Art of magic in Great Britain between 1860s and 1910s. Artistic expression of the impossible.

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Alexey Pivovarov

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Introduction

"Magic – the very word seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities!"

Bronislaw Malinowsky, anthropologist

This work focuses on theatrical magic - a performing art, which presents an idea of magic on stage in form of an illusion. This work analyzes performances of theatrical magic in Great Britain in the late 19th-early 20th centuries from different viewpoints. This research started as an attempt to introduce magic to the history of arts. However, in the process I came to conclusion, that this is a demanding task as the amount of material is so large and there is so much potential for various types of analysis, that every particular topic raised in this work deserves a separate research. This vast field of possibilities is a direct consequence of the fact that magic was often studied in isolation from other forms of entertainment and art. Yet, there are many connections and links between magic, photography, theatre, cinema and literature that can help us better understand the concepts of belief and disbelief, magical and supernatural, rational and irrational in culture and art. I see this work as an attempt to provide a mind map, an overview of the field and ideas that might partly be controversial and partly, I hope, inspirational. This is, at the same time, a very personal work as I have been studying and performing magic for the last fifteen years and have always been fascinated by the philosophical and cultural richness of this performing art, the qualities that very often remain hidden from the eyes of the audience. I hope that this work will help the readers to see magic from a new perspective and may serve as a helpful source of information for researchers in the field of art history and cultural studies.

Magic, along with religion, art and science is an important subject for anthropology, art, and cultural studies. Magic can be studied in terms of its functions and cultural role in the society, its historical influences on science, religion or philosophy, its depictions in artworks and literature.

Our world might seem to be very rational. However, we are still surrounded by magic and myth. Details might change, but the concept stays the same. The American culture of comic books and the massive pantheon of superheroes possessing supernatural powers is one example that comes to mind. The enormous popularity of Harry Potter books in the past decade, the multimillion screen versions of the "Lord of the Rings" and

"Hobbit" once again demonstrate the never-ending popularity of fantasy and magic in fiction.

Yet it is not so easy to define the word "magic". Especially in the English language, as one can use the word "magic" in two different contexts. For instance, there is magic as a cultural, ritual activity, mostly associated with ancient rituals or shamanism and there is performance magic – magic that is performed on stage. These two phenomena still go under the same name (although the latter can also be described by the word "conjuring"). This fact presents a need to understand the relation between these two kinds of magic in the first place.

If we search in the library catalogs and do a broad search using the word "magic," we would probably first get studies of magic that refer to early and tribal societies, where magic can still be found in its original form. These are mostly anthropological studies. From them, we can understand that the very concept of magic as an opposition to science and religion was formed during the 16th-18th centuries when Europeans started to intensively explore other continents.[1]

Numerous studies were written on the subject of magic by respected authors in the field of anthropology. The focus of those works by researches like Frazer, Malinowski and Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah is on the supernatural or "ritual" magic, which is usually the first image that comes to mind with the word "magic". This type of magic may be described as a specific worldview, mode of rationality or way of thinking. It is a set of attitudes to the world and the human's place in this world. At the same time, it is a "specific art for specific needs"[2] – a set of traditions, rites, procedures, and folklore aiming at influencing and controlling the world and nature.

Magic was a dominating form of understanding and interpreting the world for a long time, and had close connections with religion. It made belief in a demonstration of supernatural powers possible. Grabbing the idea is easier when it is visually represented. The historical data appear to suggest that demonstrations of supernatural powers have taken place since ancient times – probably earlier than 1700 BC.[3] The descriptions of these feats, although seemingly impossible, remind us of what we call nowadays "magic tricks" or "conjuring tricks". In fact, there can be little doubt that the supernatural

[1] Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
[2] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 68.
[3] Melbourne Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic* (Toronto: Fitzhenry&Whiteside Limited, 1973), 9.

demonstrations were nothing but *illusions*, which leads us to a conclusion, that magic as a type of public performance was known to people for a long time. From the early times, people managed to develop specific techniques, based on knowledge of science, sleight of hand and human psychology, which allowed magicians to demonstrate visual supernatural effects. Using clever applications of natural principles, they managed to produce illusions that probably the audience believed to be real.

No matter how these effects were achieved and what particular methods and techniques were used, it seems reasonable to assume that for a very long time demonstrations of magic were perceived as *real*. Nowadays, when we watch theatrical magic it is obvious to us that there is a *secret.* In other words, we are aware of the fact, that if we took the performer's place, we would not notice anything supernatural but rather purely natural methods. We can call it a dual reality: there is a reality of the spectator where a magic effect is apparently happening and the reality of a performer, where the secret operations are taking place. This subtle balance between being amazed by the magic trick yet not believing in the supernatural powers of the performer creates the essence of every magic performance. During a theatre play, a person can have a similar experience – being emotionally involved in the performance yet being aware of its real nature. This effect is called a temporary conscious *suspension of disbelief*.

The concept of the suspension of disbelief is one of the essential criteria that defines if a certain activity becomes a performance. In earlier times, a magical performance was not a theatrical performance for a spectator. Magic could be perceived as real. This is an important fact to keep in mind when studying magic as a performing art. The history of theatre magic is not an ongoing process that started when the first magic effects were demonstrated, i.e. thousands of years ago. It is crucial to understand, that if a "magical method", i.e. a secret technique invisible to the spectators, took place, it does not necessarily mean that we deal with magic as a performing art. Ancient priests or shamans who demonstrated their powers and performed what we now know was an illusion, could be praised by their audience, but the spectators had no idea about the *modus operandi*. Furthermore, they could be ignorant of the very fact, that there *was* a secret. Therefore, the performance was not a *performing art* as there was no connotation of it being only an illusion, an *imitation* of the supernatural. Performances of this type did not imitate or represent anything simply because the audience did not interpret what they saw as a *representation,* it saw only the object of representation itself.

The 19th-century authors who wrote about the history of magic, such as Henry Ridgely Evans, focused on this idea of different types of magic. They realized that, although the methods and secrets in magic stayed the same, if we talk about the history of magic, we should make a distinction between two completely different phenomena. The separation is based on the attitude of the audience. In the first case, the audience believes that they see a genuine supernatural phenomenon. We can call it "real" magic. In the second case, the viewer is aware of the fact that he only sees an illusion. We can call this type of performance theatrical magic. These two types of magic started to separate around the 15th century when the first books revealing secrets of magic were published. The "Discovery of witchcraft," first published in 1584,[4] is considered to be an important turning point for the magicians, as it includes the first known attempt to educate the general public about the very idea of a secret behind the feats performed by sorcerers, as well as to prevent entertainers from becoming victims of the witch hunt. The two types of magic continued to exist side by side, sometimes being confused or misunderstood. One was represented by visual demonstrations of ritual magic, which continue to take different, although often marginal, forms in modern society. The other was theatrical or, as magicians used to call it in the 19th and early 20th centuries – "modern", "natural" or "white"[5] – terms, which imply illusions that can be learned, and which are done for entertainment purposes. These terms were introduced as an opposition to the other form of magic – black magic, associated with witchcraft and treated by Western society as the reminiscent of the past. The idea of a modern society that is free from the superstition and is based on the ideas of enlightenment and progress became an important feature of the 19th century and allowed the theatrical type of magic to develop and take its place in culture and art. We can also apply the term "stage magic" to this performing art or, even better, as philosopher Lawrence Hass has proposed "staged magic", "in order to stress that its character is performed rather than necessarily being "onstage".[6] We can say with certainty that starting from the 19th century stage magic was widely recognized and socially accepted as a form of stage performance. A paragraph from a theoretical book on magic under the title of "Our magic" published in 1911 states that:

[4] Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft,* https://archive.org/details/discoverieofwitc00scot.
[5] Henry Ridgely Evans, *The Old and the New in Magic* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1906), https://archive.org/details/oldandnewmagic00evangoog.
[6] Lawrence Hass, "Life Magic and Staged Magic: A Hidden Intertwining," in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass and James Peck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 14.

> … at the present day, the term "magic" must have a meaning very different from that assigned to it in bygone centuries. The only meaning it can now possess must relate to the apparent, not actual defiance of natural laws. Modern magic, therefore, deals exclusively with the creation of mental impressions. We cannot perform real miracles, as everybody is well aware. We can only perform feats which look like miracles, because the means whereby they are performed have been skilfully screened from observation.[7]

There is a reason why authors of the described period, again and again, drew the reader's attention to this distinction in the meaning of terms. It is worth emphasizing that even at the end of the 18th century, magic could still be easily regarded as real. 19th-century historian Thomas Frost in his book on magic history provides an example of a magician who performed in London in 1780s under the name Katterfelto. On one of his posters he had to print that, he "is sorry to find that writers in the newspapers have several times, and particularly within the last fortnight, asserted that he and his black cat were devils."[8] Although the times of witch-hunt had been left in the past, these stereotypes could harm magicians' reputation. It is, therefore, no surprise that magicians performing on stage only a century after the performers who could be blamed to be devils had to take extra precautions and educate the audience about the nature of their acts. More than that, ritual magic changed forms but never really ceased to exist. It continued to develop throughout the 19th and the 20th century. For example, in 1888 The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn – the first modern organization truly dedicated to the practice of ritual magic – was formed in England.[9]

However, it is important to note that the question of the relation between performances of ritual and theatrical magic is not that obvious and these two phenomena cannot be simply described with the opposition of fraud versus entertainment.

First of all, it is incorrect to assume that everything related to "real" magic was a deception. The 19th-century authors often presented it in such a way to emphasize the idea of progress and science and to demonstrate how previous beliefs in magical powers had been inferior to the modern way of thinking about the world and nature. Yet magic was

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[7] Nevil Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," in *Our Magic: The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic*, ed. Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant (Fleming, 1946), 92.
[8] Thomas Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors* (1876), 138, https://archive.org/details/livesconjurors01frosgoog.
[9] Owen Davies, "The Rise of Modern Magic," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, ed. Owen Davies (Oxford University Press, 2017), 207.

much more complex than that. Although it could involve elements of deception, it was not centered around them and was a broader phenomenon. We cannot separate demonstrations of magical feats from the culture that they took place in. Only then can we understand the real meaning of these feats and their perception by the audience. Therefore addressing earlier magic as an instrument for fooling masses to acquire power and money (as historian and magician Eugene Burger called it – "economic-political" theory[10]) is a very one-sided approach.

Second, the only fact that the same term "magic" is used for these two fields, which are very different nowadays, tells us, that there might be a connection on a conceptual level. The entertainment magic still focuses on the same concepts and ideas as its counterpart. Theatrical magic is a play about supernatural magic or, as one scholar formulated it "the artful performance of impossible effects."[11] Ritual magic is a way of life and perception, whereas theatrical magic demonstrates its visual components with the aim of achieving surprise and amazement from the audience. Yet surprise and amazement are only what we see on the surface as there certainly is a deeper cultural meaning in the magical performances. A stage magician performing an illusion is representing the same key idea that ritual magic focuses on. Famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski formulated this idea as "the affirmation of man's power to cause certain definite effects by a definite spell and rite." According to Malinowski, the principal aim of ritual magic is "to ritualize man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear."[12] Magicians on stage do it in a symbolic way and theatrical magic becomes an *artistic representation* of real magic, a performance telling about the idea of controlling nature.

We can also find other ideas and meanings in the magic performances. Lawrence Hass observes that: "The magical artist, far from performing superficial or trivial tricks, reflects our own deepest abilities and desires as magic makers."[13] As another example, I would like to quote a passage from the research of the historian of theatre and performance Michael Mangan:

> One, that the art of the conjuror contains a level of hidden symbolism which links

[10] Eugene Burger and Robert E. Neale, *Magic&Meaning* (Seattle: Hermetic Press, Inc.,2009), 62.
[11] James Peck, "Conjuring Capital: Magic and Finance from Eighteenth-Century London to the New Las Vegas," in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass and James Peck, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 109.
[12] Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, 70.
[13] Hass, "Life Magic and Staged Magic: A Hidden Intertwining," 28.

> us with a sacred past, remnants of preindustrial beliefs, echoes of shamanic rituals and magical practices now emptied of their efficacy and reborn as entertainment. If this is so, the conjuror seems to offer a form of compensation for something lost: in an age of science and technology, belief in magic (which came naturally to earlier societies) is no longer available to us. By engaging in a theatrical context with the skills of the stage conjuror, however, we can experience imaginatively a kind of echo of the past and convince ourselves temporarily that the world is still full of wonderland magic.[14]

In that way, theatrical magic is a performing art which at every point in its history is referencing to the idea of "real" magic. Stage magic is also closely connected with science, because science provides the audience with an understanding of where the border between possible and impossible lies and gives the necessary criteria to define whether the demonstrated feat lies beyond our comprehension.

Today magic is a rapidly developing performing art. Magic shows get growing popularity on TV and live performances of magic are still among the top attractions in world centers of entertainment: London Westend in the United Kingdom, Broadway, Hollywood, and Las-Vegas in the USA. Today one can find magic shows of completely different styles, scales and formats that include the legendary illusions created by American magician David Copperfield, the unconventional "rock'n'roll" magical theater of Las Vegas performers Penn and Teller, and the psychological illusions of British star mentalist Derren Brown. The TV shows and movies also vary from the revelations of famous magicians' secrets to magicians trying to fool their colleagues, historical documentaries about the roots of magic, and fiction films such as "Illusionist" (2006), "Prestige" (2006), and "Now you see me" (2013) - to name a few.

At the same time magic is an important part of popular culture, mainly because of the many references and stereotypes it has created. It must be admitted, that magic often has a primitive or an oversimplified image in the public imagination and magicians are associated with mechanical tricks and performances whose main audience is kids. This image, of course, cannot be simply called wrong, although some magicians prefer to see it as such, as it seems offensive to them. Yet every stereotype is partly based on reality.

[14] Michael Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring* (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 191.

A stereotypical and often comical image of a typical magician takes its roots in the growing popularization of magic, which made it available for millions of people from all around the world. Focusing on the tricks rather than the presentation and using *clichés* from the past (such as top hats and tuxedos), hundreds of magicians created an image of a non-professional kids entertainer who is not supposed to be treated seriously. This fact has its roots in an important quality of magic – its primary effect, which is surprise or deception. Every magic trick or illusion has this effect at its core. This particular result is not that difficult to achieve. What is difficult is to present it in an artistic way and fill the presentation with a certain meaning. Yet this second point is often neglected or overseen. Historian of magic Jim Steinmeyer formulated this problem as follows:

> Magicians tend to focus on deception, as if it's the essence of their skills. It's an attitude often reinforced by audiences, who have learned to expect very little from magic acts. If a magician manages to fool his audience, most accept that he's done his job-just as if a juggling act is great because the performer didn't drop any balls or a singer is wonderful because she didn't hit any clinkers. With the expectations set so low, most magicians are perfectly happy to descend to them.[15]

At the same time, popularization of magic can be regarded as a positive trend. With the appearance of home video players and later internet, a huge and constantly expanding market of teaching materials for magicians emerged. The number of books, DVDs and websites about magic is growing considerably every year, making this field much more opened to amateurs that are willing to learn. These factors created amazing possibilities for everyone to contribute to the world of magic, allowed new talents to grow and made the world of theatre magic easier to understand for academic scholars.

It seems that magic is now going through a new golden age, becoming one of the most popular forms of public entertainment and obtaining more and more interest from the general audience, producers, and theatres. This is certainly a cultural phenomenon that deserves more attention as a subject of an academic research.

[15] Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the elephant* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2001), 93.

Historical framework

For my research I have chosen a specific period. The 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century are known to be the golden age of the art of magic. This is not a post-historical observation, this is a fact that was already clear to the contemporary magicians. A London newspaper proudly proclaimed in 1897:

> This the golden age of legerdemain. The classic giants, it is true, are dead … But most of their tricks have come down to us … and a decade which counts among its living conjurors Mr. Maskelyne and M. Buatier de Kola obviously occupies a very distinguished place in the history of practical magic.[16]

Magicians were performing everywhere from the city streets to aristocratic saloons and royal courts. This was the time when magic was finally institutionalized and accepted as a type of public entertainment. Tickets for the magic shows were sold out in advance and stars of magic had successful tours around countries and continents. A significant percentage of methods and techniques used by magicians all over the world until nowadays were created during this period. The interaction between magic and other art forms was more intensive and more fruitful than before. Magic influenced other arts such as theatre and early cinema, and it was in turn influenced by them and by the whole cultural paradigm of the time.

Great Britain in the 19th century was a fast developing country with technology, science, and culture growing at an unprecedented pace. This period was the beginning of the triumph of popular culture and mass entertainment in Victorian England. It was the first period in history when mass theatregoing became a norm.[17] Economic stability and prosperity, as well as the development of communication, allowed many middle and working class citizens to look for new forms of leisure and activities that had not been available to them before. These trends made a boom of popular entertainment possible and allowed theatrical magic to become one of the most popular attractions of the time.

Almost every renowned performer of the time gave a show in Britain. The London Egyptian Hall – a building in central London, which had been initially designed to be a

[16] "The Art of Stage Magic," London Evening Standard, December 10, 1897, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

[17] David Mayer, "Encountering Melodrama," in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 146.

museum, became a venue for the top magical performers in the middle of the 19th century. It soon acquired the name of the "British home of mystery". The Egyptian Hall was actually such an important and symbolic place for magic that American magician William W. Durbin in 1895 opened a magic theatre in his hometown Kenton, Ohio, and named it American Egyptian Hall. The London Egyptian Hall is associated with several legendary magicians: John Nevil Maskelyne (the founder of the Maskelyne family, whose descendants were successfully doing magic long time after his death) and his partners George Alfred Cooke and David Devant, who joined them later. They became the key personalities in the history of magic of the late 19th century in Britain and were a "household word in their day."[18] It is also a fact that at the time of their work they had the longest run in London entertainment ("with the sole exception of Madam Tussaud" – as Maskelyne's son put it).[19] Not only did they invent a huge number of magic illusions and performing techniques, but also developed new ways of presenting magic. Jim Steinmeyer also sees Maskelyne as the "greatest brand name in magic."[20] A historian of magic Albert Hopkins in his 1897 book on magic called Maskelyne "the leading exponent of the magic art" in England.[21] Not only was Maskelyne one of the most well-known magicians of his time, a lot of other magicians in England and continental Europe were completely dependent upon him as he launched many careers and supported several performers. For these reasons, he was sometimes called "The Chief" by his colleagues. He was more than a performer, he was also an entrepreneur and a skillful master of advertisement and publicity. David Devant, Maskelyne's partner, was considered by his colleagues to be one of the most talented magicians of his time. In 1913, the magicians of England held a testimonial for Devant at St. George's Hall and presented him with a service of plate and an address printed and signed by the most of the outstanding magicians in England and many outside of England.[22] He later became the first president of the newly found Magic Circle of England. For more than fifty years, the Egyptian Hall and later St. George's Hall were associated with the magic performances of Maskelyne, Cooke, and Devant. These places became tourist attractions for people from Europe and even from the USA, as well for the magicians who were coming to see the latest

[18] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 13.
[19] Ibid., 13.
[20] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 94.
[21] Albert Allis Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography* (New York: Dover Publictations, 1976), 24.
[22] David Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater* (Cornwall Books, 1985), 136.

developments in the art of magic and to get inspiration and advice. Maskelyne's son – Nevil Maskelyne - followed in his father's footsteps and continued to cooperate with David Devant. The period between the 1860's and 1910's in Great Britain can be, with no doubt, called one of the key periods in the history of magic. Although the title of this work suggests that only the magic scene of Great Britain will be studied, it must be pointed out, that magic, by its nature, was very international. I chose Great Britain as the home of John Nevil Maskelyne, who created one of the most popular and significant magic theaters of the time – the Egyptian Hall – yet some performers who will be mentioned in this research are not of British origin but they did perform their shows in London at some point of time.

This period is also interesting for another reason. The progress of science and rationality was paradoxically combined with the growing interest in supernatural and magical phenomena. The popularity of spiritualism and theosophy went along with the enormous success of magic shows, where magicians often exposed mediums and recreated spiritualistic feats. Yet, as I will argue in this work, both phenomena were codependent and often represented the same cultural trend – a search for mystery in life and the world. The representatives of rational thinking and rational worldview kept looking at the areas of mystery and magic to find new, hidden truth, instead of simply rejecting them as superstitious and false. These ideas are stressed by Josephson-Strom in his book on modernity and disenchantment, where he argues, that Western society only created the myth of disenchantment while in fact, preserved the supernatural beliefs and the magical attitudes. For example, the most prominent scientists researched spiritualistic phenomena and often turned into believers. French medium Eusapia Palladino was observed for three years, starting from 1905, by famous scientists of France, England, Italy, and Germany. Moreover, Josephson-Strom claims that:

> The paranormal researchers who investigated Eusapia were not marginal eccentrics, but the cutting edge of the period's academic establishment. Yet these researchers were exploring areas that were often marked out by their contemporaries as occult, if not downright magical. They did so not as a legacy of medieval "superstitions," nor generally as a way to overturn science, but rather as a means to extend its borders.[23]

[23]Jason Ā. Josephson-Strom, *The Myth of Disenchantment. Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 2.

This interest in the paranormal allowed stage magicians to prosper as they addressed these burning issues in their shows.

From the point of view of the performing art, the last quarter of the 19th century was also a critical point for magic. On the surface magic was as popular as never before. It was the time when magic was finally socially accepted as a form of entertainment. There was, for the first time in the history of magic, a very little chance for a magician to be perceived as a real sorcerer. It was clear to the audiences that what they saw was nothing but tricks. However, this brought up an important question for magicians themselves – what makes a particular magician special? If it is all about secrets, then what makes a performer unique? What is the value of the magic performance? Fooling an audience and presenting a puzzle? There was a feeling that magic had more potential than this, and that it was bigger than just a set of technical skills. Yet there was no clear understanding of the essence of this problem. Magicians were attempting to incorporate dramatic and theatrical techniques in their performance, to combine magic and cinema, to present magic as a scientific performance, to reveal magic tricks with the aim of demonstrating that secrets were not that important. The search for an answer led to the publication of the first book on the theory of magic "Our Magic"[24] which became the first serious attempt to give an answer to the most important question "Is magic an art?" This book can be regarded as a manifesto of magicians about their art, where they tried to formulate their attitude towards magic. The question of whether magic can be considered an art form has been raised many times since then, and the literature has still shown no consensus on that matter. The difficulty to answer this question is enhanced by the fact that the very concept of art and its definition became extremely controversial in the 20th century due to the appearance of modern art in a broad sense of the word. If we look at the facts, then it becomes clear that magic is still not a part of the art history and is quite rarely studied by the academic community. Still, the same questions appear and are discussed by magicians: why magic should deserve better attitude from the public, what differentiates an amateur from a professional, should magic secrets be kept better and, in the end, is magic a form of art? The very presence of this ongoing discussion makes it worth paying attention to.

The problems that magic is facing today are similar to the fundamental theoretical issues of the 19th century. With the appearance of TV and the development of stage

[24] David Devant and Nevil Maskelyne, *Our Magic: The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic* (Fleming, 1946).

production, special effects, virtual reality, and 3D cinema, magic effects often cannot seriously compete even with modern movies. Every effect, no matter how supernatural it may seem, can now be reproduced using technology that the audience is familiar with. This fact leads to the question: what is left to a magician? Is there any special value which magic as a performing art can bring to the spectator and to the art world?

To explore the possible answers to these questions, it is necessary to conduct a deeper cultural and historical analysis of magic and its evolution. One should try to look at magic from different angles and engage in an interdisciplinary research without limiting oneself only to the history of magic secrets or to the psychological aspects of magic. Most importantly, one should analyze and compare the views of magicians on the subject.

Before presenting the purposes of this research, a short overview of the most important literature on magic, which is available today, should be provided.

Modern studies of magic

Secrecy makes magic stand apart from all other kinds of performing arts. Secrecy is a fundamental part of magic, and there has been an inconclusive debate inside the magic community about the ethics of exposure. The underlying argument against exposure of secrets is that magic instantly loses its value for the spectators. However, it might be convincingly argued that the obvious drawback of secrecy if that magic becomes a difficult subject for research. There is no clear way to approach an art, which methods are not transparent and often misinterpreted by the public, and which image may be at times highly controversial because of its associations with fraud and charlatanism. As a consequence, in the mind of academic community magic might often be either oversimplified or ignored, and seems to exist separately not only from the world of art but also from the world of popular culture and entertainment.

Yet it is clear that magic has been a popular phenomenon for a long time. It would be incorrect to claim that there has been no interest in magic as a performing art from the researches. It is interesting to see which specific features were analyzed and from which perspectives.

Matthew Solomon has studied the relation between theatre magic of the late 19th century and cinema. He analyzed the ways in which such magicians as Harry Houdini and Georges Méliès influenced the development of the early film industry in terms of

narrative style, editing, and content. Solomon focused on the most important trends in magic of the 19th century and on the question of how they shaped early cinema.[25]

Karen Beckman looks at magic in the context of social history and regards the most famous illusions of the 19th century as the symbolic representations of gender problems. The author analyzes the magic performances from the perspective of gender and feminism. It leads the author to reveal the subtle connections between the political situation, the changes in the perception of the woman's role in society and the popular magic shows, which, often subconsciously, put fears and contradictions of an audience in a form of a magic trick.[26]

Simon During provides another example of finding specific patterns in magic which are regarded as highly influential for the whole modern culture and mass entertainment. It is important to mention that the author chooses a specific approach to the idea of "secular" magic (in opposition to "religious" or "supernatural" magic") and claims that the reasons for the significant influence of magic on modern culture are its triviality and "little cultural weight", meaning that magic shows "require so few competences to enjoy."[27]

In 1997, in Muhlenberg college, the "Theory and Art of Magic" conference took place. It was the first symposium that intended to bring academics from different disciplines to discuss the art of performing magic and its meaning. It resulted in an interesting collection of essays "Performing magic on the Western Stage" and led to a series of symposiums. Respected scholars from the fields of cultural and theatre studies as well as famous magicians were invited to participate. During the conference, the organizers and the participants have discovered "profound, diverse interdisciplinarity" of magic and attempted to study magic from very different methodological and conceptual approaches.[28] This type of events demonstrates the growing interest in magic from scholars from various fields and the rich potential of magic as a subject for research.

Considerable research has been conducted in the fields of psychology and neurology with the aim of obtaining information about the human mind, perception and cognitive functions. Magicians, being specialists in deception, attention control, and

[25] Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks. Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (University of Illinois Press, 2010).
[26] Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2003).
[27] Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Harvard University Press, 2002).
[28] Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass and James Peck, *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

optical illusions have become subjects for scientific investigation starting from the late 19th century. A key topic of these studies was always not the performance of magic, but rather its perception by the audience. There are numerous studies published in major journals as well as popular science books for a general audience.[29] These works deal with the physiological and psychological aspects of the perception of magic and, therefore, are only indirectly related to the topic of art and its cultural significance.

