in musical culture in Europe

By 1814, the relationships between magnetiser and patient during somnambulistic performances had begun to fascinate fiction writers. E. T. A. Hoffmann's pioneering role in the fictionalisation of magnetism in German literature is well established.[21] The Prussian Romantic author and music critic played a significant part in the representation of magnetic charm and enchantment. In articles and short stories, Hoffmann linked Ritter's scientific reflections, sleepwalking and Romantic themes with magnetism and music.[22] Hoffmann's stories were highly influential in the nineteenth century. They made of him a major author of the Romantic musical movement. One of Hoffmann's characters, his moody and sensitive alter ego Johannes Kreisler, inspired Robert Schumann's *Kreisleriana* (1838), a renowned composition for solo piano. Numerous other examples demonstrate how fiction linked music to magnetism and somnambulism.[23]

This new phenomenon illuminated the mysteries of magnetism and somnambulism alongside the triumph of various theatrical and musical performances on Parisian stages at the end of the 1820s. *La Somnambule*, composed by Ferdinand Hérold and performed at the Académie Royale de Musique in 1827, marked the Parisian peak of the popularity of magnetism and somnambulism on stage.[24] (Fig. 12.2) The success was not unique to Paris. In 1831, the Italian composer Vincenzo Bellini adapted the libretto to music for the opera *La Somnambula.* His musical orchestration of the tale about the romantic entanglement of a young sleepwalking woman strengthened the association of music with the circulating subtle fluid. In Italy, other famous musicals and operas took up the themes of musical somnambulism and passionate torment related to the mysterious fluid. Gaetano Donizetti explored the themes in another form, in a piece initially composed for glass harmonica, and associated with a renowned "mad scene" in the highly successful opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which premiered in 1838. In Verdi's *Macbeth*, also released in 1847, the final aria offered an extended scene of somnambulism: "Una macchia è qui tuttora . . .."


LA

SOMNAMBULE,

OU

L'ARRIVÉE D'UN NOUVEAU SEIGNEUR,

BALLET-PANTOMIME EN TROIS ACTES,

PAR MM. *** ET AUMER,

MAÎTRE DES BALLETS DE L'ACADÉMIE ROYALE DE MUSIQUE,

Représenté pour la première fois à Paris, sur le Théâtre de l'Académie Royale de Musique, le 19 Septembre 1827;

Musique composée et arrangée par M. Hérold;

DÉCORS PAR M. CICÉRI,

COSTUMES D'APRÈS LES DESSINS DE M. H. LECOMTE.

BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE

247

PARIS.

CHEZ BARBA, ÉDITEUR,

COUR DES FONTAINES, N. 7,

ET AU MAGASIN DE PIÈCES DE THÉATRE,

AU PALAIS-ROYAL, DERRIÈRE LE THÉATRE FRANÇAIS.

1827.

Yth 16655

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 12.2. Cover page for the musical libretto of La Somnambule, adapted musically by Ferdinand Hérold (1827). Source: gallica.bnf.fr /Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

The influence of magnetism in the artistic circles of Paris before 1850 facilitated the spreading of new musical interpretations among various exiled communities. In Paris for a brief period in 1841 and 1842, the Polish composer and political activist Andrzej Towianski (1799–1878) exhibited a keen interest in magnetism.[25] In the literary and intellectual circles of Polish exiles in Paris, particularly those gathered around the esteemed poet Adam Mickiewicz, the enigmatic and mysterious nature of the relationship between the magnetiser and the magnetised inspired various religious reflections. It bolstered his personal messianic theory.

These examples illustrate how magnetic interest in musical performance grew in various European countries between 1815 and 1850. It contributed to the celebrity status of captivating magnetic performances on stage.

The gift of singing

In the mid-nineteenth century, medical experiments in magnetic therapy employed music and sound vibrations. Magnetiser's reports recounted private experiments that clarify the relationship between practitioners and patients. However, in 1855, the Parisian physician Jean-Jacques Beaux

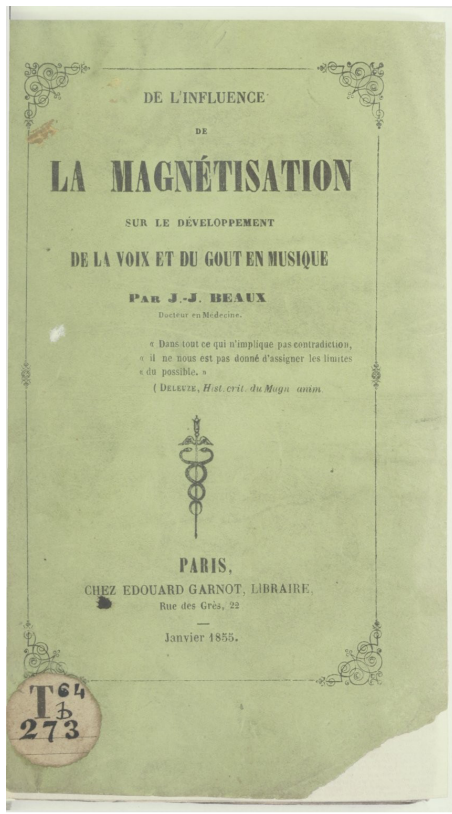

DE L'INFLUENCE
DE
LA MAGNÉTISATION
SUR LE DÉVELOPPEMENT
DE LA VOIX ET DU GOUT EN MUSIQUE
PAR J.-J. BEAUX
Docteur en Médecine.
« Dans tout ce qui n'implique pas contradiction,
« il ne nous est pas donné d'assigner les limites
« du possible. »
(DELEUZE, *Hist. crit. du Magn. anim.*
PARIS,
CHEZ EDOUARD GARNOT, LIBRAIRE,
Rue des Grès, 22
Janvier 1855.
T64
b
273

Figure 12.3. Cover of Jean-Jacques Beaux's book, De l'influence de la magnétisation sur le développement de la voix et du goût en musique, Paris, Garnot, 1855. Source: gallica.bnf.fr /Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

published a curious work in which he advocated magnetic practice as a challenge to scientific and medical establishments.[26]

The book was intriguing. (Fig. 12.3) Its introduction is presented as an academic discourse on magnetism, but the experiments are described with passion. Although Beaux mocked pro-magnetism circles and criticised Mesmer's obsession with money, his interest in magnetism stemmed from key theoretical texts by Mesmer, Puységur and Deleuze.[27] Beaux detailed experiments with young patients who, after magnetic sessions, developed singing abilities even if they lacked talent. He suggested instincts could be awoken without somnambulism. The singing issue showed how magnetisers could grace individuals with singing skills, even if they had no prior talent. While Beaux's book offers scholarly insight into magnetism's history, his treatment of musical topics is underdeveloped and frustrating.

Beaux did not mention any musical practices in his discussions of the other physicians he referenced, and who also practised magnetic therapy: Antoine Despines and Alexandre Bertrand. Despine was a physician who practised magnetism, believing in the existence of fluids. He combined magnetism and electricity with hydrotherapeutic treatments like showers and baths, and during sessions he played the piano.[28] Harshly critical of Bertrand's fluctuating positions on magnetism, Jean-Jacques Beaux failed to mention the use of music in magnetism and somnambulism, which he would not have been able to overlook if he had read their essays.

The book shows no influence of contemporary musical trends or theatrical allusions. This raises an intriguing reflection: here was a magnetiser who engaged with ongoing academic developments in magnetism, yet overlooked recent cultural interest in magnetism and somnambulism. After addressing the gift of singing, a familiar question arose about the power dynamics between practitioner and patients in somnambulism. The familiarity with patients is surprising given the context of this treatise's publication. The judgement of female patients as cunning and the willingness to "punish" one of them reflects the magnetiser's dominance. His portrayal of female patients as cunning reflects a power dynamic between practitioners and patients that is influenced by gender and social class. The staging of bodies is significant in medical practice, especially in the personal setting of the office during the magnetism session.

Tension between magnetiser and patient was evident before and after Beaux's work. Beaux's experiments were not unique. Many doctors

conducted similar experiments with only a limited understanding of animal magnetism. He described instances of magnetism involving Baron Jules du Potet in the 1820s, which spoke of violent dynamics between him and his patients.[29] Other practitioners of magnetism, notably Charles Lafontaine (1803–1888), often put patients under duress. Lafontaine's bestseller, *L'Art de magnétiser,* discussed music choice in therapy. He used music even if it caused pain and suffering in his patients: "The cheerful music hurt them and gave them convulsions."[30]

Jean-Jacques Beaux did not mention hypnosis, even if it defined his practice. His references to animal magnetism include French scholarly works, yet he seemingly ignored or was unaware that in 1843 Scotsman James Braid (1795–1860) defined hypnosis, distinguishing it from animal magnetism and somnambulism.[31]

To conclude this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that Mesmer used well-known musical instruments, which further piqued curiosity in his therapy. With his stance in the centuries-old debate about the therapeutic virtues and dangers of music, Mesmer influenced the musical imagination linked to magnetic practice long after his death.[32] Until the mid-nineteenth century, many practitioners of magnetism deployed music to induce a beneficial "crisis" in the suffering body.

Puységur's alternative interpretation, and his ideas on somnambulism, significantly influenced changing understandings of the role of sound and music in medical knowledge. Music, an intangible product shaped by Romantic scholars and artists, became a vital component of the energy—or the fluid—that magnetisers exchanged with their patients.[33] This new connection between body and psyche fascinated artists and the public; it made the somnambulist relationship a popular theme in the first half of the nineteenth century. Magnetised bodies were thus brought to life on the musical stages of great music capitals such as Paris, Milan and Naples.

One should keep in mind, however, that the use of music in magnetic therapy was characterised by experimentation that was sometimes disorganised or inconsistent. While music could affect the body's health, experiments in the 1850s still aimed to assess the medical efficacy of singing and musical production methods. Similarly, eighteenth-century harmonic music still featured widely in magnetic sessions even as new musical forms reignited the desire to reconnect with the mesmeric crisis

state. These issues re-emerged in the later nineteenth century with the rise of spectacular hypnotic performances. Just as how sociological studies have recently revisited magnetism's "magical aspect", so do the early nineteenth-century debates on the relationship between music, animal magnetism and the sciences warrant further examination.[34]

Notes

1 David Armando et al., *Animal magnetism in motion. Reconfigurations and circulations, 1776–1848* (Schwabe Verlag, 2025), 355–378; Mélanie Traversier, *L'Harmonica de verre et Miss Davies. Essai sur la mécanique du succès au siècle des Lumières* (Seuil, 2021), 240–292.

2 Bruno Belhoste, *Franz Anton Mesmer. Le magnétiseur des Lumières* (Armand Colin, 2024), 32–175; Traversier, *L'Harmonica*, 273–278.

3 Simon Schaffer, "The astrological roots of mesmerism", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 41, n. 2 (2010): 158–168; David Armando et al, "L'harmonie au prisme du mesmérisme: recompositions scientifiques, politiques et morales au tournant des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles", *La Révolution française*, 24 (2023). Accessed 13 February 2025: http://journals.openedition.org.janus.bis-sorbonne.fr/lrf/7470; Penelope Gouk, "Cosmic vibrations. Echoes of universal harmony at the time of the British Enlightenment", *Terrain*, 68 (2017). Accessed 12 February 2025: http://journals.openedition.org/terrain/16424.

4 Alfred Orel, "Die Legende um Mozart's 'Bastien und Bastienne'", *Schweizerische Musikzeitung*, 9 (1951): 137–143; Belhoste, *Franz Anton Mesmer*, 56–64.

5 Traversier, *L'Harmonica*. A podcast reviewing the musical curiosities in the Enlightenment: https://ihmc.ens.psl.eu/episode-32-curiosites-musicales-dans-mondes-lumieres-melanie-traversier.

6 Peter Pesic, *Sounding bodies: music and the making of biomedical science* (MIT Press, 2022), 190–204.

7 Caullet de Vaumorel, *Aphorismes de M. Mesmer dictés à l'assemblée de ses élèves* (Quinquet, 1785), 152.

8 Jean-Jacques Paulet, *L'Antimagnétisme ou Origine, progrès, décadence, renouvellement et réfutation du magnétisme animal* (s. n., 1784), 33–34.

9 Franz Anton *Mesmer, Mémoire de F. A. Mesmer, . . . sur ses découvertes* (Fuchs, 1798–1799), 73. [All translations from French by the author.]

10 James Kennaway, *Music and the nerves, 1700–1900* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–17.

11 A.M.J. Chastenet de Puységur, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire et à l'établissement du magnétisme animal* (Dentu, 1784).

12 Bernard Gainot, "Des baquets sous les Tropiques. À propos de la diffusion du magnétisme animal à Saint-Domingue en 1784", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 1, n. 391 (2018): 81–104.

13 A.M.J. Chastenet de Puységur, *Recherches, expériences et observations physiologiques sur l'homme dans l'état de somnambulisme naturel et dans le somnambulisme provoqué par l'acte magnétique* (J.G. Dentu, 1811).

14 Belhoste, *Franz Anton Mesmer*, 372–387.

15 Johann Wilhelm Ritter, *Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse eines jungen Physikers* (Mohr und Zimmer, 1810), 233–246. Alexis B. Smith, "Ritter's Musical Blood Flow Through Hoffmann's Kreisler", in *The early history of embodied cognition 1740–1920. The* Lebenskraft*-debate and radical reality in German*

science, music, and literature, eds John A. McCarthy, Stephanie M. Hilger, Heather I. Sullivan, Nicolas Saul (Brill Rodopi, 2016), 144–162.

16 Olivier Verhaegen, "The scholarly discussions and dissemination of magnetic theory in German-speaking Switzerland (1780–1850)" (PhD diss. in progress).

17 Dietrich Georg Kieser, *System des Tellurismus oder thierischen Magnetismus: ein Handbuch für Naturforscher und Aerzte*, vol. 1 (Herbig, 1822), 102.

18 Kieser, *System*, 451.

19 Pesic, *Sounding Bodies;* Peter Pesic, "Composing the Crisis: from Mesmer's Harmonica to Charcot's Tam-Tam", *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 19, no. 1 (2022): 7–30.

20 Peter Lichtenthal, *Der musikalische Arzt, oder: Abhandlung von dem Einflüsse der Musik auf den Körper, und von ihrer Anwendung in gewissen Krankheiten: nebst einigen Winken, zur Anhörung einer guten Musik* (Wappler, 1807), 61–104.

21 Jürgen Barkhoff, *Magnetische Fiktionen. Literarisierung des Mesmerismus in der Romantik* (Metzler, 1995), 195–238.

22 E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Der Magnetiseur. Eine Familienbegebenheit" in Hartmut Steinecke, *E. T. A. Hoffmann, Fantasiestücke in Callot's Manier. Werke 1814* (Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker, 2006), 178–225; E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Kreisleriana", in Hartmut Steinecke, *E. T. A. Hoffmann, Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 2 (Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2004), 32–82 and 360–455.

23 Jürgen Barkhoff, "Gazes, attractions and the law of gentleness. Mesmerism in Adalbert Stifter's *Brigitta*", in *Animal magnetism in motion*, 399–418; Francesca Pagani, "La science des fluides impondérables. L'imaginaire littéraire du magnétisme de Révéroni Saint-Cyr à Balzac", in *Animal magnetism in motion*, 379–398; Carmel Raz, "The expressive organ within us: ether, ethereality, and early Romantic ideas about music and the nerves", *19th-Century Music* 38, no. 2 (2014): 115–144.

24 Sarah Hibberd, "'Dormez donc, mes chers amours': Hérold's *La Somnambule* (1827) and dream phenomena on the Parisian lyric stage", *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 2 (2004): 107–132.

25 Marlis Lami, "Die Sache Gottes – das ist Poesie. Zur Funktion von Dichtung, Kunst und Musik in der Lehre von Andrzej Towiański (1799–1878)", in *Finden und Erfinden. Die Romantik und ihre Religionen*, ed. Daniel Cyranka, (Königshausen & Neumann, 2020), 313–349.

26 Jean-Jacques Beaux, *De l'influence de la magnétisation sur le développement de la voix et du goût en musique* (E. Garnot, 1855).

27 Joseph Philippe François Deleuze (1753–1835) was a librarian, advocating animal magnetism and urging the Academy of Sciences to examine it.

28 Antoine Despine (1777–1852) was a physician at the Royal Baths of Aix in Savoie, not to be confused with his nephew, the alienist Prosper Despine, who practised somnambulism, hallucination, and hypnosis.

29 Beaux, *De l'influence*, 20–21.

30 Charles Lafontaine, *L'art de magnétiser, ou Le magnétisme vital considéré sous le point de vue théorique, pratique et thérapeutique*, 5th ed. (F. Alcan, 1886), 122.

31 Céline Frigau Manning, *Ce que la musique fait à l'hypnose: une relation spectaculaire au XIXe siècle* (Les presses du réel, 2021), 34–37.

32 James Kennaway, *Bad vibrations: the history of the idea of music as a cause of disease* (Ashgate, 2012), 1–22.

33 Romantic authors like Chateaubriand and Madame de Staël adopted and reinterpreted this notion of harmony.

34 Fanny Charasse, *Le retour du monde magique. Magnétisme et paradoxes de la modernité* (Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2023), 183–192.

CHAPTER 13

Under the lantern's spell: The use of the magic lantern within magnetism

Eleonora Paklons

In the 1887 novel *Le Bilatéral*, author J.-H. Rosny evokes a father's despair and helplessness at his daughter's flirtations with an unsuitable suitor by using a remarkable metaphor: that of the magic lantern. "He remained looking within himself, in the tenacious memorial chamber, and his dark destiny paraded across the sombre magic lantern."[1] His, and more specifically his daughter's, ultimately uncontrollable fate is projected onto the walls of his own mind like a private theatre of suffering, where the magic lantern casts shadowy, dreamlike visions that blur the line between inner reality and illusion. Joseph Delboeuf, a Belgian doctor with a penchant for magnetism and hypnosis, also relies on the metaphor of the lantern when describing the landscape of dreams. He describes how scenes dissolve fluidly into one another, a snowy expanse morphing into a bucolic meadow, and finally guiding the dreamer into the depths of a forest, "as if one projected on the same screen, at the same place, by means of two magic lanterns, two tableaux, illuminating one gradually or abruptly while dimming the other".[2] By the late nineteenth century, the magic lantern clearly had developed a very close relationship with the human psyche that would prove very tenacious.

This chapter analyses the lantern as a metaphor for the subconscious, segueing into the lantern's connections with the notion of control. It explores how the magic lantern functioned as both a metaphor and an instrument of control. On the one hand, it served as a powerful image for the altered state of mind of patients and the potential to control those states. On the other hand, it was employed in practice as a tool to exert control over the subjects placed before it, mimicking the position of the magnetiser. This is illustrated through the magnetic experiments of the renowned Dr Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893), focusing on the origins of his experimentations within magnetism, the performative character of his demonstrations, and his uses of the lantern. This discussion

highlights the importance of the performative dimension in the lantern's powerful hold over the public imagination during the fin de siècle.

The many faces of a medium

The lantern, a projection medium that had been around since approximately the mid-seventeenth century, had always cast a certain spell over people with its magical connotations and nostalgic qualities. It was such an evocative medium that it also worked its way into literature and was used as a widely understood metaphor. In the fin de siècle, in the guise of a mass medium, it amassed even more aura and power, insofar as to become one with people's minds through its uses in magnetism, as will be demonstrated in this chapter.

The late nineteenth century saw the technical optimisation and mass production of lanterns and slides.[3] Concurrently, photographic slides became widely available. Because photography was "widely considered to objectively document reality and thereby to produce objective images", photographic slides created a realistic effect for audiences and encouraged immersion.[4] The audience often experienced the images projected in lantern performances as reality itself. Because different audiences saw the same slides, the lantern helped form a shared framework of perception, a way of seeing the world that made "tenuous cultural characterisations seem like natural law or scientific fact".[5] In contrast to other mass media, such as newspapers and magazines, the lantern immersed its audience in a world that combined pictures and words, music and light, gestures and intonation in a live performance. Whereas newspapers were read by individuals or in a small group, the lantern transported audiences of several hundred, sometimes up to a thousand spectators, to new virtual and immersive worlds.

While conventionally associated with "edutainment", the lantern's impact extended well beyond traditional lecture circuits to encompass more indirect applications.[6] Renowned performers like Loie Fuller employed the lantern to craft mesmerising visual tapestries. Concurrently, the lantern illuminated the stages of theatres, opera houses and even storefronts, enhancing the dramatic spectacle for audiences. This expansive influence underscores the nuanced nature of media, which transcend prescribed contexts, evolving in both definition and function.[7]

From metaphor to magnetism

The pervasive influence of the lantern reached beyond the illustrated lecture into everyday use. It was so omnipresent that it became part of contemporaneous language. It specifically harboured strong connections to gothic (literary) imagery.[8] The lantern was consistently used as a figure of speech in connection with dreams and emotions, often carrying a dark undertone. This idea is aptly captured by famed journalist and world traveller Elizabeth Bisland:

> Many persons, while hovering on the borders of sleep, but still vaguely conscious, are accustomed to see pictures of all manner of disconnected things – many of them scenes or faces which have never had part in their waking life – drifting slowly across the darkness of the closed lid like the pictures of a magic lantern across a sheet stretched to receive them, and these, by undiscernible gradations, lead the sleeper away into the land of dreams, the dim treasure house of memory and the past.[9]

In his seminal work *Hallucinations and Illusions: A Study of the Fallacies of Perception*, psychologist Edmund Parish quotes an account from the Society for Psychical Research's proceedings to illustrate a particular kind of hallucination. It tells of a haunting night when a daughter, restless in her bed, sees an image of her ill mother on her bedroom curtains "as if reflected by a magic-lantern". The vision, showing her lying still and unresponsive, fills the daughter with terror and compels her to get up. She hurries to check on her mother, only to find the vision chillingly true: her mother has passed away.[10]

On a broader philosophical plane, the symbology of the lantern's light suggested transcendent connotations, evoking parallels with divine enlightenment. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the radiance of a single beam of light carried profound meaning.[11] Beyond vivid lantern slides cast upon screens through the play of colours, it was the unembellished purity of the light itself that held sway here. Thus, the lantern became intricately linked to the unconscious within the cultural *Zeitgeist*.

