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6 Magic, spiritualism, and cinema

Viewing dispositives and illusionist spectacles in France in the early twentieth century

Mireille Berton

In the early twentieth century, the debate about ghosts, in which sceptics and believers opposed one another on the subject of paranormal phenomena, crystallized discourses of illusionist *mise-en-scène*. Prestidigitators, cinematographers, and scientists wondered about the probity of spiritualist mediums who claimed to be able to give life to spirits coming from the other world. This started a heated dispute between champions and opponents of Spiritualism, which involved challenging adversaries as part of standardized performances. The comparison between the three viewing dispositives of magic, Spiritualism, and cinema shows that, beyond partisan disputes, the stakes of such debates rested mostly in the mastering of illusionist spectacles aimed at stunning the public during a time when mass culture relied on the attraction of both magic and hyper-realistic representations.

In Europe as well as in the United States, organizers of spiritualist séances, whether private or public, were often accused of deceiving their audiences by taking advantage of the viewers' fascination with the supernatural. The English magician Dicksonn asserted that "all mediums use trickery and magicians know their tricks since they invented them in the first place, before mediums claimed them for themselves in order to exploit the credulity of their audiences" (*Annales des sciences psychiques* 1914, 89). While magicians openly embraced manipulation as a vital element of their art, spiritualist mediums defended themselves against accusations of producing ghosts by artificial means, arguing that supernatural appearances, such as those of ectoplasms, were far too difficult to replicate – besides, séances given by serious mediums were always subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny (Bensaude-Vincent and Blondel 2002).

For this reason, wherever spiritualist practices were on the rise, magicians were invited to use their expertise in order to track down imitators of their art, as many mediums would imitate magicians so as to attract audiences [passionate](#) about occultism. Depending on the case at hand, what was at stake in these controlled séances was the observation, confirmation, or refutation of facts that science was powerless to explain. These included telepathic hallucinations, remote viewing or, generally speaking, anything

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having to do with the fabled sixth sense – a purported intuitive form of intelligence. Accompanied by challenges sometimes involving large amounts of money, these controversies often turned into open confrontations between magicians and psychics, with impartial but curious scientists, publicists, editorialists and men of the world serving as intermediaries. Major newspapers and specialized publications were rife with articles and short pieces about the latest challenges posed by one of the two conflicting parties to their opponents. However, most of these provocations went unanswered – a fact that both sides invariably took to be a sign of the other party’s cowardice and fear of failure.

Mediums and illusionists

At the turn of the twentieth century, the magician and cinematographer Georges Méliès and his colleagues from the Théâtre Robert-Houdin were frequently called upon as experts and asked to serve on committees in charge of investigating the production of paranormal events. The aim was to determine whether the authenticity of these experiences could be scientifically established as claimed by the spiritualist mediums themselves or if they were produced by way of magical tricks and were thus merely a form of show, as claimed by their opponents. Generally considered Robert-Houdin’s rightful heir, Méliès had a perfect knowledge of the magician’s art and of all the tricks that could be used to produce at will supernatural phenomena, such as miraculous appearances and disappearances, transformations, telekinesis, and the levitating of objects or of people. He fought Spiritualism by parodying it in his shows and by writing letters to the editors of newspapers, thus taking an active role in the quarrel between supporters and opponents of occultism. Be it through his shows or his *féeries*,¹ or his status as expert of illusions, Méliès spared no effort in his exposing of phony mediums who preyed on the gullibility of audiences fascinated with the occult (see Charconnet-Méliès and Quévrain 1981, 230).

In 1907, Méliès invited a certain Mr. Rémy, an honorary member of the Federation of French Magicians (Chambre syndicale des illusionnistes de France) of which he was the director, to give two conferences at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin on the topic of “Spirit Mediums and Illusionists” (“Spirites et Illusionnistes”).² The conferences that took place on 22 April 1907, and 29 April 1909, brought together a “who’s who” of magicians, contributors to the newspaper *L’Illusionniste*, and members of the medical and scientific professions. Rémy’s aim was to provide a historical perspective on Spiritualism before assessing its scientific validity by analyzing the various spiritualist doctrines of his day (Rémy 1911, 10). The majority of his listeners were adept in the theory of scepticism. To win them over, he started by cautioning against the dangers of Spiritualism that awaited gullible audience members as well as the psychics themselves, since the latter

relinquished their free will by letting themselves be possessed by spirits. *Anxious* to medicalize the beliefs of the adepts of Spiritualism, Rémy drew attention to the fact that:

Many among them are neurotic or hysteric subjects to varying degrees, their state being heightened by the tension they impose upon their own minds; they are influenced as well by their milieu and are probably prone to frequent hallucinations. If we only found this kind of subjects in narrow spiritualist circles, there would be reason to doubt the reliability of their declarations, but there is an extraordinary number of spiritualists.³

(Remy 1911, 47, unless otherwise specified,
all translations are mine)

According to Rémy, the population of psychics divided fairly equally between “charlatans” and “authentic spirit mediums” (ibid., 50). Hence, it would result in the worst-case scenario of a séance in which a group of spectators “whose imagination has become hallucinatory” (ibid.) watches the performance of mediums using trickery in order to produce “supernatural effects” inspired by prestidigitation. All of these deceptions lent weight to the arguments of those who denied the reality of Spiritualism and of the extraordinary phenomena it entailed. Spiritualism was thus susceptible to fraud and shams, especially in those cases where it was performed in front of people who were either ignorant or easily fooled by obvious hoaxes (ibid., 55). The responsibility of the discredit brought on Spiritualism was divided equally between its two main groups, with the first group taking advantage of the mental weakness of the second. This is what Rémy hints at when he stigmatizes those among the clientele of mediums considered to be manipulable and uneducated, and thus apt to be easily impressed. This discourse activates all the representations associated with pathological hallucinations, the latter being understood as resulting from the influence exerted by “neuropaths” (ibid., 136)⁴ on their audience: “The link between mediumship and nervous accidents is thus beyond dispute and it can be said that psychics belong to the family of neuropaths” (ibid.).