A significant part of the literature on magic is represented by works written by the practitioners of theatre magic. There are three main categories in this field: histories of magic, books on magic theory, and teaching literature. Teaching literature is not analyzed here as it focuses primarily on techniques and methods and is meant to be read by professional magicians.

The history of magic is represented by numerous studies conducted by magic historians who usually work independently of any academic institutions. The common feature of these works is the fact that most of them investigate magic performances without paying specific attention to the cultural or artistic context in which they existed. In the most magic histories, we see an approach that can be identified as a "method-effect" approach. The research question is normally "what is performed" and sometimes "how it is done", but very rare "why". The studies represent a detailed history of magic methods and effects performed from the ancient times. Therefore, less attention is paid to the perception of magic performances and their meaning for the audience. The classical work on magic of this type is Melbourne Christopher's "The illustrated history of magic."[30] The book accumulates a great amount of work and uses various sources and has served as an important reference point at the first stages of my investigation.

Jim Steinmeyer tries to outline the problem of focusing only on the history of tricks and methods in his book on magic history:

> Generally, there have been two approaches to writing about magic. Many books appeal to the public by breathlessly promising to tell "how it's done," then marching through techniques in shorthand: It's done with a mirror, the box has a

[29] For example: Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman, *Magic in Theory. An introduction to the theoretical and psychological elements of conjuring* (University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008).
[30] Melbourne Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic* (Toronto: Fitzhenry&Whiteside Limited, 1973).

false panel, or the lady slips through a trapdoor. In this way the secrets sound simple, crude, and uninteresting. On this level of X's and O's, they are. Other books simply ignore the techniques of magicians or consider them too precious to discuss. They keep the secrets and focus only on the personal histories of the performers."[31]

Mr. Steinmeyer chooses a more general approach to present more information about people responsible for the creation of the illusions and the history surrounding them. He turned his historical research into a number of brilliant essays dedicated to the most notable personalities in the history of magic. He has also written a number of wonderful books about particular performers such as Howard Thurston and Chung Ling Soo.

It is important to take into consideration the fact that most literature of this type is written for the general audience and has a popular educational character. For this reason, it often may lack a particular methodology and a set of research objectives. It may also lack references to sources, and therefore it might be difficult to track some of the facts described.

One can also find bibliographical works on magic that present the reader with pure facts and a collection of valuable sources like posters, tickets, and newspaper quotes. The book by George Jenness "Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall"[32] was especially valuable for this research because it focuses on the history of the main venue for magical performances in London of the late 19th century and contains rare materials and facts assembled by the author. So was the research of a magician and theorist Sam Sharpe under the title of "The Magic Play"[33] that focused solely on a particular type of magic performance that is described in the first chapter of this research.

Magic was approached as an art mostly by magicians themselves. Some works written by professional performers contain interesting thoughts on the subject. Among many, it is necessary to name Derren Brown's essay "Can magic be art? New thoughts" and Darwin Ortiz's books "Strong Magic" and "Designing Miracles: Creating the illusion

[31] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 20.
[32] George Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904* (1976) www.miraclefactory.net.
[33] Sam Sharpe, *The Magic Play* (1976) www.lybrary.com.

of impossibility". The works by Sam Sharpe, Richard Osterlind, Al Schneider, Eugene Burger[34], and other magicians have been of great use to understand the current approach to the role of magic and its connections to art as seen by the practitioners of magic.

Having been able to study magic as a performer I believe that there are still more things about magic which might be of interest to a researcher.

The concepts of magic, impossibility, and supernatural, which are the central topics of any magic performance, have always been important concepts for human culture, and are present in every form of art. The idea of magic was a topic for visual and performing art and literature, it even served later as a method for symbolists and surrealists who looked in their magical dreams for inspiration. Magical tales of the Grimm Brothers, symbolists' paintings and works of expressionists all partly deal with the concept of magic.

As it has already been pointed out above, magic performances have deeper meanings and can be analyzed from different perspectives. Magician Eugene Burger expressed his opinion on the topic: "…performance magic is worthy of our attention if only because it appears to be the only art form that is always and forever concerned with *transcendence*. I find this fascinating. This is not to say that other art forms do not also deal with transcendence. They surely do. Sometimes. Theatrical or performance magic, on the other hand, *always* deals with reaching beyond the ordinary and everyday; it always deals with transcending the human condition."[35] He then goes on and argues:

> For me, performance magic has always been a deep and profound art that raises fascinating questions, and some of these are questions that we ignore at our own peril. Consider this one: why are we all so easily *deceived* ? Why is deception so common? Why are we deceived by politicians, the so-called religious, and even those who reside in the inner circles of those we love and who love us? Would our lives benefit if we could reduce the amount of deception in which we are involved on a daily basis? And how shall we deal with *self*-deception? Indeed, is self-deception always a "bad" thing? I submit these are important questions.[36]

[34] For details see bibliography table in the end of this work.
[35] Eugene Burger, "Foreword, " in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass and James Peck, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), ix.
[36] Ibid., x-xi.

The concepts of magic, of possible and impossible, of rational and irrational were changing with time. Theatrical magic was trying to represent these concepts in the most visual and understandable forms. At the same time, entertainment magic also influenced the perception of these topics by the society. It is worth emphasizing that magicians were not simply passively reflecting current trends, they were powerful creators of meanings and myths about magic, science, enchantment, and disenchantment. I believe that a better understanding of stage magic, its audience, its cultural references and its connection to other art forms can bring a better understanding of the very concept of magical and impossible and its role in our culture and society.

Historical sources

The primary sources for this research were the books written by the performers who took part in the development of the Egyptian Hall and the business of Maskelyne. It is important to point out that magicians clearly stood out from other representatives of the entertainment scene as they wrote extensively. They published books on magic, autobiographies, and research on the history of magic. This provides scholars with valuable data for the historical analysis of magic.

David Devant coauthored the book "Our Magic" with the son of John Maskelyne – Nevil Maskelyne. The book was a theoretical study of magic and is the main source for the third chapter of this research. His other books are autobiographical: "Secrets of my Magic", "My magic life" and "The woes of a wizard". They provide insights in his personal biography in magic and describe his magic acts and the performances of his contemporaries. He also wrote several books on magic tricks and secrets. Another magician, Charles Bertram, who performed with Maskelyne in Devant several times and had a successful career in magic, also was a prolific writer. He published two books: "Isn't it wonderful?" and "A magician in many lands". These works are very personal and contain a lot of stories and opinions on magic, as well as valuable historical information about magic shows of the time. I will address other autobiographies, as well as books on magic history and theory that were published during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries.

British newspapers of the period gave the chance to analyze the perception of magic shows by media and audience and to establish and cross-check some specific dates

and performance details. It was an important source of valuable information for this research.[37]

Research objectives and methodology

The main objective of the study is to investigate the history of magic in Great Britain during the second half of the 19th and the start of the 20th centuries in the context of culture and history. I will address the history of magic from three different perspectives: magic as entertainment and show business, magic as a cultural phenomenon, and magic as a type of performing art. This approach will allow me to look at magic from various angles and to create a complete picture of magic as a social, cultural and artistic phenomenon.

I believe that the conduction of this research might help to improve the understanding of the history of culture and art of the 19th and 20th centuries. Besides, the conducted research might provoke interest in the art of magic and its history among art scholars.

It is necessary to acknowledge that studies of theatrical magic are usually conducted in the fields of cultural or drama studies. The attempt to do this research under the roof of the history of arts serves the goal of looking at the phenomenon from a different perspective as it might provoke new thoughts on the subject.

Several methodological approaches were used during the research. As it has already been mentioned, from the 18th century onwards magicians' performances became theatrical actions aimed to create an *illusion* of impossible. It was not anymore a way of making people really believe in the supernatural, but a way of giving spectators an experience of wonder. It became *an artistic expression of impossible*. I analyze magic from this point of view: magic as a performing art that deals with the concept of impossible and creates an artistic shape for it.

The work implies a theoretical approach of thorough comparative analysis of primary sources with the aim of generalization and formulating a contemporary attitude to the subject. Although I mostly depend on autobiographical material written by the magicians, it is important to point out, that I do not try to imply biographical method, as my aim is not focusing on particular personality, but rather using the most influential

[37] To access the newspaper I used www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk website. I will not quote it in every reference to avoid repetition.

figures as bright representatives of their age. I also employ a contextual method to look at the art of magic in the cultural and historical environment of the chosen period.

The hypothesis of this work can be formulated as follows:

Theatrical magic became a highly influential cultural phenomenon of the late 19th-early 20th centuries in Great Britain that represented the idea of real magic on stage. It reflected the struggle between rational and irrational that was present in the society, generated and popularized narratives about science and the supernatural and presented them in a form of an artistic performance.

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion.

The first chapter is concerned with an issue of magic being a part of the entertainment scene of the period and analyses the social image of a magician, production and management processes in magic and provides an overview of magic acts and performances. I analyze the theatrical magic focusing on two principal topics: the social image of a performer and the content of the magic shows. It will provide the reader with an understanding of how magic functioned as an industry and what the most important aspects of magic performances were.

The case issue of chapter two is the analysis of magic as a cultural phenomenon. I will look at the concepts and ideas behind the magic shows, the cultural role of a magician and will investigate how magicians created narratives that reflected current trends. I will mainly focus on the question of how the ideas of rationality and irrationality were represented by magicians both on and off stage.

In chapter three, I analyse the approach to magic as a performing art that was expressed in the most important theoretical work on the subject - the book “Our Magic”. In the last part of the third chapter, I will attempt to draw parallels between magic and other art forms on a conceptual level.

In the conclusion the reader will find the general overview of the main research topics and final thoughts on the subject.

Chapter 1. Theatre magic in the late 19th-early 20th centuries

Chapter 1 discusses the magic performances of the late 19th-early 20th centuries. It has two principal aims: first, to describe how magic was functioning as an industry, second, to get into details of the most famous shows and acts and get a picture of what a magical performance looked like. I will focus mainly on the magic shows of John Nevil Maskelyne and his partners, who were the most influential magicians in Great Britain, but will also pay attention to other performers who were working during the period in question.

Part 1. Magic as a part of the performance scene

Location

Magic shows were performed primarily in music halls. A music hall originated from a public house and served as a room, which offered both food and entertainment. However, closer to the end of the 19th century, there was a separate hall for performances.

Music halls hosted variety programs that mixed dance, singing, comedy, juggling and other types of minor performing arts. Magic was often part of the program. However, it was not unusual for a magician to run his own magic show (often him being the only person on stage) that could last between two and three hours. In these shows, variety acts could be included as intermissions and served as a way to provide diversity and allow the magician to prepare for his next act.

Magicians were often invited to perform on special occasions to entertain important guests – royal families and aristocrats. It could be, for example, a private show in a drawing room. It could also be a special variety program that included other performing arts along with magic. For example, on the 1st July 1912, a Royal Variety Command performance was organized at the London Palace Theatre and David Devant was selected to represent magicians. King George V was in attendance and there were other renowned performers invited, for example, Anna Pavlova – a famous Russian ballet dancer.[38]

There was already a market and demand for private entertainment. In 1899, Maskelyne and Cooke opened their own entertainment bureau that was providing talents for public and private events. David Devant was the managing partner and the actual

[38] "Before the King," *Western Daily Mercury,* June 7, 1912, 10.

person in charge. One could apply to the bureau and hire a professional magician or variety performer for an event.[39]

While some magicians made their living by performing their acts as part of a variety program, the most successful performers managed to acquire their own performing space.[40] There were several music halls in central London that offered only magic performances throughout the week. This fact indicates the popularity, growing public demand for magic entertainment and, as a consequence, the financial success of magic as part of show business.

London was definitely the trendsetter for the world of entertainment in Great Britain. Every famous magician on tour, such as American performers Harry Houdini or Howard Thurston in the first part of 20th century, had London on their list. New shows were first performed in London. As soon as the audience started to lose interest, performers went on tours to the province to entertain less sophisticated and experienced spectators. As one of the contemporary newspapers put it: "London has always maintained the reputation of being perhaps the "hottest" place which any magician can visit."[41]

John Nevil Maskelyne, his lifelong partner George Alfred Cooke, and David Devant, who joined them later, were performers who for a period of more than thirty years were providing London's audiences with top-quality magic entertainment and were attracting the best talent from Great Britain and Europe.

Maskelyne started to perform magic in the Egyptian Hall in 1873. In 1904, shortly before the demolition of the Egyptian Hall, he moved to St. George's Hall that was situated nearby. He died in 1917 but his partners and sons continued to run his entertainment business until 1933. George Alfred Cooke was the confidential assistant of Maskelyne to the end of his life. Maskelyne met Cooke by chance in the 1860s. Cooke was responsible for a lot of handwork as he was a talented cabinet maker. Since the start of cooperation with Maskelyne, he created and produced most of the boxes and cabinets used in their magic acts.[42] David Devant, whose real name was David Wighton, was listed

[39] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 74.
[40] The idea of a magician having his own theatre seems to have its roots in the biography of a French magician of the early 19th century Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin. He acquired a small theatre in central Paris, designed it specifically for his show and made it a principal attraction for bourgeoisie as well as upper class and aristocracy.
[41] "Conjuring and conjurers," *The Graphic,* June 20, 1896, 22.
[42] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 25.

as managing partner of the bureau and did not become a full partner in the Maskelyne enterprise until April of 1905, after which the shows were billed as "Maskelyne and Devant Mysteries". It has been suggested that Maskelyne's jealousy over Devant's becoming more and more honored by fellow magicians might have been partly responsible for the final dissolution of their partnership in 1915.[43] David Devant retired from performing in 1920 because of ill health and never returned on stage.

So successful was their collaboration that the grandson of Maskelyne, Jasper Maskelyne played in the Westminster Theatre more than twenty years later – in 1945 - under the banner "Maskelyne and Devant Presents."[44]

The Egyptian Hall was a building in Picadilly in central London that became the symbol of magic entertainment in England. It had been originally used to host a collection of English naturalist and traveler William Bullock and later hosted other expositions and public lectures on natural sciences. It acquired the name "Egyptian Hall" in 1819 because at that time many researchers transported the relics of ancient Egypt to London and exhibited them in the hall. There had been magical performances in the Egyptian Hall before Maskelyne and some well-known magicians of the time had offered their entertainment there, for example Henri Robin in 1861, Colonel Stodare in 1865, Signor Rubini in 1867.[45] With so many famous names on the list, it was a serious challenge to open a show at the Egyptian Hall. One can assume that Maskelyne did not expect to gain equal success as he at first signed just a three months' lease with the owner of the hall. However, it must be noted, that Maskelyne had already had a lot of success and publicity for his performances. According to the contemporary press, Maskelyne and Cooke's show had made a furor at the Crystal Palace[46] and according to the newspapers, the rapidity with which they produced changes and disappearances on stage had "never yet been equaled by any prestidigitateur who has visited England"[47]. Therefore, it was no surprise that after the premiere at the Egyptian Hall on the 26th May 1873, the show of Maskelyne and Cooke instantly became a huge success. John Maskelyne managed to bring the Egyptian Hall its true fame and make it known as the "England's home of mystery" - the name which was written on a huge banner hanging on the front of the building. The press kept giving praise and highly positive reviews to every show at the

[43] David Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater* (Cornwall Books, 1985).
[44] Ibid., 140.
[45] Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater*.
[46] Advertisement section, *Morning Post,* March 31, 1873, 1.
[47] "The Drama," *Sporting Times,* April 5, 1873, 5.

Egyptian Hall and played an important role in creating its legendary status in the world of the variety entertainment and magic. "One of the greatest entertainments of a century has been the Egyptian Hall,"[48] – one newspaper wrote in 1904. In 1899 "The Era" newspaper claimed that "…for the traveler from a foreign shore athirst for the marvelous, or the visitor from the country, no tour of London is complete until the exploration of the mysteries of the little hall in Picadilly has been attempted."[49]

The theatre of Maskelyne was on the first floor of the building and was rented by Maskelyne from William Morton – the manager of the Hall. The hall could accommodate up to three hundred people. The stage and the room were quite small; however, the room was visually larger due to a big dome in the center. There was a long central "run down" from the stage to among the front seats. The walls had Egyptian designs. There was a gallery with balcony seats.[50]

There was normally two daily shows at three and at eight o´clock. The duration of the show was around two hours with an interval in between. Price of admission could vary from one to five shillings.[51]

Music

David Devant in his autobiography underlines the importance of music in a performance by saying:

> …I always took a pianist with me when I was engaged to attend private parties where there was no professional pianist present. In producing a new act, too, I always paid great attention to the music. "Let magic charm the eye whilst music charms the ear" was my slogan.[52]

Magic performances at the Egyptian Hall were opened and accompanied by live music. Between the magic acts, the audience was entertained by musicians. There were a piano, an organ and a set of bells and gongs to create dramatic effects. This set of bells, gongs, and drums was cleverly arranged and manipulated to create a magical effect and

[48] "The Great Conjurer," *Lakes Herald*, July 22, 1904, 2.
[49] "Maskelyne&Cooke's Entertainment," *The Era*, August 12, 1899, 11.
[50] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 19-21.
[51] We can estimate that the average price then was around 12 Euros if we convert it into current money. This is, of course, a simple estimate to provide some reference. I used http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency website, which offers money converter based on its historical buying power.
[52] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 47.

was known as Maskelyne's "Mechanical and Automatic orchestra" – the instruments that "seemed to play by themselves."[53] This was a separate act in itself. The musical instruments were connected by a wire, and the operator sat at an instrument that resembled an organ. He produced a selection of national songs and tunes, thunder and storm effects.

Team

Magic shows at the Egyptian Hall were performed by a team. Maskelyne introduced a concept of a magic play – a short dramatic sketch built around a small story and involving several magic effects; four or five people could take part in a performance. These were usually Maskelyne, his wife and his son, Cooke, and Devant. The performers often changed costumes and played several roles during the sketch.

It was quite common for magicians to work together with their spouses or members of their family. French magician Robert-Houdin performed his famous "Second Sight" - an illusion of telepathy - with his son. Performers of the middle of the century, like Henri Robin and Colonel Stodare performed with their wives. David Devant worked with his wife and his sister as his assistants, and John Nevil Maskelyne introduced his sons to the art of magic and they continued the dynasty later on. This was the case of the 20th century as well and it happened often that magicians´ wives continued the work of their husbands after their death (as in the case of such magicians as Stodare or Hermann).

It seems logical that Maskelyne worked with members of his family of fellow magicians, rather than hired assistants. Magicians described many cases, in which hired assistants failed the magic trick. These stories surprise with the level of irresponsibility on the part of the assistants. For instance, Devant in his autobiography remembers a performance when his assistant was supposed to get himself free of ropes and escape out of a trunk where he was locked. However, the assistant got intoxicated with alcohol and fell asleep inside the trunk, thus ruining the trick. Charles Bertram also tells about a case when his assistant fell asleep behind the stage and dropped himself into a big bowl of water prepared for the act. Next day he was gone and stole gold and a silver watch from Bertram.[54]

Stage Setting

David Devant mentions that any kind of stage production, be it a magic show or a theatre performance requires much attention and work in terms of stage design. Special

[53] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 111.
[54] Charles Bertram, *Isnt't it wonderful?* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & CO., Ltd., 1896), 81.

attention should be paid to the colors. There should be harmony and balance between the colors of a magician's clothing, backdrop and all the items on stage. Devant's wife always assisted him in choosing the appropriate color scheme.

In the same way, choosing the wrong colors might affect the performance negatively as it will generate the wrong atmosphere. Devant gives an example of another magician of his time – Verbeck.

> The wrong colour scheme can ruin a show. This, in my opinion, is what happened to Verbeck's second séance in London, in which he produced a new programme. For this event he had his stage entirely draped in Cambridge blue. Had he been a large canary it would have been a suitable background, but as he was dressed in ordinary evening clothes it made him appear as a moving silhouette. The colour was much too effeminate and cold, and gave a totally wrong atmosphere to the performance.[55]

Stage setting and the items present on stage could also tell a lot about the performer. Designing the stage and the objects in a specific way could project an image of a performer who belongs to the higher strata of society. Devant praises the approach of Bertram, as his hall "…was arranged like a Society drawing-room. At the back of a small open platform stood a handsome folding screen; in front of this were a couple of gilt chairs and two gilt gipsy tables. These did not suggest conjuring-tables in any way, except that they were beautifully decorated."[56]

The notion of specially manufactured "conjuring tables" which had secret compartments known as "servants" in them, already existed at the time. Performers tried to avoid any association with stereotypical magician's items. Choosing a drawing room as a point of reference was also an attempt to make the setting look "normal" to the audience.

This way of approaching the production of a magic show demonstrates the amount of thought put into every little element. Devant believed that performer was responsible for creating perfect harmony in everything.

[55] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 32.
[56] Ibid., 31.

Social image of a magician

Earlier in the 17th and 18th centuries, the stars of magic like Pinetti could make fortunes by performing mainly for nobility and therefore worked on creating a particular image that would appeal to the high society. Yet Pinetti was rather an exception. A traditional niche for magicians was performing at fairs. Some magicians managed to prosper while doing this kind of entertainment. For example, a magician under the name Sieur Comus performed in a fair booth and demonstrated various automata, first in Paris and then in London. He managed to earn an incredible sum of five thousand pounds per year in the 1760s.[57] Yet the social image of a performer of magic remained low. 19th-century historian Thomas Frost, while describing magic shows in the 17th-18th centuries, pointed out that:

> The social position of the professional conjuror was at this period even more dubious than that of the actor. The prejudice against his art and its professors which had been born of ignorance and superstition was dying out with the process of mental enlightenment ; by the was ranked, in common with the juggler, the posturer, and the tumbler, as a vagrant, and in his provincial ramblings was sometimes in danger of being treated in that character with the stocks. He might be patronised by the upper classes, and even by the royal family; but he was not admitted into good society, or even regarded as a respectable character. [58]

This situation was challenged by a French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin in the middle of the 19th century. His famous show under the title of "Soirées Fantastiques" in his own theatre in Paris changed the attitudes toward magic as a profession. Robert-Houdin devoted himself to simplicity and elegance. His most important achievement was that he changed the social image of magic by presenting himself as "gentleman sophisticate sharing curiosities with social equals."[59] He became "the first magician to achieve cultural legitimacy on bourgeois terms."[60] Since that time, magic gained more respect and became a profession that could be practiced by middle

[57] Ibid., 159-160.
[58] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 125-126.
[59] Graham M. Jones, "The Family Romance of Modern Magic: Contesting Robert-Houdin's Cultural Legacy in Contemporary France, " in *Performing Magic on the Western Stage: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Francesca Coppa, Lawrence Hass and James Peck, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 46.
[60] Ibid., 39.

and even upper classes. This approach brought great fame to Rober-Houdin, and up to this day he is often referred to as the "father of modern magic."

What allowed magic to develop quickly was the variety of cultural, social and educational background that magicians came from. Unlike visual arts, magic had no established tradition or official school. Magic was attractive as a means of quick social mobility as it allowed people from lower social classes to acquire great fortunes, that otherwise would be impossible to imagine. Performers brought their own backgrounds to magic and contributed to the development of the genre. Magic could "open the doors" for people who otherwise would probably never get to the higher social circles. In biographies of the magicians such as Devant, Maskelyne or DeKolta we read about them performing for royal families and nobility all across Europe, while most of them were not of a noble origin.

Magic involved a lot of traveling. In this way, Maskelyne seems to be quite an exception as he was performing in London during most of his career and only went on a few big tours. Magicians often started their careers by going on tours around Europe. Then the ones who were successful ended up performing for the aristocracy and royal families and got more and more luxurious engagements. They often visited British colonies, like India, Egypt or South Africa and then headed to America. Such tours could be a huge financial success.

Magicians came from all sorts of backgrounds. Very often, they came from the middle-class families and could have had a decent career in various trades, so their start in magic was immediate downshift that involved several years of struggle.

Joseph Buatier, who later would perform under the name of Buatier DeKolta[61] and become extremely famous, was born of well-to-do parents and was sent to a theological seminary. He then discovered his passion for magic, left the seminary and went to Italy on foot. He quickly managed to progress from strolling magician to a performer who played in the greatest European theatres and later became the inventor of several most popular illusions of the time.

Magician Hercat (R.D.Chater) started his career in the British Navy, then became a journalist and later an actor touring Australia and the United States. He then became a magician after deciding to follow his boyhood dream.[62]

[61] Different spellings of his name can be found in literature. Although modern authors write Buatier, one can also find Bouatier and Bautier.
[62] Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater,* 128.

Charles Bertram is another bright example of gaining fame, popularity and critical acclaim from the most distinguished circles of society. In his autobiography, he says that before he started magic he had not thought that this profession "would, in a manner, be my passport into society, and a means of bringing to me so many acquaintances and friends."[63] He goes on to praise the person who taught him his first magic trick "for it was he who unconsciously put me in the way of earning a fairly good income - who gave me the "open sesame" to the world."[64]

He later describes some people he had a chance to meet during his magic performances. He performed before

> all the Royal family on many occasions, the late Czar of Russia, the Emperor of Germany, the Shah of Persia, Prince Bismarck, the Chinese Embassy, the German Embassy, the late Mr. Waddington, the President of the Argentine Republic, General Boulanger, the Sultan of Johore, the Gaekwar and Princes of Baroda, and many Indian Princes and Maharajahs. I may pass over this portion of my book by saying that there is scarcely a person of any note with whom I have not become, in some slight measure, associated.[65]

By the end of the 19th century magic was regarded as a respectable career to pursue, and, more than that, a career that required hard work, talent, and natural ability. Bournemouth Graphic newspaper dedicated an article to the show of Maskelyne and Devant that was coming to the town. In this article the author called the magician "a hard working public servant" and claimed that the conjurer is the hardest working person in the field of entertainment. The profession of a magician was described in the following way:

> The conjurer is both mechanician and performer ; mostly he invents his own tricks and constructs appliances to carry them out. His alert eye has constantly to be over the *mis en scene,* lest at the last moment some trifle should be misplaced and ruin the whole scheme. Then, too, he has to keep up a running patter of comments upon what goes on around him suiting his observations to his audience and his

[63] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 61.
[64] Ibid., 64.
[65] Ibid., 103-104.

> helpers, and he must be an accomplished actor that he may both look and act the part he assumes. Then, again, the sleight of hand on which he so largely relies for the success of his tricks has to be constantly practised, and this keeps him perpetually employed during a part of the day that would otherwise be his leisure. But this constant devotion and attention to business bring with it its reward, as witness the magnificent success which has attended the illusory and mystical performances of Messrs. Maskelyne and Cooke…[66]

Not only did hard work brought success in the form of public appraisal, it also could lead to cooperation with politicians and diplomats. Magicians could be hired by the government and sent to colonies to impress the local aristocracy with their magic. The task was to demonstrate the power of the European magicians in comparison with the local magicians whose influence in the region could be harmful for the interests to the British Empire. One can notice a certain contradiction with magicians' claim of not deceiving the audience about the nature of their performances, as in these cases their acts could often be perceived as real.

