

# Illusion in Cultural Practice

## Productive Deceptions

Edited by Katharina Rein

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### Chapter 5

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Katharina Rein

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## 5 “The Vanishing Lady”, the railway, and illusions of movement<sup>1</sup>

*Katharina Rein*

The technological progress of the nineteenth century caused a rapid acceleration. Not only did the mechanization of transport revolutionize the mobility of commodities and people, but new technologies such as telegraphy, photography, telephony, phonography, and cinematography also transformed the mobility of ideas. The introduction of the modern postal system additionally accelerated traditional forms of communication. In mathematics, geometers theorized the changed perception of space and time by developing non-metric, non-Euclidean, topological concepts of space. This chapter brings together the change in the perception of space that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of these developments and technologies with illusionism. The first part is dedicated to the most pertinent means of transforming the perception of space, the railway. After tracing the way in which it shaped practices of performance magic as well as the experience of space and time more generally, the following section examines the mark the railway left on illusionism by inspiring practices and concepts of optical illusion. Its role in the history of technologies of pre-cinema and early cinema is analysed in the third section of this first part. The second part explores the stage illusion “The Vanishing Lady”, which, I argue, because it is a teleportation rather than a vanish, has to be regarded within the context of the acceleration of travel and as its extension into the fantastic.

### **Eliminating distances**

#### *Magical mobility*

Within a period of about 50 years around the middle of the nineteenth century, the railway system grew from single lines to a Europe-wide network, impacting colonialism, migration flows, economy, the circulation of goods and ideas, and transport within cities as well as on a regional and international scale. At the same time, steam navigation introduced maritime traffic independent of external, uncontrollable sources of energy, while balloon flights, and – at the beginning of the twentieth century – aircraft engineering made airspace available for the locomotion of humans and commodities.

Magicians were among the first artists to make use of the new means of transport: Harry Houdini was an enthusiastic hobby pilot, and the first person to fly over the continent of Australia in March 1910 (Silverman 1996, 141, 146). Earlier than that, magicians were the first entertainers to exploit the alliance of railways, steamships, and communication media during their tours (see During 2002, 109). The most successful US-American magicians, in particular, performed their grand touring shows all over the world, encircling the world several times in the course of their careers. Telegraphy, newspapers, and the iconic posters of the time, made possible by the invention of colour lithography and the refinement of poster art, promoted their performances throughout the world in advance of their arrival. Thus, the mechanization of horizontal transportation significantly contributed to the heyday of magic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thanks to the new inner-city mobilization, venues were easier to access and audiences became more numerous, especially in the expanding urban areas. Here, growing middle-class audiences were eager to consume the diversions offered by the newly emerging modern, urban entertainment culture.

Outside of cities, potential spectators were informed about shows by newspapers such as *The Times*, which featured in Bertram's and Patrice's version of the "Vanishing Lady" illusion (see below) and which became the dominant mass medium of the late nineteenth century. While the postal reform allowed for a cheaper distribution of press articles, the railway enabled supraregional publicity. Further, new communication media reached new audiences as magicians started conducting world tours of unprecedented extents. Harry Kellar, for instance, completed two world tours between 1873 and 1884, visiting South America, Great Britain, South Africa, Australia, India, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and other countries. About thirty years later, between 1907 and 1936, Carter the Great completed no less than seven world tours, appearing in the USA, Canada, Portugal, Italy, Egypt, China, New Zealand, Japan, South East Asia and other places. Instead of circus tents and fairground stalls, these magicians played theatre and opera stages, which were increasingly being equipped with electric lights from the 1880s onwards.

This also means that a lot of magicians were leading a semi-nomadic life. On the road for months at a time, they usually returned home for a summer break – a time used to repair apparatus and develop and construct new illusions for the coming season. The most successful among them travelled comfortably – Alexander Herrmann, for instance, had a private, luxuriously decorated train carriage (Price 1985, 85).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, such a lifestyle – during his two world tours, Harry Kellar was away from his home country for a period of five years – meant that the numerous train carriages, hotel rooms, and theatres would merge into a succession of non-places. The endless journey through transitory places devoid of a sensual experience of the traversed distance was (and is) an experience familiar to travelling artists.

*Re-shaping space and time*

The first accelerating transportation technology which facilitated magicians’ world tours was steam navigation, which allowed for faster and more reliable maritime transport, independent of outside energy sources. The paradigmatic transport of the nineteenth century is, however, the railway. Between 1830 and 1880, the rail system grew from single lines to a trans-European network. Within the cities, too, traffic sped up; starting in London in 1860, metropolitan railways were built throughout Europe and the USA. In 1881, the first electric tram was introduced, transporting its passengers twice as fast as its predecessor, the horse tramway. In 1914, tram networks had been established in almost all European cities, accelerating the movement over shorter distances or in cities too small for an underground railway (see Osterhammel 2010, 444).

