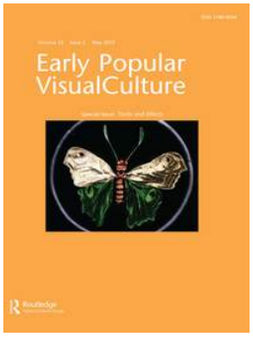

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The 'magism' of cinema and imaginary spiritism in France at the beginning of the twentieth century

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This article examines how cinema was considered a magic tool by French imaginary spiritism, thus influencing views on 'new' technologies around 1900. In fact many contemporaries considered the magic of cinema in terms of infinite technical potential, evocative power and affinities with the world of the invisible and mental life. While several scholars have analyzed the idea of the cinema as a 'haunted machine', less has been said about the historical relationships between cinema and spiritism – an area allowing us to study the reciprocal exchanges that go beyond their apparent incompatibilities. With the support of primary sources describing the spirit medium as a machine that projects images (and sometimes sounds) onto a mind screen, as well as texts that consider the spectator as a sort of telepath endowed with great sensitivity, it is possible to observe how the spiritualistic séance affected the codification of cinema as a cultural practice. But while spectrality appears as a framework through which the specificity of the experience of cinema is understood, spiritism in turn reveals a stage and an imaginary full of technology that are indicative of epistemological functions assigned to audiovisual devices. Exchanges between spiritism, magic and cinema should thus be considered as a continuous flow of concepts and ideas at a time when popular and scientific imagination was as fascinated by modern technology as by the 'archaic' world of occultism.

Keywords: early cinema; trick films; spiritism; magic; technology

In December 1894, an advertisement in the *Revue scientifique de l'occultisme* triumphantly announced the publication of an article about a new discovery by Edison: a device designed for telepathic communication[1]. Written by the French poet, playwright, journalist and essayist Gustave-Fabius de Champville, then editor of the *Revue*, the article in fact compares telepathy to a process of electrical communication between two 'sympathetic' individuals. The apparatus in question is then a mere fantasy reflecting the imaginary of the time influenced by psychical research. While Thomas Alva Edison was interested in the powers of the mind, as is clear from the experiments he carried out in the 1910s with the supposed mentalist W. Bert Reese (Marshall 1910; 'Expériences d'Edison' 1916), his investigations concerning the possibility of communicating with the dead provide us with an opportunity for examining a new set of connections between magic, media and spiritualism. The idea is to study the interaction between cinema as a cultural practice and psychical sciences in order to show that this interaction was two-way with each field determined by each other.

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This article focuses on the magic of cinema and its special effects on the spectator, in the cultural context of spiritism where technology is used to claim technical proof of the existence of paranormal phenomena. Through the spiritist phenomenology and its cultural imaginary, it is possible to see how contemporaries considered the 'magism' of cinema – namely its infinite technical potential, its evocative power, as well as its affinities with the world of the invisible and inner. With the support of primary sources describing the spirit medium as a machine that projects images onto a mind screen, as well as occurrences that consider the spectator as a sort of telepath endowed with a great sensitivity, it is possible to observe how the séance affected the codification of the experience of cinema.

Rapidly becoming commonplace in discourses on cinema, the spectrality of the screen stands out as defining the medium, like dreams or hypnosis which also helped to strengthen the interpretation of cinema as a haunted technology, capable of giving access to the world of the invisible. From the early projections, observers raised the question whether cinema was a 'ghost machine',[2] as for instance the French critic Jules Claretie, who declared in 1896:

> And will this marvelous cinema, which renders us the specter of the living, also give us, allowing to preserve their ghost, and their gestures, and their tone of voice even, the gentleness and caresses of deceased loved ones? (Claretie, in Banda & Moure 2008, 43)

In a darker version, in the same year, Maxime Gorki sees the cinema show as a realm of shadows inhabited by beings deprived of life, voices, and colors, reminiscent of 'ghosts, of the wicked and cursed charmers that immerse entire cities into sleep' (Gorki 2006, 115). In 1897, a short note in the scientific journal *La Nature* suggests to readers the possibility of creating 'spiritist cinematographies' that extend the field of moving pictures to the sphere 'of the unreal and incomprehensible' by using the double exposure trick (*La Nature*, 'Cinématographies spirites' 1897, 350).

Many primary sources therefore note the affinities between the cinema and the supernatural, the 'féeries' (trick films) of Georges Méliès playing on the ghostly potential of the medium. But while spectrality is a cultural framework through which the specificity of the experience of cinema is understood, spiritism in turn provides a stage and an imaginary full of technology indicative of the epistemological functions assigned at the time to audiovisual devices.

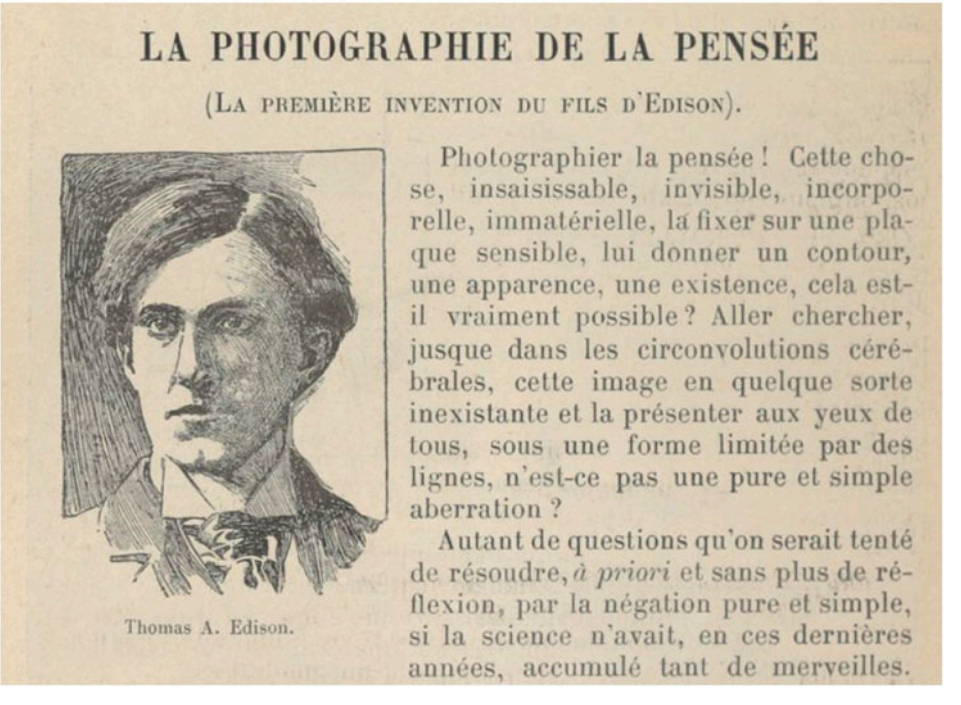
To show how the spiritist imaginary invests the field of cinema through magic, and vice versa, we propose to recontextualize some epistemological nexus formed around the magic of audiovisual technology. More precisely, we will examine two theoretical figures that reflect this imaginary: the 'medium-cinematographer' who projects mental activity onto a psychic screen, and the 'spectator-telepath' who develops a new sensibility made possible through modern technology such as the cinematograph. Exchanges between spiritism, magic and cinema should thus be considered as a continuous flow of concepts and ideas at a time when people were as fascinated by modern technology as by the 'archaic' world of occultism.