The most famous and classical stories are that of the French magician Robert-Houdin who travelled to Algeria on behalf of the French Government to demonstrate the power of France by performing his magic show for the locals. His travels gave him the reason to call himself "ambassador" and this description was later used in the title of his book "Memoirs of Robert-Houdin: ambassador, author, and conjurer". He was not the only one to take part in such a mission. In 1892, Douglas Beaufort, a British society magician, was sent to Fez by the Foreign Office of Great Britain to perform for the Sultan of Morocco and demonstrate that Marabouts were inferior magicians. Some years later, another magician who worked for Maskelyne, John Warren, was sent on a similar mission.[67]

Bertram used to perform many times for the representatives of British colonies in London. He described his performance for Zulu King Cetewayo and his chiefs in 1882. The reaction of his audience seems to be very authentic and there is no doubt about their belief in the reality of the performance. As Bertram magically produced a dove, it flied around the room and then settled upon one of the chiefs "to his intense horror". Bertram thought that he "felt bewitched". He then produced a pudding cake and offered a piece of

[66] "Messrs. Maskelyne & Cooke's Mysteries," *Bournemouth Graphic,* 30 October 30, 1902, 3.
[67] Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater,* 129.

it to the king, when "his medicine man jumped from the floor, where he had been reclining, and with terrific gestures, absolutely forbade him to touch it."[68] On another occasion, he performed for Matabele Warriors who were visiting England.

> During the course of my performance their astonishment seemed unbounded … The exhibition of the phonograph also struck them with wonder and awe. Some of them looked and felt under the table to discover, if they could, from whence the sound came; while others closely watched their chief (who had previously been induced to sing a kind of war song into the machine) to see that he was not speaking when the sounds came from the instrument.[69]

At the same time, we might assume that Bertram consciously exaggerated the effect of his performance as he was clearly presented as a conjurer, a master of deception, rather than a real magician. Yet the political message was a part of the show. Bertram performed a trick where he produced flags of all countries from nowhere and in that way showed the far-reaching power of the British crown.

Later in his career, Charles Bertram performed for American Indians and was told by the interpreter that they were impressed and decided to call him "Black Bearded Medicine Man with the Tricky Fingers."[70] The potential power of magic that could be used to demonstrate political and economic power was well illustrated by an ironic remark of an American cowboy who was present at the performance: "if I would go away with him and do as he told me, we should own Mexico in a week."[71]

It is important to note that although magic was an integral part of the vaudeville scene, it was at the same time separate from it. First, successful magicians had their own, complete theatre shows. Second, as there was no particular school, association or common social background for magicians, they presented a very diverse group of people whose main common characteristic was their art. According to Thomas Frost, if there were certain common traits and stereotypes, associated with circus performers, their lifestyle and social image, there were none to be found among magicians.

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[68] Bertam, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 74.
[69] Ibid., 89.
[70] Ibid., 92.
[71] Ibid., 93.

> I have said nothing concerning the manners and habits of conjurors, simply because there is nothing to be said. There are so few conjurors, as compared with circus performers, or members of the theatrical profession, that they do not contract those peculiarities of manner, language, and dress by which individuals of other classes of entertainers may almost invariably be distinguished.[72]

Frost later points out that there is normally only one magician in town and this is why it is difficult to create associations and besides, rarely do magicians train in their profession like circus artists from the early childhood.

The social status of a magician was as ambiguous as theatrical magic itself. People from all different paths of life with no common traits, who learned magic in their own ways and developed their own methods to gain fame and success. This lack of association with any particular social class was probably the key to magicians being so easily accepted in the elite social circles. This fact also poses a serious difficulty for the researchers as it is hard to trace the real biography of magicians. Magicians often invented, changed or exaggerated incidents that happened to them, and their autobiographies may be as misleading as their performances.

In the same way as the career paths of magicians could differ, so could the stage persona and image created by the performer.

Buatier de Kolta, the creator of one of the most admired and copied illusions of his time – "The Vanishing Lady", was a performer, whose "quiet, grave, mysterious, and deliberate method in all his movements lend an air of mystery to his performances (a method, by the bye, very difficult to acquire, and requiring great nerve and self-possession)"[73]

Verbeck, an important competitor to Maskelyne presented himself as "Mephistophelian and serious" and to create an even more mysterious atmosphere talked in his native French and had an interpreter who translated his every phrase.[74]

Other magicians chose a more light-hearted presentation. Charles Bertram presented tricks which usually did not require any specific magicians' apparatus and did it in a cheerful and lively manner.

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[72] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, viii.
[73] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 116.
[74] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 30.

Imro Fox was another example of an amusing, rather than a mysterious way of presenting tricks. He was a comic conjurer and "was a merry fellow indeed, who displayed feats of magic in such quick succession that he almost took one's breath away."[75]

As we can see, there was a great diversity in the magic scene of the late 19th century. Magicians experimented with their images on and off stage and most successful of them enjoyed fame and respect from the representatives of the wealthiest social classes.

Gender aspects of magic performances

The industry of magic entertainment was with no doubt dominated by male performers. This fact drew attention and initiated some remarkable articles that analyzed the role of gender in magic and its meaning.[76]

First, the women were not regarded as candidates to be magicians. Although Bertram points out that there are several examples of successful women in magic, he still remains very skeptical about women having enough talent and potential to compete with the male entertainers. Bertram sums it up in the following way:

> It is only during the last ten years that ladies have, with any success, attempted to practise the art of deception in public as conjuresses. One or two have, during this period, certainly earned considerable fame. Facile princeps amongst these ladies is Mdlle. Patrice (Mrs. Lang Neil), whose graceful dexterity in sleight of hand, aided by a charmingly ingenuous stage presence, makes her experiments as difficult of detection as those of any conjurer I know. This lady has had the honour of performing on several occasions at Sandringham before T.R.H. the Prince and Princess of Wales. Her success is phenomenal, as good conjuring requires qualities very seldom indeed found in a woman, and she may perhaps be taken as the exception which proves the rule that ladies do not make good prestidigitateuses.[77]

Mademoiselle Patrice, mentioned by Bertram, was indeed a successful female conjuror of her time. She contributed to some newspapers where she explained tricks that

[75] Ibid., 58-59.
[76] For example by Francesca Coppa and Karen Beckman. For more details look in the bibliography chapter.
[77] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 119.

can be repeated by women and promoted the conjuring as a hobby that should not be only limited to men. She was a bright example of the fact that women could seriously pursue magic as a career. She told in a newspaper article:

> I have often wondered why ladies have not yet taken up sleight-of-hand and conjuring as a hobby, and have come to the conclusion that it is because they think it too difficult, and that it would require too much time and practice to be able to mystify and amuse their friends. The query is sometimes put – "Is conjuring a suitable thing for a lady to do?" My answer is: "Certainly, or I should have found it out during the twelve years I have been entertaining in society drawing-rooms."[78]

More often women had the roles of assistants on stage. One of the most popular effects was the disappearance, that could be performed in a variety of ways. Bertram was the first to perform the Vanishing Lady illusion in England with the admission of its original creator - Buatier de Kolta. The disappearance illusion could get a macabre twist when after the lady vanished, she was replaced by a pile of bones surmounted by a skull.

Beckman in her book "Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism" links every aspect of this illusion to current social, economic and gender situation of the time.

> Apparently killing two birds with one stone, Bertram first does away with the body not just of any woman but of the woman who is unmarried, overly corporeal, overly consuming, and overly accomplished in the professional realm. Next he disappears the remaining visible trace of the potent oriental magician and colonial labourers, the silk shawl. Finally, he mobilized India (through the India rubber mat) as an invisible site of disappearance into which both the surplus woman and the colonial other can vanish without even making a dent in the news of the day.[79]

In that way, Beckman argues that the Vanishing Lady should be read as an expression of mid-nineteenth-century anxieties about Britain's surplus female population. Having a woman vanish into thin air was one fairly nonviolent solution to the problem; others included emigration, the workhouse, and marriage. Whether we agree with

[78] "Conjuring by Ladies," *Workington Star,* 12 September 12, 1902, 6.
[79] Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2003), 54-55.

Beckman or not, it must be admitted that women, more often than not, were only passive subject to some magic procedure initiated by the magician.

Women often became part of stage "torturing". Whether we see some deeper cultural narrative in these illusions or not, is a matter of approach, but we have to admit that the variety of this type of illusions was incredible. Women could be divided in part, saw in half or even executed on stage. In an illusion entitled "Gone" a lady was brought upon the stage and for some terrible crime was sentenced to be electrocuted.[80] Another trick - the "Mystery of She" - was a cremation illusion. A woman stood on a table and was covered with a cloth and set afire. The cloth and presumably its contents burned down to ashes.

Another important aspect of female presence on stage was that women often were presented as mystical, fantastical or mythological creatures. There could be a woman who apparently had three heads and who answered questions of the audience. The illusion under the title of "The mystery of Dr. Lynn" was a trick in which half of the woman's body, alive and acting, appeared to be suspended in the air.[81] In a similar way, a woman could be a sphynx or a creature with a head of a woman and a body of a spider.

There could be even nobody present on stage at all. In one illusion, there was an empty box hanging on the ropes in the middle of the room. The spectators could approach the box and whisper question in the box. They then heard the woman's voice coming from an apparently empty box and the answered the questions.[82] In this illusion woman's voice reminds of ancient oracles. There were various versions of illusions where women played a part of a "prophet". They could answer questions, give prophecies and, in general, demonstrated the supernatural ability to know more things that a human possibly could know. The classical example of such an illusion is the "Second Sight". In this act, a woman on stage is blindfolded and then apparently hypnotized by the performer. She then describes in detail objects that the spectators give to the magician without seeing them.

The fantastical role of women could take different forms. In sketches of Maskelyne and Devant, women very often represented muses, princesses, queens of

[80] Albert Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography* (New York: Dover Publictations, 1976), 520.
[81] Ibid., 60.
[82] Ibid., 102.

flowers, angels, anthropomorphic butterflies, birds, and other mythological, biblical or fairy tale characters.

As we can see, the active role of a magician as a wonder maker mostly belonged to a male performer; though conjuring for women was also promoted by female magicians such as Mdlle. Patrice. The male performer normally took the role of a representative of burgeousie that the spectators could identify with. Yet he possessed some special abilities that allowed him to produce supernatural effects on stage. Female performers took more passive roles, they were subjects to magical procedures or represented magical creatures in the performance narrative.

Publicity and management

Magicians were not regarded and did not see themselves as traveling street performers, whose income and fame is based on the word of mouth and recommendations from royal families of Europe as it had been in the 17th and the 18th centuries. Magic was a part of an already existing entertainment business – a complex system connecting theatre owners, newspaper editors, agents, and performers. Magic was already regarded as a competent career choice for bourgeoisie like any other profession.

A magician had to be not only a performer but also a hard-working entrepreneur. Devant writes that:

> I soon discovered, too, that it is useless trying to run a show without adequate capital; a show, after all, is a business, and out to make a profit. I began to see that the adjuncts, such as bookkeeping, advertising, and general business management, were of the utmost importance to a successful conjurer's career.[83]

Devant was very down to the Earth, and although he had the ambition of creating artworks in magic, he was very practical in his views. He made an ironic remark:

> I have often heard of' public performers who have boasted that they have appeared in public. At times when they would rather have done anything else, I cannot say that I had any such regard for the feelings of the public. The only part of the public that I did not wish to disappoint was my landlord; and as I imagined that if I did disappoint him he would not take his troubles lying down. I decided that I must

[83] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 47.

> go through with the conjuring. Had I been able to get the money I wanted in any other way, I would have risked disappointing the public by not performing before them. I would cheerfully have left them there in the hydro, lamenting that their great opportunity for seeing me was gone, and might never return.[84]

Devant always mentioned that a magician should be a businessman. The repertoire should be chosen very carefully and the magician should always keep the idea of profit in mind. In his book "Secrets of My Magic" Devant describes an idea for an illusion and then continues with the following statement:

> Quite an effective illusion, I think, but one has carefully to consider what can be done with it. Even a magician has to consider overhead expenses. For this illusion you have the expense of four expert banjoists to provide for, and at least a couple of men to set the apparatus and work it from underneath. Then there is storage, for such an illusion requires almost a room in which to store it. Then again there are travelling costs. These expenses come into all illusions and it behoves the beginner to consider very carefully how far his takings are likely to meet these expenses. An illusion show requires capital like any other business, and it is far wiser for a performer to select material of a simpler nature for his illusion. He must always remember the public are apt to take little notice of the expense involved and are very often equally pleased with a smaller effect which costs the performer practically nothing to produce.[85]

Devant did approach his work as a business and helped Maskelyne a lot to expand his company and increase capital. He always initiated tours in different cities and later organized several performance troupes that toured Europe and America. Magicians were hired to perform original tricks of Devant and Maskelyne. The show would have their names on the title, yet the original performers were replaced by booked magicians. This idea of being able to copy a magic show was quite innovative for its time, as it shifted the focus from the performer to the performance, in a way underlining the idea of the importance of the magic act itself. Yet the idea turned out to be not very successful mostly due to the difficulties in managing the enterprise.

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[84] Ibid., 114-115.
[85] David Devant, *Secrets of My Magic* (London: Hutchinson & CO. Ltd., 1936), 164-165.

As any business enterprise, magicians required advertisement. Historically, magicians were masters of advertisement and did not miss a chance to promote their shows. John Henry Anderson, a magician who performed in the middle of the 19th century in Great Britain, was known for his incredible marketing campaigns. He built his own theatre in Glasgow, was publishing his newspaper and appeared in public with a street parade, during which "Prancing stallions pulled four carriages festooned with colourful pictures. They were followed by twenty-four marchers, each holding alof a pole topped with a giant letter of the alphabet. Viewed from one side the message read "The Celebrated Anderson!!!"; from the other, "The Great Wizard of the North."[86]

Posters and newspaper ads were the main types of advertisement at the time. Normally a poster included a description and pictures of the most interesting acts of the show. Newspaper advertisement was usually text only and could include small excerpts from the press. The imagery used on posters was often an exaggerated version of what really happened in the show, as it had to quickly grab attention and provoke interest.

It is interesting that the advertisement could often include statements like: "A Sphinx illusion, upon a new principle, invented by..."[87] Although it can be assumed, that the audiences did not have that much knowledge to be aware of *any* possible principle, this kind of statements added certain credibility and allowed to attract spectators who had already seen the same illusion performed.

Maskelyne and Cooke advertised their show daily. The competition was tough and the performers had to attract the audience by promising new programs and unique illusions. Maskelyne printed colorful programs sold for a penny or two that contained pictures representing the main attractions of the show: illusions, automata, variety acts. The programs also contained small, comic-like sketches of the most popular acts.

A popular way to attract more attention was to provide impressive references from famous names. "Royal Illusionists" was a title used by many performers if they had performed for the members of the royalty. Maskelyne and Cooke successfully used this title at the beginning of their career with a note that "Special Patron – His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, by whose gracious command, the Entertainment was given at Berkley Castle, Jan. 20, 1870."[88]

[86] Christopher, *The Illustrated History of Magic,* 111-112.
[87] Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater,* 118.
[88] Ibid., 123.

Maskelyne managed to prosper and acquire fame largely due to his talent in the area of publicity and public relations. He started his career by revealing the secrets behind the spiritualistic *séance* given by then famous brothers Ira and William Davenport from the USA, who were on tour in England. Davenports claimed that they possessed supernatural powers and accomplished their feats with the help of spirits. Two brothers were tied to their chairs with ropes in a big cabinet with musical instruments. As soon as the cabinet was closed, the instruments started to play as by themselves. When the cabinet was opened again, the audience could see that the performers were still tied and motionless. Maskelyne sat at a place in a theatre from which he was able to notice the real work behind the mystic cabinet of brothers Davenport. Maskelyne saw that Davenports managed to free themselves from the ropes in a blink of an eye and then get back to the initial positions before the cabinet was opened. With the help of his friend – George Cooke, who was a professional cabinet maker – he recreated the *séance* in every detail and presented it as a performance of magic with the aim of exposure of the fake mediums.

Maskelyne was also a master of manipulating public's interest and covering his secrets. He constantly challenged the audiences by offering considerable sums of money to anyone who could recreate some of his well-known illusions.

One of the famous cases was the offer to pay five hundred pounds to anyone who could repeat the Maskelyne Box Trick – an illusion in which a magician could escape out of the chest carefully inspected by members of the audience.

On the 20th June 1898 two gentlemen - Stollery and Evans – claimed the reward. The case was brought to the court where both the original and the new boxes were present, as well their creators. There were two hearings and both sides presented their illusions to the jury. Stollery and Evans did repeat the effect of Maskelyne, yet he argued that he had never offered money for the reproduction of the *effect,* he was only ready to pay the money if the illusion was accomplished using the same method. The case was a controversial one, as Maskelyne refused to reveal the workings of his box and only claimed that Stollery and Evans had a completely different secret.[89] Eventually, even after bringing the case to the House of Lords, Maskelyne lost. He had to pay the promised

[89] The case and the arguments of both sides appeared in multiple newspaper articles of the time. For example "The Plaintiffs´ Case" 1898, *St. James´s Gazette,* 21 June, 10.

amount of money; however, the litigation was covered in every newspaper of the day, which allowed Maskelyne and Devant to gain lots of publicity for their show.[90]

Audience

A magic show is a very specific kind of entertainment, as it involves a lot of interaction with the audience. Spectators participate in the show as they examine props, select cards or provide their personal items such as rings or handkerchiefs. Therefore, every performance is different and highly depends on the performers' skills in audience management. It is also important to remember that theatre culture in the 19th century was different from what we are used to in the 21st century. The audience could be loud and at times disrespectful towards the performer. Here is an example of a typical audience´s behavior during the presentation of one of the tricks involving an egg:

> The audience at the back of the hall stood up; those in the front chuckled to themselves at the idea of having puzzled the conjurer. "Go on!" shouted a small boy at the back of the hall after I had tapped the egg twice on the plate and nothing had happened. "Go on! Break it! It ain't an egg at all. You see, it's going up his sleeve directly!"[91]

This passage illustrates two things. First, the audience already had a set of ideas about how magic tricks could possibly be accomplished, for example by using sleeves to hide things. Second, spectators took an active part of the show and their reactions could strongly influence the actions of the performer. Therefore, performing magic required proficient audience management and improvisation skills from the performer.

Magicians could use the audience to their benefit. In one of the most famous magic plays of Maskelyne and Devant – "Will, the Witch and the Watchman" that will be described in details later in this chapter – members of the audience were invited on stage to examine the props before the play began. The play centred around a mysterious cabinet, a "lock-up" in which characters mysteriously disappeared and reappeared. Jasper Maskelyne, the grandson of John Maskelyne mentions in his book:

[90] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 73.
[91] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 42.

> Some of the committees were so anxious to detect the working of the amazing tricks that followed that they deputed one of their members to lie full length on the stage with his head under the lock-up, staring upwards, while another would sit on top of the lock-up, and a third on a chair at the back. But none of them noticed any trickery, though they were often so eager to do so that they remained in their places quite oblivious to the play that was proceeding on the stage around them.[92]

Thoughtful performera, such as David Devant, attempted to make general conclusions about different types of audiences depending on it social, demographic or geographic characteristics. After going on tour around England as part of a midget show in the beginning of his career, Devant stated that he had learned a "great difference between audiences in different towns, and how an item that would elicit roars of laughter in London would be received in cold silence in Burnley. I learned to judge an audience and create, as far as possible, the right atmosphere to suit each."[93]

Publicity and promotion allowed to create acts that were the highlight of their time. "Will, the Witch and the Watchman" was became such a big hit in Australia during the Maskelyne's tour that the audience in every town desperately wanted to see it. Some bills announcing the performance of Maskelyne did not have the name of the sketch printed on them, so when the curtain raised during one night at a mining camp in Western Australia, a couple of members of the audience demonstrated their desire to see the famous sketch in an extraordinary way. "A couple of dozen of them rose to their feet as soon as the curtain went up, and flourished revolvers. They were placed at strategic points all over the hall, and they shouted in unison: "Don't any of you move if you value your lives. We want Will, the Witch and the Watchman, or else we'll shoot up the stage." There followed the crash of a revolver volley as they all fired together into the floor at their feet. Then, while the smoke still eddied about them, they all shouted in chorus: "Are you going to let us have it?" Luckily, the performers were ready to present their famous act to the great satisfaction of the agitated audience.[94]

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[92] Jasper Maskelyne, *White Magic: The Story of Maskelynes.* (London: Stanley Paul &, 1936), 57. https://archive.org/details/whitemagicstoryo00maskiala.
[93] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 46.
[94] Jasper Maskelyne, *White Magic: The Story of Maskelynes,* 60.

Competition

The demand for entertainment was high, as people had enough free time and finance to afford a night out. The supply was also quite impressive: there were more than enough of various attractions: musicals, theatre plays, popular lectures, public readings and, of course, magic shows. London had six million inhabitants by 1900. The metropolis had become an imperial center for a world empire and for entertainment and leisure. Historian Thomas Postlewait writes in his research on the history of Victorian theatre:

> Forty West End theatres, located in central London, presented everything from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and Wagnerian operas (sung in italian) to comedies, farces, musicals, melodramatic spectacles and Christmas pantomimes (that often ran until Easter). Another forty neighborhood theatres operated beyond the central area (eleven to the north, fourteen to the south, seven to the east, and eight to the west). And fifty to sixty music halls, distributed throughout the city, entertained working-class audiences nightly with a popular array of songs, dances, variety acts and a steady flow of comic performers.[95]

Not only had magicians to compete with other types of entertainment, they also had to compete among each other. Competition in the magic industry was tough, especially during the Christmas season. Several magic shows could take place at the same time at different locations. In January 1901, right after Christmas, one could choose among the best magicians of Europe and America: Harry Houdini was performing in Alhambra Theatre, Howard Thurston from the USA was in the Palace theatre and British comedy magician Imro Fox was at the Empire.[96]

Big music halls and performance spaces like Chrystal Palace, London Polytechnic Museum or Alhambra Theatre were all hosting magic shows on a regular basis throughout the year.

The Egyptian Hall did not host only Maskelyne's show at the beginning. At some point there were two shows running simultaneously. For example, in 1874 Maskelyne and Cooke were performing their show upstairs while Dr. Lynn was giving his show

[95] Thomas Postlewait, "George Edwardes and Musical Comedy: the Transformation of London Theatre and Society, 1878-1914," in *The Performing Century. Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, ed. Tracy Davies and Peter Holland (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 98.
[96] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 77.

downstairs. Moreover, Dr. Lynn had his shows at exactly the same times as Maskelyne´s and their advertisements were placed right next to each other in newspapers. There were specially hired workers who tried to attract the audience to a particular show by shouting out advertising lines. In 1885 there were two other magic shows in the area of the Egyptian Hall: Verbeck was performing at the Prince´s Hall in Piccadilly and Charles Bertram was conjuring at the St. James´s Hall nearby. However, by the time David Devant joined Maskelyne in the 1890´s, magic shows at the Egyptian Hall were already an established success and had a steady flow of willing spectators.

Maskelyne became a mentor and a producer for many aspiring magicians whom he gave a chance to perform on the stage of the Egyptian Hall. A lot of them later went on to start their own successful careers. For instance, Charles Morritt, who had spent a couple of years with Maskelyne and Cooke opened with his own show in 1893 in the Prince's Hall that was down the street from the Egyptian Hall. More than that, his trademark illusion for the show, called the "Convict's escape" was entirely based on the principle employed in the Maskelyne's escape illusion.

There was a lot of copying and imitation. There were illusions which were particularly popular to imitate – for example the effects produced by the magician Buatier de Kolta. The performers who created original effects had to improve their methods and ideas constantly to avoid plagiarisms. Sometimes the change could be tiny but made a big difference. For instance, Buatier de Kolta invented his flying birdcage trick as an upgrade for his disappearing cage illusion in order to "eclipse the imitators". The only difference between his new and the old effects would be the shape of the cage: "The new version consisted of a round cage; the first one was oblong shaped, about the size of a large cigar-box, and this at that time was being imitated all over the place."[97]

Thomas Frost wrote how difficult it was to impress an audience with a new concept of a magic trick in the last quarter of the 19th century. He says that:

> The gold-fish trick, the second sight, the rope-tying feat, the decapitation, the instantaneous growth of flowers, the basket trick, and the aerial suspension are, as the reader has seen, none of them new.[98]

[97] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 31-32.
[98] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 347.

As we can see, the growing demand for entertainment had positive effects on the art of magic. Performers were able to establish their own brands and have their shows running throughout the year. Due to intense competition, magicians had to look for new illusions and were pressed to invent new acts, which in turn was beneficial for the development of the art. An established system of theatres and music halls and economic development of Great Britain during the second half of the 19th century allowed magic to become a prosperous and respected industry and its most talented performers to acquire international fame and financial success.

In the next part of the chapter, I will look at the content of the magic shows in more details and will describe and categorize the most popular acts and illusions.

Part 2. Magic shows and their content

The magic play

One of the most innovative and successful forms of magical performances was the magic play. David Devant and John Maskelyne were among the first performers to make it a regular part of their show and to build a big part of their success on it.

Magic play, or magic sketch, was usually a short act, which lasted between ten and twenty minutes. It consisted of a simple storyline with magic effects happening to the characters along the way. The dramatic part was not usually too exceptional and could not be compared to a proper theatre piece in terms of dramatic structure or acting, but it was still a professional performance. The idea was to use dramatic techniques, decorations and a story to switch the audience's attention away from the question "How is it done?" and allow the spectators to enjoy the show. Other advantages of the magic play were that it allowed magicians to create a logical structure for a performance, combine several illusions in one act and make the tricks look meaningful to the spectator.

Sam Sharpe, a 20th-century magician, a historian of magic and an author of several magic sketches, wrote a comprehensive study on magic plays and linked the idea of the magic play to magical mystery performances of ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. These performances often incorporated the usage of mechanical, optical and psychological principles to create illusions.[99] Sharpe claims that many dramas, plays, and operas had magic as a significant plot element (such as Shakespeare's plays, Goethe's Faust or Wagner's operas) and when performed on stage, magic was a natural element of a performance rather than a set of isolated illusions. He, therefore, praises magical sketches of Maskelyne and Devant for elevating the art of magic to the new level.