Modern public transport allowed for an unprecedented urbanization. At the same time, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has shown, it required a partial rebuilding of cities in order to handle the new increase in traffic (see Schivelbusch 1986, 171–87; Beaumont and Freeman 2007, 15). The most iconic example of this is Baron Haussmann’s renovation of Paris (see Schivelbusch 1986, 171–87 for more details), during the course of which the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, one of the most renowned magic theatres of the second half of the nineteenth century, was torn down to make space for the Boulevard Haussmann. Thus, the new means of transport inscribed themselves into the cities, permanently changing their layout (see *ibid.*, 171–97). Similarly, the construction of railways affected the countryside, too, as train tracks were “built across the terrain by means of cuttings, embankments, tunnels, and viaducts” (*ibid.*, 23). Painter Paul Cézanne visualized this experience of a permanently changing landscape in his *Railway Cutting* (c. 1870), depicting his native country around his father’s manor in Aix-en-Provence, into which a railway line has literally cut itself, leaving a gaping, dark red rift (see Figure 5.1).

It has often been noted that, in addition to these changes, the acceleration brought by modern transport generated a cognitive shock (see Seitter 2010, 208). Moreover, and more interesting in the context of this chapter, Schivelbusch has shown that the railway travel was experienced by contemporaries not so much as acceleration but rather as shrinkage of space (1986, 33–9). A reduction of journey time to a third (the railway was about three times faster than the horse carriage) created the impression that two-thirds of the space in between the points of departure and destination had vanished. While many poets and authors of the time captured the impressions of the railway and its impact on movement and perception (see Müller 2012, 130–6, 141–5), I would like to quote Heinrich Heine. In view of the inauguration of a new railway line between Orléans and Rouen in May 1843, the German poet – who was living in exile in Paris at the time – wrote a frequently cited passage, in which he expressed the ambiguous feelings inspired by the new means of transport. He called the railway “a providential event [...],



Figure 5.1 Paul Cézanne: *Railway Cutting (La tranchée avec la montagne Sainte-Victoire*, c. 1870), reprinted with permission by bpk | Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen (Bavarian State Painting Collections).

which changes the form and color of humanity, so that a new era begins in universal history”, comparing its significance to that of the discovery of the Americas and to the invention of gunpowder (Heine 1893 [1843], 368). On the one hand, Heine regarded the terrific, powerful machine with awe and invested hopes in it. On the other hand, he expressed dread in view of the unforeseeable changes the new technology would bring. The two are necessarily intertwined with each other and also with the topos of the elimination of space. Heine wrote:

The whole population of Paris forms at this instant a chain in which one communicates to another the shock. But while the great mass stare, benumbed and bewildered, at the outward form of the great powers of force and motion, the solitary thinker experiences a terrible shuddering emotion, such as we always feel when the most tremendous and unheard-of things take place, whose consequences are beyond sight and calculation. [...]

Even the elementary ideas of space and time are tottering; for by the railway space is annihilated, and only time remains. [...] In three hours and a half one can now go to Orléans, in the same time to Rouen. What will it be when the lines to Belgium and Germany shall be finished and connected with the railways of those countries? I seem to see the mountains and forests of every country coming to Paris. I smell the perfume of German lime-trees; the billows of the North Sea are bounding and roaring before my door.

(ibid., 367–9)

While the beginning of this quote attests to the shock and anxiety the new, awe-inspiring technology generated, the last two sentences express a phantasy of omnipresence as they locate the forests and the sea of Heine’s home country immediately before his Parisian doorstep. He connects this utopian promise of the potential accessibility of all places to a disintegration of conventional notions of space. Destinations come so close to one another that the distance between them seems to vanish. The traditional space-time continuum, Heine seems to fear and hope at the same time, had been disrupted and replaced by a new one: “Compared to the eotechnical space-time relationship”, Schivelbusch writes, “the one created by the railway appears abstract and disorienting, because the railway [...] did not appear embedded in the space of the landscape the way coach and highway are, but seemed to strike its way through it” (1986, 37). What had indeed disappeared was not space or spatiality but rather, as media theorist Stephan Günzel put it, the “life-world foundations for the assumption that space was an immutable substance” (2007, 16).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the conceptualization of space in Cartesian and Kantian terms as a positive, three-dimensional, experienceable a priori was no longer applicable to mechanized travel.

