Techniques of Illusion

A Cultural and Media History of Stage Magic in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Introduction

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Introduction

I.1 "I have been making believe"

Lyman Frank Baum's 1900 children's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* describes Dorothy's journey into a fantastic land. A tornado brings Dorothy and her dog Toto from rural Kansas (which is tinted in sepia in Victor Fleming's famous film adaptation from 1939) to the magical land of Oz (which shines in rich Technicolor in the film). Her desire to reunite with her family leads Dorothy to the legendary Wizard of Oz who is to facilitate her return home. On the way to his much-praised Emerald City she finds friends who also want to ask the Wizard to fulfil their wishes: a Scarecrow who would like the straw in their head to be replaced by a brain, a Tin Woodman – a sort of a lumberjack robot – who desires to have a heart in his chest, and a Cowardly Lion who longs to be courageous.

As this party arrives in Oz, the famous wizard turns out to be an illusionist and his throne room is revealed as a multimedia theatre. He appears to each of his applicants in different shapes: as an oversized head with a rumbling voice, framed by rising flames and smoke; as an attractive young woman; as a monstrous beast; and as a floating fireball (Baum 1900, 126–36). These apparitions – which could just as well have been part of Robertson's repertoire of phantasmagoria lantern slides – send the adventurers on a quest to eliminate the Wicked Witch of the East and promise to fulfil each of their desires upon their return. When the deed is done and Dorothy and her friends come to claim their rewards, the Wizard receives them in the shape of a disembodied voice that tries to use its acousmatic authority to put them off (ibid., 181–3). The only character who escapes the voice's enchantment is Dorothy's dog Toto, who knocks over a screen standing on the side – an item that is not only associated with the cinema[1] but that first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in connection with the phantasmagoria (see Grau 2007, 429). Behind the screen the real Wizard of Oz becomes visible, a man whose spectacular illusion is unveiled as such, whereupon he admits: "I have been making believe" (Baum, 1900, 184). The illusionist immediately comes under suspicion of fraud and is even condemned by Dorothy and her friends as "a very bad man," to which he responds: "No, I'm a very good man, I'm just a very bad wizard" (ibid., 189). In Oz, a land in which there

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are witches, winged monkeys, and lumberjacks made of tin, the fairground magician that the ruler of this land is revealed to be is nothing more than an unmasked humbug, to use the term popularised by P.T. Barnum.[2] He can only be exposed by strangers, namely Dorothy and Toto, who, like the Wizard himself, come from a world in which there are no fantastic creatures with magical powers but in which there are fairground magicians.

I.2 Techniques of illusion

This work – a history of magic not written by a magician – reveals performance magic as a self-referential game with revelations. If the secrecy of methods and workings of illusions is an essential component of performance magical practices, then this study shows that the conjuring art of the second half of the nineteenth century self-referentially addressed the relationship between showing and concealing. It did so not only through references to secret knowledge and methods of magic but also indirectly, because stage illusions essentially rely on the concealment of the techniques and practices responsible for them. The two are directly related, and both are mirrored in late nineteenth-century illusions. The greatest and at the same time the most tabooed weapon of the magician is the disclosure of illusionistic methods. In the late nineteenth century, it was primarily directed at modern spiritualism, which made use of similar practices as performance magic. Even though this volume addresses the process of uncovering as a strategy, it attempts to reveal concrete methods only insofar as this serves the arguments.[3]

At the beginning of this study, which is dedicated to the cultural and media history of stage magic, was the observation that its emergence falls into a period in which modernity was constituted in Western cultures, including its technology, urbanisation, media, industry, globalisation, science, etc. The time span from about 1850–1920 – and this is one of the reasons why most magic historians regard this period as the "golden age" of conjuring – saw the creation (at least in principle) of all grand stage illusions, which are performed in variations until this day. The simultaneity of modernisation and conjuring in this period of time seems paradoxical at first glance. This contradiction is often resolved superficially by referring to a longing for a re-enchantment of the world. Secularisation and science, this narrative claims, displaced belief and created a void that was filled by a newly emerging modern, illusionistic entertainment culture. Other approaches seek psychological or psychoanalytical explanations for the appeal of magic (see e.g. Lamont and Wiseman 2008, or Burger and Neale 1995) – they are referenced in this study, though a psychological analysis was not the concern of this book. A number of existing examinations look at stage magic from a film-historical perspective, from which it is portrayed in a more or less teleological way as the predecessor of cinematography and especially of cinematic special effects (e.g. North 2008; Gunning 1995; Barnouw 1981) – a perspective, which is modified in this book from the point of view of illusionistic stage practices.

Overall, considering the dominant role performance magic played in entertainment culture at that time, there are very few scholarly works dedicated to it – also compared to other performing arts. This may be due to an external and an internal cause: Firstly, magic does usually not enjoy a particularly high reputation as an art form and, secondly, magicians like to keep their methods under lock and key and do not appreciate close examination by outsiders. Especially in the German-speaking world – the language in which this book first appeared – with the exception of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g. most contributions in Felderer and Strouhal 2007a; Andriopoulos 2013; Hochadel 2004), performance magic remains fairly under-researched to this point.

This volume aspires to contribute to closing this gap in research. It takes performance magic seriously as an artform in its own right and makes it the subject of historical analysis. It is also concerned with neither looking at stage magic as part of an illusionistic prehistory of film, nor as some kind of return to a pre-scientific, magical world. Rather, this study understands the performance magic of the late nineteenth century as an integral part of its cultural context. From this point of view, it becomes apparent that the high degree of rationalisation and mechanisation is not in opposition to the magical imaginary world conjured up in modern performance magic but, on the contrary, proves to be its condition of possibility. Modern performance magic is not in conflict with the technical and scientific developments of its time, but is their product, and what is more: It reflects this circumstance.

This volume casts light on four paradigmatic grand illusions: "Pepper's Ghost," the first stage effect with a large glass plate – the archetypical trick with a mirror; "The Vanishing Lady," which stages a teleportation and was most popular at a time of new conceptualisations of space and time; the levitation, which simulates weightlessness with the help of extensive state-of-the-art steel stage machinery; and "The Second Sight" and its successors, a series of mind-reading illusions using up-to-date communication technologies. The close readings of these illusions (or in some cases, several variations) are framed and complemented by three sections focusing on visual media: a chapter on the phantasmagoria around 1800, a precursor of stage illusionism, which I connect to Jules Verne's novel *The Castle of the Carpathians* from 1892; an excursus on early cinema as an illusionistic field of activity, with particular regard to the work of Georges Méliès; and another excursus – I have called them entr'actes to reflect the performance setting – on Christopher Nolan's feature film *The Prestige* (2006), in which various motifs and topoi connected to performance magic around 1900 converge. These analyses show that stage magic was a highly mechanised form of entertainment that occupied a prominent place in the culture of the second half of the nineteenth century. Having received relatively little scholarly attention to date, it is in fact strongly embedded in nineteenth-century culture, having interacted just as much with rationalism, science, and industrialisation as with spiritualism, occultism, and "real" magic.

This book examines techniques of illusion in several respects: Firstly, techniques meaning technologies, devices, tools, and apparatus with the help of which humans enter in an interaction with the outer world. Secondly, the techniques examined include techniques of the body as they have been conceptualised by ethnographer Marcel Mauss: "action[s] which [are] effective and traditional," i.e., learned through mimesis and education, which concern the use of the body, "man's [sic] first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means" (Mauss 2006 [1935], 82, 83). Performance magic is such a technique which is passed on through mimesis and education (usually mentorship). It includes not only sleight of hand but also other physical and mental abilities such as mobility (especially for slipping in and out of containers in escapology and enterology) or memory skills (especially in mentalism). And, thirdly, the techniques considered here also include cultural techniques, which Thomas Macho and Christian Kassung (2009, 16–8) define as techniques "with the help of which […] symbolic work is performed," that "use and generate media" and "have the possibility of being self-referential" as well as neutral to context.[4] Although magic itself is not directly addressed as a cultural technique in this book, it is dependent on various cultural techniques. It should also be noted that I do not use the term "illusion" – which often smacks of fraud or criminal acts such as pickpocketing and cheating – pejoratively but rather in a positive sense, referring to the production of illusions inherent in media, fiction and simulations.[5]

I.3 Magic

The connection of magic to religion is ancient and is made obvious by the word's etymology: The term goes back to "imga," the Akkadian denomination of members of the priestly class. Via the Assyrian transformation, "maga," this became "magos" (μάγος) in Greek, respectively latinised to "magus" (see Fischer 1978, 13–5; Ralley 2010, viii–xvi). At the same time as modern magic flourished, cultural anthropologists such as Émile Durkheim, Bronisław Malinowski, or Marcel Mauss explored magic as a secular counterpart to religion, which consciously shrouded itself in mystery (see Schwartz 2008, 198). The oldest evidence of performances in religious contexts, which today would be regarded as magic tricks, can be found in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Ancient written sources describe optical, acoustic, and mechanical devices to produce "wonders bordering the supernatural" (Evans 1928, 15). These include the well-known machines described by Heron of Alexandria, such as pneumatic devices that automatically opened temple doors, mirror projections that made ghosts appear, and acoustic effects that made statues of the gods laugh (see ibid., 15–9; Macho 2004a, 27–8). Such demonstrations of the miraculous served not least to establish and consolidate power. For example, the staff miracle in the Old Testament proved Aaron's authenticity as a prophet of God (Ex 7, 1–13).[6] Magic in this sense, in contrast to performance

magic, references a sacred, an absent other in the form of one or more deities or other supernatural beings (see During 2002, 2; Mangan 2007, 16).

Marcel Mauss understands ritual magic as an interplay of officers (magicians), actions (rites), and representations, i.e., "ideas and beliefs which correspond to magical actions" and convictions underlying them (Mauss 2005 [1902], 23). As a collective phenomenon, magic is based on a consensual belief that arises from a social need (ibid., 119). According to Mauss, ritual magicians do not deceive their spectators but fulfil their expectation and perform a social function: "Magic is believed and not perceived. It is a condition of the collective soul, a condition which is confirmed and verified by its results. Yet it remains mysterious even for the magician" (ibid.). By assuming her role as a magician in all sincerity, "[t]he magician then becomes his [sic] own dupe, in the same way as an actor when he [sic] forgets that he [sic] is playing a role" (ibid., 118). The magician, in this case, "is not a free agent. He [sic] is forced to play either a role demanded by tradition or one which comes up to his client's expectations" (ibid.). Thus, the magicians' societal role forces them to believe in their own magic to the extent that the community believes in it: "Indeed, his [sic] faith is sincere in so far as it corresponds to the faith of the whole group" (ibid., 119). The magicians' performance is the magical ritual, the form of which is handed down and "sanctioned by public opinion" (ibid., 23).

Mauss understands rituals as "*traditional actions whose effectiveness is sui generis*" (ibid., 54, emphasis in the original). They are temporary interruptions of the usual, to which they create a difference (see Macho 2004b, 14–7; Mauss 2005 [1902], 56–8). For this reason, rituals take place not only in special (preferably liminal) places but also at special times: They refer to the symbolic time and are subject to a temporality of repetition (see Macho 2004b, 47; Mangan 2007, 16; Mauss 2005 [1902], 29). Insofar as they are not only symbolic but also material practices, they use "props, instruments and bodies" (Macho 2004b, 16).[7] Rituals are rooted in the conviction that, Robert Pfaller (2007, 387) writes with reference to James Frazer, "magic – just like science" assumes "that the same causes will always produce the same effects."[8] They usually also require the participation of the audience, which in turn attaches certain notions and expectations to the ritual, the minimum of which is "the display of its effect" (Mauss 2005 [1902], 75). Mauss distinguishes magical rituals from religious rites in that they have different agents, are performed in different spaces, and, most notably in that magical rites "are anti-religious," do not belong to cults, and "are always considered unauthorized, abnormal and, at the very least, not highly estimable" (ibid., 28). "Religious practices, on the contrary, even fortuitous and voluntary ones, are always predictable, prescribed and official. They do form part of a cult" (ibid., 29).

The kind of magic examined in this study – magic performed for entertainment purposes – defines itself as devoid of the claim to supernatural effects that rituals make. However, it is not entirely different from ritual

magic. Mauss' conception of the magician as an actor [sic] who "forgets that he [sic] is playing a role" (ibid., 118) echoes the much cited dictum of the moderniser of performance magic Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (2011 [1877], 43) that "[a] conjuror is an actor playing the part of a magician." While the Maussian actors who become magicians nevertheless fulfil their social functions as magicians, Robert-Houdin's actors, who remain conscious of their acting, play the same magicians within the framework of an entertainment culture. Their performance can be ironic because they appear before an audience that generally does not assume that they have supernatural powers. In this sense, performance magic can be understood as a form of entertainment that disguises itself as a ritual (see also Mangan 2007, 17).