Devant and Maskelyne were not the only ones who experimented with making illusion part of a play. For example, in 1862, a version of Dicken's story "The Haunted Man" was staged at the Royal Polytechnic Institution, using Henry Dirk's "Phantasmagoria" illusion to produce the ghosts. It successfully ran for fifteen months.[100]

In France one of the most prolific sketch writers was George Méliès, who is mainly known due to his contribution to the cinema. He took over the Theatre Robert-Houdin in Paris in 1887 and wrote, invented and performed about thirty magical sketches. Most probably, he was inspired by the performances that he witnessed at the Egyptian

[99] Sam Sharpe, *The Magic Play* (1976), 6. www.lybrary.com
[100] Ibid., 27.

Hall. Later in his career, he then proceeded to create short films, many of which were cinematic adaptations of magic plays. Thanks to the short films of Méliès, we can at least have an impression of what the magic plays could look like. Although the illusions in the films of Méliès are accomplished by the camera cuts, we can still see the stage settings and the style of the presentation.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a famous magician and an escape artist Harry Houdini also tried producing magical sketches. He wanted to build them around his famous escapes and illusions, such as "The Water Torture Cell" and "Walking through a Wall". Yet his endeavors were unsuccessful and he had a much more positive reaction when he performed the same acts as stand-alone sensational stunts.[101]

During the career of Maskelyne and Devant they produced thirty-six magic plays: sixteen were produced on the stage of the Egyptian Hall during a period of thirty-two years and twenty were performed between 1905 and 1915 on the stage of St. George´s Hall. Some of the sketches are funny, some are serious, some are written in poetry and others have no speaking at all and are done to music. The variety of genres, characters and stage settings is incredible. It is especially impressive, if we remember the fact that the sketches were performed by the same people and very often several sketches were presented during one show.

David Devant did a lot of theoretical thinking on the subject of drama and magic and had a strict opinion, that there should be a proper balance between the two. He did not intend to create a play that had magic as part of it, he rather wanted to perform a magic act and use drama to make it more meaningful and interesting. In this way, Devant and Maskelyne were way ahead of their contemporaries, as most magicians would present pure illusions without a story. The importance of story and drama in magic has since then been underlined by many authors in magic.[102] Adding meaningful stories as a way of enriching magic has proven itself to be a very successful way of thinking. We can see wonderful examples of this in popular performances of famous magicians of our time such as David Copperfield, Penn and Teller, Derren Brown.

However, there was an obvious difficulty to overcome: the theatrical part could draw too much attention and then the performance would stop being a magic show but rather become theatre piece. Here is a quote by David Devant:

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[101] Ibid., 49-50.

[102] For example Henning Nelms, Darwin Ortiz, Derren Brown, Arturo Ascanio. For more details look in the bibliography chapter.

> I believe Mr. Maskelyne was the first to introduce the magical sketch or playlet. His plan was to take two or three illusions, or even one, and weave them into a sketch with three or four characters. This is a very entertaining way of showing illusions, but somehow it is difficult to make them convincing. It is so hard to find a plausible cause for the effect: either the drama kills the illusion or the illusion kills the drama. Probably the best magical play ever written was "The Brass Bottle", by F. A. Anstey, while "Aladdin's Lamp" was probably the first of all magical plays.[103]

Drama should enhance the magic and not the other way round. If drama becomes the central part of the performance and the spectators' emotions from the dramatic action overshadow their surprise from the illusion, the show becomes a theatre piece not a performance of magic. Therefore, it was important to first arrange the magical effects and only then write the script around them. "I had found how much an illusion could be enhanced by a sketch, or play, being written around it, and in fact how much easier it was to produce an illusion with the art of the play to help it" – writes Devant.[104]

Although there were sketches of different genres, the authors had to keep in mind that in the end they had to produce an entertaining show rather than a serious dramatic action. Sam Sharpe argued that: "the majority of the plays are light-hearted skits on spiritualism and occultism, or sentimental stories written around magical effects."[105] As one newspaper reviewer wrote, the sketches were "semi-humorous, semi-scientific."[106] Both Sharpe and Steinmeyer in their researches on the magic play claim that magicians had to keep the story of the play simple and easy to grasp and serious dramatic productions were doomed to fail. The most important reasons for that were that an audience expected to be entertained by a magic show and that magicians could not compete with theatre. One notorious example of it was the play under the title "The Coming Race" – an ambitious project of John Nevil Maskelyne. David Devant lists it in his book as "a magical drama in a prologue and three acts, dramatized by David Christie Murray and Nevil Maskelyne."[107] Maskelyne opened his show at St. George's Hall with

[103] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 67.
[104] Ibid., 92.
[105] Ibid., 4.
[106] "Death ot Mr. G.A.Cooke. Mr. Maskelyne´s Associate. Celebrated Cheltenham Conjurers," *Cheltenham Chronicle,* February 11, 1905, 7.
[107] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 224.

this play as the main attraction in 1905. However, it only was on the bill from the 2nd January until the 25th February of the same year. There was a "very famous caste" and a lot of money invested. Sir Henry Irving – a respected actor and a manager – was a huge admirer of the play and Maskelyne himself prepared for the triumph, yet the play turned out to be a catastrophic failure that nearly brought Maskelyne to bankruptcy.[108] The magicians gave two shows a day and a *matinée* performance for eight weeks to almost empty houses. Devant, who at that time was in the province doing a tour, saved the situation. Maskelyne asked him to return and made him an official partner of the company. Soon Devant started with a new magic show under the title of "A Feast of Magic" that became an immediate success.

John Nevil Maskelyne stated that "The Coming Race" was just too serious to draw more visitors. Yet Steinmeyer argues that the problem was deeper: by introducing a complicated dramatic action, Maskelyne created a theatrical suspension of disbelief – a state of mind of a spectator, in which he or she is ready to accept everything that is happening on stage as a theatrical convention. In this situation, every illusion loses its value, as it no longer is an attempt to demonstrate the defiance of natural law and becomes just a "special effect". Steinmeyer claims: "John Nevil Maskelyne had been mistaken in competing with the West End theatres. His product has always been different, and for many years this had been his advantage. Maskelyne's shows had featured a magician – the medium who could quickly and efficiently establish the reality for the audience, then transform artifice into magic. Without this advantage, his product was no better than the collection found in any London theatre."[109]

It must be admitted the "The Coming Race" was an exception as most of the other sketches were successful. In the following pages I will provide a short overview of the sketches produced by Devant and Maskelyne. The sketches will be sorted according to their genre. It is important to mention that there were many more sketches and magical plays produced than I will describe. My task here is to provide the reader with a general understanding of what a magic sketch could look like, so I have chosen the most notable examples that were mentioned by the authors of the sketches. One can find full account of magical sketches in books by Sharpe and Jenness that are quoted throughout the chapter.

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[108] Jasper Maskelyne, *White Magic: The Story of Maskelynes,* 88-89.
[109] Jim Steinmeyer, *Art&Artifice and Other Essays on Illusion* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 38.

Situational comedy

"The enchanted Hive"

"It is an amusing little play, which contains no mystery till the very end, but then it is sudden and threefold" – wrote a reviewer of London Daily News when the sketch was first produced on the stage of St. George´s Hall in 1905.[110]

The sketch is set on the American plantation where an old slave Sambo is constructing a hive. His master is expected to come to secretly meet his beloved lady. However, a witch comes and tells Sambo that a police officer is coming to arrest Master Dick for the crime he did not commit. She advises Sambo to hide Dick in the hive, and then make the policeman to lift the hive in order to play a trick on him. The policeman arrives and Sambo tells him that Dick is hiding inside the hive. The officer first decides to disguise himself as an old black woman and puts on a mask so that when he would lift the hive Dick would not run away. As soon as he lifts the hive, the audience sees that Dick is no longer there as he was replaced by his mistress dressed as a bee. When the policeman takes his mask off, he turns out to be Dick himself.

The sketch was accompanied by many comedy bits played by Sambo and the Witch. The illusion was only happening at the very end and consisted of three simultaneous effects: the transformation of Dick into the woman, the transformation of the police officer into Dick and the appearance of the police officer among the audience.

"Will, Witch and the Watchman"

The magical farce under the title "Will, Witch and the Watchman" was first presented during June and July in 1872. It was long before David Devant joined the Maskelyne's enterprise. The sketch had previous versions, it was first presented as an interlude called "La Dame et la Gorilla" which was based on the Maskelyne's imitation of the Davenports' Brothers spiritualist act. In 1869 a new, more elaborate version of the sketch under the name of "The Mystic Freaks of Gyges" was produced. Three years after that, it was improved and presented as "Will, the Witch and the Watch."[111] This version was already closer to the sketch that later became one of the most well-known and popular parts of the Maskelyne's show.

[110] "An Enchanted Hive," *London Daily News,* September 18, 1905, 4.
[111] Sam Sharpe, *The Magic Play,* 28-30.

The sketch was performed over eleven thousands times. It toured the provinces in England; it toured Australia with great success, and was used in the shows of the magicians Kellar and Valadon in America under the title of "The Witch, the Sailor and the Enchanted Monkey" during the years 1905, 1906 and 1907. John Maskelyne himself appeared in a revival of the sketch at the age of 76 on the British stage in 1916.[112] [113]

The play was set in a village in the period of November 1799. In the foreground was a wooden trunk, covering canvas and cord, and the Watchman's Box. The box was a big cabinet that had double doors with small windows. Before the presentation of the sketch, John Maskelyne invited members of the audience to inspect these. The committee remained on stage during the whole performance. In the early years, the characters taking part were Dolly – a lady who was in love with Will, sometimes played by Mrs. Maskelyne; Will Constant, her lover; the Gorilla played by George Cooke; Daddy Gnarl the Watchman, Witch of the Village and Joe Killbull, Butcher who were sometimes all played by John Maskelyne himself.[114] Throughout the sketch, the various captives disappeared from their places of imprisonment to be later revealed elsewhere.

Will the sailor is locked up in a cage. His lover Dolly gives a witch a golden guinea so she can help her to rescue Will, which she does, as Will disappears from the cabinet. The Witch then conjures up a big black monkey that chases the Watchman who tries to lock up the Witch and the monkey but they appear and disappear in a quick sequence. He shouts for help and his friend Butcher comes and manages to cut a piece of monkey's tale off, that then dances all over the stage. Butcher is then locked up in the cabinet with the monkey but when the cabinet is opened once again, there is the Witch. The monkey returned on stage, being finally caught by the Butcher and is locked one more time in the cabinet which is again inspected by the audience. Nevertheless, in a few moments, the cabinet is found to be empty. Finally, Will the sailor appears again in the cabinet and Will and Dolly are given a blessing from the Witch and Dolly's father.

"Will, Witch and Watchman" became one of the most famous magic plays in the Egyptian Hall and was performed for several years. It owed its success to a clear and humorous plot, clever and witty lines and fast-paced series of illusion. All these allowed

[112] John Braun "Will, the Witch, and the Watchman, " in *The Magic Play*, ed. Sam Sharpe (Chicago, 1976), 59.
[113] Maskelyne, *White Magic: The Story of Maskelynes,* 58.
[114] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 29.

to "keep the audience in a mixed condition of wonderment and amusement"[115] – a perfect combination that allowed to entertain even those who had already seen the sketch.

Fantasy and mystery sketches

"Artist's Dream"

The sketch under the title of "Artist's Dream. Romance mystique" was first produced on stage in September 1893, shortly after David Devant joined Maskelyne at the Egyptian Hall. It was a creation of David Devant that he was particularly proud of. Devant himself did not take part in the original production, the roles were played by the members of Maskelyne's team and Mrs. Devant. The whole sketch was written in poetry.

The artist was on stage, working on a picture of his wife that had passed away. He was telling the audience how much he missed his beloved one. He then fell asleep and the audience could see the "Spirit of Mercy" mysteriously appearing at the back of the stage. The Spirit made the picture come to life – the artist's wife appeared from the canvas, talked to her husband and then went back into the picture. Artist waked up, ran to the picture and realized it was a dream. Later Devant added another illusion to the sketch: the artist noticed the Spirit of Mercy, tried to capture it but the Spirit instantly vanished.

These were three different illusions (the appearance of the spirit, the appearance of the woman, the disappearance of the spirit) combined together with music, poetry, and acting, centered around the topic of the dream.

This sketch was adopted by a famous magician Alexander Hermann and was billed as "Herrmann's Magic Comedy - a sketch taken from life, entitled - The Artist's Dream" and after his death was performed by his wife – Adelaide Hermann.[116]

The sketch was praised by the spectators and the critics and Devant kept it in his repertoire for more than twenty years. "It is, indeed, a work of art as far as the staging and setting goes, and over and above that an extraordinary illusion"[117] – said the reviewer in a Scottish newspaper after witnessing the performance of the sketch by Devant.

[115] "Egyptian Hall," *Morning Post,* 27 December 27, 1895, 6.
[116] Sharpe, *The Magic Play,* 39.
[117] "Devant. The Illusionist at the Empire Theatre," *The Scotsman,* September 9, 1913, 8.

"St. Valentine's Eve"

The story is about an old bachelor and his housekeeper. He finds a book of magic spells where he finds a spell to be performed with a valentine's card. First, Valentine's letter is made to float. Then, the fire is set in the bowl and the characters decide to burn Mr. Birnington's old Valentine – a symbol of his unhappy love story. As the letter is thrown into flames, his beloved one, Edith, appears. She recites a small verse:

> I am but a vision that surely mutt fade,
> I come to earth from a fairyr glade
> Where spirits of love enchantmenta weave,
> And thus I appear each St. Valentine's Eve.[118]

and then the lights slowly go out.

"The Magician's Heart"

The script for this sketch was written by a writer for the "Strand" magazine. Mrs. Nesby. The main characters were the wicked magician and his apprentice. The wicked magician had to boil his heart to soften it. At the same time, his apprentice, while wandering about in the magician's laboratory, found a magical picture that could bring his dreams to reality. He produced a beautiful lady whom he fell in love with and the magician had to make the lady vanish. David Devant used one of his best disappearance illusions for this sketch – the one he developed for the "Mascot Moth" sketch (this sketch will be described further in the text).

"Window of the haunted house"

A big cage made of gauze was brought up on stage. The committee of the audience members was invited on stage to examine the cage. In the middle of the cage, there was a stand on top of which there was a glass window.

Two people were asked to remain on stage and were seated outside of the cage. The lights were deemed and Devant told the spectators a story of a window which had been a part of the haunted house where some shocking tragedy had taken place. Therefore people had been seeing ghosts in the window.

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[118] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 244.

In the deemed light the spectators could suddenly see something in the window. First a man washing the room. Then another man – a sailor. The audience then witnessed a story of jealousy, revenge, and murder told by the pictures appearing in the window. The last scene was that of a fire in the room and a fireman saving the girl.[119]

"Temptations of St. Anthony"

This sketch was based on a story of a Christian Saint and was produced in 1880. The main piece of decoration on stage was a lightweight cone representing Cleopatra's Needle, the obelisk which is erected on the Thames embankment. It was placed in an isolated position on a platform, and from it, during the course of the sketch, were produced Mephistopheles; the Imp with the Trumpet Snout; and Imp Fair Lady, or Cleopatra the temptress.

The curtain rose on a scene representing the inside of St. Anthony's cave. St. Anthony was in his cave studying the book. Suddenly the Mephistopheles appeared and tickled St.Anthony's head with a feather. St. Anthony thought it was a fly and did not pay much attention to it. Mephisto then produced an armless black demon with a red head, which jumped down and rushed about the stage, making diabolical noises. But St. Anthony was so lost in his studies that he noticed nothing. Then the Queen of Egypt appeared, covered with a long veil. She approached St. Anthony and began to flirt with him; finally persuading him to elope with her. But while he was getting ready, Mephisto removed Cleopatra's veil; vanished her and threw the veil over himself.

St. Anthony, who had seen none of these pranks, then seated himself again and beckoned the veiled figure to sit on his knee — which it did. As the veil was thrown back, Mephisto was revealed and he dragged St.Anthony round the stage by his nose; on which comical scene the curtain fell.

According to Sharpe, this sketch was based on Flaubert's story of the same name.[120]

[119] Ibid., 109-110.
[120] Sharpe, *The Magic Play,* 35-36.

Oriental Magic

"The Mascot Moth"

"The Mascot Moth" story led to its climax – an illusion of disappearance of a woman. This illusion was one of Devant's personal triumphs and he regarded the trick as one of his best. Devant first thought of an illusion where a woman in a costume of a moth disappears in full view in the center of the stage (figure 1). It could lose a lot of its effect if presented as a standalone illusion as the effect was too quick, so Devant commissioned a writer to create a sketch around it. The sketch became a principal attraction when the show of Maskelyne and Devant was reopened at St. George's Hall in 1905.

At first the story was odd and dark and later it was rewritten by Devant, probably because of the same reasons that led to the closing of "The Coming Race" – an audience needed a lighter and a more innocent play.

The action takes place in an Indian Bungalow where British officers play poker. One of them, Bob, is losing his money and is getting more and more upset as he is about

Figure 1. David Devant presenting the ending of the "Mascot Moth" illusion
(Devant, *My Magic Life*, 86)

to get married and he needs the money. Then two Indian jugglers are invited to entertain the officers. While they are performing their tricks, Bob is in another room trying to win his money back. He then returns into the room full of despair as he has lost all his fortune and now is "a beggar – poorer than that juggler."[121] However, Munga, the Indian juggler, makes a Mascot Moth – a lady, symbol of luck – appear and then disappear. Right after that Bob is told that the winner of the game was caught cheating and the officer is getting his money back.

"The Pillar of Brass"

This spectacular small play was performed only one night but, according to Devant, was a great success. The sketch, with a subtitle "A Travesty Arabian Night with Magic" is set in Baghdad inside the Caliph's Palace. Everything on stage is arranged to create the right atmosphere and spirit of the place, there are slaves, girls, and attendants who play lutes and sing, and are "passing to and from, lighting braziers, carrying fans, arranging cushions, and generally acting a living picture of the languorous and luxurious atmosphere of the East."[122] The Caliph arrives and a traveling magician magically appears on stage. It is told that the magician had had a task from the Caliph to find and bring back his son, the Prince, who had been enchanted. The magician goes on to tell a story of his adventures and magical events that happened to him. He reproduces every magical story on stage so that Caliph believes that his words are true. In the end of the story a slave is locked inside a hollow black pillar and when the pillar is opened, the Prince is seen to have replaced the slave.

[121] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 279.
[122] Ibid., 260.

Magic tricks

In this part I will describe various magic tricks and illusions that could be performer by magician of the late 19th-early 20th centuries. I will limit myself to the most popular examples and categorize them according to their genre.

Grand Illusions

Nowadays grand illusions usually mean tricks involving massive objects like airplanes, statues, trains or trucks. For this chapter I will use this term to refer to illusions during which people are vanished, reappeared, transposed or transformed on stage.

Vanishing Lady

This is perhaps the most famous illusion of its time and it can be found in every book on magic history or magician's memoirs. The illusion was originally created by a French magician Buatier de Kolta. Buatier de Kolte was the most famous and respected illusionist of his time. He managed to keep surprising his audience with new inventions on a regular basis. He was much praised by his colleagues and contemporary press for his inventive ability and quick, baffling effects that involved very little inventory on stage.

I will give here the complete description of the illusion as found in Bertram's memoires as this illusion is one of the most important acts of the period:

> Mdlle. Patrice was now introduced to the audience, and looked perfectly charming in a long white silk Grecian costume, trimmed with gold lace, and with a long yellow silk cloak hanging from her shoulders. Upon seating herself in the chair I informed her that I had the power to cause her to disappear, and that I could send her unseen to any place which it pleased her to name. … Giving her a little bottle to smell containing a potent liquid, she fell into an apparently deep sleep, with her head dropping gracefully on one side. I then produced a large red silk shawl, seven feet square, which was given for examination to the audience. This was lightly placed over her head and tied at the back, and then was lightly drawn downwards, so as to completely envelope her. I walked round the chair, and after again showing that she was still underneath the veil, I stood for a moment by the side of the chair. I touched the veil lightly with both hands, whereupon it disappeared, as

had the lady also, nothing being left except her dainty lace handkerchief upon the seat of the chair. Looking round the theatre I inquired, "Where are you ?". "Here!" she exclaimed, and there she was, seated in the gallery beside some astonished person, absolutely ignorant of her presence, and oftentimes greatly frightened at her being there She then quickly made her way to the stage, and there received the thunders of applause, which were continuously bestowed upon our joint efforts.[123]

The "Vanishing Lady" was first presented to the London audience in 1886 on the stage of the Egyptian Hall by Charles Bertram with the permission of the creator. In his memoirs, Bertram calls this illusion "*l'escamotage d'en personne vivante*" and adds that it "is considered by every known professor of the magic art to be the most perfect and most startling stage trick which has ever been produced."[124]

Bertram gives a piece from the Morning Post review of the illusion from August 7, 1887.

It is announced that the illusion is performed by Mr. Bertram in London precisely as it is performed by the inventor in Paris; but this is not absolutely exact, as there are two or three modifications in the trick as shown at the Egyptian Hall, which are obvious improvements. The administration of a strange elixir to the young lady about to vanish does not take place in Paris. And in Paris, when the young lady vanishes, she does not leave her lace handkerchief on the chair from which she has disappeared. These are both excellent touches of art, admirably adapted to heighten the final effect.[125]

In 1887 Buatier de Kolta, inventor of the illusion, appeared in the Egyptian Hall and presented his program "Modern black magic" and his famous "Vanishing lady" which, as he claimed, was at this time based on an entirely new principle.

The illusion was indeed a revolutionary one as it required minimum apparatus, could be presented on mostly any stage and the effect was visual and stunning. Right after the invention of the illusion, its immediate success led to the appearance of dozens of

[123] Ibid., 126-127.
[124] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 125.
[125] Ibid., 129.

imitations and many magicians included the trick in their programs, often without receiving any consent from the creator.

Yet the illusion was a very complicated one and not many performers managed to repeat "The Vanishing Lady" in the exact same way as De Kolta was doing it. The main difference between the illusions of disappearance produced by many of his contemporaries, as well as by the later generation of magicians was that De Kolta made the cloth disappear as well. It required extreme precision, perfect timing and coordination of movements.

The Cocoon

In May 1887 Buatier de Kolta produced his new illusion under the title of "The Cocoon". A paper framework was suspended in the middle of the stage and the performer painted a picture of a silkworm on it. From this picture, a large golden silk cocoon was magically produced. Missis De Kolta in the costume of a huge butterfly with outspread wings then emerged from the cocoon. "The rapidity with which the whole trick is executed, the simplicity of the apparatus, and the nature of the climax, is astonishing"[126] – the newspaper reporter commented after witnessing the premiere of the illusion.

Bertram commented on this illusion that it "was so neatly performed and seemed so inexplicable that it called forth the admiration of all conjurers and illusionists, and again served to prove what an admirable inventor and mechanician was this master of the conjurers' art."[127]

Captive's Flight

Captive's flight was another disappearance illusion by Buatier de Kolta that was performed on the stage of the Egyptian Hall. In this case, de Kolta introduced a large wire cage that was "the shape of a parrot cage, and big enough to hold a person in a crouching position."[128] His wife came on stage; she was dressed in wings to represent a bird. She slipped into the cage and the magician put a silk over the cage. He then took the cloth away and the spectators saw that there was nothing but an empty space. The lady, as well as the cage, vanished. "Captive's Flight" became another sensation in London and was

[126] "M. De Kolta's New Illusion," *Western Times,* May 5, 1887, 3.
[127] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 140.
[128] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 53.

proclaimed to be a new, revolutionary take on the vanishing lady illusion, which by that time had already become classics.

Séance tricks

Maskelyne and Cooke started their career with a successful recreation of an act performed by brothers Ira and William Davenport. Davenport brothers toured the world and performed demonstrations of various supernatural phenomena, claiming that they did not perform tricks, but rather that they could really contact the spirits. During their famous act, the members of the audience tied them to the chairs in a closed cabinet, where there were also musical instruments on the walls. Even though the performers were apparently unable to move, the instruments made sounds. Maskelyne, who at that time had not yet started his career as a professional magician, by chance, got a seat from which he was able to observe the secret of the trick. Maskelyne announced to the audience what he had seen, and claimed that he would reproduce the presented phenomena himself. Davenport brothers challenged him to do so, as they claimed that their effects were produced by supernatural abilities. In six weeks with the assistance of Cooke, Maskelyne recreated the *séance* in detail and therefore proved that the original presentation was a fraud. His attempt was so successful that he performed the recreation of Davenports' *séance* all over the country. Since then this kind of demonstrations became an important part of his performance. Many magicians used to include tricks of this kind in their performances. It was a successful way to attract an audience to the show as interest in spiritualism was growing and people were eager to see the exposure of mediums on stage.

As spiritualism was the topic of the day, it was also a perfect subject for magicians to make fun of. Maskelyne created a comedy sketch: "Mrs. Dafodil Downey's Light and Dark Séance" that involved the demonstration of some spiritualistic manifestations, as well as exaggerated elements, such as a skeleton appearing and disappearing on stage and a lot of witty dialogues that did not fail to produce laughter from the audience.

Mentalism

There was a certain difference between the *séance* effects and mentalism tricks. *Séance* effects were always clearly referring to psychics and spiritualists who represented "real" magic. Mentalism acts were demonstrations of psychological illusions with little or no reference to spiritualism.

The most popular illusion of this kind was the "second sight" that could also have different names: thought-reading or mental magnetism. The act was presented at the Egyptian Hall by Charles Morritt and his sister Lilian, by the magician Valadon, and later by David Devant and his sister. It was an illusion of telepathy – a woman sat on stage and was blindfolded. A magician walked among the audience and received objects from the spectators. The mind reader on stage could then perfectly describe the objects in every detail without seeing them. This illusion was popular before the times of the Egyptian Hall. Yet every new performer managed to improve on the older methods and make the presentation more mysterious. Morritt came up with an ingenious method which was not known by many magicians. Normally a magician used a specific word code to tell his partner on stage, which object was chosen or which question was asked. Morritt reduced his speaking to only simple sentences, so even the people who knew the original method had no clue to how it might work.

Later David Devant with his sister also performed this act. Devant also invented new principles and even his colleagues could not understand how he accomplished the illusion. Devant called his act "Mental Magnetism" and, according to some reviewers, it utterly eclipsed anything of the kind to be seen on London.[129]

Automata

Magicians have used mechanical tricks based on engineering since the Middle Ages. The image of a magician as a gifted inventor and a scientist was appealing through the times and especially popularized by the French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, who started as a clockmaker and then regularly used various mechanisms in his performances.

One of the most popular trends in this field was the construction of automata – mechanical figures of people or animals that could move, react, play games and interact with spectators. Magicians usually claimed that a mechanical figure could perform some actions and the operations of the figure could not be explained by normal science. The performers argued that there was indeed science behind the trick, not magic, yet it was advanced science known only to the performer and unknown even to the most educated minds.