However, Rémy soon switches to a softer tone and admits that there are indeed a number of authentic mediums whose exploits do not lend themselves easily to criticism because of the reliability of the witnesses on one hand and the rational ways in which these exploits can be explained on the other. Seeking a middle way between two extreme positions, Rémy invites his audience to take a benevolent view of “the phenomena of true Spiritualism”, for all mediumistic practices are not necessarily of an illicit nature. *Anxious* to bring the two sides together, he advocates an atmosphere of tolerance that would enable to distinguish between proven and verified mediumistic facts and cases of deception, a distinction without which no scientific knowledge would be possible.

In 1911, these conferences gave rise to a publication accompanied by engravings illustrating Méliès’s latest magic show staged at the Théâtre

Robert-Houdin (see especially the chapter “Le Spiritisme au Théâtre Robert-Houdin”, *ibid.*, 245–54). Opening in September 1907, the show was first called “A Retrospective and Modern Review of Spiritualist Phenomena” (*Revue rétrospective et moderne des phénomènes spirites*) before being renamed “The Wonders of Occultism” (*Les Merveilles de l’occultisme*) in September 1910. The photoengravings show the magician Jules-Eugène Legris struggling with ghosts and levitating tables (Figure 6.1), the images having been realized with the use of “some truly unusual new ‘tricks’,” (*ibid.*, 253, note 1), namely the processes of double exposure or overprinting that Méliès claimed to have invented himself. Here is the review of Méliès’s show titled “Le Spiritisme”, published in the “Theatrical Chronicle of Prestidigitation” (*Chronique théâtrale de la prestidigitation*) of *l’Illusionniste*:

The best rated establishments have given in to the latest Parisian craze and the Théâtre Robert-Houdin couldn’t help but follow suit. Master Méliès’s latest masterpiece is thus sub-titled “A retrospective and modern review of spiritualist phenomena”. As suggested by the latter, the show features an interesting succession of some of the better-known occult experiences, which Legris, miraculously transformed into a first-rate medium, presents with his customary animation and energy. [...] First comes the curious levitation of a series of objects: a table, a pedestal table, a banjo; all of this is done without any tricks and under the watchful eye of the audience. Then comes the invocation of specters and ghosts [...] The members of the audience are themselves enchanted and their enthusiasm becomes contagious. We will not say any more about the rest to our readers: be they spiritualists or magicians, they are sure to find a most interesting demonstration of their respective doctrines in the Théâtre Robert-Houdin’s new show.⁵

(*ibid.*)

The author of the review insists, in an ironic way, on the fact that the mediumic phenomena featured in this magic show involve no trickery, thus taking up on behalf of magicians an argument frequently used by spirit mediums. It also highlights the pleasure the audience takes at the view of such wonders, as if the amazement of seeing ghosts, be they authentic or not, took precedence over everything else. However, even if the dispositives of magic and Spiritualism have in common the goal of enchanting their audience, their practitioners differ when it comes to explaining the means by which they reach it. While magicians freely admit their use of tricks and make sure to forewarn their audience that everything they are about to see is but an illusion, spirit mediums deny producing false ghosts by means of tricks. So, as Simone Natale’s work reminds us (2016, 28–9), the only major difference between magic and Spiritualism lies in the fact that the practitioners of the former refuse to mislead their audience whereas those of the latter assert the authenticity of phenomena that happen in private or public séances.