While Schivelbusch describes this dissociation with the traversed space as “panoramic travel”, evoking landscapes calmly moving past the window and presenting an enjoyable view, philosopher Paul Virilio sees a cinematic quality in it, which he associates with madness via its relationship with the phantasmagoria, a multimedia spectacle projecting ghosts and demons, which was at its most popular around 1800 (see Schivelbusch 1986, 52–69; Virilio 2002, 49). Virilio expresses a more pessimistic view, claiming that modern transport not only destroyed the identification of the pedestrians’ bodies with their speed and surroundings, but also facilitated the very dissolution of meaning and social continua itself (Virilio 2002, 47). Modernity’s acceleration, Virilio argues, leads to the disappearance of the reality of the human body, landscape and space in favour of speed, non-places, and the absence of the passenger.

Virilio uses the term “non-place”, first coined by Michel de Certeau, and picked up and elaborated on by Marc Augé. He uses it to refer to spaces such as hospitals, hotels, airports or supermarkets, which “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (1995 [1992], 77). While Augé also regards places of transit, transport, commerce, and leisure as non-places, “[t]he traveller’s space,” he notes, may “be the archetype of *non-place*” (ibid., 86). While, in an extension of the railway, which does not offer an organic movement integrated into a landscape (see Schivelbusch 1986, 37), train stations as physical places were – in contrast to their predecessors, the coaching inns – not integral parts of cities (see ibid., 171–7). For the traveller, here as well as on the road, the continuous, relational, historical space, which is concerned with identity, is substituted by a string of transitory non-places. This means a change not only in the perception of and relation to space as a surrounding but also in the conceptualization of identity and subjectivity. A common metaphor for the railway



at the time was that of a projectile, literally shooting through the landscape, creating tunnels and cuttings (id., 53–5). The traveller inside this projectile, who was deprived of any aesthetic perception of the landscape they traversed, was famously described by artist and architect John Ruskin as “a living parcel” (1903, 159). Moving at enormous speed, the traveller arrives at her destination unchanged by the traversed space, without having sensorially apprehended it, as if the distance between the points of departure and destination had never existed.

In Heine’s quotation, we further encounter the ambiguity of the railway as an intersection of rationalism and irrationalism, which was also pointed out by Matthew Beaumont and Michael Freeman: While, on the one hand, the railway symbolized progress and mechanization, on the other hand it was also associated with irrational dreams and wishes (2007, 13). If Ruskin’s metaphor of the living parcel inside a projectile conjures up images of lifelessness, violence and cold steel machinery, a different aspect of the uncanny associations of the railway showed itself in animistic connotations: Denominations such as “the iron horse” or the rail network’s comparison to the blood circulatory system invest it with life (see *ibid.*, 16) and suggest a magical independence of the train as a living entity, whose belly the travellers enter.

Organic and/or dystopian metaphors such as these faded with habituation, as did other unsettling and troubling connotations from the early days of this technology. According to Schivelbusch, the perception of the dissolution of space and time which was articulated by Heine was succeeded by a notion of the availability of landscapes as the experience of railway travel became more habitual. Subsequently, railway stations became increasingly identified with travel destinations, a stopping point after a time spent traversing unspecific landscapes. Additionally, he writes, the space of the journey itself lost significance, and, to the younger generation, “a railway journey appeared in no way different from a visit to the theater or the library” (Schivelbusch 1986, 39).

### *The railway and optical illusions*

At the same time, the railway played a significant role in a different context: it is closely linked to the history of moving images, particularly in the time of pre-cinematography and early cinema. As Jonathan Crary has shown, practices of optical illusion were equally formative and symptomatic of a new kind of reception which evolved during the nineteenth century and which is connected to optical apparatus such as thaumatropes, phenakistoscopes, or zoetropes. In the usage of illusionistic devices such as these, what Crary terms “the observer” took on the role of “an individual body that is at once a spectator, a subject of empirical research and observation, and an element of machine production. [...] a body aligned with and operating an assemblage of turning and regularly moving wheeled parts” (1990, 112). For Crary, this change is characteristic of the nineteenth century’s technological

revolution, which necessitated the regulation and standardization described by Michel Foucault (2002). This shift is also illustrated by the example of the panorama and diorama: unlike the panorama, which appeared around 1790 and allowed spectators to move freely around a restricted space and to let their gaze wander over the displayed image, the diorama, introduced in the 1820s, “is based on the incorporation of an immobile observer into a mechanical apparatus and a subjection to a predesigned temporal unfolding of optical experience” (ibid., 112–13).