The powerful potential of the lantern as a manipulative, controlling medium has already been attested by literary scholar Sally B. Palmer. She convincingly argues, drawing on Foucault, that the lantern, as the

main device in popular cultural entertainment, worked to replace spectacular punishment with internalised surveillance. It functioned as "a panoptic machine for enforcing the status quo".[12]

However, Palmer's discussion of the medium's actual operation remains quite vague and she even posits that, contrary to theatre, "there is no element of performance" in the case of the lantern.[13] Similarly, she wrongly attests that lantern slides spoke for themselves, claiming that, unlike in theatre, there was no direct interaction between the presenter/actor and the audience.[14] While this may have been true for a small proportion of lantern shows, the majority during the medium's peak featured a narrator who guided the audience's gaze and steered the interpretation of the images on display. In other words, much like in theatre, there was direct (eye) contact between the performer and the audience. Indeed, it was this very performative dynamic that lay at the heart of the power triangle at work.

In the case study below, the lantern became a potent metaphor for illustrating the shifting mental states of hysteric patients. Paul Richer, for instance, describes a patient's hallucinations as follows:

> One can distinguish two phases: the phase of cheerful hallucinations and the phase of sad hallucinations [. . .]. These two phases succeed or intermingle without interruption. In a single episode, the cheerful tableau gives way to the sad tableau, or vice versa, with the swiftness of images passing beneath the lenses of a magic lantern. Often a scene has barely begun when it is abruptly interrupted by another.[15]

Another author describes the shifts in the patients' attitudes (in this case the patients of the physician Duchenne de Boulogne) in a much more mechanical way:

> To tell the truth, there was nothing psychological about such an analysis other than the more or less ingenious skill of the operator in judging the imaginary scene and drama by the scenery that appeared and disappeared, similar to the characters in the magic lantern.[16]

Through the magnetic experiment, the human becomes a controllable and predictable machine. The magnetiser, in turn, adopts the role of puppet master. Moreover, the magic lantern became a recurring emblem

of the unconscious: flickering, elusive, yet momentarily grasped in performance. In Charcot's clinic, it signalled a deeper drive: to project, master and cure what lay hidden in shadow.

Charcot, the magnetiser

Le Moniteur spirite et magnétique, a Belgian spiritist journal, noted that Charcot's Salpêtrière Hospital was a place unlike any other, where, for the first time in centuries, the forbidden realm of the occult was brought into the light.[17] A footnote in the journal reminded readers that such knowledge was not new: the ancients had once taught these sciences openly, before they were buried under the weight of autocracy and ecclesiastical control. That Charcot dared to engage with these ideas from an official academic position marked a turning point in the history of scientific thought.

Charcot's interest in hypnosis began with his role on a committee examining Victor Burq's magnetotherapy technique. In 1876, Claude Bernard, a renowned professor of experimental medicine, tasked Charcot and two others with reporting on this case for the national Biology Society. Burq followed a tradition of physicians exploring animal magnetism, a concept introduced by Franz Mesmer. Although Mesmer's theories had been officially rejected in 1784, popular and lay magnetisers continued to practice during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Burq's innovative claim that non-human agents, notably magnets and metals, could independently induce therapeutic effects led Bernard and his colleagues to reopen their enquiries. After their investigations proved Burq wrong, Charcot no longer believed in the existence of magnetic fluid. Despite this, he would be heavily influenced by magnetic theories.[18] In turn, the resonance of Charcot's work transcended national boundaries, leaving an indelible mark on global medical discourse and affirming his seminal influence in shaping the understanding and utilisation of magnetism within the realm of medicine.

In the popular press, Charcot's practices were often framed as magnetism, despite the theoretical differences. In an article in *Le Rappel* of 11 January 1879, he is called a "magnetiser".[19] An article in *Le Figaro* posits that "the question of magnetism is thus clearly framed between Mesmer and his detractors; between the Academy of Paris, which repudiates it,

and the eminent professor Charcot, who accepts, recognises, and adopts it". It continues that Charcot

> shows us marvellous phenomena of somnambulism; he observes, like Mesmer, genuine magnetic properties in the organism. However, according to him, all of this is connected to simple neuroses, to certain disturbances of cerebral functions, to manifestations of hysteria. Nothing supernatural or mystical. The molecule, the matter, and nothing more.[20]

While Charcot explicitly rejected occult explanations, his work nonetheless echoed and reinforced the very ideas he sought to discredit. By staging dramatic demonstrations that mirrored the style and structure of magnetic performances, he blurred the line between scientific investigation and popular spectacle. Whether intentionally or not, Charcot's experiments lent legitimacy to the occult associations of hypnosis, even as he cloaked them in medical discourse. In doing so, he occupied a liminal space, publicly aligning himself with scientific rationalism while drawing on the theatrical and symbolic language of magnetism. The performative nature of his demonstrations may have actively facilitated this ambiguity, allowing his work to resonate across both scientific and popular audiences.

Charcot's experiments also led to renewed public interest in magnetism and hypnosis, which inspired popular performances. These fictional performances could subsequently cause real, infectious outbreaks of neuropathology. Subsequently, Charcot and his colleagues lobbied for a ban on public displays by lay magnetisers.[21] Still, Charcot himself would continue his experiments at the Salpêtrière without worrying about the effects on his patients and audience.

The performative dimensions of Charcot's demonstrations

Charcot's acclaimed Sunday morning demonstrations at the Salpêtrière, commencing in the winter of 1879–1880, showcased the transformative potential of hypnosis.[22] It was precisely the hypnotic and magnetic qualities of these demonstrations that truly captivated audiences, turning Charcot's pedagogy into spectacular performances.[23] Apart from mimicking some of the tropes that worked well with popular performances by lay

magnetisers, Charcot's experiments were also performative in other respects.[24] Contemporary accounts lavishly describe his imposing presence and demeanour, elevating the doctor himself to the status of a primary attraction. Charcot was hailed as a celebrity, depicted with such grandeur that *La Lanterne Magique* satirically described him as "[a] Dante, somewhat consoled and fattened".[25] Another author likened his features to those of Napoleon's death mask.[26]

Sources also emphasise the theatrical nature of Charcot's experiments, as seen in the way they describe his patients or, rather, actors. Most attention is devoted to the epileptics and hysterics, who, above all, serve as the true spectacle of Charcot's teachings, overshadowing the fascinating array of other sufferers displayed like living exhibits.[27] In *L'Indépendance Belge*, a journalist writes that

> Charcot's experiments with hypnosis caused a sensation. Everyone wanted to be involved, not merely as a witness but as a participant. People vied to take part. High-society ladies might well have had themselves incarcerated at the Salpêtrière just to ensure they could be hypnotised by Charcot and play a role in one of those dramas of suggestion which, alternately praised, exaggerated, contested, and ultimately reduced to more limited proportions, initially enjoyed a popularity that almost exceeded their significance.[28]

Charcot's celebrity-like status, juxtaposed against the vulnerability of his patients, imbued his demonstrations with a sense of spectacle, drawing eager, predominantly male spectators into the orbit of his magnetic influence. The few women present, mostly students, were described by contemporaries as extremely ugly, to such an extent that they seemed part of a third, new variety of the human race. Their unbecoming looks were linked to their ability to listen unperturbedly to the lessons in which the most realist and risqué subjects were discussed.[29] This clearly was a male playground.

It is on this stage that Charcot introduced the magic lantern for invoking states of hypnosis, alongside other new non-human agents. The use of the lantern as a *deus ex machina* in these experiments increased their performative quality.

Charcot's use of the lantern

The lantern played an active role in medical practice, employed in the treatment of (predominantly female) patients afflicted with hysteria or other mental disorders. Renowned for his pioneering research in these fields, Charcot delved deep into the mysteries of magnetism, harnessing the radiant properties of the lantern to illuminate the inner workings of the psyche.

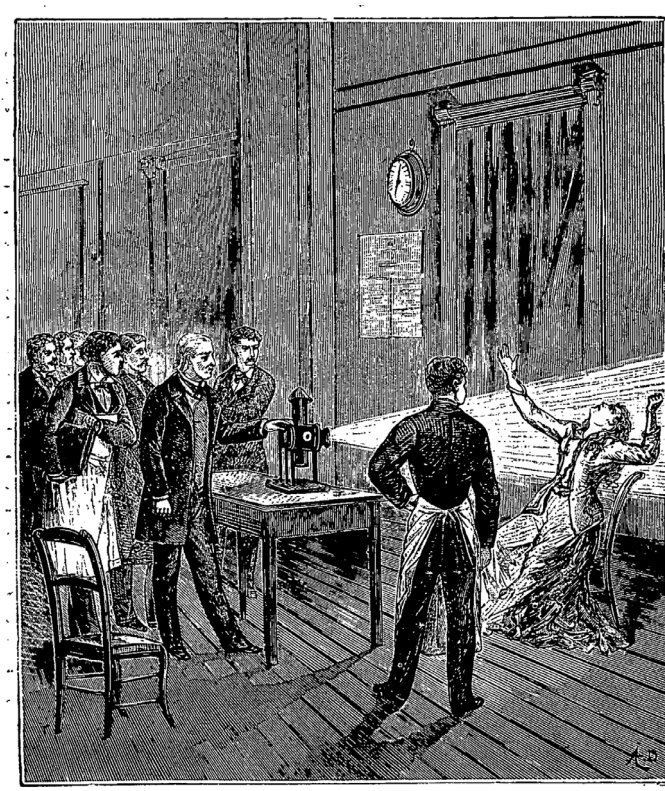


Figure 13.1: "Expériences de M. le docteur Charcot, à la Salpétrière (page 267)", Physique et chimie populaires T.2, Alexis Clerc, J. Rouff: Paris, Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF, p. 273.

Defined by Charcot himself, hypnosis unfolds through three distinct stages: catalepsy, lethargy and somnambulism.[30] Utilising the luminous capabilities of the lantern, Charcot induced the initial phase of catalepsy, characterised by the patient's immobility and rigidity.[31] Apart from a

bright light, other mechanical stimuli such as sounds or intense gazes could elicit similar cataleptic responses.[32] Neither was the lantern the only medium used to produce this strong light or *lumière vive*. However, its versatility made it a practical choice, particularly due to its ability to project coloured rays using tinted lenses. Through these lenses, the lantern's light could not only freeze patients but also manipulate their emotions. White or unfiltered light caused the catalepsy discussed above, while red light caused joy and gaiety and blue light caused sadness and depression.[33]

The cataleptic stage persisted until the light was obstructed or the patient's eyes were closed.[34] It is precisely this cataleptic state that created fascination during performances by 'commercial' magnetisers, captivating audiences as subjects under hypnosis assumed recognisable attitudes or sustained seemingly impossible poses.[35] Charcot also used the lantern to project images during his lectures at the Salpêtrière, as this description of the room reveals: "The opposite end [of the room] is cut obliquely by a large white canvas screen, positioned to face an optical projection device that quite closely resembles a magic lantern."[36]

In his role as the magnetiser, Charcot seems to have assumed a quasi-divine or messiah-like persona, wielding the ray of celestial light to assert dominion over his patients, offering the promise of redemption. In contemporaneous illustrations, his composed and professional demeanour stands in stark contrast to the dishevelled appearance and agitated state of the afflicted female patient. The attending doctors and specialised audience, akin to disciples, seek to glean his methods and mastery. The young woman, in her vulnerability, becomes a poignant symbol, her outstretched arms a gesture of supplication. (Fig. 13.1) A journalist vividly illustrates Charcot's control over his subjects. He describes how, with every step Charcot takes, "[a]rmed with this little wand one must remember", wonders emerge with such unquestioning submission that his dominance over the living subjects he works with in neurology is no less absolute than a chemist's control over the bodies he experiments on.[37]

This visual language of supplication on the patient's part recurs consistently when the lantern serves as the conduit for inducing catalepsy, creating a recognisable tableau. (Figs. 13.1 and 13.2) When the subject is exposed to the aggressive rays of the lantern, "one will see them fall immediately into catalepsy. They will remain there, motionless and as if

petrified, with their eyes wide open, their eyelids fixed, and their expression impassive; they will be as if frozen in place."[38] Other light sources seem to be associated with different, more contemplative poses or attitudes.[39]

Under the combined gaze of the lantern and Charcot, the contortions of the female patients echo the reverence associated with religious awe. Indeed, contemporaneous accounts often link the patients' demeanour to manifestations of the demonic, with one woman jesting, "it surprises me that I don't see the devil".[40] Similarly, a sketch of Charcot's character depicts his female patients imploring: "Good Charcot, don't harm us; we are not Demons, in fact: we are only Neuroses!"[41] The iconic poses of Charcot's patients were in part adopted again in popular entertainment by café-concerts, cabaret artists and early film.[42]

Figure 13.2: "Accès de catalepsie produit sous l'influence de la lumière éléctrique", Jules Rengade, La vie normale et la santé, Paris, 1881, Source gallica.bnf.fr/BnF, p. 393.

These illustrations lay bare the underlying power dynamic of the lantern as conduit between the operator and its subject. Central to the practice of magnetism is the hierarchical dynamic between the magnetiser and the magnetised, often gendered as a dominant male figure exerting control over a vulnerable female subject. The magic lantern, as a technological extension of the magnetiser's will, reinforces this dynamic. Through its projections, the lantern becomes a conduit for control, shaping the subject's emotional and physical state while simultaneously captivating the audience.

Conclusion

What makes the lantern so vital in the context of magnetism is its ability to evoke the dreamlike and the occult: it sets the stage for Charcot's performances in precisely the right atmosphere. It reinforces the power dynamic between magnetiser and subject, using tools like colour and visual manipulation to assert control. And it captivates the audience, heightening the spectacle of the entire display. In every sense, this is a performance within a performance: Charcot and his subject act out their roles within a larger theatrical presentation, all centred around the visual and symbolic power of the lantern.

Far more than a mere instrument, the lantern becomes the axis of the whole event; it choreographs illusion and authority, merging science with spectacle and turning the clinic into a space of staged fascination. In summary, the influence exerted by the lantern extends beyond mere visual representations, permeating the psyche and shaping perceptions of reality through beams of light. This profound impact not only altered individual cognitive frameworks but also extended to collective consciousness, potentially influencing societal responses and geopolitical dynamics. What emerges is a fundamental process laid bare: the lantern's capacity to override existing mental landscapes, imprinting new narratives and perspectives directly onto emotional substrates, even temporarily arresting the flow of time.

Notes

1 J.-H. Rosny, *Le bilatéral: mœurs révolutionnaires parisiennes* (Nouvelle librairie parisienne, 1887), 105. Rosny was the pseudonym of the Belgian brothers Joseph Henri Honoré Boex (1856–1940) and Séraphin Justin François Boex (1859–1948).

2 Joseph Delboeuf, "Le sommeil et les rêves: leurs rapports avec la théorie de la mémoire: le rêve", *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger* 9 (1880): 637.

3 Lydia Jakobs, "Poverty as spectacle? Victorian magic lantern shows and the urban poor", in *The pleasure of the spectacle: The London film and media reader* 3, ed. Phillip Drummond (The London Symposium, 2015), 432–442.

4 Sarah Dellmann, "Images of Dutchness: Popular Visual Culture, Early Cinema and the Emergence of a National Cliché, 1800–1914" (PhD diss., Universiteit Utrecht, 2015), 14.

5 Victoria Cain, "Seeing the world: media and vision in US geography classrooms, 1890–1930", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 13, no. 4 (2015): 277; Katie Day Good, *Bring the World to the Child: Technologies of Global Citizenship in American Education* (MIT Press, 2020).

6 Joe Kember, "The magic lantern: open medium", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 17, no. 1 (2019): 1.

7 The lantern was used in many home or private contexts, and by children, too. See for example Alfred Marshall Mayer, *Light: A series of simple, entertaining, and inexpensive experiments in the phenomena of light for the use of students of every age* (D. Appleton and Company, 1877).

8 See David J. Jones, *Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern: Desire, Eroticism and Literary Visibilities from Byron to Bram Stoker* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Maria Vara, "The magic lantern as a Gothic literary instrument", *Interdisciplinary science reviews* 48, no. 3 (2023): 533–544.

9 Elizabeth Bisland, "Dreams and Their Mysteries", *The North American Review* 162, no. 475 (1896): 724.

10 Edmund Parish, *Hallucinations and Illusions: A Study of the Fallacies of Perception* (Walter Scott Ltd, 1897), 243.

11 Sabine Lenk and Natalija Majsova, *Faith in a Beam of Light: Magic Lantern and Belief in Western Europe, 1860–1940* (Brepols, 2022).

12 Sally B. Palmer, "Projecting the Gaze: The Magic Lantern, Cultural Discipline, and Villette", *Victorian Review* 32, no. 1 (2006): 27.

13 Ibid., 29.

14 Ibid., 26–27, 29.

15 Paul Richer, *Etudes cliniques sur l'hystéro-épilepsie ou grande hystérie* (2e éd. rev. et considérablement augm.) (Adrien Delahaye and Emile Lecrosnier, 1885), 90.

16 Alexis Bertrand, "Deux Lois Psycho-physiologiques", *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger* 17 (1884): 252.

17 J. Bouvery, "Charcot", *Le Moniteur spirite et magnétique*, 15 September 1893, vol. 9, 146.

18 Jonathan W. Marshall, *Performing Neurology: The Dramaturgy of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 159.

19 *Le Rappel*, 11 January 1879, 3.

20 *Le Figaro*, 25 December 1878, 3.

21 Marshall, *Performing Neurology*, 172–173.

22 Jean Salvy Morand, *Le magnétisme animal (hypnotisme et suggestion): étude historique et critique* (Garnier, 1889), 105.

23 Marshall, *Performing Neurology*, 158; Rae Beth Gordon, *De Charcot à Charlot: Mises en scène du corps pathologique* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020).

24 Jonathan Marshall, "Nervous Dramaturgy: Pain, Performance and Excess in the Work of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot, 1862–1893", *Double Dialogues* 4 (2003).

25 Bertrand Marquer, *Les romans de la Salpêtrière: réception d'une scénographie clinique. Jean-Martin Charcot dans l'imaginaire fin-de-siècle* (Librairie Droz, 2008); Théodore de Banville, *La lanterne magique: Camées parisiens. La Comédie française* (G. Charpentier, 1883), 395.

26 Morand, *Le magnétisme animal*, 105.

27 Ibid., 105–106.

28 *L'Indépendance Belge*, 18 August 1893, 3.

29 Morand, *Le magnétisme animal*, 104.

30 Ibid., 118.

31 Ibid., 104, 122.

32 F.W. Hayes, "A Glossary of Psychical Phenomena", *Borderland: a quarterly review and index* 1, no. 1 (1893): 72.; Bertrand, 254.; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (MIT Press, 2003), 208.

33 Jules Bernard Luys, *Leçons cliniques sur les principaux phénomènes de l'hypnotisme dans leurs rapports avec la pathologie mentale* (G. Carré, 1890), 63–64; J. Luys, *Hypnotisme expérimental: les émotions dans l'état d'hypnotisme et l'action à distance des substances médicamenteuses ou toxiques* (Baillière, 1890), 121–122.

34 A. Cartaz, "Du somnambulisme et du magnétisme. A propos du cours du Dr Charcot à la Salpêtrière", *La Nature* 1 (1879): 104.

35 Morand, *Le magnétisme animal*, 122.

36 Jonathan Marshall, "Dynamic Medicine and Theatrical Form at the fin de siècle: A formal analysis of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot's pedagogy, 1862–1893", *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 1 (2008): 131–153; Morand, *Le magnétisme animal*, 104.

37 *Le Rappel*, 11 January 1879, 3.

38 Morand, *Le magnétisme animal*, 122.

39 Morand, *Le magnétisme animal*, 135; Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (MIT Press, 2002), 36–38.

40 Richer, *Etudes cliniques*, 128.

41 de Banville, *La lanterne magique*, 396.