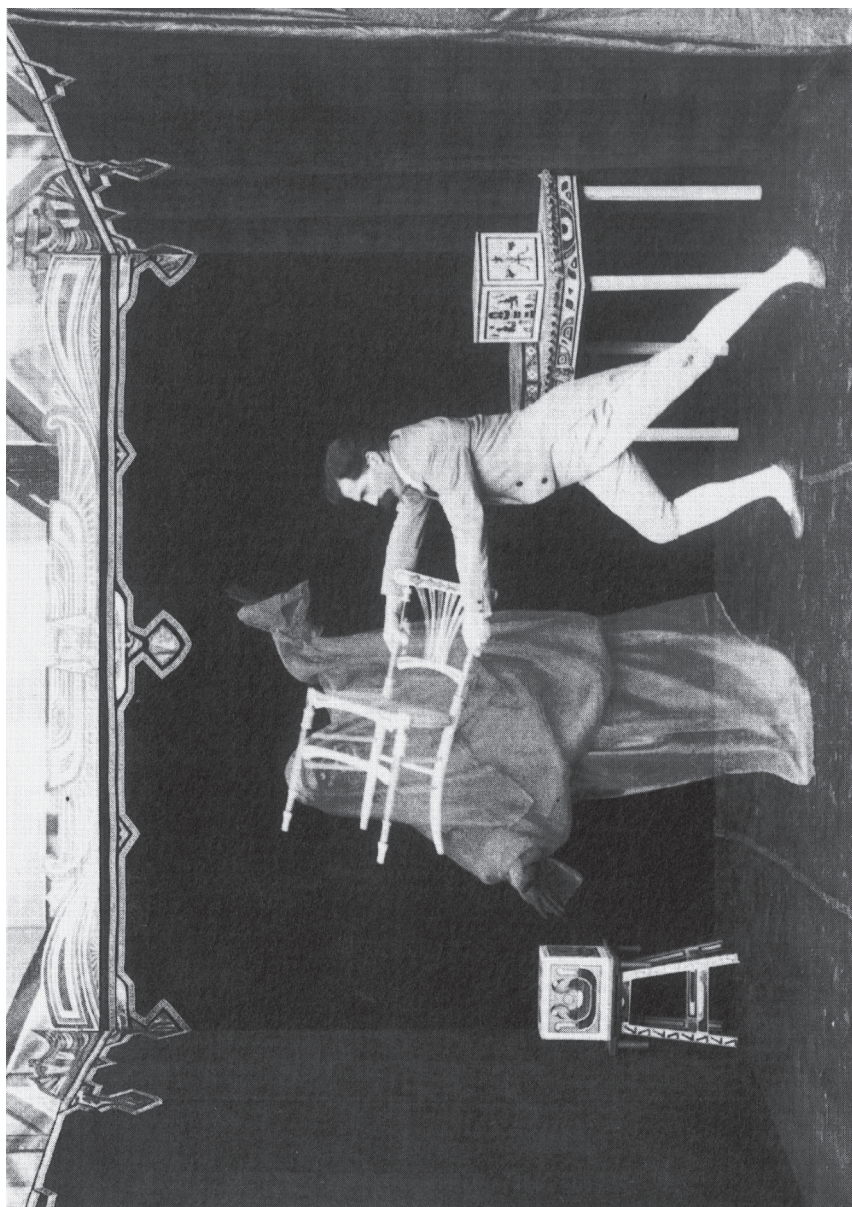


Figure 6.1 “Jules-Eugène Legris et la lutte contre un fantôme.” In: Rémy, Monsieur. 1911. *Spirites et illusionnistes, conférences faites à la Chambre syndicale des Illusionnistes de France*. Paris: Alfred Leclerc, inserted between pages 102 and 103. Originally used to advertise the show “A Retrospective and Modern Review of Spiritualist Phenomena” at Théâtre Robert-Houdin in 1909–10. Photographer unknown. Collection of Christian Fechner, Paris.

The “Debate about Ghosts”

Méliès continually insisted, in defence of the art of prestidigitation, on the necessity of keeping the audience in ignorance, not so much about the artificiality of the magic performed by magicians on stage but about the means used to produce illusions and to enthrall the spectators, astonished by the dexterity of the practitioner of magic. For him, prestidigitation is an activity that requires much work and demands *adroitness*, subtlety, and intelligence (in other words, it is an art), with the ultimate aim of creating illusions in the mind of the perceiver. Méliès held his audience in high esteem and, like all the magicians fighting the gullibility of the latter, so easily exploited by ghost merchants, *reiterated* tirelessly that “revealing the secrets of his trade to lay people is the most serious mistake a magician might make” (Méliès 1908, 2).

When Gustave Babin revealed the secrets behind some of the visual tricks used in movies in *L'Illustration*,⁶ Méliès responded in the journal *Phono-Cinéma-Revue* with a reminder of the deontological rules of an activity linked to the tradition of phantasmagoria shows and of *féeries* performed in front of an audience. He insisted, in particular, on the need to maintain its indispensable mystery so as to ensure that the audience’s suspension of disbelief remains intact, for “nothing is more difficult to *accomplish* in a *perfect and artistic way* than what in reality are *moving pictures involving well-executed tricks*.”⁷

Therefore, one should be careful not to reveal his secrets to the general public, otherwise the charm of the *féeries* – which continued the tradition of magic on the silver screen – would be broken. By not disclosing the secrets behind magic tricks, one also contributed to the perpetuation of the idea that the *féerie* is a delicate art accessible only to those who have worked long and hard to accomplish such marvellous illusions. The aim of Méliès was twofold. On the one hand, he sought to defend a profession that was still widely criticized by a cultured elite who doubted that one had to have any artistic abilities to be able to make moving pictures. On the other hand, he claimed having single-handedly invented a whole new genre, “fanciful fantasy cinematography” (la cinématographie fantaisiste et fantastique) supposed to have “saved from certain death” a leisure activity aimed at “audiences that grew quickly bored by the repetitive viewing of shots taken outdoors”.⁸ The efficiency of the cinematograph depended upon the “individual touch” of the artist that “cannot be explained: either you have it or not”,⁹ just as in the case of the magician. Asserting in conclusion that he could not “tolerate the attempt by some people to make a difficult profession look like a mere child’s play”,¹⁰ Méliès was fighting two battles at once: one against the opponents of the cinema, who saw it as a childish pastime; another against those who made an unscrupulous use of cinema and of magic. For, just like ~~the practice of legerdemain itself, magic in the field of cinema belonged entirely to the realm of art,~~

Méliès was joined by Rémy when the latter criticized the psychics who imitated a craft whose practitioners were supposed to be able to simulate occult phenomena in a refined and “artistic” manner. According to him, spiritualists plagiarized the “ingenious processes invented by master magicians or by many of their skillful pupils, which enabled them to reproduce at will so-called supernatural phenomena” (Rémy 1911, 83), citing among the former the names of Robert-Houdin, Méliès, Raynaly, and Caroly. Some of these are the protagonists of what Jean Caroly baptized the “Debate about Ghosts” in 1912 in his journal *L’Illusionniste*. Caroly kept his readers up to speed about the cowardice displayed by spirit mediums when they were challenged to let their skills be measured against those of magicians. In 1908, he published two articles under the title “Are Mediums Prestidigitators?” in which he focused on the controversies triggered by recent challenges thrown at mediums by scientists, arguing that the presence of professional magicians on committees charged with assessing the probity of psychics was indispensable (Caroly 1908). The battle between the opposing parties was waged in the general press: *Le Matin* or *L’Éclair* published letters written by leading figures of the day offering hefty amounts of money to all those whose skills, either as mediums or as magicians, would stand the test of science. Likewise, ~~a certain~~ Georges Montorgueil, ~~who was~~ a Spiritualism enthusiast, demanded to “see what mediums were capable of” while also asking “whether magicians were able to act as mediums”, noting in passing that this was “the other side of the coin”.¹¹ Montorgueil was in fact responding to Gustave Le Bon who had given an interview to *Le Matin*, where he promised a reward to any spirit medium who could convincingly demonstrate his ability to levitate (1918, 210–11). The writer Armand Blocq (writing under the alias of Gaston Danville) reminds us that in March, April, and May of 1908,