'Magism' and audiovisual technology

In France, at the turn of the twentieth century, it is common to read spiritualist sources that marvel at the advances in technology, which are seen as proof of

the validity of parapsychic phenomena. In an article titled 'The Magism', Gustave-Fabius de Champville (mentioned above) invites readers to wonder at the workings of the human psyche, such as the phonograph that operates as the 'driver agent' of 'intellectual waves' between two minds (De Champville 1894, 24). According to this idea, the phonograph is taken as material evidence of the existence of telepathy, and not only as a pure analogy or metaphor. From the beginning, modern technology is regularly celebrated for its 'magical' virtues. And this both because of the evidence it provides (the 'trick' is 'simple,' says Champville) and its mystery (it mimics, compensates for and immortalizes the human body and mind, which are themselves seen as wonderful).

In 1895, De Champville announces the discovery by Edison of an 'invention of the imagination to allow the recording of thought' (De Champville 1895, 121) and therefore make concrete what he calls 'the phenomenon of electrical sympathy' (De Champville 1895, 121–122). We know that from 1893 Edison's son was spreading information about the invention of a technique enabling thoughts to be captured through photography (Caze 1898; Naudet 1898). This project is discussed in an article published in *La Revue des revues* in which a certain Dr. L. Caze exclaims: 'Photographing thought! This elusive, invisible, intangible, immaterial thing, fixing it on a sensitive plate, giving it an outline, an appearance, an existence, is it really possible?' (Caze 1898, 438). Convinced of the existence of a mental phenomenon of retinal persistence, Edison junior hoped to be able to use a special device to record photographic evidence of a thought that would focus 'in the strongest and most tenacious way possible' (Caze 1898, 441) (Figure 1). Other researchers during



LA PHOTOGRAPHIE DE LA PENSÉE

(La première invention du fils d'Edison).

Thomas A. Edison.

Photographier la pensée ! Cette chose, insaisissable, invisible, incorporelle, immatérielle, la fixer sur une plaque sensible, lui donner un contour, une apparence, une existence, cela est-il vraiment possible ? Aller chercher, jusque dans les circonvolutions cérébrales, cette image en quelque sorte inexistante et la présenter aux yeux de tous, sous une forme limitée par des lignes, n'est-ce pas une pure et simple aberration ?

Autant de questions qu'on serait tenté de résoudre, *à priori* et sans plus de réflexion, par la négation pure et simple, si la science n'avait, en ces dernières années, accumulé tant de merveilles.

Figure 1. La Photographie de la pensée (*La Revue des revues* 24, January 1898).

the nineteenth century pursued this same dream. They included Hippolyte Baraduc who was also interested in recording psychic emanations and thoughts (Bonnaymé 1908) through photography and its special side effects named 'psychicônes'. In these instances, technology works on behalf of a fantasy of omniscience inspired by the discoveries of modern science, to which contemporaries assign magical properties.

Edison senior, meanwhile, had been interested in psychical sciences since as early as the 1870s, as shown in his personal notes and work documents, in the testimonies of friends and collaborators and in the contents of his library (Edison 1878/1998, 136; Nye 1983, 151). In 1878, for instance, his papers note contacts with members of the Theosophical Society founded in New York in 1875 by Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky. The society's aim was to investigate latent psychic and spiritual powers in all human beings in a spirit of brotherhood and Universalist ideology. It seems he joined the Society in April 1878 because of his interest in occult forces and the means of detecting them[3], but that this interaction was limited to the sale of a phonograph. In 1920 Edison went public with his research concerning a device – the 'necrophone' – that would enable spirits to communicate with the living. He had apparently carried out this research decades earlier, but the death of a close associate, William Walter Dinwiddie, would have helped to revive it (Baudoin 2014, 2015).[4] The inventor then tells a reporter from the *American Magazine* that it is possible to design a tool sensitive enough 'to enable those who have left this earth to communicate with those of us who are still on the earth'. This invention would replace the 'methods and apparatus commonly used and discussed', which 'are just a lot of unscientific nonsense', declares Edison (Forbes 1920, 82). It would allow personalities living in another sphere to express themselves more efficiently than with other mediumistic devices (Edison 1921; Forbes 1920; Lescarboura 1920). On 15 January 1921, the illustrated magazine, *Je sais tout* published a French translation of this interview, entitled 'Ceux de l'au-delà. Pourquoi je cherche à communiquer avec eux' (Edison 1921) in which he declares: 'If the device I build could be a channel, entering freely into the unknown world, we would have made a big step towards Supreme Intelligence.'[5]

I borrow the term 'necrophone' from a little novella by De Quirielle published in 1928 in *Lectures pour tous*, in which an old scientist builds an acoustic apparatus through which he can enable 'those one would not expect' to express themselves – such as, in this story, a man killed during World War I (Figure 2). Skeptical about the ability of mediums to get in touch with the dead, Edison nevertheless believed in the possibility of creating tools that would enable spirits to manifest themselves to the living if they so desired. In an interview with the French journal *Floréal*, Edison stated:

> I maintain that it is possible to build an apparatus so delicate that if there is another existence or sphere of personalities who desire to enter into contact with us, this device will provide them with a better means of expressing themselves than table-turning, mediums and other crude methods which pass for their exclusive means of communication. (Allengry 1921, 912)

In the French translation of the work *Diary and Sundry Observations of Thomas Alva Edison* (published posthumously in 1948), we can read a chapter entitled 'Le Royaume de l'au-delà' ('The Kingdom of the Beyond') in which he developed a

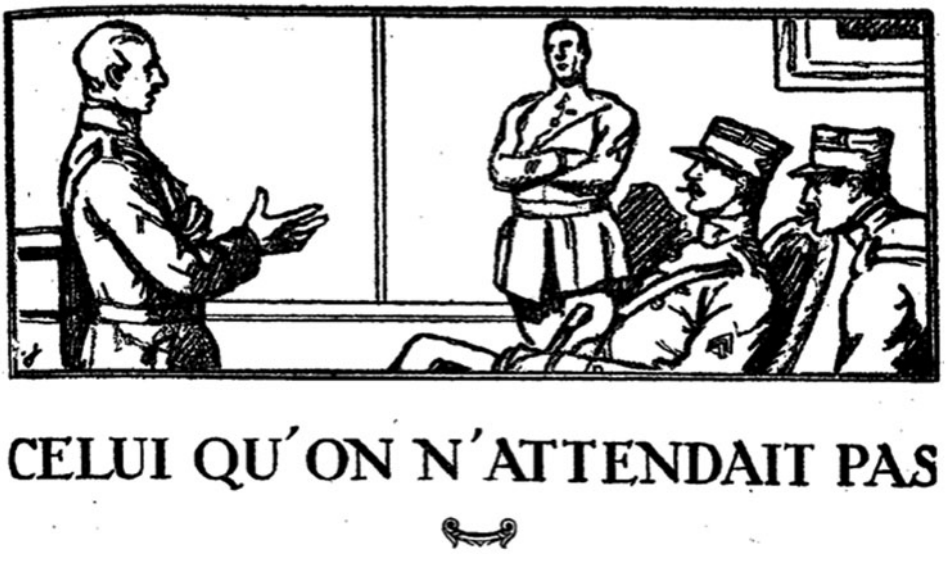


Figure 2. *Floréal* (39, 24 September 1921).