42 Gordon, "From Charcot to Charlot": 517.

CHAPTER 14

The magnetic performances of Jules Rovère: Between automata, prestidigitation, and scientific popularisation

Andrea Ceci

The first prestidigitator

On 27 November 1819, the *Journal de la Côte-d'or* reported that the south of France had been electrified by the arrival of a *prestidigérateur* [*sic*], described as an artist skilled in "illusions of magic and necromancy". He allegedly performed in an atmosphere of "oriental luxury" and possessed a "richly furnished cabinet through which he accomplished his miracles".[1] Two weeks later, citing an article from *Le Courrier français*, the newspaper informed its readers that this *prestidigitateur*—this time spelled correctly—was a man of "pleasing appearance, who expressed himself in refined yet accessible language and whose intelligence was not confined merely to his fingertips".[2] The individual in question was none other than Jules Rovère (1797–1874).[3]

The case of Rovère offers a compelling vantage point from which to explore the porous boundary between science and popular spectacle in the nineteenth century. While scientific institutions increasingly asserted their authority by distancing themselves from epistemologically inadequate bodies of knowledge, such as animal magnetism, Rovère reimagined magnetic practice—drawing on concepts and techniques borrowed from stage magic—not as a relic of superstition, but as a dynamic field of inquiry poised between mechanistic explanation and the enigmas of vital force. His rejection of orthodox doctrines, coupled with his theatrical sensibility, transformed the stage into a space where scientific discourse and wonder converged, unsettling the rigid distinctions between sanctioned science and its marginalised counterparts.

This intricate negotiation between spectacle and science is even more significant when viewed against the backdrop of Rovère's personal trajectory. The name Rovère would have resonated powerfully with early

nineteenth-century readers, evoking memories of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary upheavals of the preceding decades. Jules's father, Alexis Rovère de Fontvielle (1748–1798), initially a Montagnard deputy for Vaucluse, later embraced royalism and died en route to Cayenne following his arrest after the 1797 coup. Born in the aftermath of his father's conviction and deportation to French Guiana, Jules was raised by his mother, Marie-Augustine-Angélique de Belmont (1767–1818), who actively encouraged him to develop exceptional dexterity and coordination in his fingers, laying the groundwork for his future career. Although some of her acquaintances considered such activities unbecoming of a young nobleman, she stood by her decision, viewing them as both beneficial exercises for her son and delightful entertainment for the distinguished guests who frequented her salon.[4] Following his mother's death in 1818, Jules—legally emancipated earlier than customary because of the substantial debts she had accumulated—embarked on a career as an illusionist.[5]

As noted by the celebrated magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–1871), "on taking the stage, the aristocratic magician sought a title befitting his birth. The name *escamoteur* had been rejected as too trivial a designation; that of *physicien* was already generally used by his colleagues."[6] Thus, Rovère coined the term prestidigitator—derived from *presto digiti*, meaning nimbleness of fingers—a title that conferred an aura of sophistication and set him apart in the burgeoning world of stage magic.[7]

Between 1819 and 1827, Rovère established himself as a celebrated performer in France, his reputation soon crossing national borders with acclaimed appearances in Switzerland, Belgium and at the Court of Darmstadt. His spectacles offered a remarkable blend of "the exercises of a juggler, the leaps of a grotesque aerialist, games and feats of skill and dramatic performances such as vaudevilles and short comedies".[8] Yet, what truly captivated audiences were the intricate mechanical devices and automata he presented, marvels of engineering that seemed to challenge the limits of human ingenuity.[9]

> M. de Rovère has again this week astonished us with his inimitable and inexplicable delusions. [. . .] He changes a lady to a clown, and afterwards to a little boy, without spectators even conjecturing how it is done; they are deluded, although close to the performer. One of the clowns vanishes from

> a box, and is instantly at the top of the Hall; a little lady, in a little hotel, brilliantly illuminated, gives out wine and liqueurs to them who ask for them, without any apparent communication with the *artiste*, and yet the lady is only six inches high.[10]

Moreover, "the modest price of admission (25, 15 and 8 *sous*)" ensured that his shows remained accessible to a wide audience, democratising wonder and securing his popularity across social classes.[11]

Alongside his career as a prestidigitator, Rovère also pursued a parallel path as a stage magnetiser, performing under the pseudonym *Auguste le magnétiseur*.[12] While precise details about his adherence to Mesmer's doctrine are lacking, during his stays in Paris Rovère appears to have been in contact with Joseph Philippe François Deleuze (1753–1835), the librarian of the *Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle* in Paris and a leading figure of the mesmeric movement during the Restoration. In the capital, Rovère reimagined his stage tricks through the lens of magnetism, introducing himself as "director of fashionable entertainments and spectacles".[13] To demonstrate thought transmission, he would invite the audience to silently concentrate on flowers; soon after, those very flowers would emerge from his magic box, eventually composing themselves into a magnificent bouquet. On other occasions, he relied on his acting skills, staging his own magnetisation "through bizarre and at times grotesque gestures".[14]

The decision to maintain distinct professional identities for both careers likely reflects a keen understanding of the cultural and social landscapes of the early nineteenth century. While prestidigitation was widely recognised as a form of skilled entertainment, animal magnetism carried more profound philosophical and scientific implications, appealing to an audience intrigued by its claims of healing and the manipulation of unseen forces. This separation allowed Rovère to preserve the credibility of each pursuit. Associating animal magnetism too closely with stage magic could have undermined its perceived legitimacy, particularly among those who viewed it as a serious scientific and philosophical practice. Conversely, maintaining a distinct persona as an illusionist enabled him to entertain broader audiences without the weight of magnetism's controversial reputation.

Despite his success as a performer, Rovère appears to have struggled financially. In 1824, while performing in Strasbourg, his belongings were

seized and auctioned to cover his debts.[15] Three years later, he became embroiled in another debt-related matter in Nantes, where he had temporarily managed the Théâtre Graslin.[16] Although ultimately acquitted in this case, the incident marked a turning point in his career. In 1828, following this legal entanglement, Rovère departed France to pursue new opportunities in England.

By October of the same year, he premiered his *Soirées françaises* at London's Haymarket Theatre, receiving high praise from the press.[17] The following April, audiences marvelled at his "[s]eeming impossibilities, mechanical deceptions and extraordinary feats of dexterity" during performances at the renowned Argyll Rooms.[18] Toward the end of 1829, Rovère left London for a provincial tour, captivating audiences in Oxford, Warwick, Leamington, and Coventry. Then, without warning, his name vanished from public records by mid-1830, leaving the trajectory of his career shrouded in mystery. It was not until 1841 that Rovère resurfaced in Wales, not as an illusionist, but as a self-proclaimed professor of languages and guitar.[19]

From illusionism to animal magnetism

In 1842, Rovère returned to France and settled in Saint-Quentin, in the Aisne department, where he endeavoured to establish himself as a professor of languages. He claimed to have served "for several years, as the private tutor to the children of Sir Benjamin Hall", the Baron of Llanover (1802–1867).[20] By 1844, however, he had resumed performing as an itinerant stage magician, evidently integrating elements of animal magnetism into his repertoire. The promotional material for his "sessions of physics and natural magic" and for his "grotesque or graceful poses" reveals an approach that blended theatrical spectacle with the mystique of magnetism.[21]

At this stage, Rovère abandoned the persona of a mere prestidigitator and instead presented himself as a professor of physics and animal magnetism, thus perpetuating the tradition of *physique amusante* that had flourished in late eighteenth-century Parisian salons.[22] His demonstrations combined theoretical explanations of mesmeric phenomena with electrical experiments, including medically oriented applications of electricity, optical illusions, sophisticated mechanical devices and

dramatic performances.[23] Such displays sharply contrasted with those offered by the many itinerant magnetisers then active throughout France.

An illustrative case is provided by the mesmerist physician Jules Charpignon, who expressed his disdain after witnessing, at a village fair, a somnambulist being magnetised by a muscular figure "in a costume of false nudity, with a splendid breastplate made of spangled fabric, [. . .] a disgrace for magnetisers, who are thereby likened to sleight-of-hand tricksters".[24] By contrast, Rovère's impeccable attire, aristocratic bearing and professorial dignity ensured that he would not be conflated with such disreputable performers. (Fig. 14.1) His approach elevated his displays beyond mere spectacle, endowing them with scientific respectability and intellectual gravitas far removed from the perceived vulgarity of magnetisers less accustomed to the limelight of the stage.

Figure 14.1: Jules Rovère, Fiction et Réalité (published by the author, 1855), fig. "Éducation somnambulique". Source: gallica.bnf.fr /Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Rovère's increasing reliance on animal magnetism became manifest during the mid-1840s, when he stood trial twice—once in Auxerre and once in Troyes—on charges of practicing medicine without authorisation. In both cases he was acquitted, as no evidence surfaced to suggest that he had administered medications to his patients.[25] Although no detailed accounts of his performances from this period have survived, we do know that he presented himself as a "demonstrator of the physiological modifications wrought by the will of man upon his fellow beings", before continuing his treatments within the private confines of his patients' homes.[26]

Furthermore, in 1847, Rovère founded the *Athénée Troyen de Mesmérologie pure et appliquée*, a pioneering institution devoted to mesmerism.[27] There, he provided free treatments grounded in animal magnetism and delivered theoretical lectures on contemporary scientific discoveries—including those related to electricity, light and heat—phenomena widely considered analogous to the magnetic fluid. These frameworks enhanced the scientific legitimacy of his methods. Accounts of the cures he effected in Troyes and Auxerre, recorded in the *Journal du magnétisme*—the most distinguished publication on magnetism in mid nineteenth-century France—secured him considerable acclaim. In recognition of his contributions, the magnetism societies of Paris awarded Rovère a bronze medal, honouring his efforts to advance and disseminate the practice of animal magnetism.[28]

However, by the late 1850s, as evidenced by his numerous writings, Rovère had begun addressing the subject of animal magnetism in a manner that diverged significantly from the orthodox approaches adopted by many of his contemporaries. Central to Rovère's departure from conventional mesmerist discourse was his rejection of the term "animal magnetism" in favour of "soul dynamism", which he defined as a "harmonic union of feeling and reason".[29] In his reflections, he developed ideas first introduced during his lectures in Troyes, proposing an innovative explanation of the healing processes facilitated by animal magnetism. He argued that the body's organs produce distinct vibrations, harmonised oscillations that serve to enhance the afflicted individual's vital force. According to Rovère, these vibrations could induce a resonant response in the organs of the magnetised subject, thereby initiating a restorative process.[30]

Building upon Mesmer's foundational principles, Rovère argued that

illness stems from obstructions to "the harmonious interplay of this vital force", blockages that disrupt the natural balance of vital energies.[31] To remedy such disturbances, he prescribed the infusion of "an additional charge of vital force, of superimposed dynamic vibrations", thereby fortifying the body's innate vitality and re-establishing its natural equilibrium. Notably, these harmonic vibrations were not intended to be understood in acoustic terms, but rather through a mechanical lens. In outlining his theories, Rovère emphasised that the term should evoke a notion of force within the reader's mind.

Similarly, the communication of thought—central to the interaction between magnetiser and magnetised—was also to be conceived mechanically. Citing the physician Huguet, Rovère explained: "The mechanism of thought transmission, in general, requires words in order to operate; and for these cogs to be effective, they must correspond perfectly to their intended purpose."[32] This perspective is vividly illustrated by the testimony of Jules-François Dupuis-Delcourt (1802–1864), an aeronaut and close associate of Rovère, who assisted him in conducting experiments with magnetisation during an aerostatic ascent in 1852.[33] (Fig. 14.2)

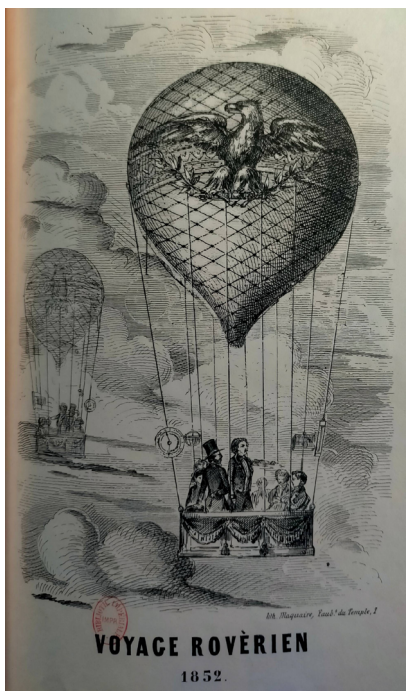


Figure 14.2: Jules Rovère, Fiction et Réalité (published by the author, 1855), fig. "Voyage rovèrien". Source: gallica.bnf.fr /Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Recalling a session in which he was magnetised, Dupuis-Delcourt described:

> Like a cat passing its paw behind its ear, many times—as I well knew and vividly remembered—I brought my hand to my left ear, which I rubbed vigorously, even inserting my finger into it; [. . .] I believed I was doing this mechanically. [. . .] I learned, immediately upon waking and from those around me, that I had in fact been repeating, just like an automaton or the instrument known as a pantograph, all the gestures and movements of the magnetiser.[34]

Rovère's conceptual framework thus drew heavily on automata imagery, a motif he had previously exploited during his stage career, reflecting his deep engagement with mechanics and the sciences.

Indeed, as early as the 1820s, automata had served as a compelling metaphor in both mesmerist writings and critical responses to Mesmer's doctrine.[35] There was a salient parallel between automata and magnetic somnambulists: both epitomised efficient yet subjugated bodies operating under the will of an external agent. More than mere curiosities or simple entertainment, these two categories came to symbolise the enduring human effort to comprehend and replicate the mechanisms of life itself. The fascination with these seemingly inanimate yet obedient figures reflected a profound curiosity about the elusive boundary separating living organisms from machines and actors from puppets.[36] Within this context, automata emerged as potent emblems of that boundary, mirroring the compliant bodies of sleepwalkers under the magnetiser's influence.[37]

This attempt to conceptualise animal magnetism as a field aligned with emerging scientific paradigms reveals Rovère's distinctive intellectual project. Unlike many mesmerists who emphasised the spiritual dimensions of magnetic phenomena, Rovère sought to articulate a vision of animal magnetism that was compatible with contemporary scientific rationalism. His notion of "soul dynamism" explicitly blended physiological mechanisms with metaphysical undertones while remaining grounded in a mechanistic understanding of the human body.

Conclusion

Rovère's activities elude straightforward classification within the conventional frameworks that defined nineteenth-century animal magnetism. By deftly interweaving scientific dissemination with magnetic practices, Rovère urged a departure from "the passive curiosity that has allowed weeds to flourish", and instead advocated for an embrace of "man's inclination towards the marvellous, which is, at its core, nothing but a fervent desire for inquiry, an innate need to uncover the truth".[38] In contrast with many of his contemporaries—be they orthodox mesmerists, itinerant magnetisers, or simple entertainers—Rovère neither adhered to a rigid doctrinal stance nor lapsed into facile credulity. Instead, his deliberate cultivation of a dual identity allowed him to preserve the credibility of magnetism as a serious philosophical and scientific inquiry, even as he showcased his mechanical automata, optical illusions, and *physique amusante* before a broad, socially diverse audience. His itinerant performances epitomised this heterodox stance: he openly rejected the idea of a specific vital fluid and refused even the label of magnetism.

In adopting this multi-layered approach, Rovère carved out an intellectual and performative space in which mechanistic analogies, experimental demonstrations and philosophical speculation could mutually inform one another. As a journalist from *L'Union bourguignonne* observed in 1860, "one must see him at work, one must hear him explain his theoretical operations in order to fully appreciate the simple and rational manner with which he addresses a subject as fascinating as it is controversial".[39] His presentations of mesmerism drew upon the recent scientific discourses on electricity, light, and heat, envisioning these phenomena as part of a broader constellation of subtle forces animating both living bodies and the machines he employed on stage.[40] By coupling technical ingenuity with theoretical reflection, he challenged the prevailing boundaries between stagecraft and science, theory and practice, refinement and vulgarity. Hence, he emerges as a figure attuned not only to the theatrical potential of animal magnetism, but also to its epistemological significance, its capacity to provoke a re-evaluation of what constituted valid knowledge and credible authority.

Ultimately, Rovère's contribution to the nineteenth-century debate does not reside in the consolidation of a single doctrine. Rather, it lies in his invitation to question assumptions and to cultivate a form of

wonder animated by intellectual rigour. His stage became a dynamic space where spectators could experience firsthand the interplay between illusion, mechanical expertise and speculative science, exemplifying the fluidity and complexity of animal magnetism's intellectual landscape. Rovère's work stands as a testament to the capacity of nineteenth-century magnetisers to transcend conventional labels, integrating science, performance, and metaphysical speculation into a coherent yet flexible framework of inquiry.

Notes

1 "Nouvelles diverses", *Journal de la Côte-d'or*, 27 November 1819. Author's own translation unless otherwise stated.

2 "Extérieur", *Le Courrier français*, 6 December 1819.

3 Often also identified as Jules de Rovère, the reasons behind this dual orthography are explained by Rovère himself. "Many people will be surprised to no longer see the particle de attached to my name; I owe them the following explanation: [. . .] I had promised my dear mother that I would use the distinctive sign *de* and it was out of respect for her memory that I did so. However, given the new law, I must now renounce it, having been born in Year VI of the Republic, a period during which the said particle did not appear in civil registers." Jules Rovère, *Les Magnétiseurs ont-ils tort ou raison? That is the question!* (published by the author, 1858), 3.

4 "Intérieur", *Journal de la Côte-d'or*, 11 December 1819.

5 Lucien Peise, "La seconde femme de Rovère (suite)", *Revue historique de la Révolution française* 2, no. 8 (1911): 566–571.

6 Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, *Confidences d'un prestidigitateur*, vol. 1, (Librairie Nouvelle, 1859), 239.

7 The earliest known reference to the term "*prestidigitateur*" appears to be in: "Mélanges et nouveautés", *Journal de Lyon et du département du Rhône*, 21 May 1819. I extend my gratitude to Thibaut Rioult for bringing this to my attention.

8 "Intérieur", *Journal de la Côte-d'or*, 4 August 1821.

9 "M. Rovère deserves praise for the intelligence he showed in directing the construction of the machines that are set in motion there." "Intérieur", *Journal de la Côte-d'or*, 22 August 1821.

10 "City and County Intelligence", Oxford University and City Herald, 27 March 1830.

11 "Intérieur", *Journal de la Côte-d'or*, 4 August 1821.

12 According to the testimony of a contemporary, Auguste le magnétiseur is said to have even performed before Charles X. See Alain Maureau, "L'achat par Rovère de la charge de capitaine de la garde suisse du vice-légat", in Alain Maureau, *Du Comitat venaissin au Vaucluse; études et documents révolutionnaires inédits* (A. Maureau, 1999), 9. See also Victorin Laval, ed., *Lettres inédites de J.-S. Rovère, membre du Conseil des Anciens, à son frère Siméon-Stylite, ex-évêque constitutionnel du département de Vaucluse* (Honoré Champion, 1908).

13 Gabrielle Castel-Çagarriga, "Auguste le magnétiseur", *Historia* 249 (1967): 104–106.

14 Louis Figuier, *Les Mystères de la science aujourd'hui* (à la Librairie illustrée, 1880), 432.

15 "Enchères publiques", *Affiches, annonces et avis divers de la ville de Strasbourg*, 15 September 1824.

16 "Nouvelles de Paris", *Courrier des théâtres; littérature, beaux-arts*, sciences, 9 February 1827.

17 "Haymarket Theatre", *Morning Herald* (London), 21 October 1828.

18 "Argyll Rooms", *Weekly Times* (London), 19 April 1829.

19 "Public and Private Tuition", *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*, 9 January 1841.

20 "Instructions; leçons publiques et particulières", *Journal de la ville de Saint-Quentin et de l'arrondissement*, 25 September 1842.

21 "Chronique judiciaire; Théâtre des jeunes élèves", *Le Commerce*, 8 December 1844.

22 Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons; sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Fayard, 2005), 263–270.

23 On medical electricity, see: François Zanetti, *L'électricité médicale dans la France des Lumières* (Voltaire Foundation, 2017).

24 Jules Charpignon, "Le vrai et le faux", *Journal du magnétisme, par une société de magnétiseurs et de médecins* 9, no. 120 (1850): 333.

25 As Nicole Edelman has noted, there were two additional crimes for which magnetisers could be prosecuted: fraud and divination. Divinatory practices were regulated under Article 479 of the 1810 Penal Code, which, like the illegal practice of medicine, imposed a monetary fine ranging from 11 to 15 francs. During the 1840s, judicial chronicles report only a handful of cases in which courts invoked this charge. It was, instead, prosecutions for *"escroquerie"* that most frequently targeted magnetisers and somnambulists. Judicial action primarily aimed to unmask criminals who exploited artificial somnambulism as a means to deceive the unwary, orchestrating frauds worthy of the most intricate plots of the *feuilletons* of the time. See Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France, 1785–1914* (Albin Michel, 1995), 54–56.

26 Jules Rovère, "Clinique magnétique", *Journal du magnétisme, par une société de magnétiseurs et de médecins* 5, no. 51 (1847): 70.

27 In defending his work as a healer, the inhabitants of Troyes attested to the growing esteem in which Rovère was held, largely due to the public somnambulistic experiments he conducted. Far from being mere spectacles, these séances were framed both as empirical investigations and as acts of civic utility. In particular, it was claimed that one of Rovère's somnambulists possessed the singular capacity to detect concealed subterranean water sources and contemporary accounts stressed the potential agricultural applications of these mesmerist practices. "Institutions magnétiques; Athénée troyen de mesmérologie", *Journal du magnétisme, par une société de magnétiseurs et de médecins* 9, no. 120 (1850): 324–326.