Mr. Gustave Le Bon, joined by prince Roland Bonaparte and Mr. Dariex, offered a reward of five hundred francs (the amount of which reached two thousand francs thanks to the contributions of the aforementioned personalities) to any medium who could successfully move an object from one table to another placed at a very short distance without physical contact and in full light, that is to say in an environment that enables the use of cinematography as a means of control. The organizers put an end to the contest after a wait of several months without a single medium having come forth.¹²

(Danville 1908, 45)

The spiritualist Gérard Encausse Papus justified the absence of volunteers by the fact that the technical aspects of the shooting of a film, and namely the lighting, were unfavorable for mediums who, when exposed to certain luminous sources like those used for movies, ran the risk of losing their psychic power:

This power, the outwards projection of which happens in a special state of hypnosis, undergoes violent reactions with physical forces, including certain types of light. White light in particular deprives this power of almost all of its vibrations.¹³

(Gérard Encausse Papus,
quoted by par Gaston Danville, *ibid.*)

Montorgueil who, like Papus, questioned the thesis, defended by magicians and scientists, that psychics made use of tricks and manipulation, received a reply by Edouard Raynaly in the columns of the same newspaper. Raynaly said he was ready to take up the gauntlet while stressing that, like any specialist worthy of the name, a magician could never duplicate the full range of mediumnic capabilities.¹⁴ Caroly is careful to point out that Montorgueil did not respond to the proposal of his colleague and friend, highlighting thereby a characteristic reaction of the supporters of Spiritualism, who always left the battlefield when a moment of “truth” (June 1908, 62) arose. As we can see, the quarrel between supporters and opponents of Spiritualism amounts to a series of missed appointments, the former failing to issue an invitation to the latter, who are happy to politely sit and wait for an invitation, the extension of which they would consider to be evidence of the other party’s courage and moral rectitude.

Gullible scientists

In this respect, the experiment initiated by Gustave Le Bon is something of a textbook case since, once the committee of experts was set up and once it established the draconian framework in which the experiment was to be conducted, no medium came forward to defend the cause of Spiritualism. Gustave Le Bon avers that:

If the experiment I suggested had taken place, its results would have constituted definitive proof, without any contest being possible. It was to have taken place in broad daylight at the Sorbonne, in professor Dastre’s laboratory in the presence of two magicians, a photographer who was in charge of filming the details of the operation and four members of the Academy of Sciences [...]. Naturally, after the public promise of a reward, I received hundreds of letters but only five mediums came forward. I informed them of the conditions I mentioned earlier, while guaranteeing them that there would be as many séances as they wanted. They all promised to come back. None of them did.¹⁵

(1918, 211)

So, did the mediums lose heart because the experiment was to be filmed? One might be tempted to think so, since this anecdote confirms the thesis of cinema as a deterrent against ghosts. Furthermore, Gustave Le Bon raises a fundamental issue, namely the qualities required to evaluate the degree of authenticity

of psychic phenomena, the magicians being much better placed than scientists to do so, since the latter have no proficiency whatsoever in prestidigitation:

Many people erroneously think that a scientist distinguished in his own field is, for this reason alone, particularly qualified to observe facts unrelated to his domain of expertise and notably those where deception and fraud play a preponderant role. Living lives of sincerity and truth, and habituated to believe the testimony of their senses, provided it is backed by accurate scientific instruments, scientists are in fact the easiest prey for swindlers.¹⁶

(*id.*, 213–14)

He advances as proof a demonstration made by Mr. Davey, a virtuoso magician who, wishing to test their vigilance, fooled a group of distinguished scholars into believing that he was an eminent psychic – an experiment that would have been grist for Montorgueil’s mill had he known about it (Hodgson 1894, 287–319, 355–66). Magicians masquerading as spirit mediums who themselves copied magical tricks is about as comical a version of this anxiety over simulation as you might find. Thus, if one judges that, being trained in the art of manufacturing ghosts, showmen are well situated to detect spectres of the fake variety, men of science should confine themselves to the study of the art in question. This is the reason why Gustave Le Bon strongly advised his peers to secure the assistance of magicians, ~~ruing the fact~~ that the Institut psychologique de Paris had been unwise enough to turn down Binet’s offer to “let skilled magicians – who would have offered their services freely – assist him” (1918, 214) in the completion of his investigation. Having corresponded with the ~~famed~~ psychophysicist, Le Bon indicated that Alfred Binet had taken the initiative of calling on Raynaly (whom he knew since their collaboration in 1894 on a study on the psychology of prestidigitation) (see Binet 1894): according to Le Bon, the latter had expressed the “most ardent desire” (Le Bon 1918, 214, 1) for taking part in séances.

Edouard Raynaly, one of the in-house magicians at the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, was himself in the vanguard of the battle between spirit mediums and illusionists. He frequently dwelt on this subject in the journal headed by Caroly (*L’Illusionniste*) and took on one occasion the liberty of contradicting his friend Rémy, having paid close attention to his lectures which, according to Raynaly, were characterized by a naïve faith in supernatural phenomena (Raynaly April 1908, 43). Like Le Bon before him, he equated Spiritualism to a sectarian church that brought ~~jeune and~~ outdated beliefs up to date (Raynaly June 1908, 67) and concluded by saying that:

There have never been any supernatural phenomena, except when faked by magicians (which is harmless and entertaining) or, more regrettably, when swindlers who make a living out of it are involved or, sadly, when conjured by the wild dreams of a few distraught individuals.¹⁷

(Raynaly July 1908, 80)

Raynaly's outlook is representative of his colleagues as a whole, all of whom are keen to prevent prestidigitation from being perverted for venal or obscurantist purposes and regard spirit mediums as unfair competitors.