lengthy theory on the survival of the personality after death (Edison 1949; see also Townsend 1923). His device would be capable of detecting the words of this personality transformed into what he called 'living units' that vibrate and disperse through the ether. The principle of this machine is based on a kind of valve designed to amplify all energy, however small (Edison 1949, 221), suggesting the working of the phonograph designed to amplify sound vibrations (Figure 3). As Philippe Baudoin puts it, Edison's investigations draw on the metaphysics of vibrations, a notion that occupied a significant place in the main scientific advances at the end of the nineteenth century (Baudoin 2014, 2015). The theory according to which the universe is floating in an invisible ether in turn supports the idea that all these psychic phenomena would be, in essence, vibrations of variable frequencies imperceptible to humans (Milutis 2006). The fact that new reproduction techniques such as photography, phonography, cinematography and wireless telegraphy are considered as means of recording these extra-sensory vibrations allows for all sorts of speculation as to their possible application within the framework of psychic research and spiritualist séances. Even if Edison's approach does not at all stem from any spiritualist belief, we notice that much of his research shares common ground with parapsychological sciences. Thus, it is no wonder Edison's machines greatly inspired mediums who would use 'spirit trumpets' taken from the pavilion of the phonograph. Used during séances to ease the appearance and amplification of ectoplasm phenomena and direct voice channeled by the medium's electric fluid (Doyle 2013, 426), these aluminum cones can be regarded as tools aimed to produced special effects, namely, fake ghosts. As such, these instruments appear to enhance audience's illusion of reality and astonishment, relying on her gullibility.

Beyond the statement on the proximity of official and occult sciences, it may also be useful to recall the historical context of 1920 in order to provide new insights into this uncanny invention. One cannot but wonder whether Edison had not thought of getting in on a new market likely to interest millions of people left

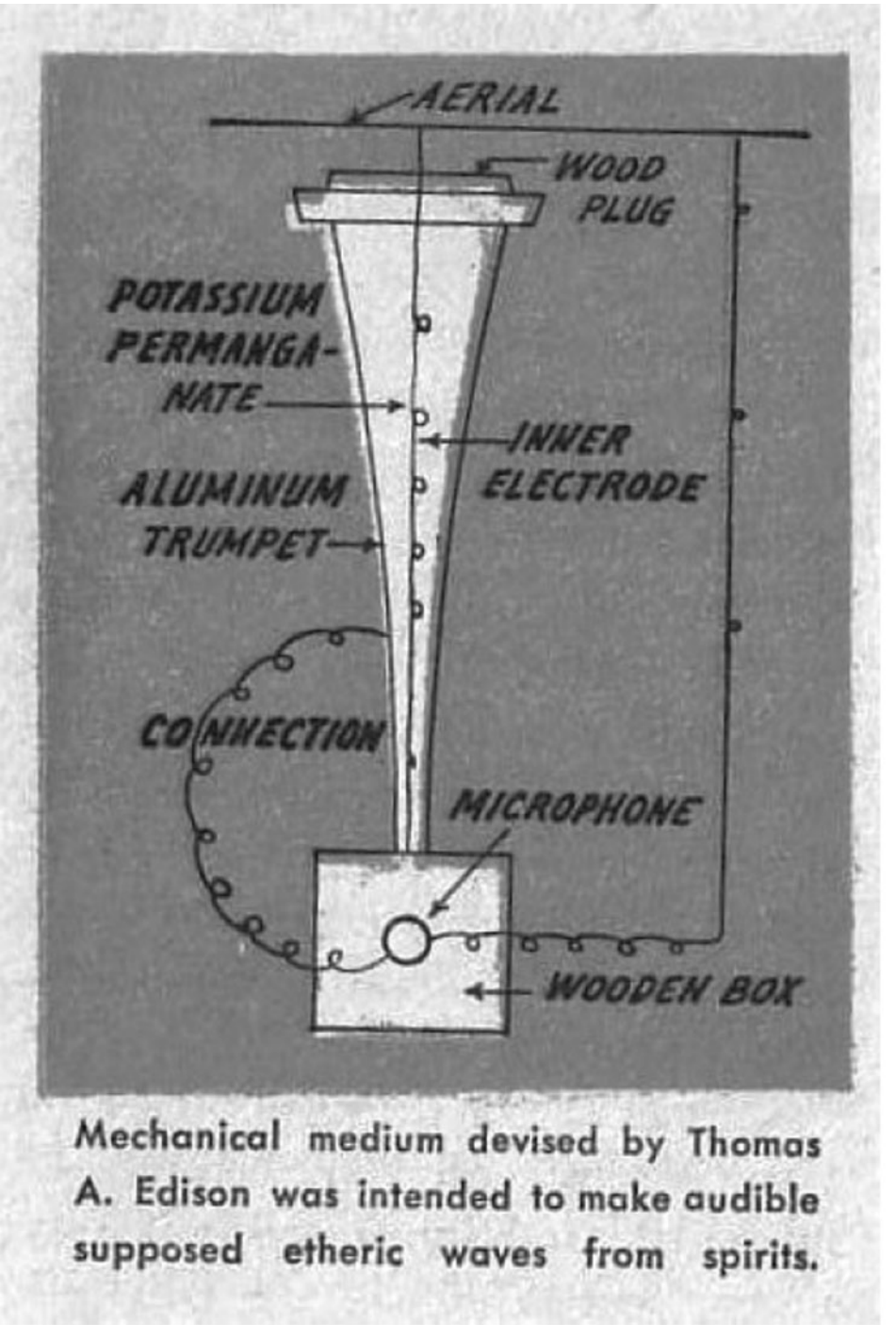
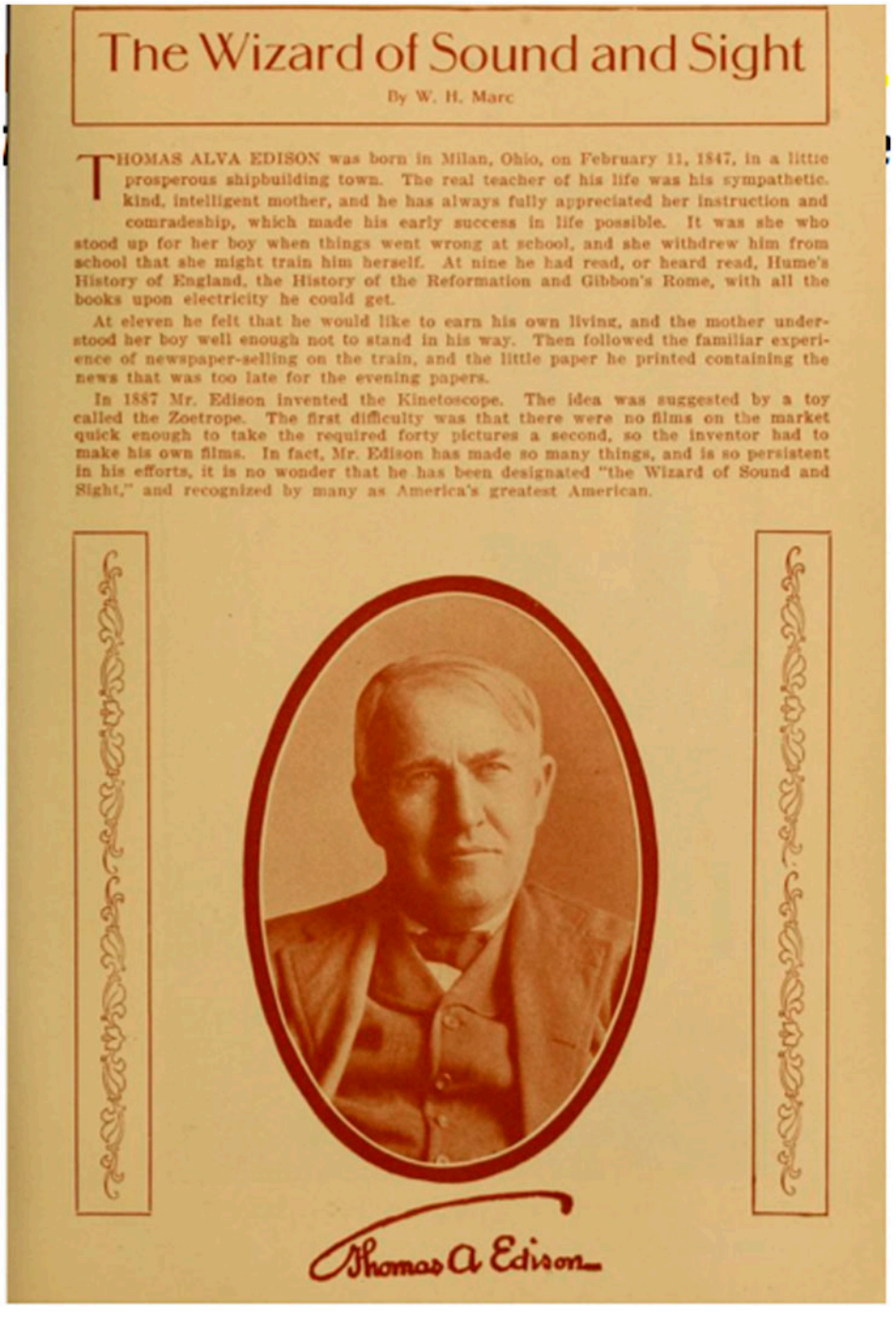