28 Jean-Bernard Mac Sheehy, "Institutions magnétiques; jury magnétique d'encouragement et de récompense", *Journal du magnétisme, par une société de magnétiseurs et de médecins* 8, no. 103 (1849): 572–574.

29 Rovère, *Fiction et Réalité* (published by the author, 1855), 4.

30 For his interpretation, Rovère was deeply indebted to Charles Fourier and his discussions on animal magnetism, of which the illusionist was an ardent supporter. On this subject, in a somewhat inelegant manner, yet with the utmost humility, I would like to point to my article: Andrea Ceci, "Animal Magnetism and Romantic Socialism; Circulations and Reinterpretations along a Porous Border", in *Animal Magnetism in Motion; Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848*, eds David Armando et al. (Schwabe Verlag, 2025), 319–340.

31 Rovère, *Fiction et Réalité*, 9.

32 Ibid., 41.

33 Both Rovère and Dupuis-Delcourt were members of the *Société aérostatique et météorologique de France*. See Jules Rovère, Roveriana (imprimerie de Giroux et Renaux, 1862), 3–5.

34 Rovère, *Fiction et Réalité*, 69.

35 As early as 1812, a critic of magnetism wrote: "Who could be the person who, upon a moment's reflection, would not be revolted by the thought of being reduced to nothing more than a vile automaton, moved by the whim and will of another?" Antoine-François Jenin de Montègre, *Du magnétisme animal et de ses partisans* (Colas, 1812), 17. By 1820, when Rovère became involved with magnetism, magnetisers had appropriated this metaphor, stripping it of its negative connotations. "It follows that, just as a mineral magnet moves iron, attracting and repelling it, one can likewise, with the tip of a finger, set in motion—like an automaton—the somnambulist in crisis, upon whom a magnetic influence is exerted, and reduce them to act, obey, and think through a single mental act of the magnetiser." Étienne Félix d'Henin de Cuvillers, *Le magnétisme éclairé, ou Introduction aux archives du magnétisme animal* (Barrois l'aîné, 1820), 112.

36 Minsoo Kang, "Sublime Puppets versus Uncanny Automata", in *Victorian Automata; Mechanism and Agency in the Nineteenth Century*, eds Suzan Anger and Thomas Vranken (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 255–271.

37 This conception would endure well into the twilight of the century. Even as late as 1877, the physiologist William Benjamin Carpenter (1813–1885) described the mesmerised subject as a "conscious automaton", which, by appropriate suggestions, "may be made to think, feel, say, or do, almost anything that its director wills it to think, feel, say, or do". William Benjamin Carpenter, "Mesmerism, Odylism, Table-Turning, and Spiritualism", *Popular Science Monthly*, no. 11 (1877): 21.

38 Rovère, *Fiction et Réalité*, 24.

39 "Chronique locale", *L'Union bourguignonne*, 8 May 1860.

40 For a discussion of these themes in literature, see: Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines; Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent State University Press, 2006), 28–62.

PART 5

THEATRICS & THE ARTS

CHAPTER 15

"I am going to unwrap the secret of secrets": Performing the trial of mesmeric and spiritualistic authorship in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*

Zoë Ghyselinck

> Ladies and gentlemen, this prologue is not in the script. Doubtless the author, if he's here tonight, will be surprised to see me in front of the curtain. But I have a request to make. This tragedy he has given us to perform is a ticklish affair, and so I'm asking that you wait until the very end to express any objections to the way we play it. You see, we'll be performing very high with no nets to catch us if we fall. The slightest distraction from the house might make us lose our balance. That means death for me and my fellow actors.[1]

The self-reflexive opening of Jean Cocteau's play *Orphée* which premiered at the *Théâtre des Arts* in Paris in June 1926, serves a dual function. It anticipates the audience's aesthetic judgement of the play's quality and features the actor's mediating role as a self-conscious interpreter of the author's script. The cited request stems from the actor-protagonist who plays the modernised version of the ancient mythical artist Orpheus, called Orphée, as he steps in front of the closed theatre curtain just before the play is about to start.[2] By breaking the fourth wall and making the audience aware of the artifice at play, the actor pushes the limits of his physical abilities (by describing the performance as life-threatening), his artistic authority (by claiming to deviate from the script) and the spatial boundaries of the stage (by addressing the audience before the curtain rises). He tries to assert control over the play's reception, while shifting responsibility for any shortcomings onto the playwright and likewise exposing his own vulnerability.

I take this prologue as the starting point for my discussion of Cocteau's play. The tension this seemingly desperate but equally confident actor

presents between scripted authority and interpretive agency, obedience and transgression, echoes controversies about the localisation of agency and control as they are found in the production and reception of modern European art in the cultural avant-garde scene of the early twentieth century.[3] Less well known is that these controversies grew out of a long-standing nineteenth-century fascination with therapeutic performances of mesmerism, also called animal magnetism, developed by Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) in the late eighteenth century. Fascination for these practices extended to other popular, and so-called "mediumistic" practices such as spiritualism and hypnotism, which shared underlying ideas about invisible energies and the influence of (un)consciousness.[4] Research has shown how these practices affected the cultural imagination in Europe since the late nineteenth century and negotiated "cultural anxieties regarding literary authority, authenticity, inspiration and the reliability of new communication technologies".[5] The showcasing of these practices led to a cultural craze of writers and artists experimenting with the technique of automatic writing or drawing and trance speaking which had its offshoots well into the twentieth century.

Parallel to the rise of mesmeric, and later on spiritualistic and other mediumistic performances, there was an equally remarkable increase in the experimental testing and contesting of these practices, which cannot be excluded from the broader experimental history of medicine and science. By blurring the boundaries between the scientific and the magical, the secular and the religious, mesmeric performances triggered processes of establishing evidence, often using scientific standards to create a burden of proof for rational observers who attributed the mesmeric effects not to a fluid or sensation, but to the faculty of imagination.[6] These investigations, particularly known in France and Germany, sought to determine whether magnetisers or mediums were genuine conduits of invisible forces or manipulators of perception. Significantly, and important for my understanding of Cocteau's play, the focus of these trials and investigations was primarily on the abilities, receptivity and (potentially manipulative) power of the human (trance) medium in these practices – whether the magnetiser, spiritualist medium or hypnotist.[7]

By drawing attention to the constructed nature of theatrical illusion, *Orphée*'s prologue engages with a similar audience dynamic that structured mesmeric, and later on spiritualistic performances—where belief and scepticism, agency and submission, spectacle and authenticity were

in constant negotiation. The prologue thus echoes contemporary debates and "the testing of the capacities and potentials of both humans in altered states of consciousness and technical devices", which were often subject to scientific validation and public contestation.[8] Just as the actor claims interpretive power while remaining dependent on the script and audience reception, mesmerist practitioners and other mediums constituted an in-between, balancing between exerting influence and obeying others' rules.

The argument I develop in this chapter is twofold: first, I demonstrate that Cocteau's *Orphée* engages with the obvious spiritualistic explorations of authorship and creative agency, as the myth of Orpheus naturally lends itself to spiritualistic themes, particularly the occult practice of communicating with the dead.[9] The play is, however, also deeply informed by key aspects of mesmeric healing practices. This is particularly evident in the overall portrayal of Orphée's deteriorating professional condition which impacts the relationship between the poet and his wife Eurydice. Second, I situate these mesmeric and spiritualistic recodings of authorship within Cocteau's broader poetical writings, in which he frequently theorised about audience involvement, lamenting its perceived shortcomings. Echoing the prologue, *Orphée* confronts the audience with its own unwillingness to suspend disbelief, ultimately enacting a testing and contesting of the audience's agency and responsibility.

Healing, sleep and trance: dying as rebirth

Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), a prominent figure in twentieth-century continental art, devoted his life to an intense engagement with the ancient Thracian singer Orpheus. At the heart of his highly egocentric artistic practice, Orpheus assumes the role of the archetypal, though idiosyncratic artist. His encounter with the world of the dead serves as a "unique symbol" representing Cocteau's perception of ideal artistic endeavour.[10] The existential and artistic identification with the illustrious poet spurred Cocteau to create a series of adaptations, most notably the play *Orphée* (1926) and the Orphic film trilogy consisting of *Le sang d'un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959/60). In line with twentieth-century interpretations, Cocteau's Orphée does not descend into the underworld primarily out of love for his wife.[11] Central to his perilous

venture is the recovery of his impaired (or no longer existent) artistic practice and products. Once a renowned writer and a poet, Orphée finds his creativity in decline and appears to have turned to spiritualistic practices to confront his artistic and existential crisis: in the opening scene, we find the artist Orphée, in his "magician's parlor", where one senses "the presence of occult forces" (100). There, he interprets coded messages sent to him by an unknown source through the medium of a horse (with human legs) that taps its hoofbeats. Orphée's attempt to communicate with the otherworld will prove to be indispensable to his literary production, as only the dead, paradoxically, appear to be able to revitalise it.[12] His creative crisis puts considerable strain on his relationship. Eurydice, feeling increasingly neglected, responds with a ritualised act of defiance, smashing a windowpane every day as an appeal for recognition.

Orphée lays bare the complex underpinnings of what is traditionally considered to be the magical and powerful song of the talented Orpheus—the medium that makes the encounter with the dead possible. The play unpacks the conditions of Orphée's artistic productivity, by distributing it among a set of mediatory and dead agents, both in human(ised) and non-human or technical form, such as the horse, an angel figure Heurtebise and Orphée's (symbolical) Death, La Princesse. Heurtebise, appearing as a glazier, oscillates between being a trickster and a modern-day Hermes with sandals (100)—a mediator between life and death.[13] At first, Heurtebise appears to be a minor character, maintaining a detached attitude as an internal observer of the marital conflict between Orphée and his wife. This changes, however, when the glazier takes on the role of marriage therapist and confidant to the couple. Both Heurtebise and the Princess present themselves as merely executing a script dictated by higher authorities (i.e. "the ultimate, unknown Death"). Both, however, overstep the boundaries of their powers—just like the actor in the prologue—by revealing the mechanics and secret techniques of how Death works, namely, how Death is capable of healing.

Orphée's artistic productivity is reinvigorated by all these mediating agencies within a framework where occultist spiritualism and mesmeric practices intertwine, making it unclear whether the play is reinterpreting spiritualism through a mesmeric lens or vice versa. Furthermore, Eurydice acts as a medium: as both myth and script dictate, she must die to heal her husband's artistic practice. Through an arbitrary twist of

fate (she "unwillingly" poisons herself), she falls into a coma from which she is "released" through a semi-medical procedure. In this scene (Fig. 15.1), Eurydice is ritually killed during what appears to be a surgical operation, demonstrating a complex interplay of mesmeric techniques, technological interventions and theatrical illusion. The scene artistically reinterprets Mesmer's efforts, from the very outset of his practices, to develop techniques for channelling animal magnetism through the body of the therapist—La Princesse—as well as the use of specific substances and apparatus as technical mediators.[14] The scene depicted in the figure does not simply replicate mesmeric and spiritualistic practices, but enacts them in such a way as to expose their mechanics and performativity. In a semi-scientific tableau, the princess is accompanied by two angelic companions, Azrael and Raphael.[15] Clad in surgical attire and carrying sizable black cases, they proceed with a sequence that unfolds in a meticulous manner. The trio assembles an unconventional piece of technological equipment—a seismographic electronic contraption—powering it, as Mesmer did in his early experiments, with electricity to enable the blindfolded princess, dwelling in an altered state of consciousness or "a deep sleep or hypnotic trance" (125), to make distant contact with and exerting control over Eurydice's body.[16]

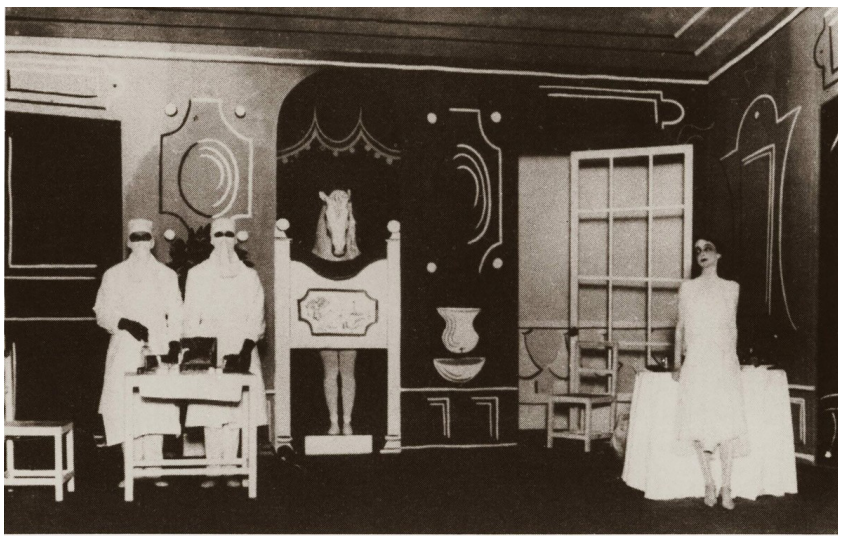


Figure 15.1: Mireille Havet joue la Mort (scène VI), © Adagp / Comité Cocteau, Paris [1926].

As the scene makes clear, Azrael and Raphael take on the role of controllers or guides, preparing and operating the scientific-ritualistic setup to ensure the smooth running of the process. The scene's quasi-scientific setup, with a seismographic device and surgical precision, recalls nineteenth-century attempts to quantify psychic phenomena through empirical testing. Azrael explains that the machine "operates through a neutral element which changes its position in space." (123) "These machines enable her to touch things where she [i.e. Death] sees them. That eliminates mathematical calculations and saves us considerable time." (123, my emphasis) Through the manipulation of time (one minute in real life on stage equals a complete hour for Death), and with the current at full throttle, the trio sets up a spool containing a white thread, wound and anchored within Eurydice's chamber. The opposite end of the thread is attached to a metal box, reminiscent of Mesmer's magnetic boxes, which the princess carries.[17] The entire sequence is executed with meticulous precision and accompanied by the rhythmic resonance of drumbeats.

Yet, the mediated and participatory nature of this spectacle is emphasised: a momentary oversight from Raphael, who forgets a chronometer, compels Azrael to address the audience, requesting a watch. Following this subtly unobserved instance, she resumes her ritualistic act, winding the thread. At this juncture, the thread becomes taut. Death hastily enters Eurydice's room, and reemerges with a living dove, symbolising Orphée's wife. Without doubt, the trio embodies not only an *unholy* Trinity, but also the three Fates – Lachesis, Klotho and Atropos – of Greek mythology, responsible for spinning, allotting and severing the life thread of humankind.[18] Similarly, Orpheus' Death delegates Raphael to sever Eurydice's thread, releasing the dove to soar "into space" (125).

In this scene, both Eurydice and the princess are reduced to seemingly passive mediums through which forces beyond their control operate, like hypnotised subjects in mesmeric experiments.[19] The white thread symbolically materialises the link between the living and the dead, the seer and the sacrificed body. Like the ectoplasmic threads reported in spiritist séances, it could be interpreted as both a conduit and a tangible manifestation of spiritual transmission.

At this point, also Heurtebise's role as a mediator becomes increasingly uncertain. Initially a secondary character, he now re-emerges as a fully conscious therapist. Arriving belatedly at the *locus delicti* alongside Orphée, he enables the poet to perceive what was initially hidden from

him. By employing the technical medium of glass ("look through the glass on my back", 126), he allows him to witness (though his view is mediated by the glass) the death of his wife. From this juncture onward, Heurtebise assumes the role of a (spiritual) guide and instructor, largely overstepping his authority and reveals to Orpheus the occult wisdom or "the secret of secrets" (128), assuring him that "glass is [his] business" (129):

> Mirrors are doors. It's through them that Death moves back and forth into life. You're not to tell anyone. Besides, spend your life looking at yourself in a mirror, and you'll see Death at work like a swarm of bees storing up honey in a hive of glass. Good-by. And good luck! (128)

By showing Orphée that mirrors are the technical media through which the transition from one world to another is completed, Heurtebise cunningly reveals the mediating technology that creates (the illusion of) immediacy, or the magical trick of descending into the otherworld and becoming healed. This scene thus fuses technological intervention, theatrical manipulation and supernatural illusion, creating a meta-theatrical reflection on the nature of mediumistic healing spectacles. It positions the performance as a deliberately crafted construct, reliant on both audience complicity and its deconstruction.

Cocteau's poetics: inspiration as expiration

Cocteau's engagement with mediumistic—both mesmeric and spiritualistic—techniques was not merely artistic but also deeply personal. His well-documented experimentation with and addiction to opium, which he described as a fluid in his diary *Opium: journal d'un désintoxication* (1930), offers a striking parallel to the play's themes.[20] It is perhaps no coincidence that this term evokes the concept of an invisible force, which the physician Mesmer called *fluidum*. According to Mesmer, disturbances in the flow of this *fluidum* were the cause of disease. He argued that the *fluidum* could be harnessed by a human healer or by technical instruments and then transferred to patients to restore proper circulation.[21] In his writings, Cocteau explored alternative medical spaces and linked his drug use to heightened artistic creativity, reinforcing the belief that art emerges not from conscious control but from a state of surrender to external forces,

comparable to the altered states of consciousness magnetised patients and trance mediums often dwelled in.[22] Throughout his life, Cocteau encountered many altered perceptual and bodily experiences first-hand—"ranging from illness, depression and opium use to hyperesthesia, queer sensibility, homosexuality and likely PTSD following his frontline service in 1916".[23] In *Orphée*, too, creative production is presented not as the product of individual genius alone, but as an act of mediation—between the living and the dead, the conscious and the unconscious, the author and the unknown forces that dictate his work. In his autobiography on the imbrication of life and art, *La difficulté d'être* (1947), Cocteau unmistakably uses a mediumistic vocabulary to describe the characteristics of artistic processes, as he interprets his creative process as one in which he is not the master of his own work but merely its conduit: "I shall never be my own master. I am made for obedience."[24] This was indebted to the surrealist movement, which championed an "authorless text that has written itself."[25] Cocteau's creative and programmatic work undeniably reflects upon aspects of this cultural craze. In line with the paradigm shifts in psychiatry at the time, he explored the pre- and unconscious, which, as his writings reveal, take on a socio-critical dimension. He presents mythopoesis as an unconscious and deeply physical process, and explains that, as a creative individual, his goal is to minimise conscious influence on art-making processes by reducing his authorial power to that of a medium.[26] Cocteau explains how this approach allows artworks to appear effortlessly and reach their true potential.

> The completed work does not release me quickly. It moves its chattels slowly. The wise thing then is a change of air and of room. The new material comes to me on my walks. Whatever happens I mustn't notice it. If I interfere, it doesn't come any more. One fine day the work demands my help. I give myself up to it in one fell swoop. My pauses are its own. If it falls asleep my pen skids. As soon as it wakes, it gives me a shake. It couldn't care less if I am asleep. Get up, it says, so that I can dictate. And it is not easy to follow. Its vocabulary is not of words.[27]

Despite the passive surrender that the work-to-be seems to require of the artist, Cocteau is nevertheless a necessary agent or (seemingly passive) medium in interacting with the new material that overwhelms him. Strikingly, Cocteau refers to the artistic process as an act of expiration

rather than inspiration, a process in which the work-to-be takes over command in creating itself with the help of Cocteau and his pen. He goes on to explain that once he attempts to assert his own voice for once, enticed by the fluidity of his pen and despite the compelling force of dictation, he ultimately has to surrender. Although Cocteau relates to his work in a relationship of passivity, they are mutually dependent, since the latter is also in need of the author (as a nevertheless awake, so not completely passive medium) to build its existence through.

This mediumistic view of artistic creation extends to Cocteau's views on the theatre and its audience. In his essays, diaries and letters, he frequently expressed his dissatisfaction with what he saw as the corrupted tastes and behaviour of contemporary theatregoers, who were still bound by the conventions of realist drama.[28] In *Orphée*, he stages not only the complexities of mediumistic performance, but seems to be invoking a trial or test of the audience's ability to navigate illusion (or what he called "mass-hypnosis"), control and "the trick behind the curtain."[29] In other words, the play becomes an experiment in perception designed to recalibrate the audience's viewing habits.

My reading of *Orphée* as a trial is reinforced by the intratextual performance of mediumistic—both mesmeric and spiritualistic—practices, in which Heurtebise and the princess act as internal observers, mediators and directors of the dramatic conflict, merging various performative roles.[30] They not only participate in the events of the play, but also hide and reveal its mechanisms—showing both the characters and the audience how the *trick* of dying and healing works and how to execute them effectively. Just as spiritualist mediums blurred the boundaries between control and possession, *Orphée* dramatises an artistic process in which the actors are both creator and conduit, both author and subject to invisible authorities (or the audience in the black box). The play thus tests a dual response from its audience: on the one hand, it requires total immersion in the theatrical illusion (a de-individualised surrender to the fiction, or to external forces, whether immaterial, spiritual, technological or pharmacological), and on the other, a moment of reflective distance—a critical engagement with the very act of theatrical representation. By subtly reminding its viewers that they, too, are being judged, Cocteau regains control over the performance and its audience. Still, it remains unclear who is tricking whom, as the boundaries between observer, mediator and performer remain blurred.