### *Moving panorama*

A specific type of illusory entertainment that combined moving images with illusionistic techniques was the moving panorama, extensively analysed by Erkki Huhtamo in *Illusions in Motion* (2013). In the chapter “Sensory Bombardment: A Medium's Final Fanfares”, Huhtamo describes three exemplary attempts to render the moving panorama more immersive which were exhibited at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1900 (306–29): While Raoul Grimoin-Sanson’s *Cinéorama* simulated a balloon ascent with the help of a film projector, Hugo d’Alési’s *Maréorama* attempted to reproduce a cruise across the Mediterranean Sea, and the *Panorama Transsibérien* imitated the experience of a railway journey along the route from Moscow to Peking (now Beijing). Commissioned by the sleeping-car enterprise Compagnie Internationale des Wagon-Lits, this attraction was meant to promote its train cars:

Moving scenery depicting the still unfinished railway route between these two cities was viewed from three authentic but stationary railway cars. They are said to have contained a dining room and smoking salon, luxurious sleeping compartments, and even a beauty parlor and a gym. [...] The illusion of travel was enhanced by three zones of moving cut-outs – from the sandy ground next to the tracks to trees further away – rotating as endless loops in front of the main canvas. The speeds had been carefully calculated so that the elements closest to the spectators moved fast, and the ones behind them progressively slower.

(310–11)

These rotating cut-outs, along with the sandy ground next to the tracks and the trees planted further away, enhanced the immersive qualities of the experience. This elaborate display demonstrates but one way in which the railway journey and optical illusions are intertwined. It takes a literal interpretation of the aforementioned associations of the landscape passing by the window of the railway car with a phantasmagoria or panorama: if the landscape rushing past the windows seemed like a painting to railway travellers, in this assemblage, the landscape outside the windows literally *is* a painted moving panorama. This effect creates an illusion of movement by inversion: While the train car stands still, the scenery moves past the



windows. In this manner, the *Panorama Transsibérien* relates to non-Euclidean geometry, which had an impact on Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. To illustrate the principle of relativity in 1920, Einstein evoked a thought experiment describing exactly this type of arrangement: Passengers of a train travelling through a station with constant velocity will perceive their system as a standing one. While to them the persons standing on the tracks will appear as being on the move, those will, in turn, perceive the train and its passengers as being in motion, while experiencing themselves and the platform they stand upon to be at a standstill (40–2). This establishes another link between the railway, illusionism, and the topologization of space, which was theorized in the non-Euclidean geometry of the late nineteenth century.

### *The afterimage and optical instruments*

Furthermore, the railway figured in the pre-cinematic discourse around moving images as a model for the persistence of vision. According to Cray, the afterimage, which he calls “the presence of a sensation in the absence of a stimulus” (1990, 98), contributed to the dissolution of the concept of “optical ‘truth’” (ibid., 97). This notion refers to the belief that human optical perception refers directly to a factual phenomenon in the world. This divestment was a necessary condition of the conceptualization of optical illusions which are based on the assumption that sensory perception is not inevitably linked to an external referent (see ibid., 97–8). Peter Mark Roget, author of the first thesaurus, established a direct connection between the railway and optical illusions in his *Explanation of an Optical Deception in the Appearance of the Spokes of a Wheel Seen through Vertical Apertures* in 1825. Watching the wheels of a moving train, Roget observed the illusion known today as the stroboscopic effect:

A curious optical deception takes place when a carriage wheel, rolling along the ground, is viewed through the intervals of a series of vertical bars, such as those of a palisade, or of a Venetian window-blind. Under these circumstances the spokes of the wheel, instead of appearing straight, as they would naturally do if no bars intervened, seem to have a considerable degree of curvature.

(131)

To explain this illusion, Roget draws on the persistence of vision, stating “that an impression: made by a pencil of rays on the retina, if sufficiently vivid, will remain for a certain time, after the cause has ceased” (135). Thus, “[i]f the impressions [...] follow one another with sufficient rapidity, they will, [...], leave in the eye the trace of a continuous curve line; and the spokes will appear to be curved, instead of straight” (136–7). Roget's ideas played a crucial role for the development of optical instruments such as Joseph A. F. Plateau's phenakistoscope. Three years before its construction,

Plateau described the persistence of vision in his doctoral dissertation *Sur quelques propriétés des impressions produites par la lumière sur l'organe de la vue*, in which he explicitly refers to Roget's article (1839, 18–19). Thus, as Cray has pointed out, nineteenth-century optical illusion devices are based not only on self-experiments as conducted by Plateau and others but also on “the often accidental observation of new forms of movement, in particular mechanized wheels moving at high speeds” (1990, 111).