Figure 3. A retrospective reconstitution of the Edison's necrophone. *Fate Magazine*, April 1963.

bereaved by World War I. Indeed, when questioned by a reporter from the *New York Times*, he said he was concerned about providing answers to those who have lost family or friends in the war (Rothman 1921). Jean de Quirielle's novel is based on that exact premise: a sort of mad scientist builds a device that allows a soldier killed in World War I to communicate with his wife and to give his blessing to her wedding with an officer freshly met. Proving the great phantasmal potential of the necrophone, this project indicates to what extent Edison was at once an inventor, a showman, a keen businessman and a miracle-worker. The press constantly emphasized his sorcery and magical skills, implicitly linking him with the best spirit mediums able to challenge the limits of the possible. His name and inventive verve are regularly associated with the realm of magic, including in the field of cinema, as shown in the *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (Marc 1911), which uses the lexical field of witchcraft in reference to his work in the area of image and sound recording (Figure 4). We also find this isotopy of witchcraft and magic related to Edison in the title of one of the volumes of *Papers of Thomas A. Edison*: 'The Wizard of Menlo Park' (Edison 1998).

No trace has been found of this device, no drawing or prototype; all that is left to us are the testimonies of some of those close to him, public statements in newspapers and a chapter in his memoirs. However, Edison's efforts led him to invent audiovisual apparatus that could be considered updates of the 'ghost machine' he never made. Or, in other words, instead of creating the necrophone, Edison invented the kinetoscope, the kinetophone, the phonograph and other sound and vision reproduction devices. (Remember his parapsychological experiments began at the end of the nineteenth century.) Cinematography can be considered as an instrument that produces ghostly presence thanks to the specials means of modern technology (camera speed, superimpositions of various kind, scene dissection, shot transition, camera movements, etc.), but also through ghost narratives. Filmic language is particularly suitable for the representation of ghost figures as illustrated by films like *Photographing a Ghost* (G.A. Smith 1897) which uses double exposure: 'The ghost is perfectly transparent so that the furniture, etc., can be seen through his body' (Smith's catalog description in Chanan 1996, 227). As Chanan puts it, trick films are equally inspired by traditional magical arts as by 'the panoply of scientific and technology marvels of the times' (Chanan 1996, 227).

If Edison's research in electrical technology and psychical sciences reflect a common interest in voice, body and their electrical doubles, the phonograph and the cinematograph in return reveal the spectral dimensions of modern devices. In fact, Edison considered the phonograph essentially a technique for preserving the voice of loved ones after they pass away and as a means of bringing them back indefinitely[6]. By giving the human body and voice an electrical dimension, Edison was participating in a wider movement of increasing spectral manifestations made possible by modern media. The phonograph and movie shows both dismissed conscious mediation (at the same time enabling the subconscious to infiltrate perception), and instituted the '*déliaison*' (disconnection) of the body from its voice and image which thus become autonomous, producing uncanny effects readily related to the paranormal field. By *déliaison*, I am borrowing from Alain Boillat's work on voice-over in cinema (Boillat 2007), spiritualism being quite saturated with voice-overs and operators who guide the séances. As Edison's necrophone shows, modern communication techniques have not caused ghosts to disappear; on the contrary, they have amplified them, multiplying the opportunities for specters to haunt our



The Wizard of Sound and Sight

By W. H. Marc

THOMAS ALVA EDISON was born in Milan, Ohio, on February 11, 1847, in a little prosperous shipbuilding town. The real teacher of his life was his sympathetic, kind, intelligent mother, and he has always fully appreciated her instruction and comradeship, which made his early success in life possible. It was she who stood up for her boy when things went wrong at school, and she withdrew him from school that she might train him herself. At nine he had read, or heard read, Hume's History of England, the History of the Reformation and Gibbon's Rome, with all the books upon electricity he could get.