[129] "Maskelyne and Devant's Mysteries," *Morning Post,* 20 February 20, 1907, 1.

In fact, to our knowledge, these claims were fake. There usually was a much simpler technology used (like an assistant or air pressure), yet these methods were cleverly hidden so the audience had to believe that it could be some unprecedented technology.

Psycho

Psycho was one of the most famous mechanical figures invented by Maskelyne. It was first presented in 1875. It was a card-playing machine. A small Hindu-like figure that was approximately fifty centimeters high sat on the clear glass pedestal in a form of a cylinder. One could clearly see through the cylinder. Therefore, it was not possible that an assistant who secretly operated the figure was hidden there. Psycho could play a card game of whist with three volunteers from the audience who were invited on stage to sit before him. Cards were dealt, Psycho had his cards placed in thirteen holders so that he could reach every card with his hand. Psycho played the game and sometimes could even win. The automaton did not simply perform some random actions. He followed the rules and apparently processed the information. After the round of whist was finished, Psycho shook hands with his partners to the delight of the spectators.

Psycho could spell any word. Members of the audience could write words on pieces of paper and conceal them, yet Psycho managed to "divine" the words correctly and then spell them. He could perform arithmetical operations and gave answers to mathematical problems by sliding numerals with his hand.

During the four years, Psycho gave four thousands performances. Maskelyne offered an award of two thousand pounds to anyone who would present a correct imitation of the automaton but no one claimed the award.

Psycho made great publicity and attracted thousands of people who wanted to see the invention live and to try playing the card game of whist with it. Morning Post wrote in 1875:

> Mr. Maskelyne's Latest Achievement and Dynamic Mystery has become the topic of conversation in fashionable society, not only in London, but throughout the country. The public and the press declare that nothing half so wonderful in the form of an automaton has ever before been introduced to the public.[130]

[130] "Maskelyne and Cooke," *Morning Post,* March 12, 1875, 1.

Public and press came up with all sorts of possible explanations of the mechanisms at work, starting from magnetism or electricity and finishing with a small boy or a dog being hidden inside the machine.

The explanation was, however, much simpler. Jim Steinmeyer in his book on magic history "Hiding the Elephant" presented a brilliant research about Psycho as well as revealed the secret behind the automata. Here is a short excerpt from his book:

> Psycho was much simpler than many suspected. With the aid of a small bellows, air was pushed up through the stage and into the glass cylinder. This affected corresponding bellows concealed inside the wooden chest beneath the figure. George Cooke, concealed backstage, could see Psycho's playing cards. By blowing or drawing through the bellows, he moved the automaton's hand and selected the proper card. It was an almost perfect deception. The glass cylinder reminded many of an electrical insulator, a showy way of pointing out that the figure was perfectly isolated on the stage. But as the spectators stared at the glass cylinder, they never suspected that it was the actual air inside it that was responsible for the illusion. A conjurer could hope for nothing more invisible.[131]

However, the problem with the secret was that Maskelyne had patented it first. Therefore, there was a document, openly available to the general public that could prove that Maskelyne's claims were false. Nevertheless, Maskelyne managed to argue with all the exposures. Dr. W.Pole, a writer on games, found the patent and wrote an article where he explained the real method behind Maskelyne's illusion. In 1877 Maskelyne replied by saying: "We believe it is almost possible to construct an android upon Pole's principle, though not with the variety of movements Psycho is able to go through. Mr. Maskelyne ... will shew that Dr. Pole's clever idea does not afford a satisfactory solution to the Psycho mystery."[132]

John Clarke – Maskelyne's partner in Psycho's invention wrote an article for Encyclopedia Britannica entitled "Magic, White", where he claimed that:

[131] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 104.
[132] Ibid., 106-107.

> In 1875 Maskelyne and Cooke produced at Egyptian Hall, in London, an automaton whist player, Psycho, which, from the manner in which it is placed upon the stage, appears to be perfectly isolated from any mechanical communication. What the mysterious means of connection are has not been discovered; or, at any rate, down to the time of writing this article there has appeared no correct imitation of this joint invention of John Nevil Maskelyne and John Algernon Clarke. It may be mentioned that, in the same year in which Psycho appeared, the joint inventors patented a method of controlling the speed of clockwork mechanism by compressed air or gas. But it is not known whether the principle obscurely described in the specification was applicable in any way to the invisible agency employed in Psycho.[133]
>
> In a letter personally written by John Maskelyne he said:
>
> My automaton is not a toy but a very scientific piece of mechanism the result of many years study and experimentalising and has taken me upwards of two years to construct after the plans were completed. There is no trickery whatever about it, but purely mechanical and self-acting being isolated upon a piece of clear glass and the audience is allowed to examine every part inside and outside and to walk around it whilst at work.[134]

Though the secret of Psycho was never revealed by Maskelyne and was supposed to be kept hidden from the general public, it is interesting to find the exact description of its workings already in 1879 in the book "Ancient and Modern Magic" by Arprey Vere and later in 1898 in the American book "Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography" where the exact method used by Maskelyne is revealed. It demonstrates that secrets of magicians were openly available to the public, yet magicians managed to create their own narratives and promote them through publicity, press and their performances.

[133] As cited in Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 108.
[134] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 33.

Zoe

Zoe was created in 1877 and was presented as a new step in the field of automaton creation. Zoe was a mechanical woman dressed in a Greek costume and placed on a pedestal. She held a pencil in her hand and was able to write and draw with incredible accuracy and precision. The process of drawing looked highly realistic and as we might assume, was a truly fascinating spectacle. According to a newspaper report, Zoe was

> holding her crayon in professional form, striking a true line across her easel in a masterly manner, promptly carrying her hand from one point of her drawing-board to another, carefully yet instantaneously raising her pencil from the paper and transferring it to another spot, returning to add touches and insert omissions…[135]

The most impressive thing about Zoe was that she could write any letters and numbers called by audience and draw portraits of famous people, such as the Prince of Wales or the actor Henry Irving. The portraits were of a high quality and the faces could be easily recognised.[136] Zoe also performed together with Psycho and assisted him in some difficult calculations, writing down the figures with no mistakes.

The audience was offered the possibility to carefully check that there was no person concealed inside of the automaton, members of the audience could even lift the figure and carry it to make sure that it weights nothing close to a real person.

Fanfare and Labial

The next success and sensation of Maskelyne was the presentation of two musical automata called "Fanfare and Labial". Two life size dolls sat on the platform and held a cornet and a trombone and played them with "astonishing accuracy and good quality of tone."[137] Both figures were placed on clear glass tubes to avoid the idea of electricity being used in the act. Fanfare and Labial winked their eyes, moved their fingers upon the keys and blew air through the mechanical lips. They were able to play their instruments well and produce melodies of a high quality to the astonishment of the audience.

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[135] "A New Automaton," *Wicklow Newsletter and County Advertiser,* June 23, 1877, 4.
[136] Jenness, *Maskelyne and Cooke, Egyptian Hall, London, 1873-1904,* 41.
[137] *Shepton Mallet Journal,* July 16, 1880, 4.

The Era newspaper concluded: “There is nothing to be gained by manufacturing solutions of the mystery. The better way is to look, listen, wonder, enjoy, and go away to talk about the marvels that have been experienced.”[138]

Figure 2. Maskelyne and his automata: Psycho, Fanfare and Labial, Zoe.
James Randi, *Conjuring* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 65.

Variety Acts

Various non-magical acts were always part of the program at the Egyptian Hall. David Devant was doing a shadow theatre act and Maskelyne was famous for his plates spinning also known as “Chinese Plate Dancing” – an act, which included several plates being manipulated on top of thin sticks. This act was a specialty act of Maskelyne and he was performed it throughout his career. Magic performances of Maskelyne and Devant also included “animated pictures” – a demonstration of short films using a screen and a projector. There were also performers doing ventriloquist acts, pantomime and impersonation, comedy and singing and even acts with animals: trainer Louis Duprez presented a trio of dogs that could pick out desired numbers, add sums and find selected cards.

[138] “Egyptian Hall,” *The Era,* September 8, 1878, 4.

As our study has demonstrated, in the late 19th-early 20th centuries magic was a developed branch of entertainment with enormous publicity and interest from the general public. Spectators could see a huge variety of magical acts, illusions and sketches. Tough competition motivated performers to constantly develop their acts, innovate and create new illusions.

Magicians approached their activity as a business and never forgot about the fact that the profit should be made. It made them pay attention to the needs of the audience and adjust their repertoire accordingly. Financial success gained from magic performances allowed magicians to invest in new ideas and produce new illusions. Not only were the magicians successful entertainers, they also managed to create new types of stage production, such as the magic play, and even entered the area of popular science and education by presenting their automata to the audience.

In the next chapter, I will provide a deeper analysis of the cultural meaning of magic and its place among the most important cultural trends of the late 19th-early 20th centuries.

Chapter 2. Cultural aspects of magic

The second chapter present a sociocultural analysis of theatrical magic during the period in question. As the reader already has an idea of what magic performances looked like, I will now study the question of what cultural meanings and references we can find in the magic shows.

I will look at how we can define magic in relation to two modes of thinking: rational and irrational. The former will be represented by science and the latter by spiritualism.

It seems important to underline the idea that no artwork or artistic production, and even an entertainment act, exists in isolation from current trends and topics. Magic shows are no exception and what may seem like a simple demonstration of a trick is often a reflection of some idea about the supernatural and about our dreams and desires. Magic effects change with time. Very often the guiding force behind creating them is a search for new impossibilities, yet the particular choice of the presentation is often connected to culture and time in which this illusion is performed. Why does the performer choose to make this object vanish? Why does the performer choose this costume? Of course, all these questions should be treated very carefully as it might be easy to fall into the trap of overthinking and drawing artificial connections.

Moreover, spectators' interpretation of the magic effects can vary significantly depending on cultural and historical settings in which these effects are performed. Michael Mangan formulated this idea in his cultural study of magic:

> Magic tricks and illusions take place in the minds of spectators as much as they do in the hands of the prestidigitator – and this has several consequences. Spectators bring to the performance a set of assumptions about how the world is, how it operates, the limits of possibility within that world, the place of performance within it, the limits of performance – and so on.[139]

A good way to understand the potential of linking magic shows' narratives to cultural, economic or political trends of the time is to read a study by James Peck: "Conjuring Capital: Magic and Finance from Eighteenth-Century London to the New Las

[139] Mangan, *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring,* 4.

Vegas." He provides a good example by studying the relation between magic acts and economic situation. His general argument is that throughout history magicians have been creating a particular image reflecting economic trends through metaphors. Magic performances are linked to finance and credit and magicians present themselves as financial wizards. The most vivid example is Isaak Fawkes, a renowned fair magician of the 18th century.

> His theatrical illusions thrived because they joyously endorsed the monetary illusions underwriting England's commercial growth; at other times, magic seems to have figured finance as a dangerous realm rendering England's prosperity subject to manipulation by unscrupulous, self-serving masters of illusion. During the decade, magic assuaged the fears, projected the frustrations, and embodied the dreams of a populace struggling back from the brink of financial ruin.[140]

Generally, Peck describes his approach in the following way:

> I have argued that some magic performances of the 1720s evoked and responded to events and discourses of the financial revolution, and that the patterns of meaning and value they established surface in ensuing cultural products. I have tried to demonstrate that the pleasures of these performances were historically conditioned pleasures — symbolic practices offering pleasurable psychic experiences that, although they have persisted for nearly three hundred years, were and are emphatically contingent.[141]

This is just one example of a possible approach to studying magic performances as being the reflections of certain cultural trends. In the following pages, I will try to provide some more examples of how we can look at magic performances of the 19th-early 20th centuries. In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on how magic performances represented a rational and scientific worldview. I will then move on to the relation between magic shows and the supernatural.

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[140] Peck, "Conjuring Capital: Magic and Finance from Eighteenth-Century London to the New Las Vegas," 118.
[141] Ibid., 128.

Part 1. Magic and the natural

Magicians perceived themselves as representatives of the rational worldview. Stage magic was linked to science on many levels. I use the word "science" in a very general way, not only as a set of various disciplines but as a form of thinking, a rational approach to studying and analysing the world around us.

First, science was seen as the best way to invent new methods to perform tricks. If nowadays historian and magician Steinmeyer claims that, a magicians's safe is, indeed empty, as no real secrets of magic are represented by props and apparatus, the 19th-century magician would have likely object to this statement. In a theoretical book on magic "Our Magic," published in 1911, authors outline three types of methods used in magic – manipulative, i.e. tricks based on sleight of hand (which is, according to the authors, a "form of jugglery," a phrase that they use with a negative connotation), mental, i.e. memorising specific codes, and physical, i.e. methods based on science. According to the book, the physical group is "the most extensive and most important branch" as it is based on the usage of mechanical appliances and scientific principles.[142] Nevil Maskelyne claimed in "Our Magic":

> The final conclusion which facts compel one to adopt is that, on the whole, the most important order of magic is the physical. It is only by keeping abreast with the progress of physical science that magic can retain its hold upon the public. In ancient times magic and progress were one. Today, the progress of physical science constantly tends to outrival the marvels of magic. Such being the case, it is hopeless for a magician to rely upon mere jugglery to maintain his art in the position it should hold in public regard. The day has gone by, and rightly so, when "hanky panky" and "hocus pocus" were powerful fetishes. To obtain and retain worthy estimation, the modern magician needs to be something of a scientist, and a thorough artist into the bargain. He should bring to bear upon his work every resource of modern progress that can be made available.[143]

Considering the fact that the authors call manipulative magic a form of jugglery, it is not a big surprise that David Devant in his autobiography advised students not to

[142] Nevil Maskelyne, "The Theory of Magic," in *Our Magic: The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic*, ed. Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant (Fleming, 1946), 92.
[143] Ibid., 106.

think that they require complicated sleight of hand skills to accomplish magical tricks. Devant claimed that there was always a way to substitute digital dexterity with an appropriate mechanism and at the same time keep effect the same for the audience.

During the last part of the 19th century, this was a common view among magicians. Thomas Frost finishes his book on magic history with the following words:

> Future generations may continue to applaud the evolution of a globe of gold fish from a yard of black cloth, or the development of a geranium from a pot of earth under a hat ; but the highest honours of the profession will be awarded to those who produce, in the best manner, illusions such as Silvester's ghost and Stodare's sphinx, or such marvellous examples of constructive ingenuity and skill as the automata exhibited by Jean Robert-Houdin and John Nevil Maskelyne.[144]

"Constructive ingenuity" was highly praised and appreciated by the 19th-century conjurors as it made them part of a bigger cultural trend. The impressive development of all scientific disciplines during that time changed the reality as never before. During the course of a hundred years and several generations, such things as a steam locomotive, telephone, photography, and cinema came to life, changing the way of living forever.

This view of a magician as a scientist was supported by the public and promoted by the press. The article "The Art of Stage Magic" in the London Evening Standard in 1897 claimed that:

> A performer, to attract any notice at all, must now be not only a highly-finished expert, but a man full of original and ingenious ideas, and if he has not actually received a scientific training, he must at least have some knowledge of practical mechanics. The modern conjurer, indeed, very often depends less upon actual sleight-of-hand than upon the manipulation of delicate apparatus so skilfully constructed and so cunningly concealed that its presence is not suspected. Legerdemain, indeed, is constantly becoming more scientific... Now, indeed, it has been purged of charlatanry, and has become an exacting and laborious profession, depending largely for its success upon an acquaintance with the newest and most complex discoveries of science.[145]

[144] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 353.
[145] "The Art of Stage Magic," *London Evening Standard,* December 4, 1897, 4.

Magicians were, indeed, inventors. As Frost writes about Maskelyne, he points out that: "Like Anderson and Robert-Houdin, he manifested a remarkable aptitude for mechanical invention at a very early age, and, as he grew older, showed a decided taste for the intricate mechanism."[146] According to David Price, not only was Maskelyne the author of several innovative illusions, but he also invented a typewriter, a theatre money changer, and the locking device on a pay toilet.[147] The latter led to the appearance of penny-operated toilet locks that gave rise to the English euphemism, "to spend a penny." Maskelyne also designed several other machines and held forty patents on his inventions and ideas.[148]

Some inventions used by magicians did possess significant value. One of the most famous examples was the Pepper's Ghost. In 1863, Professor John Pepper and civil engineer Henry Dircks received their patent for the device that later would become popularized through an illusion it was used in – "The Pepper's Ghost". This device allowed ghostly objects to appear and disappear on stage. John Pepper was a lecturer on popular science who gave his presentations in the London Polytechnic Institution – the place that drew crowds of people to entertain them with fascinating demonstrations and experiments. Henry Dircks was the real inventor of the principle behind the illusion, yet Pepper found a way to use it in a profitable way – on a theatre stage. John Pepper made the illusion one of the biggest attraction all around Great Britain. The original name "Dircksian Phantasmagoria" was forgotten and up until nowadays the principle and the illusion are usually referred to as the "Pepper's Ghost". The illusion was often a part of theatrical productions and magic performances. In such way, a new scientific discovery became a tool in the hands of performers.[149]

"Coming Race" – the magical play that was discussed in the previous chapter, turned out to be a theatrical failure yet it was an example of technological innovations in the field of stage effects. It was much anticipated by theatre critics as Maskelyne invested huge amounts of money to produce an incredible visual experience. Music Hall and Theatre Review in an article under the title of "A Revival of Magic" wrote:

[146] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 337.
[147] Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurers in the Theater,* 122.
[148] James Randi, *Conjuring* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 65.
[149] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant.*

> The stage is now in the hands of an army of workmen, who, under the guidance of Mr. Nevil Maskelyne, are making strenuous efforts to get the hall ready for opening at Christmas. In the new play Messrs. Maskelyne promise some truly startling physical effects. They have adopted several new mechanical and electrical inventions.[150]

Maskelyne actually had created a completely new system of stage lighting for the play that allowed eliminating all unnecessary shadows from the stage. Lightning was produced by three hundred lightbulbs that were controlled by a single operator who, with a simple turn of a handle, could adjust the brightness of the light.

The obvious problem with making public aware of scientific innovations behind the illusions was that the audience had no idea about magic methods. Therefore, a completely new principle could go unnoticed and magicians had to point it out – something that Maskelyne never missed a chance to do. This fact is well illustrated by an excerpt from a newspaper review of the Maskelyne's new program. After describing the new sketch "The Temptations of St. Anthony" (for complete description see Chapter 1) the author of a newspaper review writes: "To the uninstructed mind it seems to be but another form of the box trick, but Mr. Maskelyne claims that it is an optical illusion upon an entirely new principle."[151] This example demonstrates that the image of a magician as a creator and mechanical genius was consciously generated by performers.

This image was also strengthened by another narrative introduced in many magic books. Many magicians regarded themselves as representatives of the enlightenment process, which task was to free the world from fraud, superstition, and fake magic. In the introduction to the 1906 book "The Old and New in Magic" written by the scholar of magic and an amateur magician Henry Ridgely Evans, Paul Carus, who was a philosopher and studied religions, wrote in the introduction:

> While magic as superstition and as fraud is doomed, magic as an art will not die. Science will take hold of it and permeate it with its own spirit, changing it into scientific magic which is destitute of all mysticism, occultism and superstition, and comes to us as a witty play for our recreation and diversion.[152]

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[150] "A Revival of Magic," *Music Hall and Theatre Review,* December 2, 1904, 11.
[151] "Egyptian Hall," *London Daily News,* November 12, 1880, 2.
[152] Carus, "Introduction," 18.

In that way, the author first, separated magic from its counterpart – ritual magic and proclaimed that magic had an important mission of leading the world to rationality and promote science. He finished his chapter by stating that "Modern magic is not merely a diversion or a recreation, but may become possessed of a deeper worth when it broadens our insight into the rich possibilities of mystification."[153] The statement made total sense – who else can demonstrate and explain how to deceive the senses if not the people who make a living out of it?

Magic had an important task of enlightenment and Carus even advised parents to include principles of magic in the educational program of their children. The "deeper worth" of magic was in its intellectual effect, which might prompt reflections on the nature of illusion and deception. He went further and underscored the importance of magic in developing critical thinking by saying: "While the performance of magical tricks is an art, the observation of them and also their description is a science, presupposing a quick and critical eye."[154]

These ideas had already been expressed in 1850s by Henry Anderson – one of the most famous magicians of the middle of the 19th century. In his book on magic, he wrote:

> But Parlour Magic is something more than an amusement. It awakens thought; it stimulates the youthful mind to inquiry … it invests science with a charm that renders the study of the laws of natural physics most agreeable to the student… it teaches the intellect to distinguish between cause and effect; it educates the eye to observe and the reason to investigate.[155]

Maskelyne was on the same page with Anderson and Carus, as he was promoting rational thinking and fighting and exposing spiritualists throughout his whole life. Not only did he attack spiritualists, he also wanted to expose card cheaters. He published a book "Sharps and Flats" in which he explained cheating techniques used by gamblers. This was also a step in the direction of educating the audience and using the knowledge

[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid., 34.
[155] John Henry Anderson, *The Fashionable Science of Parlour Magic* (London, 1855), iv, https://archive.org/details/1855AndersonParlourMagic.

of magic and deception to provide readers with valuable information. Jasper Maskelyne, his grandson, recalls:

> J.N.Maskelyne wrote widely and his book entitled Sharps and Flats was published. This was a revelation of the secrets of cheating at games of chance and skill … An interesting advertisement for this work in the programmes contained the following warning: "No Parent should allow a son to go out into the world without a copy of this Book.[156]

The educational power of magic was admitted to be of high importance by the general public. In one newspaper article, the reporter expressed the desire to see a book on magic authored by the greatest contemporary magicians. He proceeded to say that the book

> would not only present to us in the most entertaining form the whole art of deception and scientific illusion, but it would be the contribution to literature - we might also say to science, too - of a commentary of inestimable value on the art of misdirection and on the capacity of man for being misdirected, and bamboozled. This, we need not say, touches not only a psychological problem; it goes to the very fountain-head of success or failure in life.[157]

The idea of magic marching along with the progress was a powerful narrative that was used by magicians and press. Conjuring was part of the paradigm of economic, scientific and cultural growth that was so important for Victorian England as one of the dominating world powers. Author of the article on conjuring in the "Graphic" newspaper proclaimed:

> It is a Great Age, on that we are all agreed. But the march of science, the new photography, the new school, theosophy, and the latest developments of literature, have not monopolised the advancing thought and effort of the times. Not less than

[156] Jasper Maskelyne, *White Magic: The Story of Maskelynes,* 69.
[157] "Conjuring and Conjurers," *Graphic,* 20 June 20, 1896, 22.

> all of these, conjuring has advances, too, borne along on the crest of the wave of progress.[158]

The automata created by magicians that had so much attention from their audiences were the most vivid demonstration of magicians being on the cutting age of contemporary science. Magicians showed that they could actually recreate intelligent life – a concept that became one of the most debatable later in the 20th century. The magician became a god-like figure who, pretty much like an ancient priest, could, by using his secret knowledge, inhale life in an inanimate object. The spectators who heard about the music playing automata Fanfare and Labial, especially those who knew how to play brass instruments, were assured that as playing such an instrument required delicate and coordinated movements of the lips, the robot could not produce melodies. And yet, Fanfare and Labial did that. Era newspaper wrote: "These unbelievers will be quickly converted if they will pay a visit to the Egyptian Hall just now. They will find that Mr. Maskelyne has upset their theory, and that his marvellous inventive powers have enabled him to overcome what hetherto has been regarded as an insuperable difficulty."[159] The reporter wondered in his article about the Zoe automaton:

> She executes anything she has a mind to…according to the ability of the secret operator who must certainly govern her movements. Herein lies the wonder of this new invention of the machinist at the Egyptian Hall. How is possible that any motion at all, much less the multifarious and complicated movements of the arm and hand…can be conveyed to a figure detached and isolated as this is?[160]

It was clear that there is a secret operator, a machinist – but the ways in which he accomplished his intents remained a mystery and produced the sense of wonder and admiration.

Magician as a representative of the progress of the Western civilization was an image cultivated not only by magicians themselves. In the previous chapter, I touched upon the topic of magicians performing for representatives of British colonies. Charles Bertram, while performing for King Cetewayo and demonstrating his sleight of hand

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[158] Ibid.
[159] "Egyptian Hall," *The Era,* September 8, 1887, 8.
[160] "A New Automaton," *Wicklow Newsletter and County Advertiser*, June 23, 1877, 4.

magic and technological wonders such as phonograph was definitely a symbol of progress and power. His demonstration was about to show how far the progress went if a stage magician could accomplish so much without making any supernatural claims. The Era newspaper remarked: "King Cetewayo, it has been said, was as devout a believer in demonology as King James. Possibly Mr. Bertram's performance, void of apparatus as it is, may tend, as one of the "resources of civilisation," to shed light on "the dark continent."[161]

Fascination with science seems to have been incredible. The devices used by magicians were seen to be of the highest importance in the profession of magic. Moreover, the whole approach to stage performance and to the image of a magician revolved around the idea of science. In the 1897 book "Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography" the author, when describing jugglers' performances says that: "His eye must take in the position of three, four or five balls that are sometimes several yards apart, and he must solve these different problems in optics, mechanics, and mathematics instantaneously, ten, fifteen, twenty times per minute."[162] Science was seen as a legitimate way to describe the skills of a performer. Even the art of a juggler could be characterized as a combination of highly developed mathematical skills.

Digital dexterity and sleight of hand could also be analysed as a scientific phenomenon. Historian Henry Ridgely Evans in the late 19th century described the famous French magician and shadowgraphist Félicien Trewey. He referred to the studies of a scientist Henri Étienne that claimed that there were specific parameters of a hand that were a decisive factor in a persons' success in any activity that requires sleight of hand. The moulding reproduction of Trewey´s hand was exhibited in the London Museum.

The vocabulary used and promoted by magicians also supported the same idea. Magicians tried to approach their craft with scientific precision. In "Our Magic", while talking about the theoretical aspects of magical performance, such as the rules of drama and their applications in magic, the authors claim that magic is "an exact science, capable of systematic treatment."[163] It was certainly done to elevate the intellectual value of magic.

Later on, the authors of "Our Magic" even called magic a form of science. "In magic, as in all other forms of applied science, the terms novelty and invention are

[161] "Cetewayo and the conjurer," *The Era,* September 2, 1882, 4.
[162] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 139.
[163] Maskelyne, "The Theory of Magic," 90.

synonymous."[164] Magicians even tried to reject the usage of the word "trick" as they believed that the trick brought the audience's attention to the deception element. "Trick" is only a means in achieving an illusion, therefore Nevil Maskelyne condemns the popularity of the word trick among magicians and calls upon the magicians to use the scientific term "experiment" or "presentation" instead.[165] John Maskelyne and Devant actually avoided the usage of the word "trick" in their advertisement and used various vocabulary to announce their shows. "Mr. Maskelyne will present his marvellous feats of dexterity, mystical problema and magical sketches"[166] – stated one of the 1905 newspaper advertisements.