Dispositives used by illusionists

After a respite of sorts, the quarrel between spiritualists and illusionists resumed with a vengeance in the early part of 1912, with no change whatsoever to the usual pattern: a personality (most of the time, a scientist or physician) issued a challenge in the press to a "true believer", who was supposed to provide proof of the preternatural abilities of a medium but ended up backing down when the moment of truth insisted upon by the illusionists. Once more, the "Debate about Ghosts" chronicled by *L'Illusionniste* brought together personalities from the world of the arts and the world of science seeking to unlock the mysteries of Spiritualism that no one had yet succeeded in dispelling. This time, Doctor Albert Charpentier demanded that ~~(assisted by Mr. Fabius de Champville, the director of the *Scientific Journal of Occultism* (Revue scientifique de l'occultisme))~~ a certain Mr. Girod convince him of the authenticity of the powers of the medium Mary Demange who claimed she was able to move remote objects without any direct contact (Caroly February 1912b, 124). According to Caroly's account, the test Mrs. Demange was supposed to submit to consisted initially of producing a ghost. Its degree of difficulty was lowered considerably once she was informed of the drastic preconditions demanded by the study commission (Caroly March 1912a, 136). Noting that, "ever since the apparitions brought forth by Robin", there had not even been the slightest progress when it came to "producing phantoms" (Caroly February 1912b, 124), Caroly lamented the absence of prestidigitators in the panel of personalities chosen to assess the abilities of the medium. He writes that Dr. Charpentier's project

was supposed to be carried out shortly under the supervision of six renowned scientists and personalities, the involved parties having each chosen three of them. The list of the panelists has been published: there's everything, from journalists, doctors and psychologists to physiologists, everything except (no doubt fortuitously) the one person one would have thought to be indispensable: a magician. This comes as no surprise to those who are familiar with the subterfuges of mediums when it comes to avoid being tested by those who are better positioned than anyone to call their bluffs and expose their frauds. Perhaps Dr. Charpentier, whose good faith is beyond question [...] lacked foresight on this issue and was guilty of overconfidence by not widening the scope of his investigation so as to use the services of members of the trade.¹⁸

(ibid., 125)

Caroly's conclusion was premature and he rectified his error in the next issue of *L'Illusionniste* by publishing a letter by Georges Méliès. In fact, Dr. Charpentier had gotten in touch with a magician to round up his commission: none other than Méliès himself – a fact that gave Caroly the opportunity to blame the withdrawal of the spiritualists on the fear of having to confront a leading expert on magic. Indeed, Méliès explained in a letter dated February 27, 1912b that:

Unlike many of his colleagues before him, Dr. Charpentier has absolutely not committed the imprudence of planning to conduct the test all by himself without the help of an illusionist. On the contrary, he sought me out to ask me to examine carefully the conditions that he intended to impose upon the medium and to determine whether there was still any place for deception in such a framework. Having finished the examination, I suggested two additional conditions and, after having gone to his home and studied the area of the house where a pedestal table was *supposedly* going to be moved from one place to another without physical contact, I suggested using a system that would enable him to catch the medium in the act without fail if ever she tried to cheat. [...] Since the medium was supposed to use *nothing but her psychic power*, I was making it impossible for her and her assistants to reach out, either with their hands or their feet, for the pedestal table which was to be put in the middle of the circle *by Dr. Charpentier himself*, and *only after all those in attendance had been tied up and sealed* (not themselves that is, but the ties that had been used to bind them). They could not refuse these conditions without admitting that the use of hands or feet by the medium or one of her accomplices was necessary for the so-called psychic power to operate. The care taken over the organization (which took place exclusively at the doctor's house) was such that it was impossible for anyone to cheat or deceive their way out of it. The result was predictable: the medium withdrew, even from the séance that was to have taken place *in complete darkness* and, a fortiori, the two following séances in red light and full light, respectively. Besides, I had warned the doctor beforehand that this would happen, adding that, if the mediums took up the challenge anyway out of cockiness, either nothing would come from it and they would blame their defeat on those whose 'lack of belief' had prevented their psychic powers from operating or they would try to cheat and would be caught thanks to my secret system.¹⁹

(Caroly March 1912a, 137)

This episode confirms that the true opponents of the spiritualists are the illusionists, not the scientists whose scepticism is hindered by their lack of knowledge about conjuration and ~~spectacular mechanisms~~. Indeed, in his letter Méliès addresses the crucial issue of the system used to test the performance of mediums who worked most of the time in relative darkness,

with the help of one or more assistants and were careful to veil the perception of viewers by various means familiar to magicians. It is therefore no accident that he highlights the “séance that was to have taken place in complete darkness”, the latter being supposedly favourable to the apparition of spectres and other paranormal events, ~~and mediums having~~ a preference for working in darkened rooms which, needless to say, are also conducive to deceit.