I.4 Illusions, tricks, magic

The problematic nature of the word "trick" has already been pointed out in 1910 by magicians Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant, who, in fact, draw on Professor Hoffmann's even older criticism of the term. In *Our Magic* they write that this denomination is not only too broad, "applicable to almost anything related to magic, apart from either rhyme or reason" (Maskelyne and Devant 1911, 173), it also supports a misconception of conjuring: "[t]he public has become educated in the belief that magic consists in the doing of 'tricks', and in nothing beyond that (presumably) trivial end" (ibid.). Instead, they suggest the use of the terms "experiment" or "feat" to refer to the production of a magical effect – if it is successful, it is a "feat," an attempt at it is an "experiment" (ibid., 179). The words "trick" or "device" are to denominate "an invention, by means of which a certain principle is utilised for the production of a given result" (ibid.). This terminology is infused by science and indicative of the authors' claim to legitimacy. The two highly influential British magicians thus positioned themselves not only in the tradition of Robert-Houdin who also spoke of "experiments" in his writings but also (like him) in the tradition of public experimenters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the same time, this term decidedly does not suggest deception, but a scientifically founded operation with an objectifying character of proof, since experiments serve the empirical generation of knowledge.

A more common term today is "illusion" for which Bart Whaley in his *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Magic* (2007, 474–5) gives three possible meanings, each with a different scope: In the broadest sense, "illusion" refers to "any effect perceived deceptively by the audience; a trick; a delusion." In the narrower sense, it means any stage effect that is clearly visible from a distance in a theatre, which is largely ensured by the size of the props used. Most effects that use small apparatus and props that are poorly visible at a distance, such as playing cards, coins, cigarettes, or thimbles, fall out of this category and instead into that of close-up magic. The third and narrowest meaning of the term refers to *grand illusions* – in particular such effects that involve humans

and other living beings and/or large apparatus. It is in this sense that this term is used in the magic jargon, as explained, for instance, by Milbourne and Maurine Christopher (1996, 6) in *The Illustrated History of Magic*: "All magic is illusion, but illusion among conjurers is a term applied to feats with human beings, large animals, or sizeable pieces of apparatus." Grand illusions prove to be the paradigmatic format of the mechanised stage illusionism of the late nineteenth century – they meet the visual requirements of theatres and make use of the possibilities offered by the latter, such as artificial lighting and mechanical stage arrangements.

The difficulty to formulating a definition of the term "illusion" in its general understanding (also outside of stage performances) has already been noted. Psychologist and neuroscientist Richard Gregory (1991, 3), for example, points out the problem that arises when illusion is defined as distinct from reality:

> The word 'illusion' is hard to define. Any suggested definition is likely too specific or too general. But in general definition is not necessary. […] We cannot define illusions for example as departures from reality without agreement on the far-too-general question: What is reality? It is fortunate that agreement over such very general questions is not needed for classifications to be useful for the Natural Sciences, or for the Unnatural Science of illusions.

Art historian Ernst Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion*, provides a somewhat different explanation for this problem of definition when he writes: "Illusion, we will find, is hard to describe or analyze, for though we may be intellectually aware of the fact that any given experience *must* be an illusion, we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion" (Gombrich 2000 [1960], 5, emphasis in the original). With recourse to Karl Popper, Gombrich even proposes to dispense entirely with the distinction between perception and illusion, since it is impossible to unambiguously distinguish the two. Although our perception attempts to exclude harmful illusions, he notes, it is easily deceived – a failure that becomes apparent, for example, in illusionistic works of art (ibid., 22). A philosophical discussion of reality, perception, and illusion is not the concern of this volume and shall not be elaborated on here. A specific concept of the kind of illusion relevant in relation to performance magic unfolds in the following chapters.

In *Modern Enchantments* Simon During (2002, 1) defines *secular magic* as "the technically produced magic of conjuring shows and special effects […], which stakes no serious claim to contact with the supernatural." This kind of magic in many ways shaped the culture of modernity from the time of its commercialisation, also with regard to its perception of illusions *as illusions* (ibid., 2). During observes the emergence of a new kind of magic from around 1850 onwards, which he distinguishes from *supernatural* or *real magic*, i.e., magic practised in religious and ritual contexts and wherever its efficacy

is believed in. Modern, *secular magic* is, in contrast, a "self-consciously illusory magic, carrying a long history, organised around is still-beleaguered lightness or triviality, which it also massively exceeds" (ibid., 27).

It would be easy to adopt During's terminology and apply the term *secular magic* to the kind of magic practised for entertainment purposes from 1850 onwards, which makes no claim to "real" magic. Although its protagonists – especially in their opposition to modern spiritualism – identify themselves as rational agents of the Enlightenment, scientists, or engineers, it should not be forgotten that such self-attributions were first and foremost marketing strategies. A closer look at what actually happened on magicians' stages shows that *secular magic* has always flirted with the possibility of *real magic* by making references to mysticism, occultism, spiritualism, and rituals, or even imitating them. While During does emphasise this, he holds on to the conceptual distinction between "secular" and "supernatural" – a differentiation which draws the line between the two forms of magic based on the assumption that a secularisation of the Western world has indeed occurred in modernity. What he calls *secular magic*, however, in fact plays with the intermingling of these two concepts of magic, insofar as it – at the latest since the phantasmagoria shows around 1800 – builds up an ambiguity that can be understood as an oscillation between the constructivism and the realism of magic. As Chris Goto-Jones (2016, 48) has pointed out, while modern magic has made an effort to legitimise itself as an attempt

> to define an artistic space for entertainment for itself by differentiating itself from 'other' forms of magic […] such as ritual magic (including witchcraft), religious magic, and various types of charlatanism (including Spiritualism and cardsharping etc.). Ironically, however, […] magic seems to need these associations in order for it to have *meaning* and for its feats to have magical *effect*.

It is further important to note that the often-used phrase "modern magic" or "modern conjuring," too, is not entirely unproblematic. In his essay "Modern Magic, the Illusion of Transformation, and How It Was Done" (2016), Peter Lamont convincingly shows that During's premise that the understanding of performance magic as illusionism for entertainment purposes only, devoid of supernatural agency has emerged in the nineteenth century is historically untenable. Lamont identifies the rendering of earlier audiences as gullible and unreflective as a construct set up by Victorian psychologists and anthropologists, reinforced by performance magicians of the time and perpetuated in amateur historiographies of magic, from where it entered into more recent cultural-historical reflections on performance magic. Reports of the confusion of *secular* with *real magic* on the side of the recipients, according to which illusionists had to defend themselves against accusations of heresy at least until the end of the eighteenth century can be found time and time again in the literature (Lamont 2016, 8). Lamont traces these back to Reginald Scot's

The Discoverie of Witchcraft, one of the earliest English magic books, which in 1584 set out to uncover magic performances as illusions in order to invalidate accusations of witchcraft and devil-mongering. This shows that an awareness of what During calls *secular magic* can be traced back to the sixteenth century.

This indeed underlies Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, which advocates its dissemination with an educational claim. Scot differentiates between magic that comes about with the supernatural help of demons and devils and is to be prosecuted as heresy and that which is the result of a sensory illusion achieved with the help of manual dexterity and attention control and which seeks to entertain. Even the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) distinguishes between different kinds of magic, one of which "is without demons, and this is better termed 'illusion,' because it happens artfully through manipulation on the part of people who show or hide certain objects, as happens in the sleight of hand performed by clowns and mimes" (57D, Mackay 2009, 198). While Lamont identifies a discursive entanglement of the different kinds of magic beginning in the early modern period, he finds no evidence for their confusion. He therefore concludes:

> […] centuries before the rise of "modern magic", whatever other magical beliefs might have been in play, sisters were able to recognize magic tricks as a form of entertainment, understand that they were illusions, and wonder how they were done. […] The historical narratives of past credulity […], far from being a reflection of early modern gullibility, were actually part of a modern struggle to distinguish between different kinds of magic.
>
> (Lamont 2016, 15)

During also succumbs to the appeal of such efforts to differentiate and classify when he separates *secular* and *real magic* from one another. However, he repeatedly emphasises their interconnectedness and affinity with one other, for instance, when he writes that the truth content of *secular magic* is equal to that of *supernatural magic* – both are equally illusory and always interlaced with one another (During 2002, 2). He understands the logic of *secular magic* as one that is only describable in relation to *ritual magic*, although its meaning is not explained by that of the latter (ibid., 3).

In a similar vein, Graham M. Jones (2010, 71) writes that "modern conjurers, while often dabbling in occult economic, generally do not intend audiences to perceive supernatural forces at work in their performances. Far from it; they want individual credit for the technical prowess." Jones conceives of modern magic as a paradoxical form of entertainment that functions both as a performative counterpart to an irrational, disenchanted worldview and as a remnant or a compensatory site of irrationality and enchantment (ibid., 68). At least implicitly, both authors conceptualise the distinction between the rational and the supernatural not only in terms of intellectual reception

but also as a historical development, with *real magic* preceding its *secular* counterpart. This, in turn, leads to the problem pointed out by Lamont: the drawing of a clear line between a modern, "enlightened" magic and a pre-modern, "primitive" one, to which the latter looks back in a reflective way.

In fact, already in 1912, anthropologist Émile Durkheim suggested that the contrasting distinction between the natural and the supernatural was a construct that emerged in modernity along with rationalisation and the sciences. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he writes:

> To have the idea of the supernatural, it is not enough for us to witness unexpected events; rather, these events must be regarded as impossible – as irreconcilable with an order that seems, rightly or wrongly, to be a necessary part of the nature of things. This notion of a necessary order has been gradually constructed by the empirical sciences; it follows that the opposite notion could not have pre-dated them.
>
> (Durkheim 2001 [1912], 30)

Accordingly, the very concept of the two kinds of magic was born in and out of modernity and rationalisation and was then applied retrospectively in order to distinguish one's own culture from "other" cultures that were labelled as believing in the supernatural. In the same vein with Graham Jones' (2001) demonstration that modern magicians were in fact the ones that held on to and romanticised the belief in the supernatural – even if they externalised it and distanced themselves from it by determining it to be the worldview of a "primitive" Other, Durkheim's quote implies that the very notion of "real magic" was a construct that emerged along with modern culture. It is a chauvinistic, colonial concept that was projected onto another culture, regarded as less developed than one's own. Rather than holding on to the fictional distinction between two kinds of magic that, in part, was instrumentalised to enforce colonial superiority, I agree with Chris Goto-Jones' (2016, 38) suggestion that "[i]nstead of being neatly divided (even operationally) into real/pretend, white/black, ritual/stage, and so forth," modern magic in fact "exists on a series of continuums that include each of these positions to varying extents."

I.5 Willing suspension of disbelief

Lamont (2016, 13) attributes During's conceptualisation of *secular magic* as specific to the modern period to his literary-theoretical point of view:

> In this case, the confusion has come from drawing on literary theory, rather than on evidence, particularly the assumption that a "willing suspension of disbelief" is a useful lens through which one can understand how magic is viewed. Magic, however, does not rely on a willing

> suspension of disbelief. Rather, it depends on audiences believing one aspect of it while disbelieving another.

The often-quoted phrase "willing suspension of disbelief," which is often used to refer to the reception attitude in relation to performance magic, goes back to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It appears in 1817 in his *Biographia Literaria*, in connection with a volume of poems named *Lyrical Ballads* that Coleridge and William Wordsworth conceived as a collection of two types of poems: those dealing with realistic themes, characters, and events and thereby achieving an enchantment of the world in the everyday and those at least partially describing supernatural events and characters and nevertheless capturing the readers through realistically rendered emotions. Coleridge writes:

> In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us […]
>
> (Coleridge 2013 [1818], Chapter XIV)

Viewed in this context, it becomes clear that Coleridge's interest exceeded the general fictionality of literature. The point is not that fictional worlds depend on the recipients' willingness to engage with their premises despite a more or less glaring lack of realism. Rather, he is concerned with the effectiveness of different genres: Coleridge assumes that fantastic (respectively romantic) literature, unlike naturalism, demands a willing suspension of disbelief from its readers. His idea is that a fantastic fictional world is less likely to draw the readers in, as it were, than a naturalistic fictional world because it bears less resemblance to their everyday reality. Fantastic poetry compensates for this lack of credibility by its ability to provoke stronger emotional reactions, which resonate with the recipients' lifeworld on another level. It therefore has, as Coleridge writes in the above quotation, "to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth." These make readers accept events, characters, or actions that are far from their own reality – and this is what Coleridge calls the *willing suspension of disbelief*. Applied to, for example, *The Muppet Show*, this would refer to the willingness of viewers to overlook the fact that the protagonists are clearly recognisable as inanimate puppets because the show's entertainment value and ability to express truths about the viewers' lives are not affected by its lack of realism.