Notes

1 I use the English translation: Jean Cocteau, "Orphée", in *The Infernal Machine: and Other Plays*, trans. John Savacool (New Directions, 1967), 97–150; 103. Page numbers of this translation will be referred to between brackets in the text.

2 The two oldest surviving accounts of the Orpheus myth, Virgil's Georgics (IV: 315–558) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (X: 1–85; XI: 1–84), recount how the Thracian singer and musician descends into the dark underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice, who tragically died of a snakebite on their wedding day. Especially since the twentieth century, artists and writers have reimagined Orpheus' journey to symbolise the quest for creativity and artistic immortality. Judith Fletcher, *Myths of the underworld in contemporary culture: the backward gaze* (Oxford University Press, 2019), xxv.

3 Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson, eds, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature and Cinema* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 1–30.

4 Ehler Voss, "A Sprout of Doubt. The Debate on the Medium's Agency in Mediumism, Media Studies, and Anthropology", in *Religion, Tradition and the Popular. Transcultural Views from Asia and Europe*, eds Evamaria Sandkühler and Judith Schlehe (Transcript, 2014), 205–224; 214; Ehler Voss, "Educating the Mediums. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing's Work of Purification on Spiritualism", in *Mediality on Trial. Testing and Contesting Trance and other Media Techniques*, ed. Ehler Voss (De Gruyter, 2020), 106–120; 109.

5 Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 8.

6 Jessica Riskin, "The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science", in *The Sixth Sense Reader*, ed. David Howes (Routledge, 2009), 119–149; 130.

7 Ehler Voss, "The Mediumistic Trial. Testing and Contesting the Thresholds of Agency, Consciousness, and Technology", in *Mediality on Trial. Testing and Contesting Trance and other Media Techniques*, ed. Ehler Voss (De Gruyter, 2020), 3–32; 6–7.

8 Mesmer instigated these "heated" public debates. With the rise of spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century, the terms "medium" and "mediumism" emerged as key concepts for addressing such controversies. Voss, "The Mediumistic Trial", 9.

9 See Marcus Hahn and Erhard Schüttpelz, eds, *Trancemedien und neue Medien um 1900: Ein anderer Blick auf die Moderne* (Transcript, 2009); Jeremy Stolow, ed., *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between* (Fordham University Press, 2013); Voss, *Mediality on Trial*.

10 Judith E. Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Southern Illinois UP, 1991), xv.

11 David Hammerbeck, "Jean Cocteau, Orphée, and the Stock of the Old", in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Classics in International Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, eds Adam J. Goldwyn and James Nikopoulos (Brill, 2016), 160–181; 162.

12 Especially in Cocteau's later eponymous film (1950), the spiritualistic *katábasis* and the altered state of consciousness, sleep, which makes possible a liminal experience between life and death, appear as even more central conditions for the revival or healing of Orphée's artistic creativity. For the film adaptation, I refer to the CNCA-version (Archives Françaises du Film) shot in Franstudio by André Paulvé.

13 The character of Heurtebise may have been inspired by the poem *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes* (1904) by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). See Michel Raimond and Jean Touzot, "Une lettre inédite de Jean Cocteau", *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 95, no. 5 (1995): 779–781; 780; Zoë Ghyselinck, "Looking back: reception as creative sparagmos. Oskar Kokoschka's *Orpheus Und Eurydike* revised", *Classical Receptions Journal* 9, no. 4 (2017): 527–545; 536–537.

14 Voss, "The Mediumistic Trial", 9.

15 Azrael, like Hermes, serves as an angel of death. Raphael, who has been linked to Apollo in his healing role, also acts as a psychopomp. Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels: Including the Fallen Angels* (Free Press, 1994), 64; 241–242.

16 Karl Baier, "The Therapeutic Mediologies of Animal Magnetism", in *Mediality on Trial. Testing and Contesting Trance and other Media Techniques*, ed. Ehler Voss (De Gruyter, 2020), 33–66; 40. Historically, rational thinkers often regarded altered states of consciousness as primitive regression or a symptom of (mental) illness. See: Marcus Hahn, "'Andere Zustände' und kommunikative Reflexivität: Shaftesburys Brief über den Enthusiasmus (1708)", in *Following. Medien der Gefolgschaft und Prozesse des Folgens. Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Kompendium*, eds Anne Ganzert, Philip Hauser, and Isabell Otto (De Gruyter, 2023), 35–46.

17 Baier, "The Therapeutic Mediologies", 41–42.

18 They constitute three manifestations of a single metaphysical force that Cocteau breaks up to construct a mirrored triadic structure that parallels Orpheus, Eurydice and Heurtebise.

19 Eurydice acts with ambivalence. She deliberately smashes a window pane every day to summon Heurtebise, reinforcing Orpheus' suspicion of her affair with the glazier (111). In death, she restores her husband's artistic practice and their relationship. Feminist critiques of nineteenth-century female mediumship see spiritualist mediumship as a paradigm for exploring power, gender and authorship, as it gave women a voice and agency—at least during the séance. Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 3; 8; Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits. Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Indiana University Press, 2001 [1989]).

20 Jean Cocteau, *Opium. The Diary of his Cure*, trans. Margaret Crosland (Peter Owen, 2013 [1930]).

21 Voss, "A Sprout of Doubt", 213–214.

22 Baier, "The Therapeutic Mediologies", 38.

23 Christophe Wall-Romana, "Le Film surnaturel: Cocteau's Immersive Writing", in *Cinepoetry. Imaginary Cinemas in French Poetry* (Fordham University Press, 2013), 97–110; 98.

24 Jean Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being*, trans. Elizabeth Sprigge (Editions du Rocher, 2003), 40.

25 Bauduin and Johnsson, *The Occult in Modernist Art*, 1. Cocteau's account of the genesis of art is consistent with Surrealist notions of the subconscious as the driving force behind creative inspiration. This idea gained ground in the early twentieth century and can be traced back to experiments in mediumistic practices. "By means of psychic automatisms and trance states", the Surrealists attempted to "liberate creative imagination". Marja Lahelma, "August Strindberg's Art in Modernist and Occult Context", in *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, eds Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson (Brill, 2018), 67–92; 78.

26 Pei-Lin Wu, "Dying to Be Immortal: Jean Cocteau's Orphic Trilogy", *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 193–208; 197.

27 Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being*, 38–39.

28 Cocteau, *Opium*, 81–82.

29 Cocteau, *Opium*, 82.

30 The concept of a trial is made even more explicit in Cocteau's film adaptation, where it is formally staged. A more detailed analysis of this cinematographic trial falls outside the scope of this contribution.

CHAPTER 16

Svengali's resurrection: Mesmerism, myth, and performance

Miranda Zent

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.[1]
—W.B. Yeats

This 'mysterious power which everyone feels and no philosopher explains' is, in sum, the spirit of the earth.[2]
—Federico García Lorca

[W]e do not shrink from using these 'quack' formulas. Anything that has an unusual or magical ring stimulates the imagination . . .[3]
—Jerzy Grotowski

Trilby-mania

On an evening walk in 1889, George du Maurier, a staff illustrator for *Punch*, pitched a story to his friend and (then) marginally successful writer, Henry James. The storyline involved a "servant girl with a wonderful rich full voice but no musical genius who is mesmerised and made to sing by a little foreign Jew who has mesmeric power, infinite feeling, and no organ [*sic*] [. . .] of his own". James turned the idea down and encouraged his friend to try writing it himself.[4]

By 1894, Du Maurier had expanded his idea into *Trilby*, the enormously popular novel that introduced the infamous mesmerist Svengali to popular culture. "One of the most sensational and widely read novels ever written", *Trilby* electrified the burgeoning mass culture of the fin de siècle, particularly in the United States and England.[5] The novel was by far the highest-grossing of its time. "[. . .] *Trilby* headed the first bestseller list. [. . .] Over one hundred thousand copies were sold within the first two months of publication; over two million in two years. If anything, these figures understate the novel's popularity."[6] Libraries struggled to meet the extreme demand. In the Chicago Public Library, "[e]very one of [their] 54,000 cardholders seem[ed] determined to read the book."[7]

Trilby's commercial success extended beyond novel sales, spawning hordes of merchandise—the trilby hat (which would crown the silhouette of the mesmerising Leonard Cohen a century later), music sheets, ice cream in the shape of Trilby's alluring foot, and sausages, among other things. Ultimately, *Trilby* "caused much more than a million dollars to change hands within [. . .] eighteen months".[8]

The story was a hit in theatres. Playwright Paul M. Potter quickly adapted the novel for the stage. *Trilby* played in live theatres headlined by eminent stars, including Wilton Lackaye and Virginia Harned in the United States, and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree with Dorothea Baird in England. (Figs 16.2 and 16.3) Other versions of *Trilby* were parodied or burlesqued, and "scenes and songs" from the novel were performed prolifically in playhouses, private parlours, and fundraisers.[9]

Silent films enacted *Trilby*'s story, which would be adapted several times for the screen over the next century, most notably in the wonderful 1931 film *Svengali* staring John Barrymore (Fig. 16.1) and Marian Marsh, and again in 1983 in an adaptation starring Peter O'Toole and Jodie Foster. The Svengali/Trilby trope also appeared in children's cartoons in the United States.[10]

The mania of *Trilby*'s success proved overwhelming for Du Maurier. Two years after the novel's release, the sixty-two-year-old author/illustrator, "singled out as no man had ever been", died of health issues which Henry James attributed to the "complications of pressure, weariness and fame" that *Trilby*'s behemoth success had imposed on his friend.[11]

The broad strokes of *Trilby*'s plot happen like this: Trilby, an orphaned young laundress/model in bohemian Paris, has an enchanting voice, but she is utterly tone-deaf. Trilby's voice captivates the maestro and

Figure 16.1: John Barrymore as Svengali in the 1931 film *Svengali* (Warner Bros).
Image courtesy mptvimages.com.

mesmerist Svengali, who teaches her to sing. She becomes La Svengali, the most celebrated singer in Europe; but Trilby's friends suspect Svengali of mesmerising her and coercing her to sing against her will. When Svengali dies of a sudden heart attack, Trilby loses her ability to sing and begins to die of a mysterious illness. Her final words whisper, "Svengali . . . Svengali . . . Svengali . . .."[12]

Despite its once immense popularity, *Trilby* presents insurmountable literary faults for contemporary readers; its antisemitism makes for an overall painful read. While *Trilby* has understandably faded into relative obscurity, we are indebted to the novel for giving us Svengali—the charismatic, spellbinding musician who mesmerises the good-hearted Trilby and transforms her from an artless, tone-deaf washerwoman to a scintillating *prima donna,* "a towering goddess of song".[13]

Svengali's myth

Perhaps the most iconic mesmerist in popular culture, Svengali has become part of the English lexicon. His name appears in the Oxford English Dictionary as a noun, meaning "a person who exercises a controlling or mesmeric influence on another, frequently for some

sinister purpose".[14] He is regularly invoked to describe a threatening bad influence, a shadowy puppet master who hijacks minds.

Like other misunderstood monsters from more enduring classics like Stoker's *Dracula* or Shelly's *Frankenstein*, the captivating Svengali character has developed his own mythos independent of his humble melodramatic origins in *Trilby*. Svengali signifies the mercurial power of mesmerism manifested in the dynamic vitality of myth, and by some measures, he has become a foil for all mesmerists.

Although his name appears in common English, modern audiences know little about his character. In *Trilby,* Du Maurier describes Svengali as a scoundrel, "as bad as they make 'em", but his character is more complex.[15] While his villainous allure is the compelling stuff of macabre fantasy, our myopic understanding of Svengali as a sinister puppet master is hackneyed and empty; it obscures the most interesting elements of his character. We neglect his miraculous healing ability, his sage talents as a teacher, and the soulful obsession that is the source of his magic: his orphic music.

Neglected facets of Svengali's character merit reconsideration and reclamation. While Du Maurier gives Svengali adept magical ability, he often ignores or obscures it with an abhorrent caricature that portrays Svengali's Jewishness as a defining aspect of his villainy. Penetrating Svengali's anti-Semitic caricature invites us to reimagine our most famous mesmerist in ways that embrace the complexity of his magic, talent, and sacrifice. Revisiting the understated magical facets of Svengali's character reveals a sublime artist capable of manifesting ancient, numinous sound: "There was nothing so humble [. . .] but that his magic could transform it into the rarest beauty without altering a note."[16] He is a charismatic healer and masterful teacher whose cultural presence elevates mesmerism to the realm of myth, inspiring our collective imagination of the ancient magic that mesmerists channelled through the connection between living beings.

Our modern misunderstanding of Svengali results in part from more than a century of performances that revel in his villainy. Bernard Shaw pointed out one of the first misrepresentations of Svengali in his 1895 review of a performance of *Trilby* at the Haymarket Theatre in London. Shaw critiqued the adaptation by Paul M. Potter as well as Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's performance, arguing "Svengali is *not* a villain", and the production's emphasis on Svengali's villainy neglected his masterful

abilities as a healer and teacher.[17] Reconsidering Svengali's mesmerism through multifaceted lenses of healing practice, teaching, and artistic legacy reveals this enduring character's rhapsodic and sometimes heroic motivations born in sublime sacrifice, ancient magic and chthonic sound. A deeper understanding of these sidelined aspects of the iconic Svengali character illuminates a cultural sense of magic that has fuelled fascination with mesmerism for centuries.

Svengali the healer

Svengali never stops healing Trilby.

Trilby suffers from chronic excruciating attacks of neuralgia, a condition so debilitating it is sometimes called the "suicide disease". Trigeminal neuralgia results from a misfiring of the trigeminal nerve on the face, producing sudden "intense, stabbing electric shock-like [. . .] sensations" with pain that those afflicted have compared to "biting on a needle or fracturing a tooth".[18]

During one of her neuralgia attacks, Svengali mesmerises Trilby and heals her. She says, "How can I thank you, monsieur? You have taken all my pain away." Svengali responds, "Yes, mademoiselle. I have got it myself; it is in my elbows. But I love it, because it comes from you. Every time you have pain you shall come to me [. . .] and I will cure you and take your pain myself [. . .]."[19]

When Svengali "takes [Trilby's] pain [him]self", he is not practising mesmerism as it is traditionally understood. Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism suggested that the flow of a vital substance in the body could be redirected through various methods to resolve "problems", but it did not involve absorbing a patient's pain.[20] To be specific, Svengali's healing ritual more closely aligns with shamanism.

In his pioneering book on modern shamanism, North American anthropologist Michael Harner documents several shamanic rituals that share notable similarities with mesmerist practices. He describes shamans who pass their hands over the patient's body to sense blocks that signal the presence of disease: "By passing his hand a few inches above the body [. . .] an experienced shaman gets a definite sensation in his hand when it is over the place where the intrusive power lies [. . .]." Unlike the mesmerist, however, the shaman extracts the disease from the patient

by sucking in and retching out the "harmful power intrusion". Harner further discusses how this part of the process can affect the shaman physically: "As he removes the power intrusion from the patient, the shaman may feel engulfed in waves of extracted power that almost stun him and cause his body to tremble."[21]

After extracting the "intrusion", Harner observes that the shaman risks becoming ill if they do not expel the extracted disease from their own body. Essie Parish, shaman of the indigenous Kashia Pomo tribe in the United States, describes her experience taking disease from a patient:

> It feels like someone—the disease—is pulling with a string. It is like what the white men call a 'magnet.' That's the way the disease in a person is—like a magnet. While the disease is coming to me, I'm in a trance [. . .] I spit out the dead disease. Then I let it fall into my hand so that many people can see it. [. . .] But that is not to be touched by anyone else [. . .]. whoever picks the disease up, into him it would enter.[22]

If Svengali's healing ritual for Trilby is anything like the shamanic practice Essie Parish describes, his act of keeping Trilby's pain could have caused the illness that eventually leads to his own death. Svengali's motivation to absorb Trilby's pain is open to interpretation, and our perception of his motives shapes our judgement of his villainy.

Building on this premise, Svengali's assumption of Trilby's pain takes on a heroic dimension when viewed through the lens of Carl Jung's wounded healer archetype. In analytical psychology, the wounded healer refers to the physician who heals through their own wound, or as Jung says, "it is his own hurt that gives the measure of his power to heal".[23] The wounded healer's endurance of pain increases their understanding of the pain of others, strengthening their capacity to heal. The archetype appears in different mythologies. The Greek god Chiron, Odin in Norse mythology, and the Christ figure all obtained greater capacity to heal through their experiences of supreme suffering. [24] From this perspective, Svengali's willingness to assume Trilby's pain signals a profound sacrifice in which his own suffering strengthens his power to heal the gravely ill Trilby.

Svengali may well have needed to strengthen his healing ability; Trilby required a god-like power to heal her. Her suffering was more than physical, she wanted to end her life. Rejected by trusted friends, blaming

Figure 16.2: Dorothea Baird as Trilby in the London Haymarket Theatre production of *Trilby*, 1895. Credit: Photo © Gwen Watford Collection/Bridgeman Images.

Figure 16.3: Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Svengali in the London Haymarket Theatre production of *Trilby*, 1895. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

herself for her brother's death and in chronic pain, the despairing Trilby contemplates suicide—but instead of dying, she goes to Svengali. "I was very ill. [Svengali] cured me. I was mad with grief, and pain in my eyes, and wanted to kill myself [. . .]."[25]

Svengali takes her in, heals her, and spends the next three years teaching her to sing like a goddess.

Svengali the teacher

The haunting, soulful sound of Trilby's voice captivates Svengali the moment he meets her. When he first hears the tone-deaf Trilby sing, she performs with utter inability to organise sound, but Svengali says, "I assure you, mademoiselle, that I have never heard a voice that can equal yours; you have a talent quite exceptional."[26]

Despite her initial tone deafness, after three years of intensive training with Svengali a transcendent Trilby emerges as "La Svengali", who quickly becomes the premier singer in Europe "[. . .] à la Paganini [. . .] she could do anything—utter any sound she liked [. . .] once Svengali had shown her how".[27]

Popular culture generally assumes that Svengali controls Trilby under his mesmeric spell when she performs as La Svengali. Stage and film adaptations of *Trilby* doubtlessly contribute to this assumption because they tend to omit Trilby's training altogether. Du Maurier's novel, however, reveals that Trilby spends years of intense study with Svengali that prepare her to sing as the renowned La Svengali.

Trilby's extensive training confronts the popular notion that her remarkable ability stems from Svengali's mesmeric coercion, highlighting instead the role that her own will and determination may have played in her artistic development. Without training, the only explanation for her seemingly spontaneous virtuosity is that she is not truly the person performing—Svengali uses his mesmeric powers to play her like an instrument. Recognising her training, however, challenges cultural perceptions of Svengali as a manipulator and opens new possibilities for reimagining the potential value mesmerism may offer to performance development. How might our perception of Svengali evolve if Trilby's music is not that of a passive puppet, but a remarkable artist whose creative relationship with her collaborator is so finely attuned their work

together elevates her performance to transcendence? How might cultural expectations of mesmerism shift if Trilby's extraordinary transformation results not from Svengali's oppressive control, but from her hard work, innate talent, and years of study with a brilliant, mesmerising artist and teacher?

The novel offers few details about Svengali's training of his protégée, except that Svengali's musical partner Gecko says, "we both taught her together—for three years—morning, noon, and night—six—eight hours a day".[28] Du Maurier implies that Svengali used mesmerism in Trilby's training, but the specifics of how, how often and for what purpose remain unclear.

While Du Maurier leaves the specifics of Trilby's training to our imagination, Jerzy Grotowski's revolutionary work with his Polish Laboratory Theatre during the 1960s sheds light on what it could have entailed. Grotowski's ground-breaking methods outlined in his iconic *Towards a Poor Theatre* pioneered experimental and ritual theatre in the twentieth century. Examining mesmerism alongside Grotowski's work as a theatre director reveals intriguing parallels between the ways both practices leverage human connection to create transfigurative performances that invite psychological transformation.

Mesmerism and Grotowski's method both draw from the power of magnetic personality and human connection. The mesmerist-subject relationship functioned through intense connection, exceptional trust and focused attention. Similarly, Grotowski's methods produced deeply invested relationships with his actors:

> There is something incomparably intimate and productive in the work with the actor entrusted to me. [. . .] our labour is to explore his possibilities to the utmost. His growth is attended by observation, astonishment, and desire to help; my growth is projected onto him, or, rather, is *found in him*—and our common growth becomes revelation.[29]

The strong connection between mesmerist and subject, or Grotowski and his actors, is central to evoking trance performance—a key element in both practices.