In 1936, Méliès took the opportunity of his show *Spiritualist Phenomena*, renamed later *The Wonders of Occultism*, to raise this matter again. Here is how he presents the show, which ran from 1907 to 1910 and was a “big hit of the Théâtre Robert-Houdin” (Méliès 1995–1997): “Levitation, catalepsy, ectoplasms, materialization and dematerialization of objects, all the so-called ‘mysteries’ of mediums produced in full light and under the direct supervision of members of the audience” (Méliès 1995–1997, no. 27, 43) He goes on by saying:

A plague of so-called mediums from other countries had descended on the Parisian salons and many were those who were dazzled by their performances, although these were accomplished with the crudest of methods, to say the least! The faith of spiritualists is unshakeable and human folly knows no boundaries! It was in vain that Raynaly, Dickson, Caroly (the first of his name) and myself [...] duplicated again and again the experiences of psychics in conferences and city halls, demonstrating their lack of honesty. It was in vain that we wrote a number of articles and issued countless challenges to spirit mediums who never accepted to perform in front of professional illusionists. But all this was to no avail: still the suckers let themselves be fleeced like sheep. This is how, one fine day, I decided, out of sheer desperation, to make a resounding statement by duplicating these experiences in an unprecedented way, that is to say: not in almost complete darkness like spirit mediums are wont to do but under the brightest of lights, on a stage that would be hermetically closed except for the part in front of the audience and the forestage, at a distance of merely 30 inches or so from the front row. It was difficult but I succeeded well beyond expectations after many a trial and error by striving with perseverance to overcome the difficulties I had willingly imposed upon myself.²⁰

(*ibid.*)

This quotation is interesting for three reasons: it shows how much the world of magic was concerned about the issue of Spiritualism, even if Méliès somewhat exaggerates the extent of the difficulties he encountered; it highlights the prestidigitation of “true” professionals who care about the artistic quality of their magic tricks, making spirit mediums look like mere beginners; and it pits against one another two diametrically opposite viewing dispositives: the scene of the magic show is filled with light that is synonymous with intelligibility, whereas the space of Spiritualism is wrapped

in a darkness that symbolizes its opacity. Audience members were warned before the show began in order to increase the reliability of a viewing dispositive meant to produce false spectres; however, the viewers were told, the prodigious verisimilitude of the latter might very well overwhelm them with amazement. “It must be said,” declares Méliès,

that we cautioned them extensively right from the start about the fact that everything they were going to see was but an illusion, adding that they were not to believe one word of the lies we were going to tell them while playing the part of mediums.

(ibid., 44)

Indeed, the risk that these “marvels” might very well have the opposite of the effect intended by the magicians had to be taken into account. In addition to verbal precautions, the magicians made a point of showing how perfectly closed the stage on which they were to perform was: it was framed with black velvet hangings “in one piece, without any opening whatsoever” and had neither trapdoors nor panels that might hide from the audience’s ~~view~~ the objects they were going to make appear or disappear. In contrast,

In Black Magic, the scene was shrouded in pitch darkness while a whole frame of lights encircling the stage was directed (exclusively) at the members of the audience, gouging their eyes out and preventing them from seeing... what they were not meant to see! [...]; in contrast, what we have is: *full light* and audience members coming on the stage for a thorough inspection, making sure that none of the objects furnishing it can be used for tricks and that it is physically impossible to leave or get on the stage except through its side that faces the audience [...]. We only began the show when the spectators satisfactorily declared that they were certain *no one could come on the stage to help the magician* and that none of the available equipment had been tampered with. ²¹

(ibid., no. 28, 33)

The spectators’ involvement is sought after in logistical as well as metapsychological terms, the former regarding the material dispositive, the latter regarding the dispositive of belief as it were: the audience, having been duly advised that a deception is going to take place, will pretend not being in the know. For the viewer’s pleasure comes not only from the astonishment brought about by the magician’s dexterity but also from the act of willingly letting oneself be deceived. Now, what is truly striking in the juxtaposition of two diametrically opposed practices is the resemblance between the dispositive of the magic show and the cinematographical dispositive, with which Méliès was very familiar thanks to his “parallel” activity. Like the Théâtre Robert-Houdin, the movie theatre consists of a light-flooded stage, since it houses a luminous screen on which images creating the illusion of reality are projected on the one hand, and an audience whose attention is

channeled in such a way that they will concentrate on the representation on the other. Thus, not only are the two dispositives structurally and scenographically related to each other but they also have in common illusionist practices based on a series of skillfully executed tricks. In both of these two spectacular modes, the use of tricks aims at dazzling the viewers, while concealing the mechanics that sustain the logic of illusion. In a text titled “Moving Pictures” (*Les Vues cinématographiques*), published in 1907, Méliès reminds the reader of the cornerstones of an authentic form of art expressed through his “fantasy pictures” (*vues fantastiques*): for him, the challenge is to “*make the impossible real*, insofar as we photograph it and show it for everyone to see!!!” (Méliès 1985, 207). Later in the text, dealing with the problem of tricks, Méliès writes:

Today, it is intelligently executed *tricks* that allow us to render visible that which is supernatural, imaginary or even impossible, as well as to create genuinely artistic tableaux that are a true delight for those able to understand that all branches of the fine arts take part in their realization.

(*ibid.*, 215)

The trick is precisely to elude the watchfulness of the audience members who are inevitably going to question the feasibility of wonders that are all the more incredible for being evidenced by the indexical character of the film image. Accordingly, the spectator postulated by Méliès is a literally stunned subject, one who is amazed by the beauty of an extraordinary spectacle and whose perceptual certainties have been shaken. The public may be watching a magic number or a cinematic *féerie*: in both cases, it must be ready to return to the naivety of its childhood while remaining fully aware of the prowess and audacity of the artist. Even if the spectator of séances and the Mélièsian spectator seem to share a common denominator in the way they adhere to the spectacle that unfolds before their eyes, they part ways as far as the intentions behind the production of illusion are concerned. In contrast to séances, based on deception passed off as truth, Méliès’s *féeries* are primarily aimed at enlightened audiences that have come to see an artistic performance.