While Brigitte Felderer and Ernst Strouhal (2007b, 21) as well as Michael Mangan (2007, 100) do apply the formula *willing suspension of disbelief* to magic, I hold with others who argue that the concept is unsuitable in this context. For instance, Peter Lamont writes:

> This is the primary aim of magic as a performing art: the creation of a dilemma between the conviction that something cannot happen and the observation that it happens. It requires disbelief (it cannot happen) based on real-time conviction (in these conditions, it is impossible) in order for the effect (it happens) to produce the experience. In short, if you suspend disbelief, willingly or otherwise, the magic disappears.
>
> (Lamont 2013, 45)

If spectators suspended their disbelief, the contradiction between belief and perception that is necessary for the reception of illusionism *as illusionism* would disappear. As we will see later in more detail (Section 1.4), the enjoyment of illusions, on the contrary, requires the illusion to co-exist with a consciousness about its illusionistic character. This, however, would be undermined by a *suspension of disbelief*, which would change the attitude of reception.

In a different way, but no less convincingly, magic historian and illusion designer Jim Steinmeyer argues against the application of this concept to performance magic. He differentiates between special effects in theatre performances and those in magic shows:

> In the theatre, a special effect often is designed to be subsumed within the fantasy of the production. To ignore its presence, to fall under the spell and accept an effect without question or wonder is the highest compliment, Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." An illusion seeks the opposite. It starts with a basic reality and attempts to make it deliberately special or surprising. In a magic show, there is no willing suspension. The magician cannot risk the audience ignoring his illusions or accepting them as part of a larger context; they must be held apart and treated as unique.
>
> (Steinmeyer 2006, 38)

While special effects in theatre are embedded in a plot in which they serve a purpose and should remain as unnoticed as possible *as effects*, illusions in magic performances aim at the opposite: Here, effects are not meant to pass by unnoticed but to be perceived as such, which is why they are decidedly exhibited *as effects*. While theatre plays use special effects for the purpose of making the artificial world they present more believable, magic shows purport to make something happen in the spectators' own world that is impossible within it. This is an important difference between stage illusions in performance magic and in theatre. In film, too, a matte painting, for example, is usually meant to blend seamlessly with the real set and landscape

without standing out as an effect. Performance magic, on the contrary, draws attention to the effect as such. Maskelyne's and Cooke's magical playlets, therefore, do not subordinate their illusions to the plot or aesthetics but make them the main attraction around which a connecting narrative is constructed. Georges Méliès' fantastic films adopted this mode and therefore represent an exception in film by following the logic of conjuring.

In the same vein with Steinmeyer, the magician duo Penn & Teller draws a distinction between theatre and magic performances: "In typical theatre, an actor holds up a stick, and you make believe it's a sword," Teller says in an interview printed in the *Smithsonian Magazine*: "In magic, that sword has to seem absolutely 100 percent real, even when it's 100 percent fake. It has to draw blood. Theatre is 'willing suspension of disbelief.' Magic is *unwilling* suspension of disbelief." (Stromberg 2012). It is *unwilling* because (ideally) in the course of the magic performance the audience is convinced that no deception is involved: The playing card is chosen by a volunteer from the audience, the ring is handed to another for examination, the container in which something appears a few moments later is presented as empty. It is only after spectators have been persuaded of the intactness of rational parameters that this is seemingly (temporarily) destroyed. While the sword in the theatre play requires the willing suspension of disbelief that Coleridge describes, namely an acceptance of the lack of realism in favour of an emotional reaction, conjuring presents something impossible within the framework of reality. Therefore, Teller continues, unlike music, film, or literature, it does not evoke an emotional but primarily an intellectual reaction: the confrontation with the distinction between imagination and reality. This differentiation is essential for our orientation in the world: "The most important decision anyone makes in any situation is 'Where do I put the dividing line between what's in my head and what's out there? Where does make-believe leave off and reality begin?'", Teller says, "[t]hat's the first job your intellect needs to do before you can act in the real world" (ibid.). Performance magic temporarily shakes up this decision under controlled conditions. It is an experimental playground for the exploration and enjoyment of the conflict between knowledge and perception – a state that Teller's partner Penn Jillette described as "rolling around in cognitive dissonance" (during a show on 25 June 2017, at the Eventim Apollo London).

Magic shows a seemingly impossible event for which it offers no explanation that might conform to a scientific worldview and thus pulls the rug of rationality out from under the spectators' feet. They know that they are witnessing an illusion, but they do not know how it is accomplished. This is what the magic show invites them to find out. But it does not provide enough pieces to put the puzzle together, leaving it forever patchy. Spectators thus find themselves in the limbo of ambiguity, in which they know that there is something they do not know but are left with no means of resolution. The two ways out both seem equally unsatisfactory: One is either dealing with a sensory illusion, which in consequence exposes one's own cognitive

perception as unreliable. Since we rely heavily on sensory perception in daily life, the possibility of its unreliability is at the very least disconcerting. The alternative is that the laws of physics are in fact somehow different from what one always thought they were. Since the magic performance takes place in our lifeworld, it must be subject to the laws of nature we have been familiar with and relying on our entire lives. But if then something happens that is impossible under the laws of physics we know, then the latter must be adjusted. This assumption in turn leads to the no less disturbing possibility that the natural laws of one's own lifeworld are unclear.

Nevertheless, magic is usually not perceived as troubling, but as entertaining. One possible reason for this could be that the seemingly disarranged order is restored in the end. This is evidenced by the examples in the following chapters: The vanished performer must come back; conjured ghosts, in turn, must disappear; the levitating person again becomes subject to gravity; the thought transmission is ended when the performers return to conventional verbal communication. If spectators encounter them at the theatre bar after the show, they certainly do not fear that their thoughts might be read by the magician at that moment. The magic performance does not become a horror show because it establishes a return to the familiar. Thus, performance magic equally affects epistemology and ontology because it not only (temporarily) questions the ontological status of the events shown on stage but also the very ability of the recipients to determine this status. How these mechanisms unfold in concrete terms is shown in this book by means of selected illusions from the second half of the nineteenth century.

I.6 Technology-based stage magic

The cognitive dissonance that, according to Penn, is entered into consciously is connected with a mechanised illusionist spectacle. One of the theses of this book is that this form of entertainment in essence emerged around 1800 with the phantasmagoria. For this reason, phantasmagoria shows are discussed in the first chapter. If such patterns of reception existed before modernity, as pointed out by Lamont in his critique of the term "modern conjuring," what is it that distinguishes this form of illusionism from its predecessors? First, it should be noted that whenever the term "modern conjuring" is used in this volume, it does not mean to distinguish illusionism as an "enlightened" technique from a pre-modern belief in magic. The first chapter shows that phantasmagoria shows blurred the problematic distinction between "Enlightenment" and "superstition" and similar dualistic concepts associated with this construct. Rather, this term refers to a specific manifestation of performance magic that emerged from around 1850 onwards and that differs from its predecessors in terms of location, dimension, and type of staging, as well as a high degree of mechanisation and self-reflection.

If philosophical anthropology, especially that of Arnold Gehlen, constructed human beings as deficient and therefore constantly adapting to

environmental conditions with the help of, among other things, technology, and techniques, i.e., artefacts as well as corresponding operations, then it is impossible to conceive of the human existing before technology. And insofar as magic is a form of action-oriented tool use, it has always been a technical means of connecting with the world. However, the term technisation, as used here, presupposes, on the one hand, a reflection of the technology's performance. On the other hand, it assumes, as Peter Fischer (2004, 47) writes, "that technology […] has emancipated itself from myth and religion as an independent and accepted cultural field."[9] Fischer therefore refers to social processes that began in Europe in the sixteenth century and became particularly virulent in the late eighteenth century. These include a rationalisation of the way of life, during which "the inner world and the environment are constructed according to the technically developed principle of the outer world, the principle of causality – both intellectually and as objects of technical manipulation" (ibid., 49).[10] Here, technology no longer merely compensates for deficiencies to ensure survival, as envisioned by Gehlen, but is purposefully advanced as a means to improve economic productivity and prosperity. "The modern technical development of the Occident," sociologists Reinhold Sackmann and Ansgar Weymann (1994, 12) write, "is thus the result of a unique socio-historical rationalisation process that includes economics, law, culture, lifestyle, religion and, last but not least, economy."[11] Drawing on Max Weber, they add the importance of ideological criteria as well as artistic motivation or even "otherworldly or fantastic interests" (Weber 1922, 33).[12]

The second half of the nineteenth century, especially in Western Europe, experienced a boom in mechanisation. This period also saw what James W. Cook (2001, 171) calls "a major historical redefinition of magic in Western culture": The change to a more socially respected, artistically ambitious form of entertainment, which, from around 1830 onwards, was increasingly performed on fixed stages.[13] According to Michael Symes (2004, 4), magic's popularity was boosted by the exploration of the stage and the Victorian drawing room as new performance spaces as well as by the fashionableness of magic as a hobby. With the move to the stage a new format emerged: the grand illusion. Embedded in a broad context of modern, urban entertainment culture, this new form of performance magic addressed a middle-class audience that also emerged in the nineteenth century. This section of the population had at its command a contingent of leisure time as well as relative prosperity that allowed its members to enjoy the new cultural activities. The consumers of this technologically upgraded entertainment culture also learned the reception of media illusionistic techniques, as Jonathan Crary (1990) has examined in detail.

Magic, along with curiosity exhibitions, ventriloquism, hypnosis, mesmerism, show experiments, medicine and freak shows, and carnivals, belongs to a cluster of performing arts that Simon During calls the *magic assemblage*. By this term he refers to "a historically developing sector of leisure enterprises which began to consolidate during the seventeenth century, at first alongside

traditional ritual festivals and revelries" – from roller coasters, ventriloquists, and "learned animals" to ghostly apparitions and mentalism to (electric) show experiments and demonstrations of moving images (During 2002, 66). A consideration of these related arts would go beyond the scope of this book and, what is more, they have already been examined excellently elsewhere.[14]

In this heterogeneous field of entertainment culture, magic combined spectacular performative practices with technical and physical knowledge, mechanical craftsmanship, manual dexterity, and state-of-the-art advertising. Borrowing from scientific practices, in the nineteenth century, it also increasingly staged its own transparency when magicians sought to shake off the shady reputation of their profession by enhancing their performances aesthetically and ideologically. One of the major modernisers of conjuring, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, programmatically opposed clumsy coverings such as long tablecloths under which assistants would hide. In his magic table, various mechanisms such as trapdoors, pedals, spring balancers, sloping shelves, and hidden compartments took over the tasks of human helpers and simultaneously extended their function (on Robert-Houdin's magic table see Fechner 2002, 35–7; on the magic table in the nineteenth century see Hoffmann 1877, 5–8; Hoffmann 1890, 6–7; Hoffmann 1904, 85–92). Replacing humans with technology saved not only space and costs, these devices were also more resilient than living beings – in this respect practices of performance magic mirrored a development that took place on a larger societal scale in the course of the industrialisation.

This example already demonstrates that this high degree of technisation is neither to be understood as a relapse to a time before the age of Enlightenment nor as a response to it in the sense of a compensation. This type of performance magic was not a countermovement to industrialisation, stimulated by a nostalgic longing for a pre-scientific worldview conceived of and romanticised as "magical." For instance, Joshua Landy writes that science, in the nineteenth century, took the place previously occupied by religion and myth. But because science promised nothing beyond what our senses perceive, it has erased "mystery, order, and purpose" and left a void in its place. This gap, according to him, was filled by performance magic, which, however, does nothing more than re-enchant the world (Landy 2009, 102–3). In a similar vein, Max Milner understands the entertainment culture of modernity as a substitute for the contact with the supernatural that was lost due to secularisation. When faith threatened to disappear, an affective void ("vide affectif") arose, which was filled by the emerging fantastic entertainment culture (Milner 1982, 19).