Mesmerism and Grotowski's method rely on a performer's state of trance to enhance receptivity and heighten ability. Mesmerist trance performances could be transportive, "a source of creativity, inspiration,

and even genius, and a way for human beings to gain access to 'worlds beyond themselves'".[30] Grotowski sought something similar in his theatre, "a mobilisation of all the physical and spiritual forces of the actor who is in a state of idle readiness, a passive availability [. . .] the actor must act in a state of trance".[31] Grotowski understood trance as "the ability to concentrate in a particular theatrical way", and designed training for his "holy" actors to "be able to express, through sound and movement, those impulses which waver on the borderline between dream and reality . . ."[32] Critic Josef Kelera described Ryszard Cieslak's numinous performance in *The Constant Prince* at the Polish Laboratory Theatre:

> A sort of psychic illumination emanates from the actor [. . .] everything that is technique is as though illuminated from within, light, literally imponderable. At any moment the actor will levitate . . . He is in a state of grace.[33]

Du Maurier similarly describes La Svengali's performance as a divine experience, "using the essence of her voice—the pure spirit, the very cream of it [. . .] divinely beautiful [. . .] with a sweetness not of this earth".[34]

Devotional practice aimed at these performance goals has the potential to generate psychological transformation. In mesmeric trance, "the constraints that the self has imposed upon the self may be thrown off; the mind may be put in touch with aspects that are otherwise hidden".[35] Grotowski's method similarly develops the actor "*via negativa*", not by building skills but by removing resistances:

> The process itself, though to some extent dependent upon concentration, confidence, exposure, and almost disappearance into the acting craft, is not voluntary. The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realise an active role, a state in which one does not '*want to do that*' but rather '*resigns from not doing it*'.[36]

Developing Trilby's musical prowess required overcoming her long-held belief that she was incapable of singing—a formidable challenge in performance training. Rather than manipulating Trilby, perhaps Svengali was a transformative teacher who used his powers of persuasion to help his protégée overcome her belief that she could not sing and find the strength she needed to "resign from not" becoming La Svengali. From

this perspective, Trilby is not a victim, but she is extraordinarily brave, and her monumental triumph demanded a mesmerising conviction from her teacher.

Svengali taught Trilby more than technique and form; her training transformed her sense of self. Pintar and Lynn write that La Svengali's virtuosity suggests a "dissociation of selves, [Trilby's] unmesmerised, talentless, working-class self on one hand, and her mesmerised virtuoso, who sang before kings."[37] *Trilby* largely supports this narrative, and the idea is intriguing to imagine from a psychological standpoint, however unlikely. From the perspective of performance training, however, it is unattainable. A more plausible and empowering way of imagining Trilby's extraordinary artistic development suggests that Svengali artfully wove mesmerist techniques into her training that provided her with the transformative ritual necessary to become La Svengali.

Svengali's legacy

Popular culture often interprets Svengali's intentions toward Trilby as driven by a lust for power, fame, love or lechery; but these motivations ring false given the magical, healing aspects of his character. Svengali devoted his life to the manifestation of La Svengali, and the herculean effort eventually kills him. His immeasurable sacrifice can only be understood if La Svengali reciprocates his magic with an unteachable quality—a final ingredient in a great spell that ushers his own transformation and secures his artistic legacy. Svengali's enormous investment of energy in Trilby could not have been for the girl, nor solely for her voice, but perhaps for the sake of a sacred sound that belonged to her alone: her *duende*.

In one of Federico García Lorca's most famous lectures, the poet/playwright brilliantly describes his concept of *duende*—a dark force whose manifestation rattles the arts with vitality, "announcing the constant baptism of newly created things".[38] Lorca describes the *duende* of iconic flamenco singer La Niña de los Pienes: "How she sang! [. . .] Her voice [. . .] worthy—given her pain and her sincerity—to blossom [. . .] around the nailed but stormy feet of a Christ by Juan de Juni."[39] La Svengali's voice—the voice that enchanted thousands, the voice Svengali died for—must have rung with a kindred numinosity. It must have

contained "black sounds [. . .] a mysterious power, which everyone feels, and no philosopher explains".[40]

Lorca describes *duende* as a force more powerful than inspiration and more immediate than our distant angels. It is the vitality experienced within the agony and splendour of healing or dying. It arises between living beings who share a longing for transformation; it flashes when the healer's hands meet the sick, or when the depth of the mesmerist's gaze penetrates the other, and their hierosgamos softly breathes through their union. The *duende* of the darkly misunderstood Svengali is the source of his magic, the power of his healing, the mastery in his music, his artistic immortality.

Cadence

Although his melodramatic origins have faded into obscurity, the myth of Svengali has developed its own longevity and vitality. He is something other than a manipulative puppet master: he is a charismatic maestro, sublime artist, and wounded healer. He appears as an artistic genius that summons mercurial fire and holy transformation—he is Joe Gideon in *All that Jazz,* Leonard Cohen's *Thanks for the Dance.*

Perhaps Svengali's myth endures because his sacrifice speaks to a deeper human impulse, the instinct for legacy. For the sake of a sound—a sacred sound that comforts the dying—Svengali assumes the gruelling, magical work of resurrecting Trilby from near death. He gives his life to heal her, take her pain, show her she is holy. His sacrifice is not for her, nor altruism, heroism, or villainy, but because in the dark sounds of La Svengali he finds a hallowed cadence that summons the sacred silence of resurrection.

> For song, as taught by you, is not desire,
> not wooing of something finally attained;
> song is existence. For the god unstrained. [. . .]
>
> learn to forget those fleeting ecstasies.
> Far other is the breath of real singing.
> An aimless breath. A stirring in the god. A breeze.[41]
>
> —Rainer Maria Rilke

Notes

1 William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium", in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Macmillan, 1951), 191.
2 Federico Garcìa Lorca, *Duende: Play and Theory*, trans. Christopher Maurer (Swan Isle Press, 2023), 24.
3 Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Routledge, 2002), 38.
4 Jonathan Freedman, *The temple of culture: assimilation and anti-Semitism in literary Anglo-America* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.
5 Amy Lehman, *Victorian Woman and the Theater of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland & Co., 2009), 36.
6 Freedman, "The mania", 91.
7 *Trilbyana: The Rise and Progress of a Popular Novel* (The Critic Co., 1895), 22.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 19–20.
10 Terry Toons, "Mighty Mouse: the perils of Pearl Pureheart", 2 January 2016, YouTube, 6:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mTSiAoIZBI.
11 Henry James, "George du Maurier", Harper's Monthly (1897), 594–609.
12 George du Maurier, *Trilby* (Harper & Brothers, 1895), 435.
13 Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 412.
14 "Svengali (n.)", *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7244571214.
15 Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 59.
16 Ibid.
17 George Bernard Shaw, *Dramatic opinions and essays*, vol. 1 (Brentano's, 1906), 228–230 [emphasis in original].
18 Barry Shirley, "Trigeminal neuralgia: hypnotherapy for pain reduction: two case studies", *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy and Hypnosis* 29, no:1 (2008): 14.
19 Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 71.
20 Lehman, *Victorian Women*, 33.
21 Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman: a Guide to Power and Healing* (Bantam Books, 1982), 153–155.
22 Ibid., 164–167.
23 Carl Jung, *Alchemical Studies*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton University Press, 1967), 116.
24 Robert Henderson, "The wounded healer: a conversation with Thomas Moore, Murray Stein, and Russell Lockhart", *Jung Journal* 13, no. 2 (2019): 115.
25 Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 388.
26 Ibid., 25.
27 Ibid., 455–456.
28 Ibid., 454.
29 Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 25 [emphasis in original].
30 Lehman, *Victorian Women*, 57.
31 Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 37.
32 Ibid., 37, 35.
33 Ibid., 109.
34 Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 434.

35 Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism* (Princeton University Press, 1975), 139, quoted in Lehman, *Victorian Women*, 34.
36 Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 17.
37 Judith Pintar and Steven Jay Lynn, *Hypnosis: a brief history* (Wiley, 2009), 26.
38 Lorca, *Duende*, 34.
39 Ibid., 27.
40 Ibid., 24.
41 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. J.B. Leishman (Hogarth Press, 1949), 39.

CHAPTER 17

Choreographing magnetism: The performance of knowledge in the ethereal field of forces

Julia Ostwald[1]

> How much we ourselves are matter and how much ether is, in these days, a very moot question.[2]
> —Robert Kennedy Duncan (1905)

This chapter explores the performances of the "dream dancer" Magdeleine Guipet in the early 1900s by examining how the magnetised body was choreographed as a spectacle of knowledge and how it became a model for what might be called a vibrational aesthetic. Placed in a somnambulant state by the magnetiser Émile Magnin, Guipet "translated" music, recited poetry, or experienced affective states that resulted in highly expressive dramatic scenes of dance and mime. Guipet and Magnin's performances in Paris, Munich, Stuttgart, and London aroused great interest among artists, physicians, and psychologists. Accordingly, their views on the performances oscillated between—on the one hand—an aesthetic and cultural-anthropological perspective, in which Guipet was regarded as a sensitive automaton that epitomises the contagious power of music and poetry, offering insights into an ostensibly instinctive primordial human expressivity; and—on the other hand—a scientific approach that considered the dances as sensually perceptible demonstrations of current psychological, physiological, and physical concepts.[3]

The performances are very well documented in two books: *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G. Eine psychologische Studie über die Hypnose und dramatische Kunst* (1904) by the German physician and later parapsychologist Albert Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing and *L'art et l'hypnose: interprétation plastique d'œuvres littéraires et musicales* (1907) by the magnetiser Magnin. This latter book, on which this chapter

will focus, is extensively illustrated with photos by Fred Boissonnas. Offering intriguing insights into the act of performing magnetism on stage, how it was received by a diverse audience, and how it positions within interrelating contemporary discourses, both books testify to the highly ambiguous status of the phenomenon between the documentation of a scientific experiment, an ethnographic observation, or a performative artistic archive for the modelling of expressive gestures. Contrary to mesmerism's association with somnambulant states of mad and supernatural female protagonists in early nineteenth-century ballets such as *La Somnambule* (1837), Guipet's dances adopted a scientific approach.

In contrast to psychological positions that pathologised the hypnotic dancer as a hysteric subject, this chapter will focus on the magnetic perspective of Magnin. He not only aimed to rehabilitate Anton Mesmer's animal magnetism, but suggested considering Guipet as an artist performing a mimetic somnambulism within a field of ethereal forces that tied in with the dancing Bacchae of ancient Greece as with contemporary ethnographic understandings of mimetic practices.[4] Revolving around the central figure of the somnambulistic dancer, this contribution asks how this body was staged, how it was conceptualised, and how it entered into a vibrational relationship with its invisible surroundings, conceived in magnetic thought as an ether-like *fluidum*.

The stage as a place of knowledge

In 1902, the woman whose stage name would become Magdeleine G., consulted the magnetiser Émile Magnin in Paris because of continuous headaches. Born in 1874 as Emma Archinard in Tiflis, Georgia, she grew up in Geneva, where she studied with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (the later founder of *eurhythmics*) for two years before getting married to the Parisian Alexandre Albert Guipet with whom she had two children.[5] Magnin, a Swiss pharmacist who worked as a magnotherapist and teacher at the Parisian *École de Magnetisme*, did not situate Guipet's somnambulant state in the pathological context of contemporary psychology but—rather taking a Nietzschean position—drafted a genealogy of ecstatic performances reaching from the Bacchae of ancient Greece (who danced "under the influence of wines and perfumes") to mesmeric animal

magnetism.[6] Claiming to use the methods of ancient magnetisers, Magnin made eye contact with the sitting subject, took her hands, and performed mesmeric strokes along her limbs.[7] Entering a somnambulant state, Guipet is reported to "translate" the music into "adequate" gestures, facial expressions, and poses.[8] To wake her up, Magnin again passed his hand around her body to dissolve the magnetic cloud of *Od*—a term to which I will return later—that allegedly had formed around her.[9]

Magnin invited befriended musicians to join the sessions and used the ateliers of artists such as Auguste Rodin, Fred Boissonnas, or Albert Besnard for performances of Guipet in front of a select audience of artists, psychologists, physicians, spiritists, and members of the upper class. Guipet performed in a tunic in Greek style, mirroring the first performances of Isadora Duncan, who had danced to classical piano music in similar costumes in Parisian salons shortly before.[10] Due to the great success of their séances, Guipet and Magnin performed in the Parisian *Opéra Comique* in 1904 and then embarked on a tour through several European cities. They were invited to Munich by Albert Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing, one of the first to apply hypnosis in Southern Germany after study trips to Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris and Hippolyte Bernheim in Nancy. Schrenck-Notzing had witnessed Guipet's séances in Paris and wanted to present her as a case study for the interrelations between hypnosis and art to the *Psychologische Gesellschaft* in Munich, of which he was a member. From February to March, performances took place in private salons before moving to the *Schauspielhaus* Munich, in both cases under the patronage of the *Psychologische Gesellschaft*. About three thousand artists, physicians, and scientists were allowed free entrance, whereas an additional two thousand spectators from the upper class had to pay high admission fees.[11] This entrance policy, the different performance spaces, and audience groups reflect the highly ambiguous position of the sessions at the intersection of scientific experiment, dance performance, and artistic affect study.

This ambiguity continued in the actual dramaturgy of the events by blending contemporary conventions of how theatre and the sciences were performed. Framed by an introduction by Schrenck-Notzing, who provided basic information on the "Magdeleine G." case study, including "facts" about her physical and psychic state, the audience was asked not to interrupt the session with applause.[12] The lights were dimmed, the musicians entered silently, and the dancer took a seat on stage to be

magnetised by Magnin. One Doctor Seif, a neurologist, reported about her dance:

> Suddenly, with the sound of the music, Magdeleine's whole being undergoes a striking change. Her face comes to life. Magdeleine rises and accompanies the music or the suggestions of affect called out to her with gestures and mimic expressions that show sadness, pleasure, delight, anger, in short, all affects in a fairly regular manner, depending on pitch, strength, tone colour, intervals, and rhythms. When the music is interrupted, catalepsy occurs: the last movement freezes [. . .].[13]

Furthermore, Magnin and Schrenck-Notzing attached great importance to the choice and dramaturgy of the musical and literary suggestions used in the sessions. Among others, an evening programme should have two "acts" of thirty minutes each; no musical piece should be longer than five minutes; orchestra works should be placed towards the end; and the program should not finish with too dramatic a scene, as this would reverberate in the waking state of the dancer.[14] This ostensibly scientific reasoning thus structured the dramaturgy of the performance. In between the acts, doctors carried out medical examinations of the dancer, discussions followed each performance; and when Guipet reappeared, awake, she stressed that she did not remember anything and repeatedly affirmed not having had any dance training.[15]

Moving to the *Schauspielhaus* performances, a photo of Guipet dancing on its proscenium stage (during a rehearsal?) (Fig. 17.1) shows the elaborate stage design consisting of a park or landscape with dense bushes and trees, interspersed with rocks and a stone bench. It seems no coincidence that the stage design placed Guipet in a "wild" yet tamed nature, as we shall see later in the exoticist discourses that accompanied her performances.

Assuming that the seances took place in this setting, it marked a clear departure from earlier scientifically framed performances of hypnosis in the laboratories and sickrooms of the Salpêtrière, but also from the more intimate and occult performances in the artists' salons.[16] As Schrenck-Notzing claims, Guipet was the first hypnotised dancer to perform "somnambulant choreographic art".[17] It is no mere detail that she was paid for her performances, differentiating her from demonstrations with "patients". Her art is not only legitimised by both the art

Figure 17.1: Magdeleine Guipet at Schauspielhaus München in 1904. Photo: Unknown. Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene Freiburg i. Breisgau.

institutions and the sciences, but it can be understood as a collaborative work staged and co-choreographed by Guipet, Magnin, and participating artists and scientists. In this vein, Schrenck-Notzing noted that "the specialised scientific and artistic preparatory work [for Guipet's shows at the Schauspielhaus] involved a number of respected psychologists, doctors, and artists".[18] Being part of what Philipp Sarasin and Jakob Tanner have called a repertory of plausibilisation strategies used by nineteenth-century sciences for the training of popular perception, the shows produced scientific, artistic, and anthropological knowledge as a choreography performed in front of an audience.[19]

The exoticised body: a sensible automaton within a field of vibrations

Guipet's dances seem to have been sequences of single poses, gestures, and mimic expressions as reflected in Boissonas' photographic series of

Guipet in Magnin's book. Among others, they document one of her most famous dances, the *Marche Funèbre* by Frédéric Chopin (Fig. 17.2): The musical composition is divided into short sections, each of which is assigned a photographed pose representing an affective expression that "matches" the respective mood of the music.

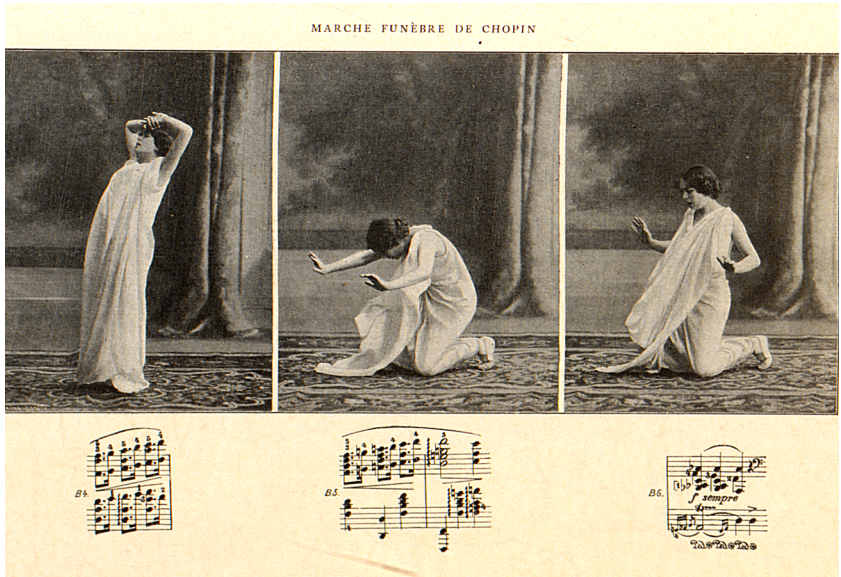


Figure 17.2: Guipet dancing Chopin's Marche Funèbre (Magnin, L'art et l'hypnose, no page). Photo: Fred Boissonas.

This depiction forms a choreography in the literal sense of the word: a visual notation system of immobilised movement that, since its "invention" in the sixteenth century, functioned as an "apparatus of capture"—"a mechanism that simultaneously distributes and organises dance's relationship to perception and signification."[20] The images in Magnin's book suggest two conclusions: Contrary to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century choreographies that notated movement in relation to music and space, what we see here is a prioritisation of static poses and gestures of recognisable emotional states over transitional movement. (It should also be noted that to take the photos, the dancer had to be placed in what was known as a cataleptic state by the magnetiser to hold each single pose.) In addition, by codifying the poses, they became repeatable and subject to possible judgments of right and wrong. In the same sense, many

reviews stressed the "correctness" of Guipet's expressions regarding the "meaning" of the music or poetry.

The idea of the dancer as an automaton or, as Schrenck-Notzing put it, a "reflex automaton" pervades both texts.[21] However, Magnin made a distinction in this automatism between a reflex-like reproduction of musical rhythm and the expressive representation of a respectively singular idea on which the music is ostensibly based: "her gestures, which follow one another without jerking, are obviously the consequence of a thought conveyed to her by the musical sounds."[22] Magnin's understanding of the transfer of sounds links notions of expression, vibration and the nervous system. Before delving into more detail on this conceptualisation, it is worth mentioning that Jaques-Dalcroze, with whom Guipet had studied—although she always denied it!—incorporated a similar connection in his musical movement education called *eurhythmics*.[23] In a vitalist approach that reflected nineteenth-century physiology, he aimed for the "co-ordination between the mind which conceives, the brain which orders, the nerve which transmits and the muscle which executes."[24] Magnin, however, drew on a wider, more eclectic range of theoretical sources such as physiology, ether physics, and particularly Mesmer's animal magnetism. A central idea of his conception of Guipet's dance is, therefore, sonorous or electric vibrations thought to be stored in the atmosphere and transformed by the dancer into "muscular expressions".[25]

The idea of invisible, all-pervading forces filling space became particularly prominent during the eighteenth century with scientific concepts related to ether, such as Isaac Newton's gravity, Benjamin Franklin's electricity, and Mesmer's animal magnetism: all of them drawing on "an ethereal fluid that bathed all things" and emphasising its vibrational relation with human perception and the nervous system.[26] As a polyvalent yet highly speculative concept, as a materially unverifiable world formula, ether paved the way for a plethora of interrelated scientific, artistic, spiritual, or political ideas and practices. The end of the nineteenth century saw a revival of ether caused by an expansion of the reservoir of invisible forces through physical discoveries like Wilhelm Carl Röntgen's X-rays (1895), Henri Becquerel's radioactivity (1896), or Heinrich Hertz's wireless telegraphy through electromagnetic waves (1888). Thus, "the existence of invisible realms just beyond the reach of the human eye was no longer a matter of mystical or philosophical

speculation; it had been established empirically by science".[27] Consequently, the boundaries between a supposed outside and inside of the body became increasingly blurred, or to use the words of Henri Bergson, speaking about the implication of X-rays for conceptualising matter: "all division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division".[28]

Against this backdrop, Magnin blended (para-)scientific historical and contemporary theories on invisible forces that, on the one hand, are thought of as a medium between bodies, and on the other, as a corporeal emission. The former, among others, related to Mesmer's animal magnetism as based on a "universal fluidum" that would constitute an intermediary, or vehicle, for magnetic forces.[29] The latter, Magnin associated with a "radioactivity of the human body",[30] building on forces like the *N-rays* discovered by René Blondlot in 1903 (and refuted in 1904) and the similar *Od*, conjured up in the mid-nineteenth century by Carl Freiherr von Reichenbach.[31] Both forces were understood as the medium of exchange between magnetiser and magnetised, as they would emanate from the body as an invisible "fluid or radiation" uniting "all beings on earth". Music, in the sense of sonorous vibrations, according to Magnin and Mesmer, had a specific importance within this magnetic circuit between invisible waves and their effect on the nerves, affects, and visible expressions. Far from being a consistent terminology, this conglomerate of terms, concepts, and forces surrounding circulating vibrations distinguished magnetism from hypnosis in the lines of Braid, Charcot, or Freud.[32] While hypnosis, situated in the emerging discipline of psychology, positioned the cause of expressive gestures inside the pathologised hysteric body, the Mesmerist tradition was based on transversal forces permeating and radiating from the body, thereby transgressing inside-outside dualisms.