### *Trains and cinema*

The mechanization of transport proves to be an instigator for the development of optical devices in the nineteenth century, including cinematography, which also relies on the persistence of vision. In *Parallel Tracks*, Lynne Kirby traces the historical interrelations between the railway and cinema. She analyses the railway as a social, perceptual, and ideological paradigm that developed parallel to cinematography and “assisted in instituting the new medium and in constituting the public and subjects” (1997, 2–3). Uncovering more than a correlation, Kirby identifies a mutual interest of the railway in the cinema and vice versa. To cite only one example:

Perhaps the most legendary railway patron in film history was Leland Stanford, the former governor of California and co-owner of the Central Pacific Railway, who in 1872 commissioned Eadweard James Muybridge to make his photographic series analyzing the sequence of movements of horses in motion, the series that would inspire both Etienne-Jules Marey and Edison in their cinematic experiments. American railway companies had in fact been avid patrons of the fine arts in photography from the mid-nineteenth century on.

(*ibid.*, 21)

The railway further figured as a popular cinematic motif from its early days onwards – from the Lumière brothers' famous *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1895) to *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which established the railway as a key motif in the Western genre, entailing numerous films about train heists as well as chases along, in, and on top of trains (see, e.g., Huntley 1969). The popular *phantom rides* (see Gunning 1989, 125–6), such as *The Haverstraw Tunnel* (1897), used the railway as a camera carrier, installing it at the front of a moving train for a thrilling effect.

Trains figure prominently in the history of cinema up to the present day. Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (UK, 1938), an adaptation of Ethel Lina White's crime novel *The Wheel Spins* (1936), seems a particularly interesting example in our context since it associates the railway with a vanishing woman. A passenger (Margaret Lockwood) notices the disappearance of a fellow traveller (Dame May Whitty) from a train compartment and begins to look for her. However, no one else on the train seems to have noticed the vanished woman, and all evidence that she ever existed seems

to have disappeared along with her. In the end, the protagonist uncovers a conspiracy, in which, among other passengers, the magician El Gran Doppo (Philip Leaver) takes part. Among his luggage the protagonists find a vanishing trunk, which is reminiscent of historical magic apparatus such as the trunk used for John Nevil Maskelyne's "Box Trick" or "The Indian Basket Trick" popular in the late nineteenth century. Schivelbusch has pointed out that "the train compartment became a scene of crime – a crime that could take place unheard and unseen by the travelers in adjoining compartments" (1986, 79). The European cars depicted in *The Lady Vanishes* were considered particularly dangerous because they isolated small numbers of passengers in closed spaces. Moreover, the whole train as a "projectile" is detached from its surroundings. In *The Lady Vanishes*, this isolation by speed is what consolidates the suspense surrounding the vanished woman. The impossibility of a true vanishing and the impermeability of the moving train means either that she must still be on the train or that she was never there to begin with. This is what makes the main character question her perception and/or sanity, especially because most of the other passengers initially deny having noticed the passenger in question.

### *The "Steam Circus"*

Lastly, I would like to mention another connection between early railway travel and urban entertainment culture. Like the telephone, which was initially used to transmit opera and concerts and other technologies whose first application was for entertainment, the railway became an amusement. Richard Trevithick, the constructor of the first steam-operated locomotive in 1804, also came up with the world's first railway ride, an attraction called "The Steam Circus". Situated on the site of today's Chadwick Building – which fittingly houses the Centre for Transport Studies of the University College London – Trevithick presented his steam locomotive named "Catch-Me-Who-Can" between July and September 1808. Visitors could enter the circular structure surrounded by a high wooden fence for a fee of one shilling. Inside, the locomotive was going around a circular track, which was about 30 m in diameter. Customers who felt courageous could jump on for a ride (for more details, see Salmi 2008). This train, the first one to transport passengers for a fee, was akin to sensationalist attractions – reaching a top speed of 12 mph, it was significantly faster than the hitherto fastest means of transport overland: stagecoaches (ca. 2 mph) and horses (ca. 4–6 mph). The name "Steam Circus" directly addresses the mechanization of transport: The iron horse on an endless circular route follows the tradition of biological horses that raced in antique Roman circuses as well as the trained ones in Philip Astley's first modern circus in the eighteenth century. With this attraction, Trevithick was hoping to spark public interest in his locomotive and to interest investors. However, after a run of just a few months, a broken rail caused the cast-iron locomotive to derail and the Steam Circus had to be discontinued. Two more decades should pass until

the potential of the mechanization of transport was widely recognized and trains were gradually established as a means of transport in everyday life.