My thesis is that, on the contrary, the mechanisation of the nineteenth century was a condition of possibility of the kind of magic that is examined in this book. The two did not enter into an opposition to one another but into a partnership. Using up-to-date technology and involving humans, animals and large objects, stage effects evolved into components of elaborate, full evening entertainments. The kind of performance analysed here

is unthinkable without state-of-the-art technology, with which it is closely intertwined on several levels. For US-American magicians in particular, financial success was largely based on the economic advantages of extensive tours, which were made possible by modern means of transport such as railways and steamships. The French moderniser of magic Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin was a pioneer in the use of electrical technology on stage and off stage: Several of his stage illusions used electromagnets, such as the famous "Coffre lourd et léger"[15] (on this illusion see Fechner 2002, 221–2; Robert-Houdin 2006 [1877], 865–9 [for an English translation of Robert-Houdin's description see Fechner 2003, 391–9]); his home was equipped with electric door openers, an automatic feeding system for horses and other gadgets (see Robert-Houdin 1867). John Nevil Maskelyne, who ran the magic theatre in the Egyptian Hall in London, was not only one of the most influential magicians of the late nineteenth century but also an accomplished mechanic and engineer. Among other things, he invented the "Maskelyne Type-Writer," which was marketed as "[t]he most perfect writing machine yet produced," and "Maskelyne's mechanical cashier" which, the advertisement promised, was "so simple in its operation that a child 12 of age can be taught to use it in ten minutes, and can do the work of two or three Clerks." (advertisement from 1891 in the of the V&A Collections, Department of Theatre and Performance). Another of his inventions was the first coin-operated door lock, which was in use in London's public toilets until the 1950s.[16] His son Nevil Maskelyne was a pioneer of wireless transmission and the holder of several electrical engineering patents. It is no coincidence that the illusions designed by these persons used up-to-date technology. Paradigmatic grand illusions of the time also made use of modern materials such as glass and steel or chemicals that had only recently become available. The study of performance magic, therefore, leads into different areas of cultural history from which magicians drew inspiration of various kinds and with which their art interacted.

I.7 A magic of white men

Especially in the nineteenth century, the world of technology was a male-dominated world. The gender relations of illusionistic entertainment become most visible in the complex dynamic between magicians and spiritualists. From 1850 onwards, modern spiritualism became a kind of identity-forming counterpart for magicians. In their confrontation with spiritualists, magicians staged themselves as specialists in deception whose expertise, as Graham M. Jones (2010, 70) writes, was "comparative with a scientific worldview and opposed to unscientific forms of knowledge." Not only in interaction and in antagonism with spiritualist practices but also in its opposition to mysticism or occultism, Western conjuring constructed itself as "a potent signifier of modernity" (ibid., 95–6) that highlighted supposed cognitive deficiencies of pre-modern subjects and confirmed the rational superiority of modern ones.

This self-conceptualisation is to be viewed critically, not least because the leading form of performance magic in much of the world at the time was one in which whiteness, patriarchy, and colonialism prevailed.

"In the modern period," Chris Goto-Jones (2014, 1453) writes, "the idea of magic has also become intertwined with powerful political and cultural discourses around the existence of the 'Other'" in various ways. These discourses concern not only the ethnical and cultural "Other" but also the other gender – in this case anything but the cisgender white heterosexual male. Magic is still a male-dominated field today. For example, in the tradition of secret societies, the membership in magic clubs was reserved exclusively for men for a long time. One of the most prestigious clubs, the British Magic Circle, has only allowed regular membership for women in 1991 – in the 86 years of its existence before that, women could only be admitted if they were awarded an honorary membership. In 2010, the Magic Circle counted about 80 female members, compared to about 1,500 male ones (Soteriou 2010).

Moreover, the history of magic is overshadowed by the witch hunts. While an intriguing subject of study, accusations of witchcraft – which, as Silvia Federici has shown have been instrumentalised as a form of patriarchal oppression throughout history – cannot be analysed in this volume extensively. Perhaps the first book on performance magic to point out that accusations of witchcraft predominantly concerned women was Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* from 1584. Here, Scot describes a performance before the king in which the sorcerer Brandon stabbed the drawing of a dove, whereupon a dove visible through the window dropped dead. Scot (1651, 217) immediately provides a possible explanation of this feat, concluding with the remark: "If this or the like feat should be done by an old woman, every body [sic] would cry out for fire and faggot to burn the witch."

Simon During (2002, 108), too, refers to the latent association with historical accusations of witchcraft as an explanation for the comparatively low success of female magicians in the nineteenth century: "The unforgotten history of early modern witchcraft panics perpetuated the fear that females who practiced magic would enter into dangerous alliances and acquire powers that might upset gender hierarchy." As in the early modern period, gender inequality thus revolved around the assertion and perpetuation of patriarchal power. While male magicians staged themselves as enlighteners, leading the campaign against modern spiritualism, the latter was dominated by female mediums and identified as fraudulent. Although spiritualist séances were also seen as entertainment and pastimes, they had a stronger supernatural connotation than performance magic. The latter's efforts to gain respectability as a secular, rationalised art form seem to have been accompanied as much by masculinisation as by a modern variant of the witch-hunt, in the course of which predominantly female spiritualist mediums were sexualised and connoted as morally depraved, corrupt, and greedy. While this was a form of illusionism for which there was no place on the "secularised" magic stage, magicians certainly used spiritualism as a source of inspiration for their own shows.

However, the relationship between the two was not one of cooperation, but of competitive appropriation on the part of the magicians (see Section 4.1).

Figures like Adelaide Herrmann (Adele Celine Sarcez), the most successful female magician around 1900, remained an exception (on female magicians see Amy Dawes 2007; Henderson 2013; *Mahatma* 1905; Marshall 1984; Rein 2022; Sanchez 2013; Steele 2000). An experienced performer herself, she first appeared (also solo) in the show of her husband Herrmann the Great (Alexander Herrmann). After his sudden death, she first tried to continue the show as it was and hired Alexander's nephew Léon as the leading performer, who had a striking similarity with his deceased uncle and performed under the name of Herrmann the Great. After personal differences, however, Adelaide dissolved the business relationship and embarked on her own highly successful solo career (see Herrmann 2012; Henderson 2013).

Magicians' wives and mistresses often took part in their husbands' shows, as managers as well as performers. Olive Robinson (Olive Path), William E. Robinson's wife, was considered the best magician's assistant of her time (Dexter 1955, 48; *Mahatma* 1895; Price 1985, 502). Like Adelaide Herrmann, she tried to launch her own show after her husband's untimely death but failed to build a career of her own (see Steinmeyer 2005b, 412–5). Georges Méliès' long-time stage partner, mistress, and later wife Jehanne d'Alcy retained her role as the female lead in his film production and became the first movie star (Idzkowski 1945). Unlike her, other women often only took part in their husbands' performances up to a certain age and later refrained from appearing on stage, such as Beatrice Houdini.

The now stereotypical role of the female magicians' assistants[17] prancing across the stage as lightly dressed showgirls was not consolidated until the twentieth century. For the longest part of the nineteenth century, performers were as often male as female, and therefore some of the iconic illusions were originally performed by men only: In his famous levitation illusion, John N. Maskelyne levitated not a young woman clad in a white, semi-transparent gown but his business and stage partner George Cooke.[18] Even the most notorious of all misogynous illusions, the "Sawing a Woman in Half," was not performed with a woman in one of its first versions: Horace Goldin (Hyman Elias Goldstein) sawed a boy in halves, before he exchanged him for a female performer, following another magician's recommendation. If "Sawing a Woman in Half," an illusion invented in 1921, can, on the one hand, be interpreted as the violent re-subordination of the woman who had recently gained suffrage to patriarchal power structures, on the other hand, its success depends primarily on the skills of this very woman, while the magician takes on a mainly decorative role (see Rein 2017). Once the woman was established as the object of the sawing, it took a long time for this pattern to be broken – even Adelaide Herrmann sawed a woman in half (*The Billboard* 1921). David Copperfield (David Seth Kotkin) reversed gender roles in the 1970s when he got into the box himself to let a woman saw him in halves with a chainsaw.[19] However, this can also be read as a refusal to relinquish

power as he himself performs the role crucial for the illusion. Later, in his "Death Saw," this woman too was eliminated by an automation of the saw. The French female magician Sophie Edelstein not only saws up men in her shows but she also consistently places them in the stereotypical female role on the magic stage by having them appear as personified, scantily dressed, dancing distractions. While this, on the one hand appears to be an empowering reversal of gender relations, on the other hand, such a form of sexualisation and objectification remains questionable regardless of the gender identity of those involved.

If female magicians were rare in the late nineteenth century, finding non-white female or male magicians was even more difficult. African American performers sometimes appeared on stage but exclusively took on comedic supporting roles, such as "Boomsky" in Alexander (and later Léon) Herrmann's show, who was impersonated by various performers over the years. Following Herrmann's example, Howard Thurston hired the African American George Davis White who assisted him both on and off stage (on Boomsky and White see Price 1985, 87; Thurston 1929, 112; Steinmeyer 2011, 94–6). According to David Price (1985, 52), the first successful American-born magician was Richard Potter, the son of an African slave who was active as a performer in the early nineteenth century (see also Chireau 2007, 87). The career of Black Herman, the most well-known African American magician of the late nineteenth century, was framed by his work in minstrel shows where racist practices such as blackfacing were common (ibid.). The fact that his stage name, which was adopted by at least two other African American magicians after him, was based on Herrmann the Great, in whose show "Boomsky" appeared as a caricature-like character, again testifies to the primacy of white magicians.

Exoticism and Orientalism were just as virulent in performance magic at that time as in other areas of culture. Orientalist Magic and magic in Asia have been expertly analysed by Chris Goto-Jones in his book *Conjuring Asia* (2016). Here, he contrasts "Oriental" magic in the West with Asian traditions of magic and the highly complex interrelationship between Western magicians and their colleagues from Eastern countries in which "the modern magician was torn between disdain for public foolishness and admiration for the magical effectiveness of Oriental glamour" (Goto-Jones 2016, 126). While, on the one hand, European and US-American magicians either dressed up as "Oriental" ones or "merely" copied illusions from touring Asian magicians, they, on the other hand, devalued Asian magic as inferior to their own, while also falling prey to what Goto-Jones calls the "Oriental glamour." (ibid., 117). Relating to the idea of the Mystic East, this romanticised view saw Asian magic as being "somehow more (and more authentically) magical" (ibid., 44) than European and US-American magic that had lost this glamour to the disenchantment of modernity. Harry Kellar, the USA's most successful magician around 1900, was particularly adamant in preserving the enchantment of, in

his case, Indian magic, despite his long, ultimately disappointing search for "authentic" magic in India (ibid., 133–5).

The influence of "Oriental" magic traditions in the West was accompanied by questionable forms of cultural appropriation. These include, for example, John N. Maskelyne's famous plate spinning performance or the still ubiquitous ring game – both were brought to Europe in the nineteenth century by Chinese performers (During 2002, 104–6). Some Asian magicians achieved considerable success in Western Europe and the USA, for example, the Chinese performer Ching Ling Foo (Zhu Liankui) or the Japanese Ten Ichi, who introduced two previously unknown illusions to the USA in the early twentieth century (Price 1985, 512–3; on Chinese and Japanese magic see Goto-Jones 2016, 205–303). Artists such as Ramo Samee, an Indian sword swallower and conjurer who performed in Europe from 1815 onwards (see Price 1985, 494), also performed under the label "oriental" (on "oriental" magicians see Ayling and Sharpe 1981; Solomon 2008 and especially Goto-Jones 2016).

At the same time, European magicians like "Col." Stodare gained fame with copies of illusions from repertoires of Indian magicians (in his case, particularly the "basket trick"). Other magicians like Harry Kellar generously took advantage of "exotic" elements in their shows. For instance, his famous "Levitation of Princess Karnac" references the Egyptian Karnak Temple complex near Luxor. Kellar's stage patter added more exoticism by relating a story of how he learned this illusion from an Indian fakir during his travels. Kellar also copied originally Indian illusions such as the Mango Tree Trick that became known in the USA as "The Kellar Flower Growth." The homogenising integration into European and US-American magicians' shows of illusions initially performed by Indian (on Indian magic see Goto-Jones 2016, 155–204), Chinese, or Japanese performers was accompanied by an attitude of cultural appropriation that was symptomatic of a colonial point of view.