A photo entitled "Séance en plein air" in Magnin's publication illustrates this magnetic relationality. (Fig. 17.3) The lower half depicts Guipet standing in front of Magnin on a stage-like platform made of earth, explicitly built to take images in which the dancer would stand out against the sky.[33] The magnetiser holds his hand above her head—a gesture suggestive of transmitting some magnetic force. Next to them, three men sit around a piano under umbrellas. In the backdrop, in the centre of the photo, we see a telegraph pole. The upper part of the image shows nothing but air.

Figure 17.3: "Séance en Plein Air", in Magnin, L'art et l'hypnose, 283. Photo: Fred Boissonas.

The composition of this and other images in the series emphasises the dancer's exposure to an air that appears saturated with various invisible forces such as magnetism's *fluidum* and sonorous vibrations of music. It is the body of the dancer in which these forces materialise. In a passage of his book related to the photo, Magnin transports this exposure of the somnambulant body to plein air back to the theatrical stage of the Parisian *Opéra Comique*, comparing the music of an orchestra to a wind that would have the visualising power of X-rays:

> The wind seemed to make her bones creak; you could see the whole skeleton twitching under the envelope of flesh, and these physical signs cannot be attributed to a will, to the interpretation of a thought, they are purely physiological and result from the sound vibrations on the nerve endings.[34]

This description adds to the aforementioned ethereal forces the momentous physiological "discovery" of the nerves which, in the late nineteenth century, became the dominating model for the human body as "sensitive machine".[35] Accordingly, media and theatre scholar Martina Leeker,

regarding Guipet, speaks of a "trigger body" as "an area of technically reproducible circuits of command; a constitution that humans share with animals and telegraphs".[36]

However, this determinist, mechanist analogy seems too simplistic and misses the meaning of ether as the medium that relates invisible forces to living bodies. Contrary to controllable, wired electric impulses (to which the telegraph pole in the image's background points), Guipet is staged as a highly porous and sensitive detector of waves in the ether, a vibrating body in a field of vibrating forces. Ether, comparable to smell, resists an on-off logic as it is characterised by "continuous cohesion and diffusion, materialisation and dematerialisation, coursed through by forces and vibrating waves".[37] Thus, the vibrant assemblage of body and forces is susceptible to imponderability. For example, in theatrical performances to improvised music, the musicians stressed that the dancer's gestures anticipated the music or showed a certain latency in continuing longer than the music was played; in other cases, Guipet's gestures "deviated" from the composer's ideas, reportedly revealing hitherto hidden influences in the music.[38]

Instead of a "physiological aesthetic" that replaced representation with presence according to Leeker, we might rather turn to Magnin's insistence on vibrations.[39] I would suggest speaking of a *vibrational aesthetic* that shifts the focus from the physiological body toward material transitions between corporeal and ethereal forces.[40] What's more, vibration is related to a specific—material, ecstatic, contagious—understanding of mimesis that Nidesh Lawtoo calls the modernist "mimetic unconscious": not in the sense of an imitation, but as "a disconcerting form of unconscious communication that troubles the boundaries of individuation", linked to specific psycho-physical states such as ecstasis, hypnosis, possession, and more-than-human forces.[41] According to Lawtoo, such mimetic performances "cannot be relegated to archaic, primitive, or pathological subjects, but [are] constitutive of modernist accounts of the mimetic unconscious."[42] At the same time, it is the above-mentioned feminised and exoticised subjects who were ascribed an unconscious mimetic ability in modernist discourses, as is the case with Guipet. Translating energetic currents into meaningful gestures drawn from a supposedly universal register of human expression, she did not waive the representational but performed it as "a mimetic loss of the ego", ridden by external forces.[43] Hence, the necessity to emphasise her lack of education, her unknowingness, and

unconsciousness, paired with a recurring exoticisation of her ostensibly primitive "oriental", Asian or Slavic origin.[44] This is said to be the reason for her receptivity to the vibrations of musical or magnetic waves (a sensitivity she shared with plants and animals, according to Magnin) and her expressivity—in other words, her permeability of the self.[45] As such, Guipet's somnambulant dances reflect what Michael Taussig in the context of ethnography around 1900 has described as a "bizarre colonial conjunction [. . .] wherein the mimetically capacious person [. . .] meets the mimetic cripple blessed with the mimetically capacious machine (the movie camera) [. . .]."[46] While by "mimetic machine" Taussig means media technologies such as phonography, photography, or film, Guipet's dances suggest expanding this notion, or rather relating it back (beyond Boissonas' camera) to the choreographic apparatus. As "a kind of organisation of the perceptive-linguistic field [. . .]", choreography is used here—similar to the ethnographic mimetic machines—to produce, assign and make sensually perceptible differences in the mimetic ability between the exoticised dancer and her audience.[47]

Conclusion

The somnambulant choreographies of Guipet and Magnin also point to current inquiries on relations between body, environment, affects, and technologies and their modernist as well as contemporary genealogies. Among others, Guipet raises questions about the history of media when she is placed in the lineage of occult female media since the mid-nineteenth century who, according to John Durham Peters, formed a link between earlier conceptions of media as environing natural elements such as air or ether and what would become technological media at the beginning of the twentieth century.[48] Furthermore, performative magnetism in the context of theatre and choreography has an afterlife worth exploring in its respective politics extending from the avant-gardist poetological mobilisation of Guipet's somnambulism in Georg Fuchs' *Die Schaubühne der Zukunft* (1905) to current reverberations like Choy Ka Fai's series *Dance Clinic* (2016–18) or Alice Chauchat's ongoing experiments with dancing as a form of telepathic encounter. Finally, magnetic vibrational aesthetics also invite us to rethink how today's relations between subjectivities and invisible forces as discussed in new materialist

approaches are performed—both in the manipulative sense of affective flows that play subjects like puppets and in an aspirational ethical sense of permeable subjects becoming sympathetic with surrounding energies.[49]

Notes

1 This research was funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the Consolidator Grant scheme, as part of the project OLFAC (Grant Agreement number: 101124672, ERC-2023-COG), Principal Investigator: Silke Felber.

2 Robert Kennedy Duncan in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Editor's Introduction: I. Writing Modern Art and Science – An Overview; II. Cubism, Futurism, and Ether Physics in the Early Twentieth Century", in *Science in Context* 17/4(2004): 423–466, 451. I would like to thank Alexander Kamber for an exchange on the topic during his research stay and talks at the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna in 2023/24 and draw attention to his ongoing dissertation project, *Ökologien des Körpers: Bewegungskulturen und Lebenswissenschaften im frühen 20. Jahrhundert.*

3 Gabriele Brandstetter proposes slightly different categories with a cultural-anthropological, a medical-psychological, and an iconographic line; see her *Tanz-Lektüren. Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (Fischer Taschenbuch, 1992), 251.

4 Émile Magnin, *L'art et l'hypnose: interprétation plastique d'œuvres littéraires et musicales; préface de Th. Flournoy; illustrations de Fréd. Boissonnas* (Édition Atar/Félix Alcan, 1907), 2.

5 Céline Eidenbenz, "L'hypnose au Parthénon. Les photographies de Magdeleine G. par Fred Boissonnas", *Études photographiques* 28 (2011), 200–224.

6 Ibid., 1.

7 Ibid., 19.

8 Ibid., 23.

9 Ibid., 137.

10 An Daly, "Isadora Duncan and the Distinction of Dance", *American Studies* 35/1(1994): 5–23; Eidenbenz, *L'hypnose au Parthénon*, 7–8.

11 Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G.*, 3.

12 Magnin, *L'art et l'hypnose*, 359 and 364.

13 Seif in Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G.*, 38–39.

14 Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine* G., 51–52.

15 Ibid., 56–57.

16 None of the written sources provide any information about the stage design.

17 Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G.*, 9 and 3.

18 Ibid., V.

19 Philipp Sarasin and Jakob Tanner, "Bemerkungen zum Konzept und zu den Beiträgen diese Sammelbandes", *Physiologie und industrielle Gesellschaft. Studien zur Verwissenschaftlichung des Körpers im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. ibid. (Suhrkamp, 1998), 41.

20 André Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture", *TDR: The Drama Review* 51/2 (2007), 119–123, 120.

21 Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G.*, 107.

22 Magnin, *L'art et l'hypnose*, 81.

23 Under the name Emma Archinard, Guipet had studied with Jaques-Dalcroze from 1885 to 1894 at

the Geneva Conservatory. Furthermore, Guipet's uncle, Benjamin Archinar, knew Jaques-Dalcroze, as the former was the choreographer of one of the latter's compositions (Eidenbenz, "L'hypnose au Parthénon", 9, 12).

24 Émile, Jaques-Dalcroze, *The Eurhythmics of Jacques-Dalcroze* (Small Maynard & Co., 1918), 15.

25 Magnin, *L'art et l'hypnose*, 179, 182.

26 Joe Milutis, *Ether. The Nothing That Connects Everything* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 7. See also Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Harvard University Press, 1968), 10–11.

27 Henderson, "Editor's Introduction", 447.

28 Bergson in ibid., 449.

29 Magning, *L'art et l'hypnose*, 31.

30 Ibid., 36.

31 See René Blondlot, *Rayons «N»: recueil des communications faites à l'Académie des sciences* (Gauthier-Villars, 1904). After a short hype, N-rays were debunked in 1904 and today still serve as a notorious example of a science that perceives sensually what it expects to prove. Regarding the concept of *Od*, see Karl Freiherr von Reichenbach, *Odisch-magnetische Briefe*, (Cotta'scher Verlag, 1852). Od was understood as an energy similar to magnetism that permeated all living and non-living entities. The name referred to the Germanic god Odin, who, according to Reichenbach, etymologically denoted an all-pervading force.

32 Ibid., 32–35, 38.

33 Ibid., 189.

34 Ibid., 189–191.

35 See Philipp Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen. Eine Geschichte des Körpers 1765–1914* (Suhrkamp, 2016).

36 Martina Leeker, "Weibliche Medien um 1900. Über okkulte Herkünfte der Medienwissenschaft", *Gendermedia. Zum Denken einer neuen Disziplin*, ed. Hedwig Wagner (VDG, 2008), 117–140, 121.

37 Henderson, "Editor's Introduction", 452–453.

38 Magnin, *L'art et l'hypnose*, 236, 387–388; Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G.*, 113.

39 Leeker, "Weibliche Medien um 1900", 121.

40 See Milutis regarding ether as the basis for a "*vibrational modernity* to be found in the work of futurist, symbolist, and other early avant-garde movements" (ibid., *Ether*, 55, emphasis added by the author).

41 Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (Michigan State University Press, 2013), 2.

42 Ibid., 205.

43 Ibid., 5.

44 See Magnin, *L'art et l'hypnose*, 168; Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Traumtänzerin Magdeleine G.*, 63, 20.

45 Magnin offers many examples of the interconnections between magnetism and a receptivity to the vibrations of musical waves found in children, sick persons, plants, microorganisms, and animals such as the huge spider that lowered itself down from the ceiling of the stage only when Artur Rubinstein played the piano (ibid., *L'art et l'hypnose*, 11).

46 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, 1993), 243.

47 Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture", 120.

48 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 48.

49 Among others, see Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego; Jane Bennett, Influx & Efflux. Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (Duke University Press, 2020).

Bibliography

Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (University of California Press, 1986).

Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978).

David Armando, "Il magnetismo animale tra scienza, politica e religione", *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 2 (2005).

David Armando, "Scienza, demonolatria o 'impostura ereticale'? Il Sant'Uffizio romano e la questione del magnetismo animale', *Giornale di storia* 2 (2009).

David Armando, "The 19th-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism Viewed from Rome: the Holy Office's Decrees", *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 19 (2022), 1–56.

David Armando, Bruno Belhoste, Jean-Luc Chappey and Claire Gantet, "L'harmonie au prisme du mesmérisme: recompositions scientifiques, politiques et morales au tournant des xviiie et xixe siècles", *La Révolution française* 24 (2023).

David Armando, Bruno Belhoste, Jean-Luc Chappey and Claire Gantet, eds, *Animal Magnetism in Motion. Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848* (Schwabe Verlag, 2025).

François Azouvi, "Mesmérisme", in *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, ed. M. Delon (Quadrige/PUF, 2007), 806–808.

Alexandra Katerina Bacopoulos-Viau, *Scripting the Mind: Automatic Writing in France, 1857–1930* (University of Cambridge, 2013).

Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (MIT Press, 2002).

Karl Baier, "The Therapeutic Mediologies of Animal Magnetism", in *Mediality on Trial. Testing and Contesting Trance and Other Media Techniques*, ed. Ehler Voss (De Gruyter, 2020), 33–66.

Stephen Bann, "Romanticism in France", in *Romanticism in National Context*, eds Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 240–259.

Jonathan Barbier and Ludovic Frobert, eds, *Une imagination républicaine: François-Vincent Raspail, 1794–1878*, Les cahiers de la MSHE Ledoux, no. 4 (Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2017).

Jürgen Barkhoff, *Magnetische Fiktionen. Literarisierung des Mesmerismus in der Romantik* (Metzler, 1995).

Jürgen Barkhoff, "Gazes, Attractions and the Law of Gentleness. Mesmerism in Adalbert Stifter's Brigitta", in *Animal Magnetism in Motion. Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848*, ed. David Armando et al (Schwabe Verlag, 2025), 399–418.

Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850–1910* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

Tessel Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

Bruno Belhoste, *Franz Anton Mesmer. Le magnétiseur des Lumières* (Armand Colin, 2024).

Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, "Raspail et la science populaire", in *Une imagination républicaine, François-Vincent Raspail (1794–1878)*, eds Jonathan Barbier and Ludovic Frobert (Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2022), 27–38.

Judith E. Bernstock and Peter Howard Selz, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: the Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

Paola Bertucci, "Therapeutic Attractions: Early Applications of Electricity to the Art of Healing", in *Brain, Mind and Medicine: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Neuroscience*, eds Harry Whitaker, C. U. M. Smith and Stanley Finger (Springer, 2007), 271–284.

Göran Blic, "The Occult Roots of Realism: Balzac, Mesmer, and Second Sight", *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 36 (2007): 261–280.

Gabriele Brandstetter, *Tanz-Lektüren. Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde*, (Fischer Taschenbuch, 1992).

Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits. Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Indiana University Press, 2001 [1989]).

Nicolas Brucker, "Charles de Villers et le magnétisme animal", *Mémoires de l'Académie nationale de Metz* 26 (2013): 195–206.

Nicolas Brucker and Franziska Meier, *Un homme deux cultures. Charles de Villers entre France et Allemagne (1765–1825)* (Classique Garnier, 2019).

Burckhart Brückner, "Animal Magnetism, Psychiatry and Subjective Experience in Nineteenth-Century Germany: Friedrich Krauß and his *Notschrei*", *Medical History* 60, no. 12 (2016): 19–36.

Peter Brunning, "The Mysterious Ladies; or, an Investigation into Three Early Mindreaders", *Ye Olde Magic Mag* 5, no. 3 (2019): 116–126.

Victoria Cain, "Seeing the World: Media and Vision in US Geography Classrooms, 1890–1930", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 13, no. 4 (2015): 276–292.

Jacqueline Carroy, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie. L'invention de sujets* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1991).

Jacqueline Carroy, "Votre toute dévouée et reconnaissante cataleptique", *Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle* 38 (2009): 79–100.

Gabrielle Castel-Çagarriga, "Auguste le magnétiseur", *Historia* 24 (1967): 104–106.

Joël Castonguay-Bélanger, *Les écarts de l'imagination. Pratiques et représentations de la science dans le roman au tournant des Lumières* (Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2008).

Andrea Cavalletti, *Suggestione. Potenza e limiti del fascino politico* (Bollati, 2011).

Andrea Ceci, "Deaf-Mutism and Savagery Through the Lens of Animal Magnetism in France During the Early Nineteenth Century", *Cromohs - Cyber Review of Modern Historiography* 22 (2019): 61–75.

Andrea Ceci, "Animal Magnetism and Romantic Socialism: Circulations and Reinterpretations Along a Porous Border", in *Animal Magnetism in Motion: Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848*, ed. David Armando et al (Schwabe Verlag, 2025), 319–340.

Robert Cecil, *Cults in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Institute for Cultural Research, 1988).

Fanny Charasse, *Le retour du monde magique. Magnétisme et paradoxes de la modernité* (Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2023).

Leon Chertok and Raymond de Saussure, *The Therapeutic Revolution, from Mesmer to Freud*, trans. R. H. Ahrenfeldt (Brunner/Mazel, 1979).

Jean Cocteau, *The Difficulty of Being*, trans. Elizabeth Sprigge (Editions du Rocher, 2003).

Morena Corradi, "Staging the Uncanny: Phantasmagoria in Post-Unification Italy", *Image & Narrative* 13, no.1 (2012): 3–20.

Morena Corradi, *Spettri d'Italia. Scenari del fantastico nella pubblicistica postunitaria milanese* (Longo Editore, 2016).

Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (Yale University Press, 1994).

Adam Crabtree, "Animal Magnetism and Mesmerism", in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Routledge, 2015), 188–194.

Adam Crabtree, "1784: the Marquis de Puységur and the Psychological Turn in the West", *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 55, no. 3 (2019): 199–215.

Guillaume Cuchet, *Les voix d'outre-tombe: tables tournantes, spiritisme et société*, L'univers historique (Éditions du Seuil, 2012).

Guillaume Cuchet, "Le retour des esprits, ou la naissance du spiritisme sous le Second Empire", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 54, no. 2 (2007): 74–90.

Brian Cummings, "Prayer, Bodily Ritual and Performative Utterance: Bucer, Calvin and the Book of Common Prayer", in *Prayer and Performance in Early Modern English Literature*, ed. Joseph Sterrett (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 16–36.

An Daly, "Isadora Duncan and the Distinction of Dance", *American Studies* 35, no. 1 (1994): 5–23.

Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Harvard University Press, 1968).

Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels: Including the Fallen Angels* (Free Press, 1994).

James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (University of California Press, 2014).

Marijke De Sadeleer, "De kracht van genezing: de keuze voor een magnetische behandeling in België", Master's thesis, KU Leuven, 2013.

Sarah Dellmann, "Images of Dutchness: Popular Visual Culture, Early Cinema and the Emergence of a National Cliché, 1800–1914", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Utrecht, 2015.

Anne DeLong, *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse: the Romantic Discourse of Spontaneous Creativity* (Lexington Books, 2012).

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (MIT Press, 2003).

Max Dif, *Histoire et évolution technique de la prestidigitation,* volume 1 (Imprimerie Lathière et Pêcher, 1971).

Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France, 1785–1914* (Albin Michel, 1995).

Nicole Edelman, "Les rapports ambigus des somnambules magnétiques, des médiums spirites et du fouriérisme au XIXe siècle en France", *Cahiers Charles Fourier* 20 (2009): 51–62.

Nicole Edelman, "Un savoir occulté ou pourquoi le magnétisme animal ne fut-il pas pensé 'comme une branche très curieuse de psychologie et d'histoire naturelle'", *Revue d'histoire du XIX siècle* 38 (2009): 115–132.

Céline Eidenbenz, "L'hypnose au Parthénon. Les photographies de Magdeleine G. par Fred Boissonnas", *Études photographiques* 28 (2011): 200–224.

Edhem Eldem, "Magic at the Imperial Palace, 1876–8", *Aca'ib. Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural* 3 (2022): 67–112.

Edhem Eldem, *V. Murad'ın Oğlu Selahaddin Efendi'nin Evrak veYazıları. I–V. Murad ile Cléanthi Scalieri* (İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019).

David Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake* (Doubleday, 1988).

Josette Feral, "Foreword", *SubStance* 31, no. 2/3 (2002), 3–13.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetic (*Routledge, 2008).

Judith Fletcher, *Myths of the Underworld in Contemporary Culture: the Backward Gaze* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Jonathan Freedman, "The Mania of the Middlebrow: Trilby, the Jew, and the Middlebrow Imaginary", in *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America*, ed. Jonathan Freedman (Oxford University Press, 2000), 89–116.

Nils Freytag, "Witchcraft, Witch Doctors and the Fight Against 'Superstition' in Nineteenth-Century Germany", in *Witchcraft Continued: Popular Magic in Modern Europe*, eds Willem de Blécourt and Owen Davies (Manchester University Press, 2004), 29–45.