At eleven he felt that he would like to earn his own living, and the mother understood her boy well enough not to stand in his way. Then followed the familiar experience of newspaper-selling on the train, and the little paper he printed containing the news that was too late for the evening papers.

In 1887 Mr. Edison invented the Kinetoscope. The idea was suggested by a toy called the Zoetrope. The first difficulty was that there were no films on the market quick enough to take the required forty pictures a second, so the inventor had to make his own films. In fact, Mr. Edison has made so many things, and is so persistent in his efforts, it is no wonder that he has been designated "the Wizard of Sound and Sight," and recognized by many as America's greatest American.

Figure 4. *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* (1, no. 2, March 1911).

lives. It even seems that the more we bring human relationships into the media, the more our ghostly doubles spread, as seen with the social networks that multiply shams of oneself.

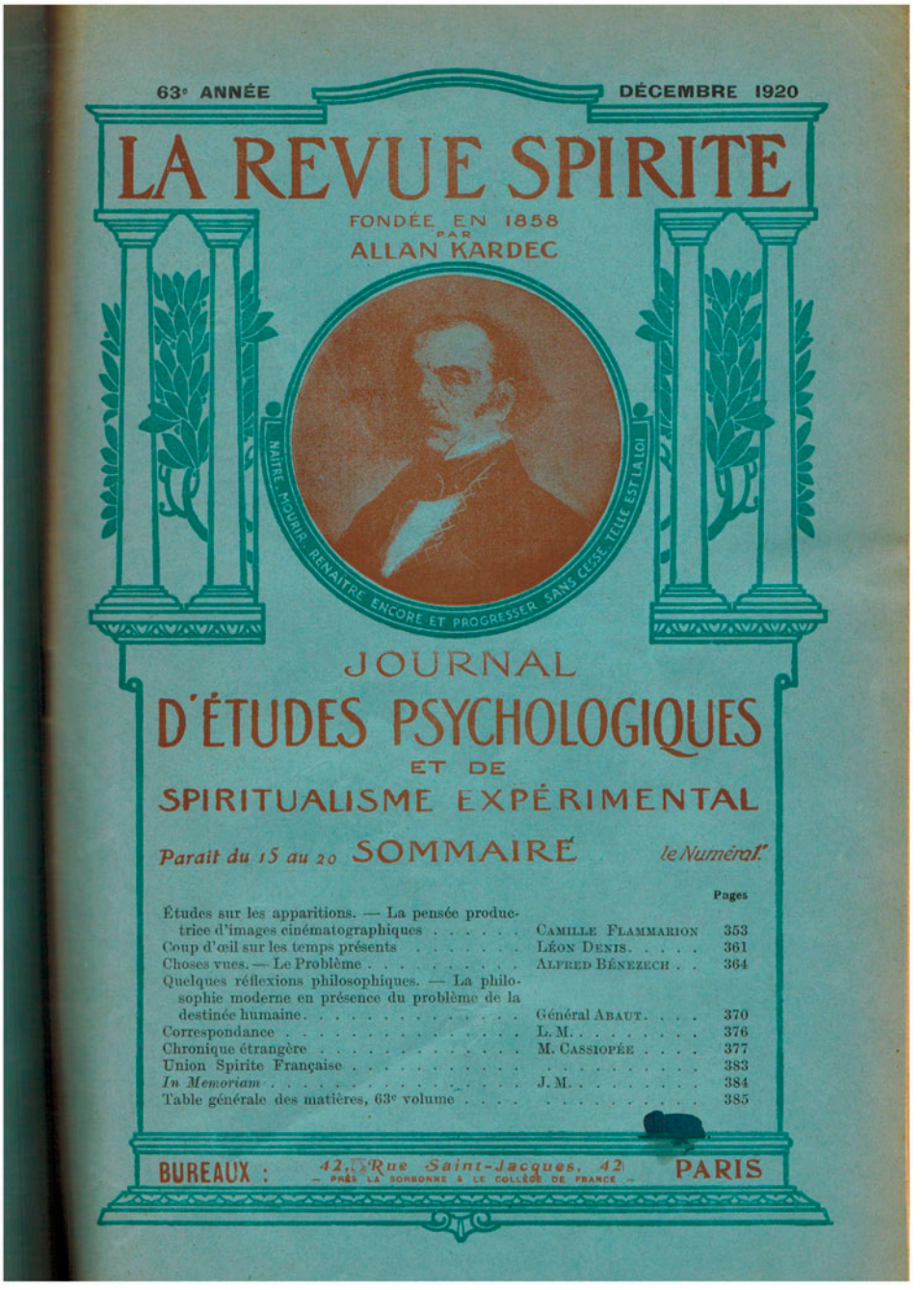


Figure 5. *La Revue Spirite* (December 1920).

Significantly, the fantasy of parapsychological communication made possible by technological progress also feeds the mind of astronomer Camille Flammarion who, in *La Revue spirite* founded by Allan Kardec, leader of the spirit doctrine in France, published an article in which telepathy is based on a cinematograph model (Figure 5):

> Every thought acts virtually, with varying degrees of intensity, as a so-called material agent, such as a projectile, a stone, a piece of metal, and can be projected far. [...] Some apparitions appear to be, in many cases, kinds of projections, animated telephotos, cinematography. The being is as it is, or as it feels, projecting his image far [...]. This is a self-projection. (Flammarion 1920, 354)

The deceased, therefore, has the power to project its image far into the spirit of a relative or friend who will capture its corresponding telepathic appearance, as Flammarion said, as 'something objective and real' – to the point where thoughts 'may mark an object on a sheet of paper'. The cinematograph – a hardware device for producing immaterial images, but endowed with a strong gradient of reality – totally matches this dream of 'telepathy' (De Champville 1894, 28) involving bodies that combine recording functions, instant dissemination and infinite reproducibility of data. Whether fantasized or proven, the telepathic model addresses issues related to temporality (through the figures of simultaneity, immediacy) and spatiality (through narrowing distances and the progressive dematerialization of human contact). It especially met the need (generalized by an industrialized and technologized society) for a synchronization of exchanges at a time when the telegraph and railways required harmonization of time zones (Kern 1983). Associated with the sphere of the 'merveilleux scientifique' (Durand 1894; Gordon 1988) which discursively constructs most of the media as they emerge in the industrial age, the phonograph, and other tools of modernity, project the spirit phenomena in terms of miraculous evidence and a compelling mystery onto the image of these same techniques.