A similar concept was applied when Europeans or US-Americans pretended to be "Oriental" magicians. Several European performers dressed up as "Indians," for instance, the Englishman Alfred Silvester, former assistant to John Henry Pepper who made a career as the Fakir of Oolu, or Portuguese magician Juan Antonio who became famous as Kia Khan Khruse. The Englishman William Peppercorn is often credited as the first "Japanese" magician to perform in England (see Price 1985, 496–8). In the course of his career, US-American William E. Robinson took on the roles of, among others, the "Egyptian" Achmed Ben Ali and the "Indian" Nana Sahib before achieving great fame as the "Chinese" Chung Ling Soo – all of these would have been understood as "oriental" at that time. The characters Robinson embodied were not so much representative of Asian conjuring as of Western exoticist clichés. For this reason, Christopher Stahl (2008, 152) describes Chung Ling Soo's public self-representation as "a catalogue of

early-twentieth-century England's fraught obsession with chinoiserie." This concept was extremely successful – Soo was followed by a series of imitators, such as the "Japanese" magician Okito, actually Tobias Leendert Bamberg, who came from a Dutch dynasty of magicians. His son David Bamberg later gained considerable success in his role as the cartoonish-comedic figure Fu Manchu in films and on stage, in particular in Central and South America (Price 1985, 523; on the Bambergs see Goto-Jones 2016, 289–91).

At the core of such racist practices of reception and imitation lies a colonial consciousness of hierarchy that regards certain cultures as inferior to others. Simon During (2002, 107–8) interprets the clout of white magicians imitating non-European performers and the comparatively low success of authentic non-European magicians in the West as a manifestation of the association of cultures considered "unenlightened" with the belief in *real magic* (on the construction of "primitive" cultures as believing in magic see also Jones 2010). Accordingly, non-white magicians ran the risk of being associated with dark forces. At the same time – as representatives of cultures perceived as inferior – they were denied the ability to entertain Western audiences as performance magic rose to a respectable form of entertainment.

European or US-American performers, in turn, Christopher Stahl (2008, 156–9) writes in reference to During, were able to use the associations of such minorities with magic as well as the exoticism of the time for their benefit (see also Steinmeyer 2005b, 253–63). Chung Ling Soo, for instance, superimposed a series of exotic stereotypes and fantasies on a repertoire consisting mostly of Western illusions (Steinmeyer 2005b, 211–20, 253). The considerable career boost he achieved when he adopted a pseudo-Chinese stage persona testifies that his exoticist performance particularly appealed to Western audiences. Soo went so far in his pretence as to starting a public dispute about authenticity with the Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo, whose performance he had originally copied. And what is more, as far as the public was concerned, Soo won (see Stahl 2008, 156–9; Steinmeyer 2005b, 253–63). Stahl (2008, 155) therefore identifies him as a simulacrum in the sense of Jean Baudrillard (1994, 2) – a substitution of the real with signs of the real that seem more real than the real itself.

The racist, colonial concept that sees non-Western performers and recipients as intellectually and culturally inferior runs through magic history. The most prominent example in the nineteenth century is probably found in Robert-Houdin's work. His programmatic conceptualisation of modern magic as an elevated form of entertainment was aimed exclusively at Western audiences. Robert-Houdin's performance on behalf of Napoleon III in Algeria in 1856 shows his willingness to instrumentalise a concept of magic (and of audiences) constructed as "primitive" in the service of colonialism: With the help of his magic performances, thus runs the narrative told by Robert-Houdin, he successively quelled indigenous uprisings against the French colonial power. Robert-Houdin travelled to Algeria with his wife in September 1856 at the time of a colonial festival to perform for Arab chiefs.

Here, he, who temporarily came out of his retirement for this diplomatic mission, claims to have demonstrated that the colonialists "are their superiors in everything, and, as for sorcerers, there are none like the French" (Robert-Houdin 1870, 287). The rivalling indigenous "sorcerers" in Robert-Houdin's story, are the 'Isawiyya, a mystical Sufi order that was famous for their ecstatic trance ceremonies. As Graham M. Jones (2010, 67, 71) pointed out, Robert-Houdin hoped as much to witness one of these famed rituals as he was excited to perform in Algeria himself. While his autobiographical account of this journey, however, depicts the Arab chiefs as well as the 'Isawiyya as intellectually and culturally inferior, it renders his own mission as representing the superiority of the Western worldview over that of the colonised population. Graham M. Jones, who has expertly analysed this complex episode in his essay "Modern Magic and the War on Miracles in French Colonial Culture," identifies this mission as

> an extraordinary example of the use of spectacle in European imperialist projects to astound, frighten, or beguile indigenous spectators and dramatize knowledge differentials, enacting and reinforcing assumptions about the superiority of Western civilization [...] and, in this case, orientalist stereotypes of North African Muslims as irrational, childish fanatics.
>
> (Jones 2010, 67)

Other magicians seem to have taken on similar assignments. For instance, Douglas Beaufort, who worked at the Egyptian Hall and elsewhere, allegedly travelled to Fez in 1892 on behalf of the British Foreign Office to secure the friendship of the Sultan of Morocco (Maskelyne 1949, 13; Price 1985, 129). As colonial strategies, these missions not only constructed a difference between rationalism and superstition but at the same time claim to have demonstrated the purported superiority of the former, which was located on the side of the colonial power. Not surprisingly, much of these narratives are fiction. Robert-Houdin's self-portrayal, for instance, did not correspond at all to the perception of his Algerian audiences: "Robert-Houdin's act," Jones (2010, 77) writes, "was seen as a prodigiously amusing curiosity of knowledgeable performance – not terrifying sorcery as the magician's narration implies." Jones observes a curious reversal of the colonial narrative, for while the trope of the "primitives" who believe in *real magic* was a common one in colonial Europe, occult and esoteric beliefs flourished in Western cultures. At the same time, the same magicians who performed the rituals described by Robert-Houdin in Algeria were among the travelling performers who appeared on Western stages in Paris or at the Egyptian Hall in London with great success. Here, they effortlessly adapted to the European tradition and took on the role of secular entertainers usually incorporated by their Western colleagues (ibid., 89). In this case, once more, the distinction between "Enlightenment" and "superstition" proves to be a construct that served to

self-legitimise Western modern culture by distinguishing itself from cultures conceived of as "primitive."

I.8 Media effects and media reflection

Magic dominated the mechanised, illusionistic entertainment culture of the nineteenth century before the primacy of cinema. Within this cultural context, performance magic not only developed a specific use of technology, but it also reflected on it. This is attested to by an increasing production of texts – since Robert-Houdin's famous *Memoirs* from 1853, the publication of autobiographic and other books had become common among magicians (see Ashton-Lelliott 2022; Rein 2017). Further, and this is one of the central theses of this book, this new level of self-reflection also manifested itself on stage. By emphasising its own illusionistic status, magic became a form of illusionism about illusionism.

At least since the popularity of phantasmagoria shows around 1800, performers of illusionistic media spectacles explicitly stressed that the supernatural agency they staged was a simulated one. They thus drew attention to the effects themselves and at the same time concealed the technology as well as the work that produced them – and which the audience nevertheless knew to exist. The stage illusions created in the nineteenth century using media such as glass/mirrors, stage machinery, apparatus, and sometimes concrete technical communication devices were thus not only presented *as* illusions but also exhibited as the products of an unknown or invisible technology. In this way, performance magic brought its own artificiality and technicality, i.e., its underlying constructivism, to the fore. Interestingly, it becomes visible in hindsight that the performative emphasis on this paradox is implicitly based on a central insight of media theory: namely, that a medium is most effective when the material basis of its effect remains as imperceptible as possible. In this act of performative self-reflexivity, magic proves to be an analytics of media effects.

According to German media philosopher Dieter Mersch (2006, 9), determining what media are is a "chronically precarious" endeavour. Attempts at doing so oscillate at least "between materials, physical properties, technologies or social functions" (ibid., 11).[20] Media theorist Georg Christoph Tholen (2005, 150) understands media as "any kind of carrier, messenger or channel, as a mediating element for the transmission and dissemination of meanings, information and messages."[21] Derived from the Latin medium – "middle," respectively the Greek μεταξύ (metaxý) – "between," the medium can be anything standing between other entities, the third between two.

Based on the aesthetic theory of the medium, which goes back to Aristotle, Mersch (2006, 19) writes that "perception requires the mediality of another element, which, however, can be neither the perceiver nor the perceived object."[22] This causes the paradox of the medial, which complicates a definition of the concept, because "[e]ven the word 'media' refers to something that holds the centre and is therefore neither one thing nor the other, neither

something given or something mediated, transferred or transformed because it itself is lost in the process of mediation" (Mersch 2013, 208). Because the medium itself is a "placeholder of a transmission," Mersch (2004, 80) writes, it refuses "mediation, transgression, transmission or transformation" – its own mediality remains invisible and unrepresentable. It follows that media "function the more effectively the more *inconspicuous* they are *as* media" (ibid., 79).[23] This eternal withdrawal – what Mersch calls the negativity of media – poses a problem to their study:

> We are therefore dealing with the systematic problem or aporia that we have to analyse something that constantly causes the analysis to become volatile and foists itself on it like an unconscious cultural element without being observable because observation is only possible through a mediation that produces its own effects and practices, its structures and materiality on the process of observation and simultaneously denies them.
>
> (Mersch 2013, 209)

Mersch further ascribes the ability to "tease out" the characteristics of the media and mediality to art: It can break open the mesmerising illusionism of media by creating interventions, paradoxes, irritations, and interruptions of various kinds. These constantly fluctuating, constantly adopting techniques "expose the specific mechanisms and operations of medial processes and their evident nature" (ibid., 218).

While Mersch constructs his negative media theory by drawing primarily on the philosophy of language, in particular Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, the observation that media take a back seat to their content was already made by media theory pioneer Marshall McLuhan: When writing about electric light as a "medium without a message," he comes to the conclusion that "[i]ndeed, it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (McLuhan 1994 [1964], 8–9). The study of media is obstructed by the fact that we usually do not notice the medium itself but focus on its "content":

> Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as "content." […] The "content" of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech.
>
> (ibid., 18)

As a figure of the "in-between," the medium makes something appear, establishes references, and constructs meanings, but without showing itself. It is, by definition, neither the message itself nor does it behave neutrally towards

it. Rather, the medium shapes and determines its message in the course of the transmission. In the same vein, German philosopher Sybille Krämer (1998, 74) speaks of the "blind spot in media use"[24]:

> Media act like windowpanes: the more transparent they remain, the more inconspicuously they remain below the threshold of our attention, the better they do justice to their task. Only in the noise, which is the disturbance or even the collapse of their smooth service, does the medium itself bring itself to mind. The undistorted message, on the other hand, makes the medium almost invisible.[25]

As long as it functions well, the medium itself becomes imperceptible while bringing its content to the fore. It is only in the moments of malfunction and breakdown that the medium draws attention to itself. It becomes recognisable as a material object only in moments of dysfunction – when it runs smoothly, the medium disappears.

Of particular interest in our context is that Mersch associated media with magic in two ways: Firstly, he contrasts the ability of art to unveil mediality, as it were, with illusionism (which he sees in opposition to the arts) when he states that:

> […] reflections on media need the kind of artistic strategies outlined here, and vice versa. Where these are lacking the mediality of the medium remains chronically obscured. This, incidentally, is also profound reason for the abrupt division between an aesthetics of illusion and the work of the arts. The latter breaks the medium open, uses it against itself, ensnares it in contradictions to uncover the medial dispositive, the structures of exposure, narrative operations and so on, while the former just uses and continues them.
>
> (Mersch 2013, 217)

This may be true for *trompe-l'œil* painting and architecture, which is "in league" with and enforces media's withdrawal, striving to create a seamless illusion, to blend the real and the represented. For instance, Andrea Pozzo's fresco *Apotheosis of Saint Ignatius* (1691–94) in the Church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in Rome, skilfully uses distortion and linear perspective to create an immersive illusion when seen from the right point of view, merging painted and architectural space (see Mancini 2021).