Daniela Gallingani, *Miti macchine magie: intrecci letterari e ipotesi scientifiche nell'età dei Lumi* (Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria Editrice Bologna, 1996).

Céline Frigau Manning, *Ce que la musique fait à l'hypnose: Une relation spectaculaire au XIXe siècle* (Les presses du réel, 2021).

Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman, *Science in the Marketplace. Nineteenth-Century Sites and Experiences* (University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Al Gabay, "The Stockholm Exegetic and Philanthropic Society and Spiritism", *The New Philosophy* 110 (2007): 219–253.

Bernard Gainot, "Des baquets sous les Tropiques. À propos de la diffusion du magnétisme animal à Saint-Domingue en 1784", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 1, no. 391 (2018): 81–104.

Clara Gallini, *La Sonnambula meravigliosa. Magnetismo e ipnotismo nell'Ottocento italiano* (Feltrinelli, 1983).

Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. A. Scheridan (Columbia University Press, 1982).

Paolo Girardelli, "Una citta nella citta. La Societa Operaia e Ie architetture della comunita italiana di Istanbul", in *Gli Italiani di Istanbul. Figure, Comunita et Istituzioni dalle Riforme alla Repubblica 1839–1923*, eds Attilio De Gaspiris and Roberta Ferrazza (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2007), 207–221.

Jan Goldstein, *Hysteria Complicated by Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

Sigal Gooldin, "Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists: Spectacles of Body and Miracles at the Turn of a Century", *Body and Society* 9, no. 2 (2003): 27–53.

Rae Beth Gordon, *De Charcot à Charlot: Mises en scène du corps pathologique* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020).

Penelope Gouk, "Cosmic Vibrations. Echoes of Universal Harmony at the Time of the British Enlightenment", *Terrain* 68, November 2017.

Anthony Grafton, *Magus: The Art of Magic from Faustus to Agrippa* (Harvard University Press, 2023).

Stephan Gregory, "Media in Action: From Exorcism to Mesmerism", *communication +1* 4, no. 1 (2015): 1–30.

Brian Griffin, "Anti-Catholicism in Bath from 1820 to 1870", *British Catholic History* 31, no. 4 (2015): 593–611.

Patrizia Guarnieri, "Teatro e laboratorio. Scienziati e medici davanti al magnetism", *Belfagor* 40, no. 5 (1985): 561–575.

Hervé Guillemain, *Diriger les consciences, guérir les âmes. Une histoire comparée des pratiques thérapeutiques et religieuses (1830–1939)* (La Découverte, 2006).

Hervé Guillemain, "Principes pour une réappropriation globale de la santé au XIXe siècle: les combats de Raspail contre la médecine de

son temps", in *Une imagination républicaine, François-Vincent Raspail (1794–1878)*, eds Jonathan Barbier and Ludovic Frobert (Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2022), 63–79.

Júlia Gyimesi, "Animal Magnetism and its Psychological Implications in Hungary", in *The Occult Nineteenth Century*, eds Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 59–83.

Júlia Gyimesi, *Fejezetek a pszichológia történetéből – egyetemi jegyzet* (Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem, 2023).

Marcus Hahn, "'Andere Zustände' und kommunikative Reflexivität: Shaftesburys 'Brief über den Enthusiasmus' (1708)", in *Following. Medien der Gefolgschaft und Prozesse des Folgens. Ein kulturwissenschaftliches Kompendium*, eds Anne Ganzert, Philip Hauser and Isabell Otto (De Gruyter, 2023), 35–46.

David Hammerbeck, "Jean Cocteau, Orphée, and the Stock of the Old", in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Classics in International Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, eds Adam J. Goldwyn and James Nikopoulos (Brill, 2016), 160–181.

Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman; a Guide to Power and Healing* (Bantam Books, 1982).

Robert Henderson, "The Wounded Healer: a Conversation with Thomas Moore, Murray Stein, and Russell Lockhart", *Jung Journal* 13, no. 2 (2019): 115–127.

Sarah Hibberd, "Magnetism, Muteness, Magic: Spectacle and the Parisian Lyrical Stage *c.*1830", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southampton, 1998.

Sarah Hibberd, "'Dormez donc, mes chers amours': Hérold's *La Somnambule* (1827) and dream phenomena on the Parisian lyric stage", *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 2 (2004): 107–132.

Kirsten Holström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion, 1770–1815* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967).

Lydia Jakobs, "Poverty as Spectacle? Victorian Magic Lantern Shows and the Urban Poor", in *The Pleasure of the Spectacle: The London Film and Media Reader 3*, ed. Phillip Drummond (The London Symposium, 2015), 432–442.

Anne Jeanson, "De la thérapeutique au spiritualisme: le baron du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), prophète du magnétisme à Paris", *La Révolution française: Cahiers de l'Institut d'histoire de la Révolution française*, no. 24 (31 March 2023).

David J. Jones, *Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern: Desire, Eroticism and Literary Visibilities from Byron to Bram Stoker* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Jason Ā Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Minsoo Kang, "Sublime Puppets Versus Uncanny Automata", in *Victorian Automata: Mechanism and Agency in the Nineteenth Century*, eds Suzan Anger and Thomas Vranken (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 255–271.

Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism* (Princeton University Press, 1975).

Joe Kember, "The Magic Lantern: Open Medium", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 17, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

James Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease* (Ashgate, 2012).

James Kennaway, *Music and the Nerves, 1700–1900* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Sophie Lachapelle, *Conjuring Science. A History of Scientific Entertainment and Stage Magic in Modern France* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Marja Lahelma, "August Strindberg's Art in Modernist and Occult Context", in *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema*, eds Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson (Brill, 2018), 67–92.

Peter Lamont, "Magician as Conjuror. A Frame Analysis of Victorian Mediums", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4 (2006): 21–33.

Peter Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Christian Landresse, "Un siècle de renouveau de l'occulte (1847–1940): Spiritisme, Théosophie et Antoinisme en Belgique", Master's thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1998.

Marie-Claire Latry, "*Le Magnétiseur amoureux*, une écriture à quatre mains?", *Eidôlon* (Lapril, Université de Bordeaux III) 55 (2000): 247–265.

Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (Michigan State University Press, 2013).

Pascal Le Maléfan and Stéphane Gumpper, "La véritable fin de la voyante Henriette Couëdon (1867–1941): itinérance asilaire d'une 'médium délirante'", *L'Évolution Psychiatrique* 86, no. 3 (2021): 627–643.

Martina Leeker, "Weibliche Medien um 1900. Über okkulte Herkünfte der Medienwissenschaft", in *Gendermedia. Zum Denken einer neuen*

Disziplin, ed. Hedwig Wagner (Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2008), 117–140.

Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland & Company, 2009).

Sabine Lenk and Natalija Majsova, *Faith in a Beam of Light: Magic Lantern and Belief in Western Europe, 1860–1940* (Brepols, 2022).

André Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture", *TDR: The Drama Review* 51, no. 2 (2007): 119–123.

Brian Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (Yale University Press, 2013).

Bernard Lightman, ed., *Rethinking History, Science, and Religion: an Exploration of Conflict and the Complexity Principle* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Fayard, 2005).

Federico Garcìa Lorca, *Duende: Play and Theory.* Trans. Christopher Maurer (Swan Isle Press, 2023).

Johann Georg Lughofer, "Adelma von Vay aus Slovenske Konjice im Kontext zeitgenössischer österreichischer Schriftstellerinnen", *Acta Neophilologica* 55, no. 1/2 (2022): 285–303.

Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

Tanya Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

Catherine-Laurence Maire, *Les possédées de Morzine (1857–1873)* (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1981).

Céline F. Manning, *Ce que la musique fait à l'hypnose: Une relation spectaculaire au XIXe siècle* (Les presses du réel, 2021).

Jonathan Marshall, "Nervous Dramaturgy: Pain, Performance and Excess in the Work of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot, 1862–1893", *Double Dialogues* 4 (2003).

Jonathan Marshall, "Dynamic Medicine and Theatrical Form at the Fin de Siècle: A Formal Analysis of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot's Pedagogy, 1862–1893", *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 1 (2008): 131–153.

Jonathan W. Marshall, *Performing Neurology: The Dramaturgy of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Bertrand Marquer, *Les romans de la Salpêtrière: réception d'une scénographie Clinique. Jean-Martin Charcot dans l'imaginaire fin-de-siècle* (Librairie Droz, 2008).

Alain Maureau, *Du Comitat venaissin au Vaucluse; études et documents révolutionnaires inédits* (A. Maureau,1999).

Michel Meeus, 'Naissance et croissance du Spiritisme et de l'Antoinisme dans le diocèse de Belgique', *Leodium* 95 (2010): 19–44.

Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité. 1: Le défi du magnétisme animal*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond (Le Plessis Robinson: Institut Synthélabo, 1999).

Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton University Press, 1983).

James Mew and Deborah Manley, "Baldwin, George (1744–1826), diplomatist and writer", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004.

Joe Milutis, *Ether. The Nothing That Connects Everything* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Paul Kléber Monod, *Solomon's Secret Arts: the Occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2013).

John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Cornell University Press, 2008).

Francesca Montesperelli, *Flussi e scintille. L'immaginario elettromagnetico nella letteratura dell'Ottocento* (Liguori, 2002).

Luis Montiel, "A Symbolic Defence of Animal Magnetism", *History of Psychiatry* 16, no. 2 (2005): 203–216.

Simone Natale, "The Medium on the Stage: Trance and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism", *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9, no. 3 (2011): 239–55.

Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments. Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (Penn State University Press, 2016).

Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900* (Yale University Press, 2007).

Matthew Niblett, *Prophecy and the Politics of Salvation in late Georgian England: the Theology and Apocalyptic Vision of Joanna Southcott* (I. B. Tauris, 2015).

Emily Ogden, *Credulity: a Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Francesca Pagani, "Un roman pour servir à l'histoire du magnétisme. *Le Magnétiseur amoureux* de Villers à Puységur", *Littérature et magnétisme: special issue of Cahiers de littérature française* 17 (2018): 25–43.

Sally B. Palmer, "Projecting the Gaze: The Magic Lantern, Cultural Discipline, and Villette", *Victorian Review* 32, no. 1 (2006): 18–40.

Terry M. Parssinen, "Mesmeric Performers", *Victorian Studies* 21, no. 1 (1977): 87–104.

Peter Pesic, *Sounding Bodies: Music and the Making of Biomedical Science* (MIT Press, 2022).

Peter Pesic, "Composing the Crisis: From Mesmer's Harmonica to Charcot's Tam-Tam", *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 19, no. 1 (2022): 7–30.

Jean-Pierre Peter, "De Mesmer à Puységur. Magnétisme animal et transe somnambulique, à l'origine des thérapies psychiques", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 38 (2009): 19–40.

John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Michel Pierssens, "Le merveilleux psychiques au XIXe siècle", *Ethnologie française* 23, no. 2 (1993): 351–366.

Christine Planté, "Les féministes saint-simoniennes", in *Regards sur le Saint-Simonisme et les Saint-Simoniens*, ed. Jean-René Derré (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1986), 73–102.

Fernando Portelo Câmara, "Pré-história da psicoterapia brasileira: a chegada do magnetismo animal no Brasil, 1823–1887", *Debates em Psiquiatria* 3, no. 3 (2013): 34–38.

Nicole Priesching, "Mystikerinnen des 19. Jahrhundert – ein neuer Typus?", in *Zwisschen Himmel und Erde. Körperliche Zeichen der Heiligkeit*, ed. Waltraud Pulz (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012), 79–97.

Carmel Raz, "The Expressive Organ Within Us: Ether, Ethereality, and Early Romantic Ideas about Music and the Nerves", *19th-Century Music* 38, no. 2 (2014): 115–144.

Philippe Régnier, "Sciences naturelles et médecine dans *La Sorcière* de Michelet", in *Le Partage des savoirs XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*, ed. Lise Andries, Littérature & idéologies (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2003), 203–224.

Jessica Riskin, 'The Mesmerism Investigation and the Crisis of Sensationist Science', in *The Sixth Sense Reader*, ed. David Howes (Routledge, 2009), 119–149.

Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (University of Delaware Press, 1985).

Robert W. Rix, "Divine Improvisations: J. J. G. Wilkinson and Automatic Writing", *Religion & Literature* 51/52, no. 3/1 (2019–2020): 101–122.

Robert W. Rix, "Healing the Spirit: William Blake and Magnetic Religion", *Romanticism on the Net* 25 (February 2009).

Jennifer Ronyak, *Intimacy, Performance, and the Lied in the Early Nineteenth Century*, Historical Performance (Indiana University Press, 2018).

Philipp Sarasin, *Reizbare Maschinen. Eine Geschichte des Körpers 1765–1914* (Suhrkamp, 2016).

Philipp Sarasin and Jakob Tanner, "Bemerkungen zum Konzept und zu den Beiträgen dieses Sammelbandes", in *Physiologie und industrielle Gesellschaft. Studien zur Verwissenschaftlichung des Körpers im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, eds Philipp Sarasin and Jakob Tanner (Suhrkamp, 1998), 12–43.

Simon Schaffer, "The Astrological Roots of Mesmerism", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2010): 158–168.

Marsha Keith Schuchard, "Blake's Healing Trio: Magnetism, Medicine, and Mania", *Blake Illustrated Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (1989): 20–30.

Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Lynn L. Sharp, "Popular Healing in a Rational Age: Spiritism as Folklore and Medicine", *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 33 (2005): 308–324.

Lynn L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lexington Books, 2006).

Barry Shirley, "Trigeminal Neuralgia: Hypnotherapy for Pain Reduction: Two Case Studies", *Australian Journal of Clinical Hypnotherapy and Hypnosis* 29, no. 1 (2008): 14–22.

Kristof Smeyers, *Supernatural Bodies: Stigmata in Modern Britain and Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2024).

Alexis B. Smith, "Ritter's Musical Blood Flow Through Hoffmann's Kreisler", in *The Early History of Embodied Cognition 1740–1920. The Lebenskraft-Debate and Radical Reality in German Science, Music, and Literature*, eds John A. McCarthy, Stephanie M. Hilger, Heather Sullivan and Nicholas Saul (Brill Rodopi, 2016), 144–162.

Marie Carmen-Smyrnelis, *Une ville ottomane plurielle: Smyrne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (İsis, 2006).

Marie-Carmen Smyrnelis, *Une société hors de soi. Identités et relations sociales à Smyrne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Peeters, 2006).

Geoffrey Sutton, "Electric Medicine and Mesmerism", *Isis* 72, no. 3 (1981): 375–392.

Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

Gábor Szentgyörgyvölgyi, "Delejezők a 19. század második felében Magyarországon", *Orvostörténeti Közlemények* 56, no. 1–4 (2011): 153–159.

Eszter Tarjányi, *A szellem örvényében: A magyarországi mesmerizmus, szellemidézés, teozófia története és művészeti kapcsolatai* (Universitas, 2002).

Maria Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1978).

Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity. A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, 1993).

Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

Guy Thuillier, "Les saint-simoniens à Nevers en 1831–1832", in *Actes du quatre-vingt-onzième congrès national des Sociétés savantes, Rennes, 1966: Section d'histoire moderne et contemporaine. De la Restauration à la deuxième guerre mondiale* (Bibliothèque nationale, 1969), 177–181.

Mariano Tomatis, *Incantagioni. Storie di veggenti, sibille, somnambule e altre fantasmagoriche liberazioni* (Nero, 2022).

Mélanie Traversier, *L'Harmonica de verre et Miss Davies. Essai sur la mécanique du succès au siècle des Lumières* (Seuil, 2021).

David Trippett and Benjamin Walton, *Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Scientific Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Özgür Türesay, "Between Science and Religion: Spiritism in the Ottoman Empire (1850s–1910s)", *Studia Islamica* 113, no. 2 (2018): 166–200.

Kurt Vanhoutte and Nele Wynants, "Magie en wetenschap in de spektakelcultuur van de negentiende eeuw: Henri Robin in de Lage Landen", *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 15, no. 2 (2017): 30–53.

Maria Vara, "The Magic Lantern as a Gothic Literary Instrument", *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 48, no. 3 (2023): 533–544.

Auguste Viatte, "Les origines françaises du spiritisme", *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 21, no. 90 (1935): 35–58.

Alessandra Violi, *Il teatro dei nervi. Fantasmi del moderno da Mesmer a Charcot* (Mondadori, 2004).

Ehler Voss, "A Sprout of Doubt. The Debate on the Medium's Agency in Mediumism, Media Studies, and Anthropology", in *Religion, Tradition and the Popular. Transcultural Views from Asia and Europe*, eds Evamaria Sandkühler and Judith Schlehe (Transcript, 2014), 205–224.

Ehler Voss, "Educating the Mediums. Albert von Schrenck-Notzing's Work of Purification on Spiritualism", in *Mediality on Trial. Testing and Contesting Trance and Other Media Techniques*, ed. Ehler Voss (De Gruyter, 2020), 106–120.

Brigitte Waché, "L'entrée de la piété mariale dans la liturgie: Exemple du XIXe siècle", *Transversalités* 122, no. 2 (2012): 201–219.

Christophe Wall-Romana, *Cinepoetry. Imaginary Cinemas in French Poetry* (Fordham University Press, 2013).

Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines: Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent State University Press, 2006).

Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne, eds *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* (Rodopi, 2006).

Kaat Wils, "Tussen wetenschap en spektakel. Hypnose op de Belgische theaterscène, 1875–1900", *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 20, no. 2 (2017): 54–73.

Kaat Wils, "Transnational Encounters in the History of Animal Magnetism in Belgium, 1830–1848", in *Le magnétisme animal en mouvement. Reconfigurations et circulations, 1776–1848/Animal Magnetism in Motion. Reconfigurations and Circulations, 1776–1848*, eds David Armando, Bruno Belhoste, Jean-Luc Chappey and Claire Gantet (Schwabe Verlag, 2025), 231–247.

Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Pei-Lin Wu, "Dying to be Immortal: Jean Cocteau's Orphic trilogy", *Concentric: literary and cultural studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 193–208.

Alper Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots. Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

François Zanetti, *L'électricité médicale dans la France des Lumières* (Voltaire Foundation, 2017).

About the authors

Alessandra Aloisi is a lecturer at the University of Oxford. She is the author of *The Power of Distraction* (2024). Her research spans intellectual history, literature, attention studies, media archaeology, and the prehistory of cinema.

Gennaro Ambrosino is a doctoral candidate at the University of Warwick. His research explores the intersections of archaeology, geology, and the concept of the 'unconscious' in Italian culture (1760s–1840s).

Andrea Ceci holds a PhD in History from the University of Pisa / École Pratique des Hautes Études. His dissertation focused on political reinterpretations of animal magnetism in nineteenth-century France.

Kornélia Deres is associate professor at ELTE University. Her research focuses on nineteenth-century knowledge circulation and scientific spectacles in Central and Eastern Europe. She authored two books and co-edited six volumes.

Zoë Ghyselinck is a Comparative Literature scholar at Ghent University. Her research intersects with Classical Reception Studies, Theatre Studies and Health Humanities, and focuses on anticipatory mourning practices in end-of-life and bereavement care.

Julia Ostwald is a dance scholar working as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Arts Linz. Her research focuses on the interconnections of aesthetics, sensory perception and (body) politics.

Eleonora Paklons is a doctoral researcher working on magic lantern travelogues at the University of Antwerp. She is co-editor of *Spectacles of Light. The Magic Lantern as Popular Entertainment, 1810–1930*.

Stéphanie Peel is a researcher at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Her work focuses on women's agency, esotericism, and literary practices in nineteenth-century Europe. She co-edited *Textyles 69*, *Ésotérique Belgique*, and wrote *Les Voix Invisibles* (*Editions MagiCité 2025).

Thibaut Rioult is a postdoctoral researcher at the Université libre de Bruxelles and associated member of the SciFair team at the University of Antwerp. He specialises in magic, illusionism, and occultism, and is assistant editor of *Arcana Naturae*.

Robert W. Rix is professor of English at Copenhagen University. He researches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, specialising in Romanticism, Blake, Swedenborg, religious radicalism, and Nordic-British cultural exchanges. Recent books explore Arctic history and Nordic folklore.

Kristof Smeyers is a senior research fellow at the University of Leuven. He has written books on the history of religion and the supernatural, fauna, flora and folklore, and economy.

Özgür Türesay is associate professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. He is the author of four books and articles on the intellectual and political history of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Olivier Verhaegen teaches history and geography. He is a doctoral candidate at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. He participates in the FNS Project on mesmerism in Switzerland.

Kurt Vanhoutte is full professor and chair of theatre and performance studies at the University of Antwerp. His research explores the intersections of media technology, performative culture, and illusionism since the nineteenth century.

Hannah Welslau is a doctoral researcher at the University of Antwerp. Her work focuses on spiritism, performance, and popular entertainment in Belgium. Her research is funded by The Research Foundation Flanders (FWO – grant number: 1150425N).

Kaat Wils is professor of modern European cultural history at the University of Leuven. Her current research deals with the therapeutic use of hypnosis in nineteenth-century Belgium.

Miranda Zent works in arts, education, and community engagement. She has performed at LAMDA, New Dramatists, South by Southwest, and regularly for the Fay Lecture Series at Texas A&M University.