Magician Valadon, when he performed various mind-reading illusions in the Egyptian Hall for the first time with his wife on the 6th of August in 1900 put the term "Psychological problems" on his poster. "Problem" was also a beloved word of the illusionist Buatier de Kolta, as he always referred to his new illusions as "magical problems."

It was quite common at the time to use stage names adding titles such as "Professor" or "Doctor" to it. Lynn, who was performing on the first floor of the Egyptian Hall when Maskelyne and Cooke started their career there, presented himself during his US tour as "Professor Simmons, the Great Basilicoithaumaturgist." The second part of the stage name could have sounded a bit too pretentious during the last decades of the century, however, titles "professor" and "doctor" were inevitably present on the posters of famous performers. Lynn was Dr.Lynn, Verbeck was Professor Verbeck, world-famous magician Buatier de Kolta, who also performed at the Egyptian Hall, had started his career under the name of Dr. de Buatier, and so were dozens of other performers. "Professor" was such a common title that Bertram in his memoirs when he tells that one of his effects was imitated by other performers, writes that his trick "has been imitated by several professors."[167]

Science was not only something happening behind the stage or in the discussions of magic in magic books, it was the very image and a presentation of a magician that had to convey the idea of him as a bearer of some secret scientific knowledge. This approach

[164] Ibid., 127.
[165] Ibid., 91.
[166] "Maskelyne & Devant's Mysteries," *Sheffield Evening Telegraph,* 27 December 27, 1905, 4.
[167] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 79.

was by no means new. Pinetti, famous magician of the late 18th century, displayed the following advertisement in London in 1784:

> The Chevalier Pinetti with his Consort will exhibit most wonderful, stupendous, and absolutely inimitable, mechanical, physical, and philosophical pieces, which his recent deep scrutiny in those sciences, and assiduous exertions, have enabled him to invent and construct.[168]

In pretty much the same way illusionist Comus II announced in his programme in 1793 that he would present

> various uncommon experiments with his "Enchanted Horologium," "Pyxidus Literarum," and many curious operations in "Rhabdology," "Stenaganagraphy," and "Phylacteria," with many wonderful performances of the grand "Dodecahedron," also "Chartomantic Deceptions" and "Kharamatic Operations.[169]

In the late 18th century magicians still had to do everything to save themselves from any possibility to be perceived as real magicians to avoid faulty associations with witchery – a phenomenon that still existed in popular culture. Therefore, they chose pseudo-scientific terms to describe their shows.

In a way, nothing has changed with time. Magicians of the late 19th century still wanted, on the one hand, to distinguish themselves from "real" magic, which was at that time represented mostly by spiritualists, but as science was gaining more and more trust and popularity among the general audiences, magicians used it as a method of promotion and advertisement.

As much as in earlier times, their scientific presentations were often *misrepresentations* of the real secret. The best example of this is Maskelyne's "Psycho" a moving figure that was described in detail in the previous chapter. Another example is an orchestra which was present on stage and produced music during the shows at the Egyptian Hall. The illusion was that the orchestra was "mechanical" and instruments played by themselves. The reviewers described the orchestra as "the most wonderful

[168] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 140.
[169] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 7.

combination of musical instruments ever devised."[170] James Randi in his book on conjuring states that:

> The orchestra that played the sepulchral music during the Maskelyne & Cooke show was invisible to the audience. Musical instruments were suspended at the ceiling as if they were the source, and in a day when recorded music was unheard-of, the mystery of the Egyptian Hall was much enhanced by this clever innovation.[171]

The magician became an actor playing a role of a scientist. Jean Pierrot in his book on decadence calls it "the imaginative use of science," which, according to his point of view, became extremely popular in the art of the late 19th century.[172] This type of acting happened both on stage and off stage. Magicians did not miss a chance to demonstrate their knowledge and intellectual dominance. This served them well as a marketing strategy. In the same way that Harry Houdini was demonstrating his unique physical skills (often them being a misrepresentation as well), Maskelyne issued official challenges and offered anyone to recreate his famous magic cabinets to receive a generous prize from him. He was so confident that no one could possibly duplicate the exact mechanisms he employed that he offered significant sums of money as a reward, which, in turn, elevated his image in the public perception.

Yet, although magicians were praised as being inventors and having an extensive knowledge of science, the reality was more complex. Magicians had no delusions about the real value of the technology used in their shows. Many principles used by magicians were by that time already inferior to the actual scientific achievements. Nevil Maskelyne wrote in "Our Magic":

> If we bring an open mind to bear upon the achievements of Past Masters in Magic, and compare the purely technical merit of those works with that displayed in other branches of invention, the comparison thus instituted is very far from being favourable to magic. On the contrary, it shows magic in a very poor light.

[170] "Egyptian Hall," *Morning Post,* 27 December 27, 1895, 6.
[171] Randi, *Conjuring,* 64.
[172] Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 260.

> Regarded in that light magic appears to consist merely in a series of second-rate mechanical devices and childishly simple processes.[173]

It was not that easy anymore to impress an audience with a demonstration of electricity and tricks based on it. Magicians could not simply put a drum with electrical tappers concealed in it and mystify the audiences by making the drum play invisibly. Devant confirmed this point of view again twenty years later by admitting that science was far ahead of magic. There could be no doubt that the scientific achievements like wireless radio and X-rays became superior to magic. Devant admitted, that the audience's knowledge of science was growing and it became more and more difficult to present experiments as mysterious illusions.

Nevertheless, magicians kept trying to prove their status as pioneers in technology and they were indeed successful in creating this image. They kept putting much emphasis on the aspect of the invention and difficulty behind the accomplishment of every illusion. As part of his advertising campaign of a new sketch that involved a levitation effect, Maskelyne declared that it was an absolutely new in principle and the most difficult feat he had ever attempted. The Era newspaper reporter concluded that this illusion should be viewed with "the astonishment and wonder that the marvellous achievement deserves."[174] John Maskelyne never missed a chance to underline the complications involved in the production of a new magic effect. In his 1906 interview, he said: "Let any educated man try to invent a new problem in Euclid and he will realise something of the difficulties to be faced in producing a new illusion."[175]

Sometimes the image of the magician as a powerful scientist was so convincing that the audience could use it in its favor. As magicians claimed to be ahead of their own time and be able to create apparatus on the border with wonder, members of the audience could make totally legit claims as to how the tricks worked. Devant provides some examples in his autobiography, telling the stories about people claiming after the trick that is was performed with the use of special mechanisms. "Once, after I had been doing some tricks with my sleeves rolled up, I heard a lady say: "Yes, that's all very well; but anyone could see that those were not his real arms. Those were merely cases over his

[173] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 19.
[174] "Maskelyne & Cooke's Entertainment," *The Era,* 12 August 12, 1899, 11.
[175] "A Conjuror on Conjuring," *Luton Times and Advertiser,* October 26, 1906, 26.

arms, and in those cases were little trap-doors."[176] As Devant started his career he used to perform his version of the "Vanishing Lady" illusion in which he would use twin sisters. He makes a remark that at the beginning of each performance, the lady "…would walk from the stage down into the hall in order that the audience might see that she was not an automaton."[177]

One more way to create associations with science and technology was to introduce demonstrations of the newest scientific achievements in their shows. David Devant was the first performer in England who presented "animated pictures" – the first version of a cinema projector on stage as a part of his performance. He first saw the device in 1896 at the presentation organized by the Lumières brothers at London Polytechnical Museum. "At once I saw the great possibilities of such a wonderful novelty for the Egyptian Hall"[178] – Devant recalls in his autobiography. It is interesting that Maskelyne was very skeptical about the invention and was of an opinion that it would be "only a nine days' wonder". Devant did not manage to buy the projector from Lumières and bought it from another inventor - Robert Paul - and opened with his "animated pictures" performance in London only two days after Lumières. He soon bought a second machine and started to give private performances for twenty-five pounds. He later sold several projectors to Méliès who would become the famous French filmmaker. Animated pictures became a regular attraction in the shows of Maskelyne and Devant. Their advertisements claimed that these pictures were projected by the most perfect apparatus yet constructed. Nevil Maskelyne introduced the films and explained the technical aspects of the new medium. During the adjustment of the films, Mr. C. W. Locke exhibited a number of snapshots that could be pretty much about anything: portraits of generals, south-African war, solar eclipse shot in America or funeral of Queen Victoria. He also showed some optical effects like colored photography and magic lantern. In that way, magic show partly became a lecture on popular science.

From being an actual demonstration of scientific wonders, magic slowly turned into a performance *about* scientific wonders. The narratives of the trick were often associated with science or, at least, the public image of it.

[176] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 42.
[177] Ibid., 32.
[178] Ibid., 70.

One of the popular topics was medicine and anatomy. As it was a quickly developing field at the time of the shows at the Egyptian Hall, it is no surprise that magicians employed the theme in their performances. Magicians were somehow obsessed with demonstrating various experiments that involved some quite cruel operations that, of course, always resulted in bringing things back to normal by using magical powers. In 1872 John Henry Pepper presented an illusion entitled "Palengenesis or the Destruction and Phoenix-like Reproduction of a Living Being before the Eyes of the Audience". Later Dr. Lynn presented his take on the same ideas. Here is a description of his act:

> The palingenesia, which was introduced into Dr. Lynn's programme, in the autumn of 1874, consists in removing the left arm and left leg, and finally the head, of a man, the limbs being deposited upon a chair, and the head handed round by the conjuror in a black cloth. These successive operations are performed in a curtain being drawn, and the man walking round from the back. To London wonder-seekers this trick, however performed, is a novelty; but it was performed in India two or three centuries ago. The high-sounding name chosen by Dr. Lynn might be just as appropriately applied to the basket-trick, genomic being derived from genesis; signifying birth or creation.[179]

If in earlier times this trick could be presented as a "black magic" experiment, in the late 19th century it was more of a scientific demonstration. The term "palingenesia" which signifies rebirth and re-creation and the title "Doctor" that Lynn chose for himself underlined this idea of scientific miracles.

In "Elixir Vitae" sketch of Maskelyne and Devant, a countryman consults a quack doctor, who gives him a sedative drug that makes him sleep in his chair. After that, the doctor cuts the head of the patient off, empties his pockets and places the body in the trunk. After the doctor leaves, the body gets out of the box and walks around the stage before finding his own head. In the end, the body sits down on a stool and "bemoans its semi-detached condition."[180] This strange sketch could be motivated by an interest in anatomy, as at this time scientists did perform experiments on the heads of decapitated

[179] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 348.
[180] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 82.

criminals in an attempt to determine how long nerve and brain functions continued in the head.[181]

In that way, one can also say that magicians were going in line with the ideas of decadence that paid attention to morbid topics of death, disease, and mortality of the human body. Magicians managed to demonstrate it in a very realistic way to convey the feeling of body's impotence in the face of death. Yet the magician manages to do the impossible - put the body back together from pieces and allow it to live. This was, in a way, the triumph of science over nature, over the death itself.

Manipulation of the human body did not end with just the physical aspect of it. Magicians could also successfully manipulate and control the psychological states of the human mind. The interest in psychology, subconscious and dreams that was rising in the late 19th century due to the studies of Freud and the Victorian preoccupation with the problems of insanity and lunacy[182] naturally helped to build up the public interest in the phenomena. It was usually a woman on stage who was hypnotized and then she either became part of a grand illusion, such as levitation, or entered a specific state of mind, which allowed her to read minds and receive mental impressions.

Magicians also demonstrated their ability to control the natural processes. Good example of this is the production of flowers – a popular feat of the magic show of the era. Seeds could be instantly transformed into flowers, rose bushes grew right on stage in seconds and then were given to the members of the audience. The magician could apparently control the nature itself.

[181] Barbara Larson, *Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilion Redon* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 73.
[182] Peter Lamont, *Extraordinary beliefs. A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 122.

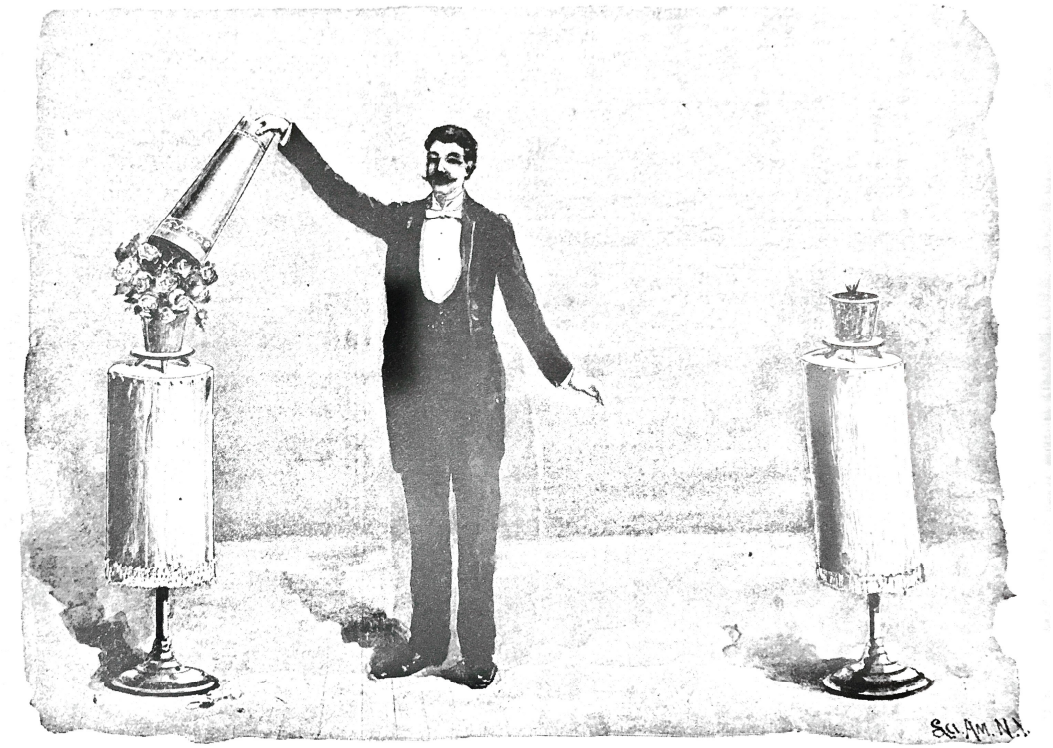

Figure 3. Magician performing production of flowers on stage.
Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 110.

Control over nature did not end with the control of its purely physical aspects. It was also about control over the dark powers. By bringing on stage dark or morbid images and characters, magicians demonstrated that due to science, they had the power to control the evil itself. Or, maybe, that science was then so powerful, that it could recreate the scariest stories about hell and damnation just for the sake of entertainment. One could often see dancing skeletons, imps appearing and disappearing on stage during a magic show. For instance, Charles Bertram used to perform a "black magic act" which involved him appearing as the Mephistopheles in the center of the stage and then making a small Mephisto appear mysteriously from space.[183]

Some performances could be quite dark in their nature. "Tavern of the dead" – an immersive theatrical action as described by Hopkins, is a good example of the topic of death in magic performances. In this spectacle, guests were guided through several rooms and in each room an illusion was demonstrated. The rooms were decorated with attributes

[183] Bertram, *Isn't it Wonderful?* 135.

of death and graveyards. Coffins were used as tables and a waiter was wearing a long black robe. In one of the rooms, a spectator was invited to take place in a coffin and the audience saw him slowly transforming into a skeleton and then back into a human being.[184]

Yet we must notice, that there probably was no seriousness in this kind of performances and they were not intended to provide horror or genuinely scare the audience. This is also a common trait of the art in the period of decadence. Pierrot in his study on the fin de siècle period and its mentality writes: "We are a long way here from the devil of the romantic era. The romantic's Satan, a heroic being with an aura of grandeur and beauty, has become in decadent literature a grotesque monkey just about capable of frightening little girls for a moment or two."[185]

As we can see, magicians of the late 19th-early 20th century still used the image that was often exploited by their predecessors – that of a "professor of natural sciences". As they were presented with new challenges, such as the development of science and general education, they had to be more careful with their claims. The devices and technology used by magicians did not present much interest from the point of view of science or engineering as there was strong competition in this field and people could see fascinating experiments in places such as London Polytechnic Institution. Yet magicians managed to keep their image of mysterious scientists by providing audiences with false explanations and misrepresentations of their tricks, by making ambiguous claims about the nature of their effects and by introducing current topics in the narratives of their acts and sketches, in which a magician could recreate the most impossible phenomena on stage. These demonstrations provided the audience with an idea that if apparently impossible phenomena could be performed on stage with such grace and ease in a form of a convincing illusion, then maybe the same can be done in reality. These set of strategies made magicians look like powerful representatives of secret and advanced, yet rational and scientific, knowledge.

[184] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 55.
[185] Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 161.

Part 2. Magic and the supernatural

Probably the most vivid example of the relation between the stage magic and the real magic in the 19th century would be that of magic and spiritualism. Spiritualism was a type of religious movement that originated in the 19th century and by the end of the century gained extreme popularity among the middle and upper class of the European society. Starting from the late 1840's in England, spiritualism managed to create an enormous amount of publicity around it. This was a significant cultural phenomenon and it represented a new and a more sophisticated type of supernatural performances.

What made spiritualism different from all other forms of ritual magic and supernatural beliefs that were present in the 19th-century England, was that spiritualistic acts, or as they were properly called *séances*, and the whole belief in spiritualism was based on the actual demonstrations of supernatural occurrences. A medium established contact with spirits and witnesses could hear voices, table raps, see objects moving apparently by themselves etc. Mediums, using the power of spirits, were able to get information that they could not know and perform unexplainable miracles such as self-levitation.

It is interesting that starting from the very beginning of the spiritualist movement, there were numerous publications that provided rational explanations of spiritualistic feats. These explanations were widely available and yet the spiritualist movement continued to grow. Peter Lamont in his comprehensive study on the beliefs in the supernatural, quotes several reasons for this apparent paradox. Spiritualism might have offered new opportunities for women, as many mediums were indeed female. Respectable women could host *séances* and invite the most acclaimed psychics to participate. Scientists who personally observed the demonstrations and could not come up with a plausible explanation could assume that as the science is developing so quickly, then there is a probability that nothing is, in the end, impossible. As the Christian faith went through a crisis due to the biblical criticism and evolutionary theory, spiritualism provided its followers with an alternative to materialism and scientific positivism and gave them a direct proof of the existence of the supernatural.

Spiritualism can be regarded as the exact opposite of the theatrical magic as it represented the "real" magic. Therefore, there was a constant exchange between spiritualism and magic. However, the relation between these two phenomena was more complex than a simple binary opposition.

The attitude to spiritualism among magicians was extremely negative. Magicians regarded spiritualists as uneducated, easily convinced, irrational people that were enemies of the scientific progress. While describing an effect of "spirit photography", 19th-century historian Albert Hopkins mentions a case when a photographer noticed a strange spirit-like figure on one of his photographs and then proceeded to examine this phenomenon. The author ironically comments on this: "Had this gentleman been of that soft-brained kind, so easily gulled by the professional spiritualist, it is possible that he would not have done what he did, which was to make a thorough and scientific examination as to the probable cause of the phenomenon."[186]

On the first page of his book "Fraud of modern "Theosophy" exposed" John Nevil Maskelyne puts a note under the portrait of the leader of the Theosophical movement Madame Blavatsky which says "The greatest impostor in history."[187] Hopkins argued that Maskleyne "…has done more to unmask bogus spirit mediums than any conjurer living."[188] This was certainly true, as Maskelyne published three books on the topic of spiritualism, in which he described its history and exposed the secrets behind the most popular spiritualistic feats. In his works on the history of the subject he used the word "spiritualism" in a very broad sense. Not only did he describe the contemporary movement, he used the word to address all historical cases of superstition and demonstration of the supernatural phenomena, such as the Delphic Oracle or the rites of Druids. For Maskelyne all these examples were just different representations of the same idea: fraud and charlatanry.[189]

Historian Thomas Frost observed: "Whenever the Spiritualists have ventured to exhibit their mysteries before the public, they have invariably been detected, exposed, and ignominiously driven from the field."[190] However, it did not stop the popularity of spiritualism to grow. In fact, it might have done it a favor. The situation is very similar nowadays. Magician Uri Geller, who claimed that he possessed supernatural abilities, has been exposed multiple times; however, it seems that it only gave Geller additional publicity. This question of presentation and interpretation, that is central to art in general, has an important place in magic up to the modern times.

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[186] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 432.
[187] John Nevil Maskelyne, *The Fraud of Modern "Theosophy" Exposed* (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1912), 1. https://archive.org/details/1912MaskelyneFraudOfModernTheosophy
[188] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 24.
[189] John Nevil Maskelyne, *Modern Spiritualism* (London: Camden Press, 1876), v. https://archive.org/details/1876MaskelyneModernSpiritualism
[190] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 332.

Yet the explanations provided by magicians were not always sufficient. Conjurers often avoided going into details of how exactly spiritualists performed their feats. Their explanations could have seemed either too primitive or impossible to the general audience.[191] Conjurors did replicate supernatural demonstrations of spiritualists on stage, yet they did not explain how they did it. In that case, their main argument was contained in the framing of this presentation: a stage magician who claims that he achieves his effects relying only on science, performs the same feat as a spiritualist during his *séance*. It seemed logical that it should be enough to convince the audience that spiritualists were lying about the nature of their demonstrations. Yet, this type of exposure could backfire in several ways.

First, spiritualists could claim that the performances of magicians did not replicate their feats in every detail. One of the famous cases happened when John Nevil Maskelyne accepted the challenge issued by Archdeacon Colley, who offered one thousand pounds to anyone who could reproduce an apparently miraculous effect, which he had witnessed, using only natural means. The "miracle" that the Archdeacon had seen, is described by David Devant as follows:

> A medium had stood in the centre of a twilit room, and, after a few writhings and contortions, vapour was seen to issue from his side, when to the amazement of the onlookers a golden-haired spirit form emerged from the same part of his anatomy. This mysterious creature made her advent horizontally, and slowly came forth until her full length was visible. She then turned her feet to the ground and began to walk about, spoke a few words to the Archdeacon, and returned the way she came.[192]

Maskelyne successfully reproduced the effect on stage of St. George's Hall and the press proclaimed that the result was an exact duplication of the trick described by the Archdeacon. However, Maskelyne had lost the case as Archdeacon Colley claimed that Maskelyne did not make the ghost return through the medium's side as it was in the original mystery.

Using such cases as evidence, spiritualists could attack the magicians. On June 15, 1873, George Sexton gave a lecture on a topic of "Spirit Mediums and Conjurers"

[191] Lamont, *Extraordinary Beliefs. A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem,* 125.
[192] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 126.

where he blamed magicians for trying to copy feats, which spiritualists performed "for real." He explained in details several acts of Maskelyne, who was also present in the audience.[193]

The framing of the phenomena played an extremely important role in how the audience perceived the effect. Spiritualistic acts were usually performed in private rooms in a gloomy atmosphere. The medium was not attempting to entertain the audience or to impress it, he was acting as a point of contact with another realm. This demonstration of intention was a strong convincer for the spectators. Therefore, spectators could assume that both phenomena were completely legit in their own ways: magicians were performing the feats using trickery, yet spiritualists performed the same feats using supernatural powers.

The followers of the spiritualist movement could also use the replications of spiritualistic acts by magicians to their benefit. Thomas Frost wrote: "The latest device of the Spiritualists was the claiming of the Egyptian Hall conjurors as "mediums," but the conjurors repudiate the connection."[194] In 1869 Maskelyne and Cooke were invited to the Crystal Palace to perform before a party of well-known spiritualists. In the end, they were accepted by them as genuine mediums. Maskelyne told later: "They would not believe it was a trick; and Mr. Beniamin Coleman, the so-called "Father of English Spiritualism" declared us to be as "powerful" as any mediums he had ever seen. What can one think of these deluded people after that?"[195] So magicians had an extra task: proving that they were not spiritualists themselves. Some illusions were indeed so incomprehensible that members of the audience believed that what happened on stage was genuine magic. Describing his "Translucidation" illusion, in which a Devant's sister was able to read the content of a sealed envelope, Devant mentions the following case:

> It seemed impossible and inexplicable, so much so, that one day Sir Oliver Lodge came to the performance armed with a specially-sealed envelope, which he challenged my sister to read. She read it with the rest and he was so surprised that he got up from his seat in the stalls and made a short speech to the audience. He said he could now understand by what means this marvel had been accomplished, as he knew nothing in science that could account for it, and finally, hinted that I

[193] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 99.
[194] Frost, *The Lives of the Conjurors*, 334.
[195] "A Spiritualistic Exposé. A chat with Mr. Maskelyne," *Pall Mall Gazette,* April 18, 1885, 4.

was using some higher powers. Mr. Nevil Maskelyne and I saw him after the performance and tried to assure him it was trickery, but he frankly said that he did not believe it.[196]

Devant also claimed that some of his illusions, such as materializing phantoms on stage, including a spirit form of himself, terrified some spectators. As these effects were presented on stage in a course of a magic performance, it was implied that none of these presentations were real. However, it was not so easy for all the spectators to hold on to this idea, as what they saw on stage was the exact replica of what they could witness during a spiritualistic *séance*. Considering the facts, that there could be no visual difference and that magicians could not give away their methods, they only could introduce the terms "stage magic" and "science" as explanations for their acts, it was not easy to prove that no supernatural agency was present during the magic performances.

The members of the audience, who were more often convinced in the reality of the performance, were spiritualists. "These persons usually accuse me of being a medium who is prostituting great powers and posing as a conjurer for monetary gain. Nothing I can say will convince them to the contrary. Even a nervous tremor which I unfortunately developed in my left hand was quoted as evidence of the power within me," - Devant complained.[197]

The matter got more complicated with the fact that the theatre space was not left entirely to magicians for entertainment. As some spiritualists, like brothers Davenport, performed their apparently supernatural feats on theatre stages, the performance space of theatre did not exclude the possibility of real magic happening on stage.