### Disappearing distances in “The Vanishing Lady”

The topological notion that space depends not on distances but on positional relations resonates in Heinrich Heine’s railway-induced fantasy of the North Sea surging at his Parisian doorstep. Both are symptomatic of a change in the perception of space and time in the second half of the nineteenth century. Having explored various ways in which the railway was linked to illusionism above, in the following part, I would like to uncover a connection between the railway and illusionistic entertainments hitherto overlooked, namely in the field of performance magic. In an examination of the stage effect “The Vanishing Lady”, I am going to argue that it can be understood as an articulation on the changing perception of space-time induced (among other phenomena) by the railway.

#### *Disappearing tricks*

The vanishing is among the fundamental operations in magic. The earliest disappearing routine is one of the oldest sleight-of-hand feats, “The Cups and Balls”,<sup>4</sup> which was first referenced in writing by Seneca in the first century AD (epist. XLV, 8). Magicians’ jargon differentiates a covered vanish, like “The Cups and Balls”, in which the ball disappears from under one of the cups and reappears under another, from a visible vanish, right from the magician’s hands (see “vanish“, in: Whaley 2007, 995). The range of vanishing objects is very wide and encompasses anything from small objects like coins, eggs, playing cards or handkerchiefs to a playing gramophone (Cecil Lyle, 1912) or radio (Robert Harbin, 1933), to a motorbike (David Devant, 1913), a car (Harry Blackstone sr., 1923), or a jet airplane (David Copperfield, 1981).

“The Cups and Balls” also illustrates that, for the illusion to be complete, anything that disappears has to subsequently reappear. Unlike an appearance, which does not have to explain where the object or person came from, a vanish asks for an answer to the question “Where did it go?” It is therefore potentially unsettling, especially when it concerns living entities, such as fish or birds (Buatier de Kolta, 1875), donkeys (Charles Morritt, 1912), elephants (Harry Houdini, 1918) or, of course, people. The most iconic disappearing trick with a living person, “The Vanishing Lady”, is the focal point of the following section. In view of its historico-cultural context, as laid out above, I argue that the illusion is an expression of a topologization of culture in the late nineteenth century, induced mainly by the mechanization of transport, but also by other media and cultural developments and innovations which are beyond the scope of this chapter, such as the postal reform or the development of topology as a branch of mathematics.

“*The Vanishing Lady*”

“The Vanishing Lady” was originated by the French illusionist Buatier de Kolta (Joseph Buatier, 1845–1903), who, by that time, was already an acclaimed magician and inventor of notable illusions, such as the “Vanishing Bird and Cage” (1875). He premiered his “Vanishing Lady”, together with his wife Alice, in April 1886 under the French title “L’Escamotage en personne vivante” at the Eden-Théâtre in Paris.<sup>5</sup> Later, the couple presented the effect at the most influential magic theatre of the time, John Nevil Maskelyne’s “England’s Home of Mystery” at the Egyptian Hall in London. The de Koltas were unable to leave Paris before December, but Maskelyne was eager to open the season at the Egyptian Hall with it in the programme in August, especially since magician Carl Hertz (Louis Morgenstein, 1859–1924) was already advertising a copy of it.<sup>6</sup> On Maskelyne’s request, Charles Bertram (James Bassett, 1853–1907), a magician in his employment, travelled to Paris to learn the illusion from de Kolta. On his return to London, he premiered a licensed version at the Egyptian Hall, together with Mademoiselle Patrice (Augusta Patrizia de Rella, active around 1890) on 7 August 1886 (Jeness 1967, 57; Warlock 1993, 58–9; “Vanishing Lady, The”, in: Whaley 2007, 1000). Interestingly, Bertram and Patrice seem to have immediately introduced a few changes – among others, a narration was added, a trademark of the magic shows at the Egyptian Hall. In his autobiography *Isn’t It Wonderful?*, Bertram describes the illusion as follows:

On the centre of the stage, [...], an open copy of the *Times* newspaper was laid perfectly flat. Upon this was placed a chair made with a cane seat and back. Middle. Patrice was now introduced to the audience, and looked perfectly charming in a long white silk Grecian costume, trimmed with gold lace, and with a yellow silk cloak hanging from her shoulders. Upon seating herself in the chair, I informed her that I had the power to cause her to disappear, and that I could send her unseen to any place which it pleased her to name. She desired to go to “Arcadia,” which was constructed into meaning the (Burlington) “Arcade here” opposite, from which she could quickly return. Giving her a little bottle to smell “containing a potent liquid,” she fell into an apparently deep sleep [...]. I then produced a large red silk shawl, seven feet square, which was given for examination to the audience. This was lightly placed over her head and tied at the back, and then was lightly drawn downwards, so as to completely envelope her. I walked round the chair, and after again showing that she was still underneath the veil, I stood for a moment by the side of the chair. I touched the veil lightly with both hands, whereupon it disappeared, as had the lady also, nothing being left except her dainty lace handkerchief upon the seat of her chair. Looking round the theatre I inquired, “Where are you?” “Here!” she exclaimed, and there she was, seated in

the gallery beside some astonished person, absolutely ignorant of her presence, and oftentimes greatly frightened at her being there.

(125–7)

The trance induced by a smelling bottle was a recurring element of illusions at the time, referencing not only mesmeric and hypnotic practices but also spiritualist séances (see Natale 2011). It is also reminiscent of Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin famous “Suspension Éthérée” (1846), in which he announced that he discovered a new quality of the then hotly discussed substance ether – namely, that it made people float. So he began his suspension illusion by holding a small bottle under his son’s nose before making him float in mid-air, with one arm supported by a pole. The third element, which seems to have been introduced by Bertram and Patrice, was her handkerchief remaining on the chair after she had disappeared.<sup>7</sup> This shows how quickly illusions were modified by various performers who added their personal touches, without significantly changing the effect. In this case, since Mademoiselle Patrice was an accomplished *magicienne* in her own right, she may well have contributed to these developments. It is also most interesting that she is invited to wish for a place to which she is to be teleported, and, matching her ancient Greek outfit, that she wishes to be transposed to Arcadia, a mythical bucolic landscape of Greek antiquity. Supposedly, there is a misunderstanding and she is instead teleported to the Burlington shopping arcade opposite the Egyptian Hall (which is still standing, while the magic theatre has been demolished over a century ago) – a humorous mix-up which serves to explain her quick reappearance.

The “Vanishing Lady” was an immediate success and was copied by so many magicians that magic historian Edwin Dawes has called it “the greatest ‘rip-off’ of all time”, listing seven magicians apart from Bertram who performed it in London in August 1886 alone (2009/2010). It set the basic structure for grand vanishes – an assistant is introduced, made to disappear, and then surprisingly reappears somewhere else – which was picked up in other highly successful illusions, such as Charles Morritt’s “Oh!” (1891), or Guy Jarrett’s “Bangkok Bungalow” routine (1908), and which is a staple in magic shows up to the present.

“The Vanishing Lady” seems to have re-entered the stage from the wings in most cases, though Bertram writes that, in their performance, Mademoiselle Patrice reappeared “seated in the gallery” (1896, 127). As Professor Hoffmann (i.e. Angelo John Lewis) points out in *More Magic* (1890), the vanished person has “to presently reappear with a calm smile at the wing, and relieve the natural anxiety of the spectators as to her fate” (448–9). A ‘satisfactory’ vanish is accompanied by a reappearance, and thus turned into a transposition. This difference is crucial because a transposition suggests the possibility of instant travel without having to traverse the distance between the start and the end point. Against the backdrop of the cultural changes described in the first section of this chapter, I argue that a

teleportation such as “The Vanishing Lady” conceptualizes space topologically, in such a way that it can be folded like a sheet of paper in order to connect two points by eliminating the linear distance between them. This illusion seems to disrupt the continuation of space, thereby mirroring the effect of topologization that was widely felt in the second half of the nineteenth century and exemplarily linked to the transport revolution above.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the mechanization of transport, and specifically the speed it introduced, was accompanied by a fundamental change in the perception of space and time. Often articulated by contemporaries as a disappearance of distances rather than an acceleration, train travel evoked a dissociation from the traversed landscape which was no longer experienced sensorially but rather as a sequence of images rushing past the window. The railway’s connection to optical illusions and cinematography has been explored by scholars such as Jonathan Crary, Erkki Huhtamo, Lynne Kirby, and others. The railway’s role as an attraction was exploited even before its potential as a means of transport was recognized. The “Catch-Me-Who-Can” establishes a tangible link to entertainment culture, which persists to the present day in the shape of rollercoasters or other miniature railways in amusement parks. A hitherto-overlooked connection between the railway and entertainment culture, via performance magic, was identified in the second part of this chapter.