More generally, the controversies opposing magicians and medium spirits epitomize a culture intrigued by perceptual and visual disturbances, as evidenced by the important literature on visual illusions, dreams, and hallucinations (Berton 2015). Paradoxically, scientific and technological discoveries (such as the cinematograph) revealed the frailty of the senses, while enriching the collective imagination with fantasies stemming from the cultural and social shock triggered by modernity. Scientists who studied nervous diseases which lead to hallucinations or make one susceptible to psychological suggestion were also interested by the uncertainties of vision – a highly subjective and unstable phenomenon in and of itself. Patients with disorders of the nervous system often experienced hallucinatory episodes,

be they spontaneous or brought about by physicians. We can thus observe that both the scientific and popular cultures of the time were imbued with practices, discourses, and representations having to do with perceptual illusions and psychological suggestion, all of which underscore a broader crisis of subjectivity. Accordingly, the anxieties and discussions to which spiritualist spectacles gave rise were part of a wider context where human beings' relationship to their social environment (as well as to themselves) was being significantly modified by modernity. This is how spectacles of magic, moving pictures, or Spiritualism came to offer spaces where one could test one's own perceptual faculties in the context of a mass spectacular culture, the latter being a phenomenon characteristic of capitalist society.

Notes

- 1 There are a number of *féeries*, such as *L'Évocation spirite* (1898), *Spiritisme abracadabrant* (1900), *L'Antre des esprits* (1901), or *Le Revenant* (1903), in which Méliès makes fun of the "powers" of spirit mediums.
- 2 The opinions expressed in these conferences must be taken into consideration alongside the stance taken by Rémy (1907).
- 3 Original quote:

Beaucoup sont des sujets plus ou moins névrosés ou hystériques, exaltés encore par la tension d'esprit qu'ils s'imposent, suggestionnés d'ailleurs par le milieu dans lequel on opère, et chez lesquels l'hallucination doit exister souvent. Si nous ne trouvions que de tels sujets dans le spiritisme, il y aurait bien lieu de douter de leur témoignage. Mais les spirites sont extraordinairement nombreux.

- 4 Rémy is quoting from Pierre Janet, who asserts in his *Névroses et idées fixes* that "most if not all mediums exhibit symptoms of nervous disorder and are neuropaths, when they are not hysterics pure and simple".
- 5 Original quote:

Les établissements les mieux cotés ont sacrifié à cette nouvelle divinité parisienne et le Théâtre Robert-Houdin devait à sa vogue de se mettre à l'unisson. Ainsi, le nouveau chef d'œuvre du Maître Méliès, porte-t-il en sous-titre "Revue rétrospective et moderne des phénomènes spirites". C'est, en effet, un intéressant défilé des principales expériences occultes que Legris, devenu soudain médium de premier ordre, nous présente avec sa bonne humeur et son entrain habituels. [...] Après quelques curieuses lévitations d'une table, d'un guéridon, d'un banjo, tout cela non truqué et soigneusement examiné, voici les grandes évocations des spectres et des fantômes. [...] Les spectateurs eux aussi sont enchantés et se communiquent avec enthousiasme leur émerveillement. Nous n'en dirons pas plus à nos lecteurs, qu'ils soient spirites ou prestidigitateurs, ils trouveront dans le nouveau spectacle du Théâtre Robert-Houdin, la plus intéressante manifestation de leurs doctrines respectives.

This review, published under the pseudonym "Servant de scène" (Stage servant), appeared in *L'Illusionniste* 90 (June 1909): 190–1. It is reproduced in Rémy's book in the chapter "Le Spiritisme au Théâtre Robert-Houdin".



- 6 Gustave Babin, “Les Coulisses du cinématographe”, *L’Illustration, Journal universel*, 28 March 1908, issue no. 3396, pp. 211–15; 4 April 1908, issue no. 3397, pp. 238–42.
- 7 Georges Méliès, “Les Coulisses de la cinématographie. Doit-on le dire?”, *Phono-Cinéma-Revue*, no. 2, April 1908, pp. 2–3.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 11 Letter published in *L’Éclair* on April 29, 1908. Its author offered a reward of five hundred francs to the magician able to most successfully imitate mediums (Caroly May 1908, 53).
- 12 Original quote:

M. Gustave Le Bon, auquel se joignirent le prince Roland Bonaparte et M. Dariex, offrit un prix de cinq cent francs, porté à deux mille par les souscriptions des deux personnalités précitées, au médium qui pourrait, en pleine lumière, soit dans les conditions de contrôle effectif par la cinématographie, transporter sans contact un objet d’une table à une autre, placée à très peu de distance. Le concours fut clos après quelques mois d’attente où aucun médium ne se fit inscrire.

- 13 Original quote:

Cette force, qui est projetée, dans un état d’hypnose spécial, hors du corps humain, subit des réactions violentes de la part des forces physiques, et entre autres de la part de certains rayons lumineux. La lumière blanche surtout enlève à cette force presque toutes ses vibrations.

- 14 The term “mediumnic” is frequently used in the spiritualist circles in order to define the special abilities of the medium.
- 15 Original quote:

Si l’expérience que je proposais se fût réalisée, elle eût constitué une preuve définitive, à l’abri de toute discussion. Elle devait s’accomplir en plein jour dans le laboratoire du professeur Dastre, à la Sorbonne, en présence de deux prestidigitateurs, d’un photographe chargé de cinématographier les détails de l’opération, et enfin de quatre membres de l’Académie des sciences [...]. L’annonce de ce prix me valut naturellement la réception de plusieurs centaines de lettres, mais cinq médiums seulement se présentèrent pour le gagner. Je leur fis connaître les conditions indiquées plus haut, garantissant d’ailleurs autant de séances qu’ils le demanderaient. Tous promirent de revenir. Aucun ne reparut.