It is interesting that, although spiritualism and magic were formally in opposition, they were in fact co-dependent. Spiritualism could not exist without the methods of magicians. Mediums, much like magicians, relied on secret devices, confederates, sleight-of-hand, various mechanisms, mirrors and misdirection techniques to produce their supernatural effects and convince the audience that they could genuinely establish contact with spirits. Magicians at the same time did not suffer much from their inability to seriously harm the spiritualist movement. On the contrary, they made huge publicity out of exposures of spiritualist acts. Reproductions of spiritualist feats could be the main attraction of the show. Ironically, John Nevil Maskelyne, who was one of the most

[196] Devant, *Secrets of My Magic,* 154-156.
[197] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 144.

dedicated enemies of spiritualists, owed his career and success to spiritualists. Maskelyne claimed to be interested in spiritualism since the start of its popularity. In one of his interviews he recalled how, as he was working as a watchmaker apprentice in Cheltenham, his hometown, a gentleman brought in a part of the machine to be repaired. Maskelyne attempted to figure out what the function of this device was and concluded from its shape and design, that it was a little apparatus that allowed the medium to produce table rapping effect without moving. This device was used by Mrs. Donovan who claimed that she could cure disease by mesmerism and conducted *séances* for the general public. Since that time, Maskelyne, according to his words, determined to investigate this phenomenon thoroughly and attended every *séance* in the town to find out the secrets behind the apparently supernatural effects produced by mediums.[198] His career really launched after his recreation of the act of Davenport brothers. Without the hype around the performance of Davenports, Maskelyne's show probably would not have received so much attention from the public and the press. Publication of his books on spiritualism allowed him to be perceived as an authority in the field and provided him with more attention from the audience. He was not only a magician, he was an "anti-spiritualist" as he called himself on the cover of his 1876 book "Modern Spiritualism." Even the court case with Archdeacon Colley that Maskelyne lost and therefore had to pay damages and cost, allowed him to have a full house for several months, as the public was eager to see the presentation of the famous trick.[199] Maskelyne later advertised this act in newspapers as "1000 pounds Ghost."

Devant in his autobiography admitted the fact that many great stage illusionists indeed built up their careers by exposing or simply copying manifestations of the mediums.[200]

In the late 19th century magicians presented various versions of spiritualistic cabinets, spiritualistic ties - an act in which a magician freed himself from ropes - "handcuff tests" during which magician escaped the handcuffs. Magicians saw spiritualism as a challenge and always tried to perform something more impressive. It is thought that Maskelyne famous "self-levitation" illusion in which he rose from the stage up to the ceiling was inspired by stories he heard about the Scottish medium Daniel Home

[198] "A Spiritualistic Exposé. A chat with Mr. Maskelyne," *Pall Mall Gazette,* 18 April 18, 1885, 4.
[199] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 126-129.
[200] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 143.

who was reported to levitate at different houses in drawing rooms and would fly up to the ceiling with no visible support.

Historian of magic James Randi claims that even Houdini's escapes were partly inspired by the act of brothers Davenports, who saw their act in 1887 when he was thirteen years old. Brothers Davenport were tied with ropes and locked in a cabinet with musical instruments, yet the audience could hear the sounds of instruments as if they were played by spirits. This demonstration of the power of the spirits turned into the demonstration of the power of the body in the Houdini's act. A mystery was turned into a performance about the unlimited possibilities of a human being.

In that way, spiritualists were generating the ideas about what real magic could accomplish. Magicians brought these ideas on stage, presenting them in a form of entertainment.

As we can see, the separation between magicians and mediums was not that strict. Performances of theatre magic and spiritualist acts could be interpreted and framed in various ways. Both fields centered around the ideas of the supernatural and science. Magicians understood that spiritualism had such a great influence on the society, that sometimes they had to use some spiritualistic claims as part of their own public image. It contradicted the idea of a magician being honest about his deceptions, yet it provided the audiences with more intrigue. Hopkins wrote in his 1897 book: "The Theosophical craze of recent years has had its influence on prestidigitation. A modern conjurer who does not claim some knowledge of the occult, or, at least, who have not travelled in the Orient, cuts but little figure in public estimation."[201]

Confrontation with spiritualism allowed magicians to present themselves as the bearers of rational worldview and guides into the new age that should be free from fraud and superstition. However, many of magicians' narratives, ideas and publicity came from their interaction with the world of mediums.

In that way, magicians used the existing tension between rationality and magic that was increasing throughout the Victorian era. Alison Butler in her research on Victorian occultism formulated this opposition in the following way:

[201] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography*, 25.

> Two seemingly opposed systems of thought rose to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century. Victorian Britain witnessed the curious blend of scientific naturalism and the belief in magic. The doctrine of the former maintained that belief in any non-physical agencies was superstitious and indicative of a culturally dysfunctional society. Naturalist thinkers wished to establish a scientifically directed culture and to eradicate religious belief entirely. The doctrine of the latter sought to establish, within the natural world and governed by natural laws, the mystery and spirituality traditionally associated with religious and magical thinking. Both arose from a growing disillusionment with Christianity and from advancement in scientific methodology.[202]

This "curious blend" can be witnessed in the vibrant scene of magic performances. Stage magicians demonstrated how they could produce wonders using only natural means (which they nevertheless kept a secret). Maskelyne and his colleagues attempted to redefine the whole concept of magic, by assigning new meaning to the term. They wanted "magic" to mean "scientific wonders" and everything else that was or could be associated with the idea of magic (i.e. spiritualism) was labeled as fake. However, as the very concept of magic presumes the element of mystery, magicians kept creating mysteries around their performances. On the one hand, they were on the frontier of the disenchantment process; on the other hand, they created their own myths and modes of enchantment. These contradictory facts correspond to the mentality and culture of the late 19th century.

In this chapter I argued that performances of magic in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had a strong ideological connection with the idea of science and rationality. Performances of magic served to demonstrate endless possibilities of the human mind. Simultaneously, magic was dependent on its "real" counterpart, mostly in the form of spiritualism, that provided magicians with topics for their narratives and additional publicity.

At the same time, the most prominent performers of the era believed that the nature of what they did was art, which potentially included stage magic in a completely different layer of culture. In the following pages, I will try to find out what was peculiar

[202] Allison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99.

about magic as a form of art and if there were similarities between magic and other art forms.

Chapter 3. Magic as an art form

Nowadays one can find a lot of research focusing on theory and philosophy of stage magic.[203] It focuses on such questions as: how magic should be performed, which goals magicians should try to achieve and what the value of magic is. Another significant question that tends to appear regularly in the magic literature and is discussed widely in the community is whether magic can be called an art form. One can notice that this trend toward self-reflection is peculiar to the 20th-century art which in many cases became self-referential. With the appearances of movements like anti-art and Dadaism in the early 20th century, the problem of defining art has become essential. It led to the development of the whole field of studies that deals with philosophy of art with significant contributions from scholars like Dante, Wittgenstein, Levinson, Davies, Carroll and many others.

In magic, the same process of self-reflection owes mostly to the progress of science, ability to reproduce any kind of phenomena on screen, availability of education, promotion of rational and scientific worldview, and popularization of magic among the general public through TV and internet. These processes led to the necessity of a better understanding of what magic should strive for as a performing art. During the last decades, significant steps in understanding more about the nature of this performing art have been accomplished. The first step in a theoretical discussion on magic was taken in 1911 with the publication of the book under the title of "Our Magic". This book will be the main point of attention of this chapter.

In the previous chapters I approached magic as a form of entertainment and as a cultural phenomenon. This chapter presents the analysis of approaches towards magic in the late 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, focusing on the point of view of magicians who claimed that magic was an art form. I will perform a textual analysis on the text of one of the most important theoretical works on the subject, written by Nevil Maskelyne,[204] and David Devant. The book "Our Magic. The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic" was published in 1911. The book consists of three parts,

[203] For example works by Darwin Ortiz, Derren Brown, Arturo Ascanio, Sam Sharpe. For more details the reader may address the bibliography chapter.

[204] Nevil Maskelyne was the son of John Nevil Maskelyne – the founder of the famous magic dynasty and the main figure at the Egyptian Hall. In the previous two chapters I mostly talked about John Nevil Maskelyne. In this chapter I will mostly refer to Nevil Maskelyne as the author of "Our Magic". To avoid confusion, I will add first names where necessary.

each dealing with one of the topics named in the book's title: art in magic, theory of magic and practice of magic correspondingly. First two parts, which are of a more philosophical and theoretical character, were written by Nevil Maskelyne. The last part was authored by David Devant and is purely practical; it explains secrets of magic tricks. The work can be regarded as a manifesto of magicians declaring that magic deserves more respect and should be treated as an art. This need for more respect reflects magicians' own concerns about magic, its social and cultural image. The particular significance of "Our Magic" lies in the fact that it was the first book to deal specifically with questions of theory and philosophy of magic. Maskelyne and Devant were unique personalities, as they were among the few who wanted to define magic as an art form, not only as science or entertainment. It shows that although magicians managed to prosper and create a popular image for the audience, they had their own doubts and aspirations about magic. In 2014 a documentary film under the title of "Our Magic" that focused of the same theoretical questions was produced as a tribute to this classic book.[205] This fact demonstrates the importance of this work to the art of magic.

It is difficult to say if the opinions expressed by Nevil Maskelyne in the first two parts of the book were shared by David Devant, who only dealt with the part dedicated to the practical aspect of magic. Yet constant usage of the "we" pronoun throughout the book suggests that the book was intended to represent the common view of both authors. Therefore, it seems logical to add another source to the research – the autobiography of David Devant, where he elaborated on the topic of magic, its definition and meaning. Although the autobiography was published twenty years after "Our Magic," it can contribute to our understanding of the author's position.

In the first part of the chapter, I will look at different views on the problem of defining magic that existed at the time. I will also include other sources of the period in question, as well as some modern works, which focus on the art of magic to provide a contextual framework for my analysis. This part is intended to be a comparative study of arguments and opinions on the problem. This analysis would be incomplete without referring to theoretical works dedicated to other art forms as well. I will primarily address the dramatic art, which naturally holds the closest position to magic, and shares a lot of similarities with it, at least since both art forms were existing on the theatre stages. I will

[205] *Our Magic.* Online video. Directed by R.Paul Wilson. 2014. https://www.dananddave.com/products/our-magic

then deal with the question of a work of art in magic and, finally, I will analyze the question of defining magic as an art according to “Our Magic”.

The second part of the chapter deals with the magic as an art in the context of 19th-century artistic trends. It will allow us to see if magic was indeed a part of the artistic paradigm of the time and if the problems that magicians faced were shared by artists in other fields. I will argue that magic could be indeed defined as an art as it shared common features with other art forms and was based on the ideas and trends that were essential for culture of the period in question.

Part 1. A theoretical approach to magic in the late 19th-early 20th centuries

Redefining magic

It seems that magic's place in the world of entertainment was already established by the end of the 19th century and required no additional proof. The vast majority of magicians as well as journalists, spectators and theatre managers regarded magic as entertainment. However, this image might have been disappointing for some performers. Moreover, the spread of magic books led to the appearance of many amateur magicians who could damage the reputation of magic by their low-quality performances. Although the press praised great magicians of their time such as John Maskelyne, it also criticized the unskilled performers. A newspaper reporter wrote in 1898: "The amateur conjurer of today is not always a popular individual, save with children and the unsophisticated yoke. To the general public he is merely a bore of greater or less magnitude, whose performance is so obvious as to deceive no one."[206]

In 1911 Devant – a performer who was at the peak of his career in the early 19th century, and Nevil Maskelyne – son of Devant's partner John Maskelyne with whom they were performing at the Egyptian Hall, tried to summarize their experience and knowledge of magic. Their main tasks were to create a theory of magic and to prove that magic should be perceived as one of the fine arts.

After the first few pages of "Our Magic" one inevitably would face an important question: why did Maskelyne and Devant, who were on top of the entertainment industry and represented one the most famous magic companies of their time, tried to introduce magic as a fine art, not as a popular science, entertainment or a form of theatre? Why did they undertake this endeavor to attribute some particular status to magic if the shows of Maskelyne and Devant were already successfully running on the theatre and music hall stages across Britain and Europe? Another key point to underline is that most of the Nevil Maskelyne's colleagues did not share his ideas. He admitted that by saying: "What we suggest is that, although magicians are studious and energetic men, they too often fail to think artistically. They are too liable to regard their profession as a branch of "show business," rather than a branch of true art."[207]

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[206] "Conjuring Tricks," *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail,* May 21, 1898, 6.
[207] Nevil Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," in *Our Magic: The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic*, ed. Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant (2nd ed. Fleming, 1946. PDF), 88.

This lack of respect to their own work from the side of the performers was combined with the lack of appreciation of magician's work from the audience. Devant wrote:

> Only the other day I noticed an article in an evening paper describing a gathering of magicians, in which the critic described the performers as "leg-pullers" and deplored that the air of "mystery" was lacking. There seems to me to be much of this sort of performance. Performances that only give that impression to the public are regrettable. There appears, too, to be a tendency nowadays to commercialize tricks. Anyone can walk into a big store and see tricks and their secrets freely displayed by an assistant … This inevitably tends to give the public the impression that conjuring tricks are like puzzles which can be bought at tea-time and presented with great success after dinner.[208]

Although these words were written twenty years later then "Our Magic," the problems he outlined had their beginnings in the late 19th century and "Our Magic" creates the impression of a brave attempt to prevent their further development. Having dedicated his life to magic, Devant seemed to have suffered from a lack of appreciation of magic. It might appear strange because Devant enjoyed enormous success and was a part of the Egyptian Hall team – the most popular magic attraction of its time. Yet he believed that simply entertaining the audience was not enough. He realized that as magic became more and more available to the general public, it also became especially important to distinguish between a good and a bad performance, between showing a card trick and producing a piece of performing art.

> I do not hold the opinion that any man who can get up and do a few tricks - even though he may do them well enough to entertain his audience - is necessarily a conjurer, because it is quite possible that he may be a mere exhibitor of tricks. To say that a man who can show a few tricks is a conjurer is about as absurd as to say that a man who can recite "The Merchant of Venice" by heart is an actor.[209]

[208] David Devant, *My Magic Life* (London: Hutchinson & CO., LTD, 1931), 213.
[209] Ibid., 99.

Entertaining is too easy to consider it to be the essence of the magician´s profession. The principal value of magic lies somewhere else. Therefore, the authors of "Our Magic" attempted to raise the level of performers and change their image of magic. To do this, they wanted first to arouse pride in magic in the performers and to elevate the status of magic in the eyes of the audience. They attributed to magic the highest status possible – that of the fine art. According to the authors, this status of magic could accomplish two things: create a respected image of a magician as an artist, and generate a proper mental attitude and responsibility from the side of the performer.

British magician and mentalist Derren Brown, in his essay written in 2001 and devoted to the same question – "Is magic art?" – argued that the statement about magic being a fine art

> … contains a faith in the status of magic that would nowadays easily strike us as misguided. The double-edged prolificacy of close-up magic and dealer business, which has both allowed our profession to flourish and be trivialised, has opened the floodgates to enthusiasts who have affected the popular conception of magic for better and for worse. … The result is a modern form of entertainment that happily trivialises itself, and would be embarrassed to deal with the issue of art.[210]

In this passage Brown refers to the quick growth of the magic market for magicians and amateurs. Books and DVDs, apparatus and devices are now easily available to anyone with online access. However, it seems that even if nowadays these processes happen on a worldwide scale, the problem outlined by Brown is not that new. In the times of Maskelyne and Devant the profession of the magician was also both flourishing and being trivialized.

Not many magicians of their time shared these concerns and claimed that magic should be called a fine art. Most of them were quite satisfied with their position and success. Moreover, as many of them still remembered the earlier times of magic, when it was often associated with fraud or witchery and when the social status of a magician was quite low, they were happy to live in the times of prosperity and growth of show business and mass entertainment. Charles Bertram, a successful performer himself, who gave

[210] Derren Brown, "Can magic be art? New thoughts," in *Absolute Magic: A Model for Powerful Close-up Performance*, ed. Derren Brown (H&R Magic Books, 2001), 218.

twenty-two performances for the King and the royal family of Great Britain during his career, simply admitted that:

> …conjuring, if it has now drifted down to the level of mere entertainment, has played its part in the history of the world; and even nowadays I am prepared to hold that it is an art which, if it not the intellectual peer of painting or poetry for instance, still demands the devotion of a lifetime and a natural aptitude, if not genious, from him who would excel in it.[211]

Bertram does call magic an art, yet he certainly does not attribute such grandiose meaning to it as Devant and Maskelyne do. However, it is interesting to note that Bertram says that magic has "now" drifted down, which means that he acknowledges the decline in the status of magic and maybe he also had certain ideas about the higher potential of magic.

However, it was not clear what exactly had to be appreciated about magic and what could bring it to the status of art.

Technical means used in magic appeared to be quite primitive even to magicians. The dexterity of the fingers and the sleight of hand were admitted to possess no serious value when compared to the level of skill required in other professions. If magic is centered around pure technical skill, then

> It must be relegated to the position of a mechanical art—an inferior mechanical art—lower even than that of a circus juggler. This is obvious, because, from the standpoint of mechanical art, the juggler's attainments are far higher than those of a magician. … In manipulative skill, he is hopelessly outclassed by the juggler. The amount of practice and physical training he requires cannot in any way be compared with that which is needed by the juggler.[212]

This statement most probably would be dismissed by most modern magicians, as the 20th century saw the incredible development of manipulation techniques that require extensive practice. Yet it might have been valid for the time of Maskelyne when many performances at the Egyptian Hall were based on a number of technical devices. One had

[211] Bertram, *Isnt't it wonderful?* 5.
[212] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 17.

to construct them and rehearse the act but this process did not require digital dexterity. Maskelyne refers to a circus juggler with a certain respect for the dedication, yet attempts to draw a strict line between circus and magic so that there is no doubt left that if magic can be compared to circus juggling, then it is simply bad magic.

If skills and sleight of hand do not form an important part of the magical art, then maybe secrets themselves represent the core of conjuring?

A modern historian of magic Jim Steinmeyer wrote in his 2001 book "Hiding the Elephant" that "magicians guard an empty safe."[213] In this sentence, he reflected one of the important trends in thinking about magic which has its roots in the early 20th century and has been present in the literature on magic ever since. This is a metaphorical representation of the problem that was outlined in the introduction – is there anything worth in magic apart from its secrets? "When an audience learns how it's done, they quickly dismiss the art: "Is that all it is?"[214] Steinmeyer's point is that there is actually more in magic, and so was the point of Devant in Maskelyne in 1911. Devant and Maskelyne appear to be quite sure about magic's great value as they claimed that "magic occupies a far higher plane than that of the actual means it employs. … As grammar is to literature, or versification to poetry, so are sleights and fakes to magic. Such things are the means not the end of art."[215]

Steinmeyer argues: "The real art is how the rubber band is handled with the finesse of a jewel cutter, how a mirror is used or concealed precisely, how a masterful performer can hint at impossibilities that are consummated with only a piece of thread."[216] Steinmeyer's thought on the subject, written a century later, is not innovative because the magicians of the earlier times were moving in the same direction. They were striving towards the development of a public appreciation of professionalism and the thinking process of the performer – subjects that are often too ambiguous for spectators, who are interested primarily in understanding the technical secret of an illusion.

Having admitted the simplicity of mechanical skills and technical gadgets used in magic shows, magicians were ready to demonstrate to the public that they had no delusions about it. Publication of multiple books with exposures of magic tricks seemed like an attempt to show that magicians did not really care about what audience called

[213] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 16.
[214] Ibid., 17.
[215] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 19.
[216] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant, 17.*

"secrets" because those were not the *real* secrets of magic. Paul Carus wrote in his introduction to the book on magic history:

> Moreover, it is not the trick alone that we admire, but the way in which it is performed. Even those who know how things can be made to disappear by sleight of hand, must confess that they always found delight in seeing the late Alexander Herrmann, whenever he began a soiree, take off his gloves, roll them up and make them vanish as if into nothingness.[217]

Aesthetical and intellectual pleasure, "delight" from seeing a magician should be available to everyone – proclaimed Carus. As a theatre critic can evaluate a play and fully appreciate all aspects of it even if he knows the script, so should the audience be able to appreciate a magic show if it is aware of the secret. This might only be possible when the focus is shifted away from the secret – which is simple in its nature anyway – to the more important matters that constitute the real value of magic. Devant argued:

> …a conjuring performance cannot be properly and thoroughly appreciated by anyone who does not know something about the art, for the attraction is not - or should not be - wholly centred in the secret, however wonderful it may be, which enables the conjurer to get one of his effects. When a member of an audience knows that secret he ceases to be curious about it, and so devoted his whole attention to the way in which the conjurer presents his little fairy story.[218]

Therefore, one should be aware of how the tricks are done and therefore not focus on this aspect of the performance in order to completely enjoy the spectacle.

By contrast, magician Charles Bertram, argued that secrets were especially important for magic because the audience wants to remain in the state of the unknown. He claimed that the audience only benefits from not knowing the secret and provided the following example:

> It may, perhaps, seem somewhat of an anomaly that so many people will pay to be deceived by a conjurer, and are pleased in proportion to the magnitude of the

[217] Carus, "Introduction," xviii.
[218] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 100.

> deception practised upon them. Many times I have offered to explain how a trick is done, and my offer has been at once rejected with a remark, "I am quite content to remain in ignorance. If I knew how it was done, I should not be, so well pleased. [219]

David Devant, who believed that secrets are not of the highest value to the art of magic, was criticized by some of his colleagues. He was blamed by his colleagues for publishing and promoting the book where he exposed magic secrets. His reaction was one of a surprise. "He told one reporter, The tricks I exposed were my own so I did not think that I had broken any rule. I owe it to posterity to give the world my secrets before I die. I don't think I shall live much longer. The Magic Circle seems to think that the mechanics of a trick are the secret of its success. In my view it is only the artistry of the performer that can make it magic."[220]

These quite radical views on the subject led Devant and Maskelyne to write their book "Our Magic" and make a courageous claim – magic is an art form. Moreover, they claimed: "we have simply done our best to carry out work which somebody was bound to undertake because the necessity had become imperative."[221] I will now analyze their approach in more details.

Work of art in magic

Before looking at how magic is defined as an art in "Our Magic," we have to find out what exactly we are focusing on. The question is - what exactly is a work of art when we discuss magic? What are Devant and Maskelyne analyzing when they talk about the principles of the art of magic? Is it a new illusion design, a presentation script or a particular performance of magic? These questions are familiar to the area of performing arts studies. It is also important to define what differs a performance of magic from that of theatre, dance or music since very often elements of each of these arts are incorporated in magic acts.

"Our Magic" proposes to talk about a *magic act* as a separate work and provides us with a formal definition of a magic act: "…one magical act, as presented to an

[219] Bertram, *Isnt't it wonderful?* 142-143.
[220] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 306.
[221] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 88.

audience, should constitute an imitation of one apparently-supernormal feat, culminating in one apparently-miraculous effect."[222]

An apparently miraculous effect can also be defined. The authors suggest that it happens when: "Something or somebody is caused to pass mysteriously from one place or condition to another. That is what invariably happens when a magical feat is performed."[223] Therefore, an apparently miraculous effect is what distinguishes magic from any other art form.

This general definition of magic effect provided by "Our Magic" seems to allow us to distinguish magic effect from any other occurrence. The main characteristic is that if we witness that something or someone has passed from one place or condition to another, we then have to ask ourselves if it has happened *mysteriously.* However, the question of whether something has happened mysteriously or not is a very subjective one. By "mysteriously," the authors mean that no logical explanation can be offered to explain how a particular change in place or condition could happen. The magic effect then represents the irrational, as it breaks the intuitive, rational cause-effect chain, or, in other words, introduces causes, which cannot be rationalized because they contradict our knowledge about the world and our everyday experiences (i.e. using mind power to move objects). If magic is an art and it is represented by magical acts, and magical act is a magical effect, then we have to conclude that a magical effect is a work of art. Yet if we follow this logic we have to admit, that if the change in place or condition does not happen mysteriously, then magician fails to produce an effect, and so fails to create a work, which would distinguish his art from other art forms. This situation is easy to model – one should simply assume that an effect is witnessed by an experienced magician, who already knows the secret.

Authors admit the problem of spectator's knowledge and confirm the idea that artistic effect in magic does not exist separately from the magical effect, i.e. it is *absolutely necessary* to create an illusion for an effect to be a work of art.

> Between the point of view of a conjurer and that of an ordinary spectator there is a great gulf. Therefore, at a public performance, the production of an artistic effect

[222] Ibid., 22.
[223] Ibid., 40.

> may often demand the adoption of methods which, with an audience of conjurers, would be quite contrary to rational procedure.[224]

Not only the magic effect will not be achieved if the spectators know the secret, the artistic effect will also not be present. Here we see an interesting problem. From the quote above, we can see that a magician has to vary the methods and the procedures he uses depending on the performing conditions. He should choose a different method when he performs for an audience of magicians in order to deceive them. Then, if one accepts the theory of Devant and Maskelyne, he would have to admit that artistic effect in magic is totally dependent on the audience and the very same act can fail to be a work of art for one audience yet achieve this status for the other.

The problem of spectator's prior knowledge and its influence on his perception of the artwork is not peculiar only to magic. It has been present in the studies on the philosophy of art and aesthetics, the most common example being that of indiscernible counterparts.[225] Usually, an imaginary situation is given: someone throws paint on the canvas randomly and accidentally creates an exact copy of a famous painting. In that case, the only way for a spectator, who is looking at both pictures – an original and a copy created by a pure accident – to determine which one *is* an artwork would be to refer to his knowledge about each of the paintings, which is not contained in the paintings themselves. In that way, magic is facing the same problem, but what is interesting about magic, is that it depends on the opposite: the *lack* of knowledge.

Magic is always a performance of it. Maskelyne writes: "Apart from its presentation, the art of magic has no sensible existence. It is naturally ephemeral, and demands instant appreciation."[226] Therefore, the art of magic is ambivalent as it exists only for a short time and only for those who experience the mysterious effect. In that way magic seems to be more audience-related then other performing arts – for instance, theatre. The most obvious example which has already been given is the case of two audiences – one consisting of magicians and one consisting of the general public who has never witnessed a magic show before. Magicians already possess some specific knowledge and the effect will be dramatically different.

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[224] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 23.
[225] Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981).
[226] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 38.

Here we come to a difficult point: if we follow the logic of "Our Magic," we come to the conclusion that magic being an art depends on the spectator's perception. As we can see, the functional approach to magic by defining it basing on the produced effect has an important fallacy. If we define magic as a performance which has to create an experience of wonder, and magic is an art form if and only if it accomplishes it, then we create a highly subjective definition. Let us imagine a spectator who has just witnessed an illusion of levitation and found it magical and mysterious. He then learns that the secret behind the levitation illusion is the usage of a very thin thread invisible to the eye. He then watches the act again. Now there is no mystery. Although the illusion may still be present (spectator does not *see* the thread but is aware of its existence), the method is clear. At this point, we will have to admit that after the secret is exposed, there is no art anymore. It means that we are facing a paradox, which I have pointed out in the discussion on the indiscernible counterparts: magic can be art and not art at the same time, depending on who is witnessing it.