The 'medium-cinematographer'

At the turn of the last century, the history of cinema and spiritism frequently converge, as when the French spiritualist Léon Denis highlights the fact that the perispirit (light body) – a term coined by Allan Kardec in his *Le Livre des esprits* (*The Spirits' Book*) and which designates the energy of a living being that persists after death – is like a filmic image which records all traces of the lived and the perceived (Denis 1908, 256). Yet the affinities between the cinema and the spiritualist séance are not only evident through the analogies presented by their respective apparatus (dark rooms, presence of technology, the expectations of a fascinated public and extraordinary performances, etc.), as is clearly shown in Matthew Solomon's study (Solomon 2003). Their interactions also appear in texts that describe the spirit medium as being able to replicate the functions of the phonograph and the motion picture camera, becoming both the producer and the receiver of an inner perception projected mentally inside out.

The most meaningful example with respect to the fantasy of the 'cinematographic medium' is delivered by the physician and spiritualist Eugène Osty, who in 1913 published his observations on a psychic-medium, Mrs. M., under the title

Lucidité et intuition. Étude expérimentale (*Lucidity and intuition. Experimental study*) (Osty 1913). The conditioning of the medium is described as requiring her to create a vacuum or 'a blank' in her mind, so to speak, so that she can receive the images of her clairvoyance 'like the white light which precedes for a moment on the cinematic screen' (Osty, 21). Once these 'technical' conditions are achieved, she mentally witnesses a 'cinematic reel of a whole line of phenomena connected by causality' (56) which are mostly visual, weaving a narrative that can then be transmitted to the person who sought her gifts of clairvoyance. 'It is therefore through the cinematography of a human face, mimicking its various feelings, that the subject becomes aware of the psychological characteristics of a being, independently of any determined outside influence,' writes Eugène Osty (96). The medium is thus able to generate a large range of cinematic tricks and procedures: editing, superimpositions, split screen, insert, close-up, point of view shot and all kind of vignette scene representing her vision. Transformed literally into a filming apparatus, the medium is placed in a double position of producer and receiver of these mental images. But Osty does not stop there and pushes even further, 'comparing the subconscious mind of Mrs. M. with a cinematic device'.

> Suppose, for instance, that Mrs. M reveals a tragic accident and the various consequences – organic, psychological and social – it will have in the future for the consultant. The moving picture of the accident will come first, with the crowd of images required for it to be moving. Then the various aspects of this picture will be followed by the vision of the one person, who, through her attitude and mimicry, will express all the consequences. Soon other pictures will successively show the vision of the affected organs; and the appearance of the person then will occupy the whole field of attention, greatly magnified, mimicking her impressions into multiple pictures which present her at different times in her life... Could we not say that this is the rolling of a film prepared according to ordinary methods and with the knowledge of substitution tricks? Mrs. M., in lucid hypnosis, is therefore as in a real cinema theatre. Her imagination creates mental images that are always hallucinatory, appearing to her as real projections. It is, therefore, through the unfolding before her eyes of a dream, of a series of moving and colorful images, selected and combined to be very expressive, that she learns fragments of our future evolution. (Osty, 74–75)

In these excerpts (and others of the same book), mediumship implies mobility of representation, physiognomic play of characters, logical narrative succession, meaningful close-ups, the illusion of reality and the realism of the pictures. Clairvoyance becomes a film in which the medium is the unique and privileged spectator. According to Osty, the best mediums would be those who receive clear and sharp messages in the form of 'cinematic and colorful hallucinations', proving a high level of competence. This source shows, on the one hand, that cinema in the early 1910s no longer simply acts as an illustrative metaphor, but provides the possibility of conceptualizing certain psychic processes (here, mediumistic clairvoyance) that are difficult to explain through verbal and theoretical frameworks of rational thought. We are left to suppose that the absence of cinematic devices during spiritualistic séances takes root at the 'unconscious' level of the spirit 'scene', itself already overburdened with electrical waves and recording instruments embodied in the person of the medium (Berton 2015).

In such a context, a cinematic device would compete with and challenge her/his gifts too directly, with the risk of canceling them out, either by interference of

'odic' waves[7] or, more specifically, by uncovering potential cons. This is certainly because ghosts do not like the presence of tools that try to 'capture' them such as photography or cinematography, often refusing to manifest themselves in séances that are over-equipped with measuring instruments (Solomon 2010, 11–27). But the superiority complex of spirits plays an even more prominent and subtle role in the regular exclusion of the cinematograph; the spiritists in fact consider the human sensitivity of the medium as being far more powerful than technology. The co-presence of a spirit medium and a cinematic instrument in the same space could create competition between two types of sensitivities (human and machine) that are difficult to reconcile: that of the medium based on the so-called supernatural faculties that are supposedly impossible to challenge, and that of the film (literally a *small skin* that records everything without discrimination). Yet it is precisely up to mediums to assert the primacy of their perceptual faculties, not only vis-à-vis the common man but also vis-à-vis existing techniques that only partially replace the need to intercept the afterlife. For the spirits, indeed, the body of mediums is best positioned to make contact with the supersensible world, because their neurological expertise cannot be delegated to any other person or device.

This is revealed in an article that comments on Edison's necrophone project mentioned above, describing it as an 'improved apparatus, with such a sensitivity that this device should allow the living to converse with the dead', thereby substituting the powers of the spirit medium (Laurent 1920, 337). The author, Marcel Laurent, regular contributor to *La Revue spirite*, although enthusiastic about this technology and agreeing to a certain extent with Camille Flammarion whom he somewhat paraphrases, nevertheless suggests:

> No machine, no matter how sensitive it is, will ever be worth ... the human brain, this divine instrument, whose infinite resources we are far from having drawn on, which is to conceive that the manufactured material of the inventor will equal the living matter of the medium. Psychic power actually lies within. It emerges from us. It is made of impalpable atoms that match our own molecules. It is this contact that we call the fluid of the disembodied soul, that cannot be projected onto the screen experience as much as we can enlighten it with light, sometimes unexpected, contained by sentient beings. Edison's invention consists of substituting this new clarity with artificial light. (Laurent 1920, 338)

In the field of spiritism, the cinematograph' tools and tricks are thus confined to the status of either speculative fantasy or a model for the extra-sensitive body, both sparing spirit mediums technical unemployment. In all cases, it is as if two film operators, one 'human', the other technologic, could not coexist in the same space, at the risk of causing ghosts to disappear; and it is as if the spirits wanted to assume the exclusive right to record, to edit, to project and to view images and sounds from another world. Because, as a 'cinematic apparatus', the medium can handle temporality and space, access the past and the future, enjoy ubiquity and capture the invisible and the impenetrable. In return, the cinema manifests itself as a 'haunted' and spectral technology allowing the constantly renewed return of wandering souls, voices and electric bodies (Andriopoulos 2008; Sconce 2000). The 'magism' of cinema should eventually be seen in the broader historical context of the simultaneous emergence in the nineteenth century of modern technology and spiritist movements. Their mutual exchanges are not mere coincidence, but must be understood as a historical co-construction process.