- 16 Original quote:

Une erreur générale consiste à s’imaginer qu’un savant, distingué dans sa spécialité, possède pour cette seule cause une aptitude particulière à l’observation des faits étrangers à cette spécialité, notamment ceux où l’illusion et la fraude jouent un rôle prépondérant. Vivant dans la sincérité, habitués à croire le témoignage de leurs sens complétés par la précision des instruments, les savants sont, en réalité, les hommes les plus faciles à tromper.



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17 Original quote:

Il n'y a jamais eu de phénomènes spirites, sauf entre les mains des prestidigitateurs, ce qui est alors amusant et inoffensif, ou, ce qui est plus regrettable, en quelques mains perverses, dans les agissements trop intéressés des aigrefins qui en vivent, ou bien encore, ce qui est triste aussi, sous l'imagination en déroute de quelques hallucinés.

18 Original quote:

Devait, ces jours-ci, être mis à exécution devant le contrôle de six savants et personnalités réputés, trois étaient invités par chacune des parties. Leur liste en a été publiée: journalistes, médecins, psychologues et physiologues, rien n'y manque... sauf, c'est par hasard, l'élément qui semblerait indispensable: un prestidigitateur. Cette abstention systématique n'est pas pour étonner qui connaît la façon habituelle des médiums de se dérober au contrôle de ceux qui sont tout indiqués pour voir clair dans leur jeu et découvrir leurs fraudes. Mais le D^r Charpentier, dont sa bonne foi et le désir de faire vérité ne sauraient être mis en doute, a [...] peut-être manqué de clairvoyance et péché par excès de confiance en n'élargissant pas jusqu'aux gens du métier son champ d'investigation.

19 Original quote:

M. le D^r Charpentier ne s'est nullement rendu coupable de l'imprudence de *juger par lui-même* sans l'aide d'un illusionniste, comme l'ont fait beaucoup d'autres docteurs. Il est, au contraire, venu me trouver, et m'a demandé d'examiner attentivement les conditions qu'il avait fixées pour le médium, et de voir s'il restait aucune place pour la fraude. Après examen, je lui ai indiqué deux conditions supplémentaires, et, après m'être rendu chez lui et avoir étudié la où *devait* se passer le phénomène de déplacement d'un guéridon sans contact, je lui ai indiqué un dispositif qui, infailliblement, ferait pincer le médium en flagrant délit s'il essayait de frauder. [...] Puisque le médium devait opérer *par la force psychique seule*, je le mettais dans l'impossibilité, lui et ses acolytes, de tendre les mains ou les pieds vers le guéridon, placé *en dernier* au milieu du cercle par le D^r Charpentier *lui-même*, après que tous les spectateurs étaient dûment *liés et cachetés* (pas eux, mais les liens). Ils ne pouvaient refuser ces conditions sans avouer que l'usage des mains ou des pieds d'une des personnes de connivence ou du médium lui-même était nécessaire pour aider la soi-disant force psychique. Les précautions et l'organisation (qui a été entièrement préparée chez le docteur) étaient telles, qu'il était impossible de truquer ou de frauder. Le résultat ne s'est pas fait attendre. Le médium, devant des précautions trop sérieuses, a battu en retraite, *même* pour la séance projetée *dans l'obscurité complète*, et, à plus forte raison, pour la deuxième séance en lumière rouge, et la troisième en pleine lumière qui devaient suivre la première. Je l'avais, du reste, annoncé d'avance au Docteur, en le prévenant que, si les médiums voulaient opérer quand même par forfanterie, ils opéreraient certainement *sans résultats* et mettraient leur défaite sur le compte de *l'opposition de la volonté des profanes présents*; ou bien que, s'ils essayaient d'agir, ils se feraient pincer grâce à mon petit dispositif secret.

20 Original quote:

Une nuée de soi-disant médiums étrangers s'était abattue sur les salons parisiens, et leurs expériences, pourtant obtenues par des procédés *plus que*

rudimentaires, faisaient tourner bien des têtes. La foi, chez les adeptes du spiritisme, est indéracinable, et la bêtise humaine incommensurable! En vain Raynaly, Dicksonn, Caroly (premier du nom) et moi-même [...], nous avions multiplié la reproduction des expériences exécutées par les médiums, dans des conférences, dans les mairies, en démontrant leur absence de sincérité, en vain avons-nous écrit nombre d'articles, et jeté d'innombrables défis aux spirites qui refusèrent toujours d'opérer devant des professionnels de l'illusion, rien n'y faisait, les gogos continuaient à se laisser plumer. Aussi, un beau jour, en désespoir de cause, je me proposai de frapper un grand coup en reproduisant ces expériences dans des conditions jamais réalisées auparavant, c'est-à-dire non plus dans une obscurité presque totale, comme c'est l'usage chez les spirites, mais dans une lumière éclatante, sur une scène hermétiquement close, sauf du côté des spectateurs et tout à fait à l'avant-scène, à 80 centimètres à peine du premier rang. C'était difficile, mais je réussis au-delà de toute espérance, après nombre d'essais, de tâtonnements, et en m'acharnant, avec persévérance, à vaincre les difficultés que je m'imposais, volontairement.

21 Original quote:

Dans la Magie noire, la scène était dans l'obscurité absolue, tandis qu'un cadre de lumières, entourant la scène extérieurement, était dirigé vers le public (exclusivement), lui crevant les yeux et l'empêchant de voir ce... qu'il ne fallait pas voir! [...], ici, au contraire, *pleine lumière*, visite scrupuleuse des spectateurs montés en scène, s'assurant qu'aucun des objets qui la meublent ne sont truqués, et qu'il est matériellement impossible de quitter la scène ou d'y rentrer autrement que du côté du public [...]. On ne commençait que lorsque les spectateurs se déclaraient certains que *personne ne pouvait venir aider l'opérateur*, et que le matériel à disposition était rigoureusement exempt de préparation.

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