Mersch (2013, 213) starts from the early modern mandate of the subjective gaze and central perspective and these paradigm's dependence on "techniques in the sense of practices that were kept secret in order to enhance their performative power." He continues:

> The dependence on such techniques, especially in popular art such as panoramic theatre, were increasingly refined in order to lose their frame,

> their immobility and their limitations and thereby released a dynamic which bears witness to the constantly failing magic of a merely technical illusion by having the apparatus used grow to monstrous scale to overwhelm the distrustful but seducable audience. Art, however, always went for the interruption of the manic eye by setting up aesthetic strategies that aggrevated [sic!] uninterrupted desire with irritations and obstacles.
>
> (ibid., 213–4)

Such irritations and obstacles, I would argue, are precisely among the techniques and practices applied in performance magic, especially in the complex, self-reflexive form it takes on in the late nineteenth century. While stage magic does endeavour to create an illusion, the most interesting illusions also include and emphasise the interruptions and irritations that Mersch identifies as tools for "teasing out" the mediality from behind the media's content. Most of the illusions analysed in this volume thematise their own illusionism in the performance and thus create paradoxical manoeuvres and contradictions. In fact, they derive much of their attraction and entertainment value from taking precisely this self-reflexive stance between revealing their own state as illusions created by humans, techniques, and technologies and at the same time nonetheless producing a believable illusion.

Secondly, Mersch ascribes a magical quality to media and mediality itself. Their deprivation of perception and definition, he writes, provokes a fascination that associates media with mystery and magic (Mersch 2004, 80–1). By holding "the double figure of an appearance in disappearance and a disappearance in appearance," he claims, media have a "stupendous reference to an enigma or an unrepresentable" (Mersch 2006, 20–1).[26] In the same vein, he states elsewhere that

> […] the problem facing negative media theory is this – if, as assumed, 'media' have their primal function in transfering, constructing and making something perceivable […], then the mediality of the medium would always be closed and indeterminable and becomes the victim of its own magic. That is why I spoke of a fundamental withdrawal, a negativity – but this indeterminability can at least be partly forced open and the magic therein excorcised through the use of "medial paradoxes." This is what I see as the special relationship between media and the arts. The latter are always probing the quasi-anamorphotic manoeuvre, the change of visual angle that allows for a "seeing from the side" where there is no reflexivity. We are dealing with "medial reflexivity", which is capable of paradoxical manoeuvres that show the mediality of the medium.
>
> (Mersch 2013, 218)

This spell of media – their inherent illusionism blinding us to their characteristics, according to Mersch, can be broken by gazing at them through a

distorted mirror – not a straight reflection but one that is anamorphic and thus capable of looking behind their mesmerising techniques.

This association with the mysterious and the magical helps to explain part of the fascination with performance magic insofar as a similar model of withdrawal applies, which grows out of the imperceptibility of the methods and the culture of secrecy cultivated around these: A close-up illusion is masterful when even those who know how it is done cannot discern the hand movements. Grand illusions are successful when they make the human and technical work necessary for their effects disappear. Be it a performer, a hidden assistant, a trap door or hatch, a false bottom, foldable objects that can be retrieved from a seemingly too small container, or a key, secretly handed over – they all produce the effect but must be imperceptible themselves. We can see how, by making the person, gesture, or prop responsible for the effect (or part of the effect) disappear, magicians perform an operation that was theorised in media studies about a century later. Performance magic not only presents "media effects" but exhibits them as such. As will become clear repeatedly in the course of this examination, magic not only makes the responsible techniques and technologies invisible, but it, further, makes sure to emphasise this circumstance. Performance magic thus illustrates the mode of action of mediality and performs an implicit theorisation of media, which has their negativity at its core. Magic tricks and media are thus grounded in the same epistemic structure.

I.9 Temporal and geographical scope

The magic stage is a dispositif that is always in interaction with other dispositifs and in which diverse cultural-historical topoi become vivid. Insofar as it points beyond itself and conveys knowledge not only about performance magic but also about culture, media, technology, and the history of knowledge, it can be understood as a prism through which we can look at the late nineteenth century. This cultural significance of magic is, on the one hand, established retrospectively through historiography; on the other hand, it was already attributed to magic during its heyday, as magic held up a mirror to its contemporaries that bundled, transformed, and threw back elements of their own turbulent times – material culture, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, technology, media, science, entertainment culture, physiology, psychoanalysis, ethnology, exoticism, spiritualism, gender as well as human-animal relations, and so on. Simon During (2002, 1) points out that, as a cultural agent, performance magic shaped the culture of modernity by providing concepts and content for its self-understanding.

Instead of structuring the history of performance magic on the basis of the biographical careers of individual magicians, as is often done in the (amateur) historiography of magic, this volume focuses on stage illusions. Although illusions cannot be separated from the people who develop, construct, and perform them, these persons and their lives do not stand at the centre of this

study. Instead, each chapter focuses on a grand illusion, with variations added where necessary for the sake of argument. Taken together, these, on the one hand, trace a history of performance magic in the second half of the nineteenth century through some of its most paradigmatic illusions and, on the other hand, function as a lens that opens up a view of a broad cultural and media-historical context.

Magic historians have identified a "golden age" of stage magic around 1900. The exact dates vary slightly from author to author. This volume follows Jim Steinmeyer's (2005a) periodisation, which considers the time between the opening of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in 1845 and the death of Howard Thurston and Charles Carter in 1936. Magician and historian David Price (1985, 59) additionally includes John Henry Anderson's creative period from 1837 onwards. Other authors, such as Mike Caveney (2009) or Edwin Dawes (2007, 109), set a shorter golden age, which begins in the late nineteenth century with the careers of Harry Kellar (1849–1922), the first US-born magician to achieve international fame, and Alexander Herrmann (1844–96). Since these two were primarily influential in the USA, this perspective proves to be North America centric. It further fails to take into account the strong influence of European magic on both these figures: Herrmann, the Paris-born son of a German parlour magician, boasted of having given a thousand performances in Maskelyne and Cooke's magic show in London between 1871 and 1873 before bringing his act to America and achieving outstanding success there.[27] The Egyptian Hall, John N. Maskelyne's magic theatre in London, was also the central source of inspiration for Kellar, who visited it almost every summer. Kellar hired magicians and assistants from Maskelyne's ensemble, copied his taglines, and made several attempts to open a magic theatre by the same name in the USA. Like Kellar and Herrmann, William E. Robinson, one of the most sought-after magic mechanics of the late nineteenth century, who worked for both these rivalling magicians, regularly sought inspiration in Europe. Before that, he worked for the USA's oldest magic shop, Martinka & Co. on New York's 6th Avenue.[28] Here the brothers Francis (Frank) and Antonio Martinka, who had already run a magic shop in their German hometown of Essen for 12 years, manufactured magic apparatus and props from 1875 onwards for amateurs and professional magicians (see Steinmeyer 2005b, 40–3, 82). Their production was based on regular trips to Europe, where they sought, copied, and bought innovations. We know that Robinson, during his employment at Martinka's, visited the workshop of Carl Willmann, a well-known constructor of mechanical devices and metalwork for illusionists in Hamburg, Germany (ibid., 69).

The geographical focus of the present study on Paris, London, and New York City results from this transatlantic influence: If the prehistory of stage magic selected here begins with Robertson's phantasmagoria and its golden age with the opening of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in Paris, its geographical centre shifted to London from the 1870s onwards, when the Egyptian Hall became the primary port of call for Western European and US magicians.[29]

John Nevil Maskelyne and George Alfred Cooke, after performing together as illusionists for eight years (on Maskelyne and Cooke before the opening of Egyptian Hall, see Jenness 1967, 27; Steinmeyer 2005a, 94–8), rented rooms at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly. This was a venue where panoramas and entertainment shows had been presented since 1825: The original Siamese twins Chang and Eng Bunker appeared here in 1829, P. T. Barnum's "General Tom Thumb" in 1844, and the world's largest electromagnet in 1845 (see Altick 1978, 235–52; North 2008, 28). This is where, in 1873, Maskelyne and Cooke opened "England's Home of Mystery," London's first permanent magic theatre, modelled on the Théâtre Robert-Houdin. As a music hall, the Egyptian Hall presented full-length revues featuring not only magic but also acrobatics, juggling, dance, music, comedy, and singing. As in the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, mechanical illusions and (pseudo-)automata took centre stage. Maskelyne and Cooke expanded the narrative illusions introduced by Robert-Houdin into sketches or short magical playlets by combining several illusions through a mostly fantastic and humorous storyline and framing them with other performances.[30]

The concept underlying the magic shows at the Egyptian Hall was inspired by Robert-Houdin's magic theatre. It was later re-imported back to Paris by Georges Méliès, who visited London, and became director of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in 1888. Naturally, Robert-Houdin was himself influenced by the work of various other magicians that preceded him, such as John Henry Anderson. Not least thanks to his skilful self-promotion, Robert-Houdin managed to establish himself as a moderniser of conjuring to such an extent that his short creative period (he performed for only seven years) represents a caesura in magic history. It is, however, important to remember that this is partly due to the circumstance that Robert-Houdin's practices and concepts heavily influenced Maskelyne and Cooke and their shows at the Egyptian Hall had a vast international influence on late nineteenth-century magic. The show model established here was exported to the USA and to the places he travelled to on his world tours by Harry Kellar who visited Maskelyne's magic theatre almost annually between 1875 and 1908. Kellar and Alexander Herrmann's move to the USA made the touring magic show boom in the USA from the 1880s onwards. In any case it is well to remember, constructs such as "golden ages" and their beginning and end dates should be treated with caution, as they try to pinpoint historical processes, which are, in fact, in flux. Such a periodisation, however, makes it easier to open and conduct a discourse about a more or less concrete period of time which was dominated by specific performative and paratextual forms and aesthetics.

I.10 Content and structure

The main part of this volume examines iconic illusions that emerged between 1862 and 1913, variations of which are still performed today. In order to examine stage magic against the background of cultural, knowledge, and

media history, the contextualisations offered here result from the respective illusions themselves. The examples analysed represent some of the most famous illusions of their time as well as paradigmatic innovations with a long-lasting impact that appeared on the magic stage for the first time in this period. A chapter on phantasmagoria shows around 1800 precedes the examinations of nineteenth-century illusions. It is regarded as a technological presentation of something seemingly supernatural in a performance context in which the supernatural was negated as an explanatory possibility. This creates a paradox that is also central to modern magic and that exposes illusionism as a balancing act between an existing illusion and a knowledge that opposes it. The second part of the first chapter connects the phantasmagoria with Jules Verne's novel *The Castle of the Carpathians* (1892). Both the phantasmagoria and Verne's novel blur the boundary between rationality and belief by placing technical media in between as a kind of tipping mechanism – in accordance with the double meaning of the word "medium" as a technical as well as a spiritualist one, these hold the potential for ghostly apparitions as well as that for objectification by technology.

While the illusionistic spectacle in *The Castle of the Carpathians* is created by a mad scientist, the second chapter explores a set-up for a ghostly apparition which originated at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, a popular scientific educational institution in London. The example of "Pepper's Ghost" (1862) accentuates the link between science and performance magic. This paradigmatic mirror illusion was a key stimulus for performance magic and inspired not only further stage illusions but also a range of effects in spiritualism, photography, theatre, and film, fundamentally changing the illusionistic repertoire. Further, this chapter shows that glass and mirror illusions appeared at the same time as industrial glass production – and thus as the entry of glass into modern architecture. Glass and mirrors also turn out to be perfect illusionistic media, as they – ideally – disappear themselves while making something else appear.

The third chapter examines "The Vanishing Lady" (1886) and sets it in relation to the phenomenon of de-spatialisation. The name of this illusion is misleading, in that it does not actually stage a vanish but a teleportation because the disappeared lady reappears in another place in the auditorium. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1986) [1977] has shown, the acceleration of transport in the second half of the nineteenth century due to the railway, among other things, was often not articulated as such, but rather as a shrinking of distances. A change in the perception of space-time also found its expression in the reform of the postal system and in topology, a branch of geometry that emerged at the same time and that neglected metric distances in favour of positional relationships. This new experience entailed by acceleration expressed itself in different contexts – in literature, art, geometry, and, I argue, also on the magic stage, where it was thematised performatively.

Moreover, the experience of travelling through transit locations, deprived of any sensory perception of the distance traversed that was often articulated

in relation to the railway, was a familiar one to magicians around 1900. Most of them, especially in the USA, toured for the longest part of the year and only returned to a permanent residence for the summer. Alexander Herrmann travelled in a private railway carriage (Price 1985, 85);[31] Harry Kellar was touring the world continuously between 1879 and 1884 – with steamships and railways, the latest means of transport. It is against this background that the third chapter interprets the emergence and popularity of teleportation illusions in the late nineteenth century, in which performers seemed to get from A to B in an impossibly short time.