The telepsychic imaginary

At this point, I propose defending the hypothesis of a *telepathic spectator*, i.e. a subject with perceptual and psychic faculties increased by technological modernity but included in a cultural legacy left by spiritist movements. Through the model of spirit phenomenology, the film spectator indeed updates a reservoir of latent abilities in every human being, and the cinematic experience is exhumed to enrich it further. If the medium can turn into a 'hyper-cinematic' machine (combining abilities to stage, register, project and perceive), then the spectator can become a 'medium' suitable for visual and mental hyperesthesia. In this sense, the film spectator embodies the visionary subject of the psychic sciences; thanks to the infinite resources of cinematic language (slow and speeded-up motion, flashbacks, simultaneity and inner speech, etc.) he can virtually burst the confines of rationality to literally travel through the impossible – a dream that was held by Georges Méliès (*An Impossible Voyage*, 1904).

In fact, film presents itself as a magical and fantastic technology, making evanescent and intangible creatures appear and disappear, escaping the laws of rationality and offering access to the infinity of the visible and invisible world. This is highlighted in an advertisement by Paramount (and Artcraft Motion Pictures) where cinema is conceptualized in the image of a crystal ball that allows spectators to see the infinite possibilities of life itself: 'The motion picture is like the magician's crystal. You gaze into it and you see life. […] By what test have Paramount and Artcraft Motion Pictures emerged crowned monarchs in this art? By the test of the *faithfulness* and *clearness* of their crystal-reflections of life!' (Figure 6). This representation of cinema as a crystal ball in which the entire world, and physical and mental life, are reflected is inspired directly by instruments that some mediums used to support their clairvoyance, such as the famous American vaudeville magician Alexander, who specialized in mentalism (Figure 7).

The 'magism' of cinema does not limit itself to extending unlimited resources of the human mind; it also determines the functioning of a medium that captures the invisible, just like a spirit medium. Full of unsubstantial materialism (Bachelard 1989), this telepsychic imaginary is also present in some discussions about cinema, as shown by Emmanuel Plasseraud in his book devoted to theories of film reception in France in the early twentieth century (Plasseraud 2011). In a chapter on 'the telepathic spectator', the author examines how the writings of Jean Epstein, Abel Gance and Ricciotto Canudo, among others, integrate the knowledge of occultism present in contemporary culture. In Epstein's texts, the cinema is seen as a 'spiritual art' (1921, 112–113), a psychic (1921, 38) and hypnotic tool, an 'eye gifted with inhuman analytical properties' (1974, 137). This 'eye without prejudices, without moral, abstract influences' (137–138) is then able to cross the barrier between the visible and the invisible in order to offer the audience a clear-sighted view of the world:

> Cinematic viewing makes us see unsuspected depths of magic in nature, which through always looking at with the same eye, we have ended up exhausting, fully explaining ourselves, even seeing enough. By pulling us out of the routine of our vision, film teaches us to marvel again at a reality in which perhaps nothing has been understood yet, in which perhaps nothing is understandable. (Epstein 1921, 43)

'Supernatural in its essence' (43), cinema uses an eye that 'sees, dreams, waves that are imperceptible to us' (37), similar to the spirit medium connected to elusive and

Figure 6. Advertisement: The Crystal of Life (*Film Fun* 356, December 1918).

distant energies. According to Epstein, cinema 'is the most powerful means of poetry, the most real way of the unreal, the 'surreal' as Apollinaire would have said' (Epstein 1974, 142). Revealing the photogenicity of beings and objects, film

Figure 7. Poster of Alexander as Crystal-Seer.

provides new access to the surrounding reality, offering a 'clairvoyant consciousness' to the spectator (Plasseraud 2011, 219). The visionary power of film is then naturally transmitted to the audience 'in a darkness that we say is favorable to telepathic phenomena, in other words distant understandings, the most secret connection between minds', according to Epstein again (1974, 142). Providing suggestion and hypnosis, cinema enables a special state of consciousness, 'an expansion of human psychic faculties, or even a new era of mankind' (Plasseraud 2011, 227). Not only does cinema encourage a new way of grasping the world (Epstein, 1975), it also stimulates a new form of sociability because, as Plasseraud suggests, 'the automatic spectator metamorphoses himself in telepath, capable of instant communication unmediated by verbal language, therefore through the intermediary of visual thinking' (224).

The telepsychic imaginary and discourses on cinema have precisely in common the tropes of increased perception, second sight, pre-verbal communication and telepathy. In 1911, Professor Frederick Starr publishes an article in *The Motion Picture Story Magazine* where the 'magism' of film consists in performing a miracle, like that of traveling on a flying carpet (Starr 1911, 57). The psychical sciences also infiltrate the thought of Abel Gance for whom cinema 'is the music of light' and the 'telepathy of silence' (Gance 2002a, 58). The movie shows are definitely loaded with symbolic values such as sympathy and hyperesthesia which appear to be central issues in spiritualist movements that also refer to a perfect fusion between individuals. Communitarian virtues of cinema are inseparable from an idealistic conception of the spectator-telepath, who has an increased sensitivity making him a superior being; 'Cinema endows man with new meaning', allowing him to transcend the limitations imposed by his humanity, according to Abel Gance (Gance 2002b, 94). Thanks to particular technical procedures – the close-up, double and multiple exposure, dissolves, etc. – cinematic language offers the spectator the possibility of moving in another dimension, while providing the necessary tools for its emancipation vis-à-vis the material world. If in the realm of cinema the functions of these filmic procedures have changed between 1895 and 1920 (Salt 2009), in the imaginary of spiritism they provide a continuous set of concepts that helps to represent the strange world of the invisible.

The magic of the cinema show

Early cinema – like magic shows or spiritualistic séances – sought public involvement and created links of sympathy and empathy between the public and the show. It is in these terms that the sociologists Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss define the relationship between the audience and the magician, and that can be extrapolated to the cinema which also generates a magical atmosphere based on a collective belief (Hubert and Mauss 1904). Hubert and Mauss claim 'that there are, at the very root of magic, affective states, illusion generators' that easily unite a meeting (131). We can also explain the magic of cinema 'by misperceptions, illusions, hallucinations on the one hand and on the other hand, by emotional states, acute or subconscious, of waiting, prepossession, excitability', each ranging from simple psychological automatism to hypnosis (139). In this 'wonderful social excitement', one can find a moderate form of the equivalent in cinema where a 'magic influx' also circulates along 'sympathetic chains' thanks to 'imaginary contagion' (64). Around the

spectator, cinema also crystallizes 'a circle of eager spectators, that the show freezes, absorbs and hypnotizes. They feel more like actors than spectators of the magical comedy, like the chorus in ancient drama' (132).

Whether in magic, spiritism or cinematic performances, 'the state of the individual is [...] always conditioned by the state of the society' and 'friendly meetings' (132). These cultural practices create a form of 'active telepathy' that connects the subjects so that 'they are one body and one soul. It is only then that the social body is realized' (134). Throughout 'crowd embryo', there are the same expectations, fears, delusions and suggestibility (136). However, unlike the séances where tricks are often used to create ghosts and exploit the gullibility of the audience, the movie shows address spectators who are both fascinated and lucid, that is to say spellbound by the performance but aware of its artificiality.