Specifically, an interplay can be seen in one of the most popular stage illusions of the late nineteenth century and the paradigmatic disappearing trick involving a human being, “The Vanishing Lady”, from 1886. Unlike the name suggests, it is, in fact, not a vanish but rather a transposition, finalized by the vanished performer’s reappearance in a different place in the theatre. As such, this echoes fantasies of teleportation articulated in connection with the railway, for instance in the famous quote by Heinrich Heine, imagining the North Sea in front of his Parisian doorstep in view of the new railway. The Vanishing Lady seems to be able to move through space, disregarding the time it takes to cross it. She thus references the effect of modern means of transportation laid out above, which suggested a disappearance of distances and evoked the possibility of instantaneous travel. The paradigmatic disappearing trick evolved around 1890, at the very heart of the described cultural changes. It seems to imply a folding in space or in time, thereby suggesting a rupture of the space-time continuum: The performer either travels through a space which exists parallel to that of the spectators, moving from one point to another without traversing the distance in between them, the way a spectator would need to; Or she moves through a parallel time, which allows for her to cover the distance much faster than would be possible for members of the audience, for instance when she disappears on stage and instantly reappears next to a surprised spectator in Bertram’s and Patrice’s rendition of the illusion.



“The Vanishing Lady” illusion transposes the perception of a disappearance of intermediate distances in modern life into the realm of entertainment. This is not to say that spectators seeing it on stage found themselves reminded of their recent train journey. Rather, a new concept emerged at the time (among other things) because of the development and spread of the railway and left its mark in different areas of culture. One of these was that the concept of tele-transportation, which was inspired by the much faster mechanical means of transport and articulated on magicians’ stages in “The Vanishing Lady” illusion, which enacts the effacement of distances and the fantasy of omnipresence as expressed by Heine. The vanished performer’s apparent movement through the theatrical space at an imperceptible speed, followed by her sudden reappearance at her destination, unaltered by the traversed distance, is an echo of John Ruskin’s idea of a “living parcel” which is being shot through the landscape in the railway-projectile. “The Vanishing Lady” thus performatively articulates a fantastical possibility which was suggested by the dissolution of the space-time continuum experienced in the nineteenth century. For its protagonist as well as for the railway traveller, for whom only the points of departure and destination matter, real space appears to be a topological one. The distance between the point of disappearance and the one of reappearance seems irrelevant.

Lastly, I would like to return to Bertram’s mention of the Grecian outfit worn by Mademoiselle Patrice during the performance of “The Vanishing Lady” at the Egyptian Hall and her wish to be teleported to Arcadia. The idea was, presumably, that rather than referring to the contemporary, geographic Arcadia on the Peloponnese, she wished to be transported to the bucolic landscape of antique mythology. The magician’s promise, therefore, is to teleport her not only through space, but also through time and into a different ontological realm, inside a fictional world. Of course, he cannot keep this exaggerated promise, and his magical “failure” is staged humorously as a misunderstanding: Mademoiselle Patrice, according to the narrative of the illusion, is instead teleported to the Burlington Arcade across the street and returns to the theatre from there. However, considering the impact of the transport revolution of the nineteenth century, the promise of even faster – namely instantaneous – transportation, which, moreover, traverses not only geographical distances but also ontological limits, does not seem too far-fetched after all.

## Notes

- 1 This is a reworked version of Chapter 3 “Die Krümmung von Raum und Zeit. Verschwinden” of my book *Techniken der Täuschung. Eine Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Bühnenzauberkunst im späten 19. Jahrhundert* (Marburg: Büchner, 2020, *An English version, Techniques of Illusion*, is currently in preparation (under contract with Routledge)).
- 2 Herrmann unexpectedly died in this private train car in the course of a tour in 1896 (Price 1985, 86).
- 3 Original quote: “Was verschwindet, sind vielmehr die lebensweltlichen Grundlagen für die Annahme, Raum sei eine unwandelbare Substanz” (my translation).

- 4 The “Cups and Balls” routine is not to be confused with the shell game, which was first described as “The Thimble’s Cheats” in John Gay’s *Trivia: or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London* in 1716. The shell game is inspired by the cups and balls; however, it is not used for entertainment but is qualified as a confidence trick and illegal to play for money in most countries; see “Three-Shell Game, (The); three shell game.” In Whaley (2007, 941–2).
- 5 According to Peter Warlock, there was an earlier performance, in March 1886 at the Petit Théâtre in St. Petersburg, Russia (1993, 58–9).
- 6 Hertz first performed his “Vanishing Lady” on 2 August 1886 at the Royal Cambridge Music Hall, with Emilie d’Alton (Dawes 2009/2010; see also *The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* 1886).
- 7 A review that appeared in *The Morning Post* on 7 August 1887 also noted these changes between the two illusions; cited in: Bertram (1896, 128–30).

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