Magicians made use of the latest technologies, materials, and devices. They therefore became mechanics, electrical engineers, as well as radio and film pioneers. For this reason, an excursus, – or called entr'acte, adequate to the performing arts context – is devoted to early film, whose repertoire of effects was exploited by magicians who turned into film pioneers in continuation of their stage activity. This excursus shows how magicians anticipated the advent of cinema and how they contributed to its dissemination by integrating it into their performances, regarding cinema as a new illusionistic technology alongside others. The work of Georges Méliès serves as an example here, whose typical cinematic aesthetics and dramaturgy are to be understood as imports from his magic theatre.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to the levitation, which, like the vanish, seems to attempt to abolish the physicality of the human body. Firstly, it serves as an example through which I examine the interaction between performance magic and modern spiritualism: Magicians publicly positioned themselves as "Enlighteners" who exposed the tricks of fraudulent spiritualists. At the same time, however, they extensively included illusions from séances in their repertories. One of these is the levitation made famous by the medium Daniel Dunglas Home, which, as this chapter shows, had a direct impact on John N. Maskelyne's shows at the Egyptian Hall. This iconic grand illusion thus reveals the influence of spiritualist practices on performance magic.

Secondly, the levitation illustrates the inherent media reflexivity of magic: It creates the impression of weightlessness by means of an extensive, complex steel machinery, which has to become invisible to the audience. This illusion is based on the implicit realisation that media are only effective when they themselves are imperceptible. Moreover, this illusion, too, implements up-to-date technology: If the industrialisation of glass production was the condition of possibility of mirror illusions, the levitation required the steel industry and the technological development of the passenger lift. In the second half of the nineteenth century, people could be seen levitating on a stage for the first time, seemingly moving up and down without support, as if gravity were suspended. The levitation did not imitate the flight of birds, but the movement of a lift. This chapter reveals how levitation illusions developed in parallel with the modern passenger lift, a technical precondition of high-rise buildings. Here, too, a new phenomenon appeared in various cultural fields and created interactions between them.

The latest technology was also employed in some of the mentalism illusions examined in chapter five, which reveal the hidden use of communication devices on stage, whose effects were presented detached from the material apparatus. Here, concealed technical media performed the magical operation of thought transmission – first with the help of sound, then electromagnetism, and later radio waves. These examples reveal how state-of-the-art technology was integrated into this stage illusion, leading to continuous updates over the course of seven decades. At the same time, the technologies employed themselves were charged with magical potential in the cultural imaginary: If telegraphy informed discursive constructions of spiritualist communication practices, the disembodied voices the telephone emitted were associated with acoustic hallucinations, and wireless transmission with telepathy. On the magic stage, these same techniques made "thought transmission" possible. While telegraphy, telephony, and the wireless were associated with voices of the dead, schizophrenia or telepathy, this chapter shows, magicians used these devices to simulate the no less improbable feat of mind-reading on stage. The illusions examined in this chapter therefore particularly illustrate the position of modern performance magic at the crossroads of illusionism, spiritualism, occultism, science, and modern technology.

Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), to which a second excursus, or entr'acte, is devoted, also revolves around this connection. Both in the feature film and in the novel of the same name by Christopher Priest (1995), historical motifs and characters merge with elements of science fiction and create an ambiguity that also characterises performance magic – an oscillation between rationalism and belief in magic, between historicity and fiction.

The stage illusions analysed in this book performatively articulate the theoretical figure addressed by Dieter Mersch as the *negativity of media* (see above). In accordance with this notion, stage effects in magic are presented as detached from their causes and the latter are rendered invisible: In phantasmagoria shows, the projection apparatus disappears into the darkness and/or behind the screen; in mirror illusions, glass plates and mirrors as carrier media become as invisible as the object they reflect; in "The Vanishing Lady," the means of illusionism are not only hidden but their absence is explicitly underscored; in Maskelyne's levitation illusion, the extensive, heavy machinery that creates the impression of weightlessness is made invisible on a brightly lit stage; and in the mind-reading illusions examined in Chapter 5, concrete media technological devices "transmit thoughts."

I.11 Sources, literature, and archives

One of the first problems this research project faced was the mapping of the subject matter itself. To get a precise notion of what was happening on the magic stages of the time, extensive research was necessary, starting with the acquisition of the relevant vocabulary, the magic jargon necessary to navigate this culture. In the search for sources and literature, autobiographies

of magicians proved to be equally illusionistic (see Rein 2017); journalistic texts too scarce and the descriptions they provide too superficial to convey a concrete understanding of the illusions; patent specifications (at least from the late nineteenth century) largely either non-existent or themselves full of deceptive manoeuvres. A fundamental problem with regard to the latter is that patents provide exact instructions for the illusion they describe, complete with a construction plan. Thus, demonstrably, patented illusions were ready to be copied. For instance, illusionist Will B. Woods had the apparatuses for his levitation illusion "Edna" patented in the USA in 1889. His colleague Carl Hertz not only copied this illusion, but he also even obtained patent protection for it himself in Great Britain under his civil name Louis Morgenstein, and, what is more, he did so using drawings and texts taken from Woods' patent specification (Booth 1980, 108; Teale 1929, 529).

As a result of such practices, many magicians either refrained from patenting their illusions altogether or included descriptions that were incorrect or too inaccurate to reconstruct the apparatus described – a practice that extended the illusionism beyond the stage. For example, John N. Maskelyne, who waived patent protection for most of his illusions, applied for a British patent for his whist-playing pseudo-automaton "Psycho" (see Figure I.1) in 1875, jointly with John A. Clarke – with a description that specifies a fictitious mode of operation (see Gaughan and Steinmeyer 1987, 25). In an interview, he noted that this was a common practice in magic books before Prof. Hoffmann's seminal publication *Modern Magic* (1876) appeared: "They either explained nothing worth knowing or gave false explanations" (Lewis 1895, 74). As an alternative to patenting, Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss) had at least two of his illusions, "The Chinese Water Torture Cell" and "Walking Through a Brick Wall," protected by copyright as plays. In order to be able to do so, the former was performed once as a one-act play called *Houdini Upside Down* before an audience of one in Southampton (see Silverman 1996, 164, 193).

Despite their own publishing activity, magicians continue to maintain secrecy concerning their methods. This does not only happen off-stage, for example, when memberships in magicians' associations are required to dedicate to keep methods secret from non-magicians. As this study shows, magic is primarily based on the fact that its methods are made to disappear in the performance. For the historiography of magic, this means, firstly, that access to detail about illusions is sometimes difficult or impossible to gain. Perhaps because of this imperative of secrecy, a comprehensive, systematic corpus of magicians' literature only emerged with the formation of associations, the first of which was founded by Carl Willmann in Hamburg in 1899. These began to systematically collect and print knowledge about performance magic in their periodicals. The oldest magicians' trade journal predates associations: *Mahatma* appeared in the USA beginning in 1895. These published reviews that are rich in detail and provide ample information about illusions. However, they commonly circulated only among members of the respective associations and are therefore not easily accessible. Magic trade journals from 1900

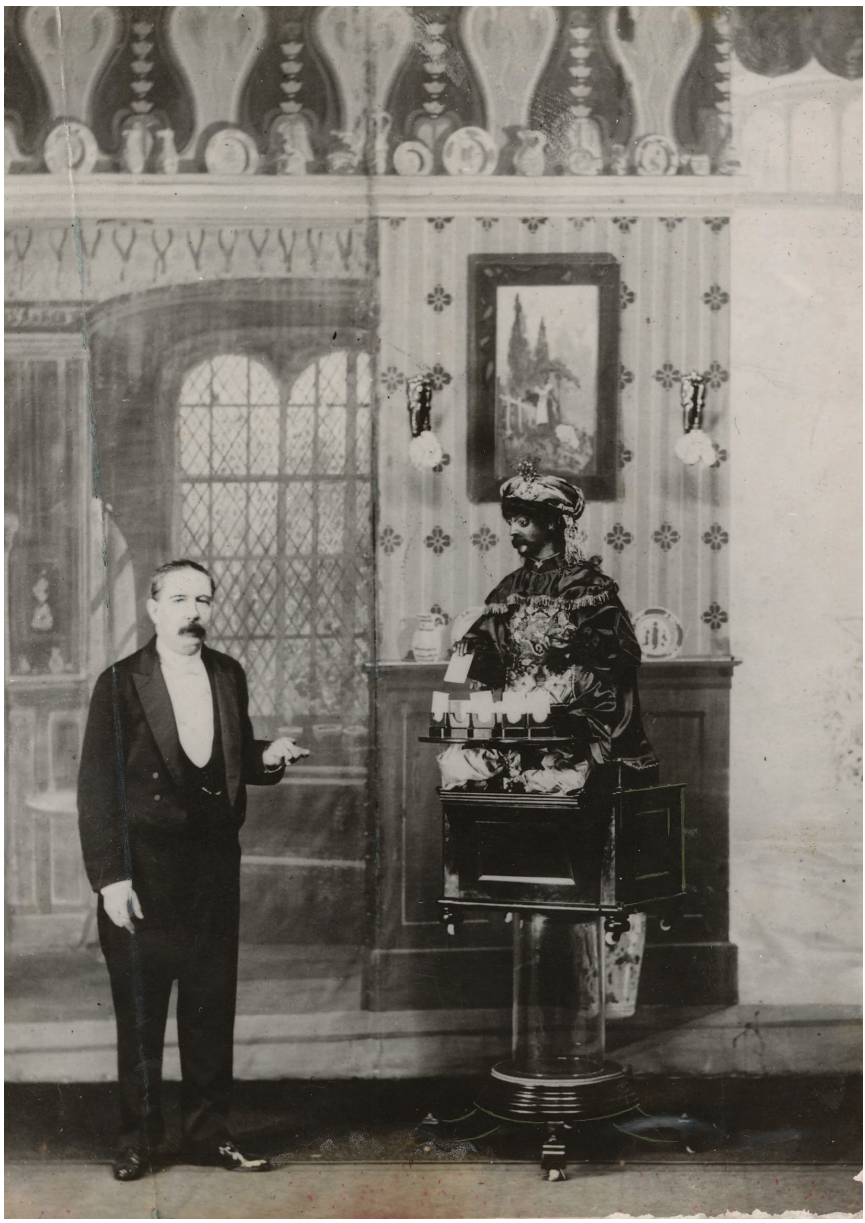

Figure I.1 John Nevil Maskelyne and his Whist-playing (pseudo-)automaton "Psycho." Photo courtesy of The Magic Circle Archives, London.

are not usually available in public or university libraries. For this research project, therefore, consultations of the libraries of magicians' associations were necessary.

Secondly, this project faced the challenge of transforming the epistemological negativity of magic into a historiographic positivity. In doing so, the uncovering of illusionistic stage techniques alone cannot be the aim of the investigation. Not only would no magic club have let me into their library if this had been my goal, but it has also already been done in an abundance of literature available there. The overwhelming mass of publications on the history of magic was and is penned by magicians, collectors, or amateur historians such as David Price, Sidney W. Clarke, Milbourne Christopher, Mike Caveney, Henry R. Evans or Edwin A. Dawes, or designers of stage illusions such as Jim Steinmeyer. Such historiographies are of great value but they usually pursue a different interest than that of a scholarly analysis in the field of cultural history and media studies such as this one. Michael Mangan (2007, xvii) calls authors such as the ones named above proto-historians, i.e., "antiquarians, in that eighteenth-century sense of collectors of books and artefacts from the past." Such authors do valuable historical groundwork, they offer a stupendous knowledge of the art and its history, the savoir-faire of stage illusionists and illusion designers, or the ambition of passionate collectors. So there is indeed an extensive corpus of histories of magic, but there is little in terms of integrating these into academic discourses and linking them to aspects of the history of culture, knowledge, and media – a gap this publication strives to begin to fill.

Academic publications examining illusions in the broadest sense include, for example, Ernst H. Gombrich's standard work on art theory, *Art and Illusion* (1960), or Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky's philosophical-historical study, *Praktiken der Illusion* (2007). Few academic monographs are devoted specifically to performance magic around 1900. In the English-speaking world, the academic literature is considerably more extensive than in the German language. There are several doctoral dissertations such as Susan McCosker's *Representative Performances of Stage Magic 1650–1900* (1982), Fred Siegel's *The Vaudeville Conjuring Act* (1993), both from New York University, and William Houstoun's *Hoffmann's Modern Magic. The Rise of Victorian Conjuring* (2014) from the University of Essex. Further academic publications that provide a relevant historico-cultural contextualisation of the subject include the marvellous works of Peter Lamont and Graham M. Jones, Chris Goto-Jones' excellent *Conjuring Asia* (2016), Matthew L. Tompkins' *The Spectacle of Illusion* (2019) as well as James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception* (2001), which is devoted to various illusions in the nineteenth century, and Simon During's *Modern Enchantments* (2002), which examines conjuring between the sixteenth and the late nineteenth centuries. In addition to psychological monographs such as Lamont and Richard Wiseman's *Magic in Theory* (2008), Eugene Burger and Robert Neale's *Meaning and Magic* (1995) provides a popular philosophical study, and Michael Mangan's *Performing Dark Arts* (2007) a historico-cultural one.