For many people at the time, film surpassed painting, sculpture, music and theater through the power of a suggestive image, providing access to a fantastic and magical reality through specific means. It was particularly the case at the late 1910s/early 1920s when consistent film theories appeared. According to the art critic Victor Oscar Freeburg:

> The ideal photoplay pleases the eye of the spectator, it appeals to his sense of wonder, it stirs and quiets his emotions, and mildly taxes his judgment; but it would cease to be ideal if it did not also pleasantly stimulate his imagination. (Freeburg 1970, 90)

Related to the realm of the supernatural and magical (4–5), the cinema holds the public in a fascination worthy of a magician: 'The cinematograph is the great magician of the twentieth century which permits us to see with our physical eyes the things which our forebears since the world began saw only in their imagination.' (81) It allows us to see, as echoed by Méliès, the 'impossible reality' (85) of a 'really amazing' world that 'appeals to the sense of wonder' (86).

> In cinema land even the laws of nature may be reversed and set aside. [...] In cinema land fairy stories may come true, because not even the laws of nature herself can confine the rare sorcery of the camera. (87)

Behind this 'new language' lies 'a treasure trove of subtle suggestion, of things unformulated and unexpressed which shall quicken and vivify the imaginations of the multitudes of grateful spectators' (105). Through its evocative intensity, the cinematograph surprises, amazes and charms (97). The perfect film is one that provides 'imaginative incursions into an unexplored realm of art under the guidance of a new artist, the cinema composer' (111). In the end, the work of Victor Freeburg offers a positive vision of cinema as a means of escape into an alternative world. What might appear in some cinephobic or moralistic discourse as a sign of amoral and fatal entertainment is also the evidence of a real expertise that extends the physical and mental horizon of the human into the marvelous (Berton 2015). In this regard, the magic of cinema shapes a form of subjectivity dedicated to telepathic sympathy, to amazement and consensual illusion.

In the early twentieth century, Georges Méliès already theorized this practice in these terms: the visitor of moving pictures should ideally be a stunned spectator, amazed by the beauty of an unusual show. In his text 'Les vues cinématographiques' (published in 1907), he presents the foundations of a true art expressed in trick films:

> Many times I have heard the most absurd reflections in the exhibition halls, which proved, beyond any doubt, that many of the spectators were far from imagining the amount of work behind the views they saw. [...] (203)

> The same sentence invariably falls on their lips: 'It's really amazing!' [...] It requires [...] to have known deeply for many years the countless difficulties to overcome in a business that consists in realizing everything, even what seems impossible, and in giving the appearance of reality to the most fanciful dreams, to the most incredible inventions of the imagination. Finally, there is no denying it is absolutely necessary *to achieve the impossible*, since we record it, and then we make it visible!! (207)

> This is the intelligently applied *trick* that today makes the supernatural, the fantasy, the impossible even, visible and achieves truly artistic paintings that are a real delight for those who understand that all branches of art contribute to their accomplishment. (215)

The 'Meliesian' spectator must be ready to abandon skepticism and remain innocent in order to enjoy the pleasures of an illusion recognized as such. However, before the advent of movies spiritualistic séances already generated delight and enchantment in their followers attending representations of the 'impossible'. While the Meliesian spectator certainly does not share the same naivety as the séance participant because he is aware of the trick, he nevertheless shares with him the pleasure of a show playing with his senses so as to dazzle him. In both cases, special effects play their part in strengthening the illusion that leads the audience into inaccessible realms.

It is through spiritism that this conception of the telepathic and mediumistic spectator is made possible – a spectator ready to transcend physical boundaries and move to a higher level of reality, as considered by Jean Epstein in the 1920s (Epstein 1974; see also Plasseraud 2011, 220–227). More broadly, the comparison between two apparatus – cinema and the spiritualistic séance – shows how spiritism participated in the construction of a spectatorship that extended to the first movies shows. Indeed, the growing interest for spiritualism generated a range of debates where the issue of perceptual illusions was central in defining the position of a spectator who runs the risk of being trapped by his senses, but who also draws a certain enjoyment from it. Cinema reception by contemporaries is thus directly dependent on these debates about tricks and special effects, as much as it is on the perceptual and cognitive hypersensitivity of an audience discovering the magic of this 'new' technology that is cinema.

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Notes

1. 'A new discovery by Edison will be examined in our next issue. Read a preview of the topic in a booklet by our chief editor: *La Transmission de la pensée* [The Transmission of thought], Librairie spiritualiste, Paris', *Revue scientifique de l'occultisme* 15, December 1894, 118.
2. This expression is found in *L'Image-mouvement* by Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze borrows it from Kafka, who in a letter to Milena defines cinema as spectral technology (Deleuze 1983, 142–143). Other philosophers and intellectuals have identified the existing

elective affinities between film and spiritism, such as Jacques Derrida who, in the film *Ghost Dance* (Ken McMullen 1983), answers Pascale Ogier (who asks him if he believes in ghosts): 'I believe that the future belongs to ghosts, and that modern imaging technology, cinematography, telecommunication multiplies the power of ghosts and the return of ghosts'. According to Derrida, the belief in ghosts is necessary since modern technology processes and multiplies them, as is the case with cinema that stores traces of the deceased.

3. Henry Steel Olcott write about this in *Old Diary Leaves: The History of the Theosophical Society*: 'I received on April 5 a request for admission to the Society signed by T.-A. Edison. I had the occasion to see him concerning the exhibition of his electrical discoveries displayed at the World Fair in Paris in 1878. […] The conversation between Edison and me fell on the occult forces and I was extremely interested to learn that he had made some experiments in this direction. He wanted to see if he had the strength of will to move a pendulum in his private laboratory. He had used as conductor various metal threads, either simple or composite, one end attached to his forehead, the other to the pendulum' (quoted in Baudoin 2015).
4. Philippe Baudoin recalls that Edison's psychical research is to be set within the context of an 'electrical pact' concluded between him and his collaborator: the one who would be the first to die should try to send a message to the other by electrical means. Provided by Edison's second wife, Mina Miller Edison, this information first appears in the *San Francisco Examiner*, and then in the *Western Argus* ('Life after Death – Vain Wait for Spirit Message – Edison's Last Promise', January 3 1934). See Philippe Baudoin (2015).
5. The original interview reads: 'If the apparatus I am now constructing should provide a channel for the inflow of knowledge from the unknown world – a form of existence different from that of this life – we may be brought an important step nearer the fountainhead of all knowledge, nearer the intelligence which directs all' (Forbes 1920, 85).
6. See: 'Acoustique: Perfectionnement apportés au phonographe de M. Edison, note de M. Gouraud' (1889, 844): 'The voice of famous men could be preserved indefinitely as well as the last goodbye of a dying person or the words of a beloved parent'.
7. This term is originally coined by the baron Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach (1853).

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