A number of film scholars approached performance magic in the late nineteenth century from a different perspective: Matthew Solomon's *Disappearing*

Tricks (2010) offers a history from Robert-Houdin's magic theatre to 1920s cinema, with a focus on the film-making activity of two famous magicians of their time: Georges Méliès and Harry Houdini; Dan North's *Performing Illusions* (2008) examines cinematic special effects as a continuation of stage illusions and their mode of reception and as a precursor to today's computer-generated effects as well as intermedial paratexts; and several essays by Tom Gunning examine performance magic in the late nineteenth century in the context of cinema as well as other aspects of culture and literature. Colleagues with a focus on gender studies have also produced a few studies on performance magic, such as Karen Redrobe Beckman's monograph *Vanishing Women* (2003), which includes a chapter on the stage illusion "The Vanishing Lady." The US-American journal *Early Popular Visual Culture* has published a number of essays on the art of magic in the "golden age" since 2003, most notably issue 5/2 of July 2007, which focuses on "Magic and Illusion," and the 2018 special issue edited by Matthew Solomon and Joe Culpepper on "The Golden Age of Stage Conjuring, 1880–1930." Other relevant works cannot be mentioned here for reasons of space but they will be referenced throughout this book. There is still a lot of work to be done when it comes to examining performance magic in the second half of the nineteenth century from the perspective of cultural and media studies.

I.12 "Trick" and "truth"

The historical model for the "very bad wizard" in Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* seems to have been Harry Kellar, the most successful US-American magician at the time the book was written (see Felderer and Strouhal 2007c, 481). A resemblance between Kellar, whom the author probably met in Los Angeles, and the Wizard of Oz in the illustrations created by William Wallace Denslow for the first edition cannot be denied. Famous for his temper, Kellar was not, by all accounts, an outstanding magician in terms of manual dexterity and originality. He seems to have had fleshy fingers that complicated the performance of close-up illusions – he remedied this impediment by using specially made, skin-coloured tweezer-like inserts that allowed for a precise grip on cards and coins (see Steinmeyer 2005a, 168; Steinmeyer 2005b, 88–9). Kellar's enormous success, despite this fact, speaks to his outstanding skills as an entertainer and a businessman. His posters are among the most copied in the industry and his spontaneous, humorous impromptu performances in public places are legendary (see Cook 2001, 208–13). In addition to a talent for marketing and publicity, he had a keen sense for crowd-pleasing productions and illusions, which he bought or copied from other magicians and then performed all over the world.

Analogous to Kellar, whose card tricks depended on gadgets and whose reputation was based on brilliant marketing, the famous Wizard of Oz turns out to be a "false wizard" (Baum 1900, 189). The illusionism becomes evident as soon as we enter the Emerald City, whose famous green glow, as

it turns out, results from everyone inside the city walls being required to wear green-glazed glasses (ibid., 117–22).[32] The magician's manifestations are unmasked as magic lantern and sound effects, his throne room is a mechanised media theatre. However, he nevertheless fulfils the wishes of Dorothy and her friends because, like the magician in Marcel Mauss' concept cited above, he understands that magic is first and foremost a societal function and a symbolic act whose effect depends on being believed in. The Wizard fills the Scarecrow's head with a mixture of bran and needles, creating a heavier weight that suggests more meaning; he inserts a silk heart filled with sawdust into the Tin Woodman's chest and visualises its presence with a patch; he gives the Cowardly Lion a "bowl of courage" to drink. He thereby empowers these characters to believe in themselves and enables them to use the resources that were available to them all along. When the Wizard tries to take Dorothy back to Kansas in his hot air balloon, it breaks loose and disappears into the clouds before she can board. Dorothy gets home anyway, after Glinda, the Good Witch of the North reveals to her that she, too, has unknowingly had the magic she needed all along – because unlike in the "civilized countries" (ibid., 24), in Oz, there is still real magic. Wearing the silver (in the film: ruby) slippers of the wicked witch she killed, Dorothy only needs to click her heels together, and utter a wish to see it instantly granted.

Just as the Lion was brave, the Tin Woodman emotional and the Scarecrow wise even before the Wizard of Oz made them aware of this through symbolic actions, Dorothy too, unknowingly, already had everything she needed. By fulfilling his societal role, the Wizard levels the difference between the magician and the humbug. The Emerald City is not made of emerald, but for those who live there as well as for those who visit it, there is no difference between a green city and one that only appears to be green. "[M]y people have worn green glasses on their eyes so long," the Wizard explains, "that most of them think it really is an Emerald City, and it certainly is a beautiful place, abounding in jewels and precious metals, and every good thing that is needed to make one happy" (ibid., 188).

According to Natascha Adamowsky (2007, 114–5), "the fact that this important difference between 'trick' and 'truth', or in other words: between fiction and reality, is eliminated in the moment of experience"[33] is not only the point of spiritualist séances and illusionist media effects but also of all mediality. For Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion as well as for the inhabitants of Oz, effects of "real" magic are just as indistinguishable from illusions as they are for spectators of phantasmagoria or magic performances.

> Oz, left to himself, smiled to think of his success in giving the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Lion exactly what they thought they wanted. "How can I help being a humbug," he said, "when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can't be done?"
>
> (Baum 1900, 199)

Notes

1 In Fleming's cinematic adaptation, Toto, rather than knocking over a screen, pulls open a curtain, which references the theatre rather than the cinema.
2 In Baum's (1900, 186–7) book, the Wizard recounts his past as a ventriloquist and balloonist who ascended near fairgrounds as a publicity stunt to attract audiences. The film *Oz, the Great and Powerful*, conceived as a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*, explicitly identifies him as a fairground illusionist.
3 This is also due to agreements with magic associations, which generously opened the doors of their libraries for me during the research for this work.
4 Original quotes:

> Sie [Kulturtechniken] können als Techniken beschrieben warden, mit deren Hilfe gleichsam symbolische Arbeit verrichtet wird. Als Kulturtechniken sind sie (erstens) der Möglichkeit nach selbstreferentiell: […] Ein zweites charakteristisches Merkmal der Kulturtechniken ist deren Kontextneutralität. […] Selbstreferentielle Kulturtechniken zeichnen sich (drittens) darin aus, dass sie Medien brauchen und generieren.;
>
> transl.: KR.

5 For a further exploration of the concept of productive illusions across disciplines see Rein (2021).
6 On magic and Christian orthodoxy see Mangan (2007, 19–30).
7 Original quote: "Requisiten, Instrumente und Körper"; transl.: KR.
8 Original quote: "die Magie – genau wie die Wissenschaft", [davon ausgehe], "dass gleiche Ursachen immer gleiche Wirkungen hervorbringen werden."; transl.: KR.
9 Original quote: "dass sich die Technik […] als eigenständiges und anerkanntes Kulturgebiet von Mythos und Religion emanzipiert hat"; transl.: KR.
10 Original quote: "die Innenwelt und die Mitwelt nach dem technisch erschlossenen Prinzip der Außenwelt, dem Kausalitätsprinzip, aufgebaut, konstruiert werden, nämlich sowohl gedanklich wie auch als Gegenstände technischer Manipulation."; transl.: KR.
11 Original quote: "Die moderne technische Entwicklung des Abendlandes ist also das Ergebnis eines einzigartigen historisch-gesellschaftlichen Rationalisierungsprozesses, der Wirtschaft, Recht, Kultur, Lebensführung, Religion und nicht zuletzt Ökonomie einschließt."; transl.: KR.
12 Original quote: "jenseitige oder phantastische Interessen"; transl.: KR.
13 Joseph Pinetti was the first magician to perform on theatre stages, in the late eighteenth century in London and Paris (During 2002, 92).
14 See for instance Cook (2001), Lachapelle (2008), or Nadis (2005) on several of these art forms; Connor (2000) or Krivanec (2015) on ventriloquism. In addition, there are media-technical optical illusions, which are examined, for example, in Altick (1978) or Huhtamo (2013), as well as a comprehensive discourse on spiritualism, which Simone Natale, among others, has analysed extensively (see for instance Natale 2016).
15 The names of individual illusions are sometimes difficult to pin down. Specific names have been established for many, but copies or variations have usually been renamed, which is why in many cases there are as many different names for an illusion as there were magicians performing variations of it. In this volume, I use the terms that I encountered most frequently in the literature on magic.
16 When these locks were replaced, a member of the Magic Circle rescued one from disposal. It has since been on display in the Magic Circle Museum in London.
17 From here on, I would like to avoid the term "assistant" in favour of "(co-)performer" because it diminishes the (often female) performers' contribution

to the show. The staging of a hierarchy between magician and assistant can be recognised as an element of a patriarchal power structure that negates female labour and talent.

18 The cast of the magical sketch in which this illusion was performed, *The Enchanted Fakir*, can be found in a programme of the Egyptian Hall; V&A Collections, Department of Theatre and Performance.

19 A performance like this was recorded for the tv show *The Magic of ABC* in 1977, in which the singer and actress Marie Osmond appears as a guest and cuts Copperfield in two parts. When the box is removed in the end, instead of Copperfield, her brother emerges from it.

20 Original quotes: "Ihre [der Medien] Bestimmung erscheint chronisch prekär", "[…] [changiert] zwischen Materialien, physikalischen Eigenschaften, Technologien oder sozialen Funktionen"; transl.: KR.

21 Original quote: "jede Art des Trägers, Boten oder Kanals, als vermittelndes Element zur Weitergabe und Verbreitung von Bedeutungen, Informationen und Botschaften"; transl.: KR.

22 Original quote: "Die Wahrnehmung erfordert die Medialität eines anderen Elements, das allerdings weder der Wahrnehmende noch der wahrgenommene Gegenstand sein kann"; transl.: KR.

23 Original quotes: "Platzhalter einer Übertragung" (80); "verweigert sich der Vermittlung, Transgression, Übertragung oder Transformation" (79), "funktionieren desto effektiver, Je *unauffälliger* sie *als* Medien sind"; transl.: KR, emphasis in the original.

24 Original quote: "blinden Fleck im Mediengebrauch"; transl.: KR.

25 Original quote:

> Medien wirken wie Fensterscheiben: Sie werden ihrer Aufgabe um so besser gerecht, je durchsichtiger sie bleiben, je unauffälliger sie unterhalb der Schwelle unserer Aufmerksamkeit verharren. Nur im Rauschen, das aber ist in der Störung oder gar im Zusammenbrechen ihres reibungslosen Dienstes, bringt das Medium selbst sich in Erinnerung. Die unverzerrte Botschaft hingegen macht das Medium nahezu unsichtbar.;
>
> transl.: KR

26 Original quote: "Doppelfigur eines Erscheinens im Verschwinden und eines Verschwindens im Erscheinen" (20), "stupenden Bezug auf ein Rätsel oder ein Undarstellbares" (21); transl.: KR.

27 A poster advertising Herrmann's appearance at the Egyptian Hall in 1872 can be found in the London Metropolitan Archives (Ephemera from the Egyptian Hall, 57).

28 The shop still exists and is now located in Midland Park, New Jersey. Recent clients have included David Copperfield, Woody Allen, and Penn & Teller.

29 This is not to say that the Théâtre Robert-Houdin was forgotten with the increasing importance of London. It existed until the 1910s and experienced a second heyday from 1888 under its last director Georges Méliès (see the entr'acte on early film in this volume).

30 On the magic sketch, see Devant (1931, 67). He describes some sketches here, e.g., on 80–4. There are also some screenplays reproduced in the appendix (228–80).

31 Herrmann also died in this private car during a tour in 1896 (Price 1985, 86).

32 The film adaptation does not feature this illusion. Here, Oz is actually green.

33 Original quote: "dass ausgerechnet diese wichtige Differenz zwischen 'Trick' und 'Wahrheit', oder anders gewendet: zwischen Fiktion und Realität, im Moment des Erlebens vergleichgültigt wird."; transl.: KR.

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