To overcome this problem, authors of "Our Magic" admit multiple times that the magician's main aim is to work for an average audience – and this is a generalization of an average visitor of a magic show: middle-class citizens or working class. It is their current idea of the world, their current way of perceiving things that magicians have to keep in mind while creating their acts. At the same time, authors claim that performing for conjurers should involve more advanced techniques and methods, which are superior to those that are used for the general public. By "superior" the authors mean the level of complexity and innovation which is necessary to create an illusion for an audience of magicians. In other words, we can say that a magician should always try to deceive the audience – surprise them so that they have no idea about how an effect was accomplished. The authors provide an example of the "Rising Cards" trick, in which three selected playing cards magically rise from the deck. Maskelyne states that the method behind the trick would differ if one would perform it for the audience of magicians, although the effect would stay the same.

> To an audience of conjurers he would, naturally, present the superior method. The other would only bore his spectators. But to the general public, apart from

some special reason to the contrary, he should present the more familiar, yet more effective method, less perfect though it be.[227]

What it means is that if a magician wants to impress his colleagues, he has to invent some new, unfamiliar way of doing the same trick. Otherwise he will even bore them.

Another side of the problem, which again brings us back to the concept on the indiscernible counterparts, is that magic inevitably relies on our knowledge about the world. The magical effect exists only in the mind of the spectator and his conclusions about its impossibility are based only on his personal understanding of the laws of nature and his inner feelings about the rational and the irrational. The appreciation of magic as an art is inevitably connected with spectator's realization of the fact, that the feats performed on stage are actually impossible, and therefore were *created* with a purpose of presenting them on stage. Lack of this understanding leads to multiple cases described of people who actually believed that what was happening on stage was a real supernatural phenomenon. Therefore magic can at some point not only stop being an art but also stop being *a performance* at all. The extreme case might be a story told by Devant in his autobiography, where he tells that he had met a person with a mental disorder at night, who threatened Devant and asked him to produce money from the air exactly as he had done during his show. It is therefore crucially important to remember, Maskelyne remarks, that "magician is not deceiving intellect, he is only deceiving senses, as deceiving intellect = telling lies about the nature of procedure and is disrespectful towards the audience."[228]

These thoughts again bring us back to the central role of the secret in magic. There seems to be a certain contradiction between Devant's claims about the unimportance of secrets that I quoted in the previous part, and his focus on choosing the right methods to achieve the magic effect. Yet indeed, Devant and Maskelyne in their book intended to demonstrate that magic had an internal artistic value. Moreover, Devant and Maskelyne were always proud of their inventions. They were working hard to create new methods for old effects. These efforts were rarely appreciated by the general audience as spectators usually had no idea about *any* kind of methods. The only people who could appreciate their creations were magicians. Famous Maskelyne's Cabinet and Devant's box were

[227] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 37
[228] Maskelyne, "The Theory of Magic," 99.

well-guarded secrets and whenever Devant mentions a particular trick of his own invention he does not fail to underline that it has also puzzled his colleagues.

> It must be remembered that, to the public—and unfortunately, to the general Press also—either the effect, or some prominent feature of a trick, is the trick itself. We commonly hear of "The Vanishing Lady," "The Box Trick," "The Cabinet Trick," "The Ghost Illusion," "The Slate Trick," and so on. Apparently, most people cannot imagine that more than one trick may be associated with a certain kind of effect, or a particular form of appliance.[229]

Devant gives us a hint on how to solve the problem of secret in his autobiography, claiming that:

> A good conjurer will present his performance in such a way that not even a man who knows the secret of how it is done will see at what particular moment the conjurer makes use of that secret. The conjurer must be an actor. By the expression on his face, by his gestures, by the tone of his voice, in short, by his acting, he must produce his effects. He may bewilder his audience as much as he pleases, but he must also entertain them.[230]

A magician has to be able to deceive the senses, to create a suspension of disbelief even for those aware of the secret and at the same time make a performance interesting and entertaining. This is where we are getting closer to the idea of magic being an art.

So far I have attempted to outline the problems in the discussion on works of art in magic. The question of spectatorship seems to be crucial to magic, as it directly influences the status of a performance as a work of art.

To clarify that, we can also look at this question from another point of view and try to analyze how magicians can regard magic as a form of art even if they know the secrets. Strange as it may seem, one would very rarely find this question in the literature on magic. Magicians, while knowing the secrets, should also be able to see their performances as works of art. This is, in fact, the main point of attention of "Our Magic"

[229] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 37
[230] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 100.

and now I will move on to the discussion of a more general question: defining magic as an art form.

Magic as an art

"Our Magic" begins with a discussion upon a question of defining magic as a fine art. It is important to mention that the style used in the book differs dramatically from all books on magic of the time. The latter, like the memoirs of Robert-Houdin or Charles Bertram, were usually written as exciting adventure books. "Our Magic," on the opposite, tried to incorporate a logical, philosophical approach and accomplish something different than simply amusing the reader. The authors wanted to introduce magic to the art world. The actual meaning of the term "Fine Art," that the authors always use with capital letters, is not properly defined. Yet one can notice that the authors mostly address examples from painting and regard it as the most obvious representative of the fine arts.

The question of defining the art of magic had been answered in the book even before it was explicitly formulated. The authors provided us with a bold statement in the introduction: "We presume that everyone will agree to the recognition of magic as an art."[231] Then they touched upon the question of defining art and based their answer on the mimetic theory: "From the time of Aristotle to the present date, the consensus of opinion has decided that all art is based upon imitation."[232] Therefore, something is an art if it imitates something, and so "a display of skill given by a magical performer should imitate, and, thus, convey to the spectators, the impression of effects produced by supernormal powers."[233]

The definition of art as an imitation, which is no longer plausible in our times, was already out-of-date even for the time when the book was published. More than that, claiming that there is a "consensus of opinion" regarding art in 1911 was an overstatement, to say the least. By the year 1911, many works to which we now attribute the term *modern* art had already been created and movements such as expressionism and cubism had already evolved. Even the late 19th century that produced impressionist and symbolist painting demonstrated a gradual shift from the classical perception of art as an imitation. By 1911 there already were Picasso and Kandinsky, in four years Malevich would present his "Black Square" and in eight years Duchamp would exhibit his

[231] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 10.
[232] Ibid., 11.
[233] Ibid.

"Fountain." It seems difficult to believe that authors who started a book on art problems were so out of touch with reality that they genuinely believed and limited their definition of art to just an imitation. Most probably, this fact only demonstrates lack of authors' desire or necessity to get deeper into the subject. Philosophical and ontological questions of art were, probably, out of the authors' real interest or competence, and they just tried to create the right impression on the reader by referring to the mimetic theory of Aristotle, thus showing that they were familiar with the theoretical side of the subject. It seems that the authors wanted to attribute a certain style to their text and wanted it to be perceived as a philosophical essay rather than another book on magic tricks. We might also assume that the book was not meant for specialists: philosophers or art critics, and was primarily addressed to magicians and the general audience.

Further in the book, we can find one more definition of art, which is: "Art is work which stimulates imagination."[234] This definition provides us only with one particular function which a work of art may possess and is, therefore, too inclusive.

It seems that the authors did not intend to focus on the philosophy of art too much, instead, they were eager to address more specific problems related to magic.

According to the authors, one of the most important qualities that a magician should possess in order to be regarded as an artist was originality. Originality was presented as the essential quality of fine art. Basing on this criterion, Maskelyne and Devant introduced three degrees in art that they named high art, normal art, and false art.

False art is an imitation of an imitation – a simple copy of another artwork.

> Pictures painted by the great masters are frequently reproduced by students and by professional copyists. Many of the copies thus executed are, in all practical respects, facsimiles of the original pictures from which they were copied. Yet nobody, in his sober senses, could possibly regard those copies, however faithful they may be, as works of true art.[235]

False art is a shame for any art form, it is "a parasitic growth that can only be productive of evil, and should never be permitted to live."[236]

[234] Ibid., 45.
[235] Ibid., 12.
[236] Ibid., 17.

Normal art is an imitation of existing things. As the aim of normal art is to imitate something that exists, the authors proceed to argue that the only thing which really exists is the nature. A "normal artist" simply transfers what he sees in the nature on canvas. The conclusion, therefore, is that this artist imitates what already exists without creating anything new and "The things he paints resemble, more or less, things which others have painted."[237]

High art, in its turn, is the most original – it is an imitation of the things imagined by the artist. It is a rare and valuable phenomenon that can be created only by geniuses and stay in history forever.

The authors move on to defining how these three degrees are represented in magic. They see the problem of applying the same approach to magic in the fact, that magic cannot imitate what already exists, i.e. nature, as its purpose is to demonstrate the defiance of the laws of nature. As the supernatural does not exist in reality, it is only possible to first imagine it and then to imitate. Therefore, the supernatural exists either in the imagination or in the works, which have already been performed by magicians. From here it becomes clear that false art in magic is simply copying someone else's act. Normal art in magic is an art "which employs familiar means to produce its own special results."[238] This statement means that a normal artist in magic uses already existing principles (i.e. secrets) of magic to design his own original presentation. For example, he may use an already existing technical equipment that can create an illusion of levitation but create his own small act set it in the atmosphere of a medieval castle. This interpretation of an illusion would be normal art. The central idea of normal art is that a magician uses "familiar methods" to create something original.

Finally, the authors define high art in magic. This time they do not search for analogies with other art forms and devote a paragraph to praising great masters of magic of the past, true artists, who belong to the world of high art simply because their achievements are still remembered. The authors then admit that there is a set of acknowledged artworks in magic, and the task is to look for common characteristics of these works. I might add that this is a typical and valid process for most works on the philosophy of art – defining a set of works and searching for a shared set of qualities. However, Maskelyne and Devant did not provide any details on which personalities or

[237] Ibid., 15.
[238] Ibid.

artworks they were actually implying. They just attempted to summarize what all great magicians of the past had in common that made them belong to the realm of high art.

> It does not consist in the inventive ability, as ordinarily understood, of the old masters. It does not consist in the mechanical ingenuity they displayed. It does not consist in the manipulative skill at their command. It does not consist in the theoretical knowledge they possessed, nor in the practical experience they gained. Such elementary matters barely touch the fringe of true art. Then, by the simple process of exclusion, we arrive at the only possible answer. The true merit of the masterpieces in question consists in the originality they display, and the perfection with which they simulate the operation of supernatural influences. The honours gained by master magicians have been due to a genius for conceiving and fulfilling the requirements of *artistic originality*. In every art the Master is he who can produce original effects and understands how to present them in an original and convincing manner.[239]

Devant repeated this thought later in his autobiography, however this time he did not employ the concept of art.

> The man who wishes to become a conjurer may also bear in mind that the very best secrets will be those which he discovers for himself. When the conjurer has discovered an original way of doing and presenting an old trick, he may consider that he has a better secret than any that a book can impart, because it is his own. Having arrived at such a success, the conjurer has found the best answer to the question, "What is magic?"[240]

We can now summarize the main points. Magic is an art that imitates the supernatural. Magic becomes high art when an artist strives towards artistic originality, i.e. creates new means to accomplish new effects.

This approach, at first sight philosophical in its methods, turns out to be a mixture of different terms and ideas. There are several logical twists employed by the authors that make this theory difficult to comprehend. When they discuss painting, they focus on the

[239] Ibid., 20.
[240] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 102.

subject matter – things existing in reality versus things imagined by the artist. If we follow this distinction, we only come to the conclusion that every painting of a landscape can only be classified as "normal art" as this landscape is not imagined by the artist and also might be drawn by someone else. When they discuss magic, they switch from discussing the *object* of representation to the *method* of representation and define "normal art" as the one that uses familiar methods. These are only a few of the multiple gaps that we can find in this approach.

It is also not clear what constitutes artistic originality if it does not include the inventive ability and how an understanding of presentation can exist without the theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

The whole definition in question obviously includes evaluative aspect. By introducing different degrees in art, the authors create an oxymoron: false art, and fail to address the question if false art can actually be called art if it is nothing but a copy of an existing artwork.

As we can see, there are a lot of contradictions and inconsistencies within the approach presented in "Our Magic." Yet one can get an impression that it was extremely important for the authors to demonstrate that there actually *was* a theoretical and philosophical framework in magic. The very fact that one can approach magic not just as a set of secrets but as a theoretical discipline had to indicate that, it was indeed a form of art. It seems that the authors' intention was not in providing a proper formal definition but outlining the direction in which magic should move to be treated on the same level as other art forms.

> Our immediate aim is the elucidation of those fundamental principles which, being reduced to practice, justify the claim of Magic to be classed among the Arts—not, of course, among the mechanical arts, but among the Fine Arts—the Arts with a big A.[241]

The idea of the Fine Arts – "Arts with a big A" – dates back to the 18th century and normally refers to painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, and music. Devant and Maskelyne formulated several principles that could provide sufficient conditions to include magic in the field of Fine Arts. These principles constituted what they called the

[241] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 9-10.

"Art in Magic" – and this particular claim – that there is "Art in Magic" was, in fact, their real argument for magic being an art.

The meaning of the concept of "Art in Magic" can be formulated as follows: magic is complex, and its complexity – intellectual, aesthetical and spiritual – can be compared with the complexity of any other art forms.

We can see two main concepts: "Art of magic" and "Art in magic". The meaning of these terms can be defined in the following way: the art *of* magic is characterized by the illusion, its final mysterious effect and the art *in* magic is characterized by the process of creating and presenting the illusion. "Art of Magic" is what distinguishes magic from other arts (causing something or someone to pass mysteriously from one place or condition to another) and "Art in Magic" is what makes it similar to other arts (following artistic principles and striving for originality).

According to the authors, every work of art can be characterized by possessing particular qualities. These qualities and ideas represent the *artistic principles*, which are common to any form of art. Most importantly, art itself is characterized by the very presence of these principles and by the existence of a theory, which should be consciously applied during the process of an artistic creation. Authors' intention was to demonstrate that, as magic is based on the same principles as any other fine art, it can also qualify as a type of fine art. Therefore, while imitating the supernatural phenomenon, according to Maskelyne and Devant, does formally makes magic art, they really believe that only originality combined with the usage of artistic principles can make magic a "High Art."

> Thus, we have not attempted the creation of new principles or new standards, but have merely adapted to the art of magic those principles and standards already common to art in general. In order to bring magic into line with other arts the first step, obviously, must be to associate with it those principles and traditions whereby other arts are governed. ... If we wish to prove the claim of magic to rank upon an equality with other arts, we must first of all establish its relation to recognised artistic principles and ideals, both in theory and in practice.[242]

The principles represent a set of rules and guidelines, which are described in several chapters of the book and deal with various topics related to different stages of

[242] Ibid., 86.

production of magical acts: writing a script, designing a stage setting, creating a character, planning the dramatic structure, acting, rehearsing, forming a correct mental attitude.

The reason for introducing these principles to magic is clear – an art form should have a set of concepts and criteria, associated with this art. As magic of the 19th century became a form of theatre entertainment, it was time to create a meta-language, commonly adopted by both artists and critics, which would allow them to make opinions about particular works. The necessity to be able to differentiate between good and bad works was one of the central ideas of the authors.

> There are always two ways of doing anything: a right way and a wrong way. Any ignoramus can bungle about with a thing until, eventually, he makes it pass muster among those who know as little as himself. But, even then, the thing will not be right, in the eyes of an expert. Anything done in the wrong way can never be really right in itself.[243]

The right way is the one on which a performer consciously follows the artistic principles. Nothing should be left to chance, every detail should be thought through and designed according to the theory of art.

As magic always had close connections with theatre and dramatic art, it is no surprise that we find very similar thoughts in the writings of Henry Irving – a famous actor and manager of the late 19th-century England. He wrote:

> It is often supposed that great actors trust to the inspiration of the moment. Nothing can be more erroneous. There will, of course, be such moments, when an actor at a white heat illumines some passage with a flash of imagination (and this mental condition, by the way, is impossible to the student sitting in his armchair); but the great actor's surprises are generally well weighed, studied, and balanced.[244]

Very much like magic, the art of an actor should be guided by knowledge, not by random impulses.

Magic is centered around creating an illusion, and in most cases creating an illusion can be ridiculously simple. It might be hard for a magician to find the motivation

[243] Ibid., 36.
[244] Henry Irving, *The Drama: Addresses* (1893), 47. https://archive.org/details/dramaaddresses00irvigoog.

to work further on the illusion after the primary aim – fooling an audience – has already been achieved. Hence, there is a danger of using the easiest way possible, which is enough to deceive an audience and to ignore the dramatic and artistic components of a performance. Maskelyne and Devant believe that this should not happen. Although the primary concern of a performer is the effect that he produces on his audience, he should not care if he gets instant appreciation unless he is not sure that he did everything correctly, i.e. that he has accomplished his artistic task. Even though "so many productions, inartistic in themselves, prove to be quite effective before an average audience,"[245] and the general public might never fully appreciate the work behind the act, this should not prevent anyone from improving. The authors claim: "Good enough for the public" is ample justification for defects which are difficult to overcome."[246]

Devant provides an example of the decline of comic opera and the popularization of musical comedy in Britain. In this example, he regards comic opera as an art and musical comedy as a clever entertainment. His opinion on the subject is that a growing demand for musical comedy had its roots in the fact that there was no better alternative. The primary problem was in the decline of comic opera as an art form and therefore the audience turned towards a more primitive form of performance. Therefore, if magicians continue to produce inartistic works, the audience will be happy to consume them, yet it does not mean that the public has a bad taste – it just takes the best offer.

Here comes the most important and central argument which is repeated in different forms throughout the book.

> However good a faulty performance may appear to the uninitiated, it would appear still better were the faults removed. The majority of spectators may not know why the thing is better in its more perfect form. They may not understand the reasons which have dictated the alterations made. But the performer, at any rate, ought to know when his presentation is defective, and should understand how to remove avoidable.[247]

Even though the mechanical secret (i.e. the construction of the box) may stay the same, there are different ways of presenting the illusion. The creation and presentation of

[245] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 9-10.
[246] Ibid., 37.
[247] Ibid., 36.

a magical act should be governed by artistic principles, this is the "Art in Magic" and this is where the performer should never stop improving.

And again we can see similar thoughts expressed by Henry Irving in his writing on dramatic art:

> Believe me the true artist never lingers fondly upon what he has done. He is ever thinking of what remains undone: ever‘ striving toward an ideal it may never be his fortune to attain.[248]

> And later

> You cannot have a fixed standard of value in my art; and though there are masses of people who will prefer an unintelligent exhibition to a really artistic production, that is no reason for decrying the theatre, in which all the arts blend with the knowledge of history, manners, and customs of all people, and scenes of all climes, to afford a varied entertainment to the most exacting intellect.[249]

The crucial point of this discussion seems to be that the artistic development is a performer's own responsibility. Derren Brown in his 2001 book is in a way repeating this thought, claiming that the only way to approach magic as an art it to try to treat it as an art and discover art in it. In "Our Magic" authors consistently claim that while magic as an art form can be defined through imitation, the real art comes with the artistic attitude towards the work. This attitude is characterized mainly by conscious efforts towards perfection and originality. The distinction between good and bad, right way or wrong way is not a matter of audience's opinion, it is a matter of a performer's personal approach to his work. This is the main point of the book, as it is the only way to save magic from trivializing it.

> An artist prefers to work in the right way, if only to show that he knows how the work should be done. … a magician should be able to demonstrate the grounds

[248] Irving, *The Drama: Addresses,* 43.
[249] Ibid., 73.

upon which he claims that the procedure is either artistically correct or absolutely justified.[250]

A magician becomes an artist only when he starts thinking like an artist and, according to the authors, artists in every branch of art have a common set of rules. "Our Magic" was most probably addressed primarily to magicians as about half of its contents consists of the discussion of secrets. The idea of the book was to change magicians' perception of their own work. They even rejected the usage of the word "trick" as they believed that the trick is bringing audience's attention to the deception element. "Trick" is only a means in achieving illusion, therefore Devant and Maskelyne condemn the popularity of this word among magicians and call upon to using the words "experiment", "magical presentation" or "magical feat" instead.

Therefore, the question about the artistic status of magic and the authors' conclusion about magic being a fine art serve to elevate the magicians' own vision of their profession. The correct attitude towards magic plays the foremost role if magicians want to be treated as artists.

> Illusionists, Prestidigitateurs, and general practitioners alike, must give proof of their artistic qualifications. This they can only do by realising that magic is essentially an intellectual pursuit and treating it as a true art— not merely as an embodiment of more or less intelligent skills.[251]

It seems plausible to argue that the aim of the authors was not to provide a consistent and logical definition of magic as an art and work of art in magic, but to demonstrate what magicians should strive for. "Our Magic" was the first and still one of the few attempts to find similarities between magic and other art forms. It was the first book to focus on creating a model for the correct attitude to the profession of a magician. It appealed to magicians to create art and to think as artists.

To conclude this part of the chapter I must add that in 1911 Devant and Maskelyne were indeed sure that magic was and should be an intellectual peer of painting or poetry. Most probably the magicians felt that the amount of work and dedication that magic

[250] Maskelyne, "The Art in Magic," 36.
[251] Ibid., 87-88.

required did not correlate with the idea of entertainment that can be produced with much less effort. In 2001, Derren Brown described this approach of Maskelyne and Devant to magic as an exaggerated pride which represents "relics from a Victorian age: one which delighted in grand statements and orgulous, magnificent artworks."[252] David Devant himself changed his views with time. He expressed an opposite view on the subject of secrets in his 1931 autobiography. In the last chapter of his memoir, he claimed that "the very nature of magic makes it an art to be practiced in secret, not broadcast and discuss with all one's friends. The air of "mystery" must be maintained or surely magic will die."[253] Devant talks here about the technical secrets that, as he claimed before, had no real meaning for a conjurer. It turned out that revealing secrets in an attempt to make the audience appreciate the presentation and skill did not lead anywhere. If the secrets are revealed, magic loses its important part – the atmosphere of mystery. Devant probably was disappointed with his glorious mission of educating the public about the values of magic and came to the conclusion that secrets are, in the end, necessary for magic to survive.

This contradiction of opinions was not unique to Devant. Albert Hopkins, an American author of the book on stage illusions, while describing an illusion, claimed that: "From the scientific as well as scenic aspect, the exhibition is most interesting, and to one who knows how it is performed, the *interest is vastly enhanced* [italics added]."[254]. Yet in the same book he later made exactly the opposite claim: "People go to magical entertainments to be mystified by the pretended sorcery of the magician, and when they learn by what absurdly simple devices a person may be fooled, they look with indifference at the more ambitious illusions of the performer"[255]. The discovery of secrets turns magic into a recreational performance of a simple scientific trick and instantly kills its entertainment value.

The radical view of magic being an art form and not simply a part of show business also seemed to have changed with time. Devant admitted in his autobiography, written twenty years after the publishing of "Our Magic" that being a part of the entertainment world is, in the end, not an insult and one can also be proud of it. One can

[252] Brown, "Can magic be art? New thoughts," 218.
[253] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 213.
[254] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 60.
[255] Ibid., 123.

assume that he probably felt disappointed about their earlier attempt to introduce magic into the world of fine arts, as he wrote:

> It has been suggested that a conjurer cannot be regarded in the same light as a musician or an actor, because the conjurer's work - everything he does - it too trifling, and that therefore a conjurer at his best can be only an entertainer as well as an exhibitor of tricks. To this I reply that the best of comedians is "only an entertainer", but that I do not think any the less of him on that account.[256]

In 1931 he was happy to admit that magic, "is now recognized as an intellectual amusement or recreation, and has made immense strides in social recognition."[257]

In the following pages of this chapter I will analyse which features of magic made it similar to other arts and how magic was a part of bigger cultural and artistic trends of the time.

[256] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 100.
[257] Ibid., 211.

Part 2. Magic in the context of art history

Claiming the art status

In the first part of this chapter, I analyzed the theoretical views of magicians on the problem of defining magic as an art form rather than pure entertainment. Although there was no clear solution to this problem, it was evident that at least Devant and Maskelyne – representatives of the most prominent magic tradition in England – claimed that, although entertainment is an inherently important function of magic, it is not the limit.

The attempt to be perceived as an art form was not unique to magic and we can find very similar trends in a field that at first sight has not much in common with magic – photography. There are some striking correlations between magic and late 19th-century photography on various levels.

First, it is worth noticing photography's close ties with science. Photographer was supposed to be a person with a decent knowledge in various fields like optics, chemistry and mechanics. The process of taking and producing a picture was at first quite a complicated one and could only be done after a thorough study of the subject.

In magic, as I demonstrated earlier, the scientific part played a huge role and was a part of a performer's pride as he was not only a performer of magical feats but also a clever scientist, exhibitor of his own inventions.

Photography was developing quickly due to two important factors. First, the technological advancements, in particular, the invention of Kodak cameras that allowed to simplify the picture taking process significantly and made this process available to amateurs all around the world. Second, the growing speed of international communication, availability of international mail and travel that allowed a quick exchange of ideas between the photographers all around the world.

The simplification of the photographic process brought up a question: if is now so easy to create a picture, can photography possibly be called art? It led to the appearance of a new movement in photography – pictorialism - that appeared and developed quickly towards the end of the 19th century all over the world. Pictorialists claimed that a photographic image should not be a direct representation of reality but rather an author's personal expression of his artistic creativity. The followers of pictorialist movement claimed that photography could be called art if the artistic principles were applied to it. To achieve this, pictorialists used multiple techniques, such as combination printing -

creating a picture from multiple negatives, applying color with a brush to a negative, removing parts of the picture etc. Some of the representatives of the movement, such as Peter Emerson, were against working on the picture after it had been taken and proposed the idea of applying artistic skills at the moment when the photograph was being taken, trying to capture the reality in such a way, that a picture conveys a particular emotion or an idea.

One can notice that magic was following a similar path. Due to growing opportunities for book printing, books describing secrets of magic were now available to anyone. It made possible the appearance of hundreds of amateurs and enthusiasts who were not dependent on magic financially and therefore had the freedom to create and experiment.

The popularization of science and technology also made it possible to buy and perform tricks that were dependent on specific gadgets or, as magicians call them, *gimmicks.* This resulted in a quick development of magic but, at the same time, made magicians wonder if magic can be called an art. As the example of photography demonstrates, this problem was not exclusive to magic only.

We can see an interesting common feature that both magic and photography (pictorialist photography in particular) possessed. This is the aspiration to become and to be accepted as an art form. The technology behind both practices – cameras in photography and apparatus in magic – obviously diminished the role of a photographer or a magician as they could be regarded just as operators of their devices, not as artists. Yet both in magic and in photography there was a feeling that there is, or at least, should be something artistic about these activities. Therefore, photographers turned to pictorialism as means to explore the artistic capacity of the medium. In magic, this discussion resulted in the appearance of new forms of stage performance, such as the magic play, and publications of books on the theory of magic. The question of the role of skill in the process of creation became central in art in the 19th century. Modern art, anti-art, and Dadaism provided the most radical answers to the question of the role of the artist. In magic, as in photography, this question was always present. It was always difficult for the audience to understand, even on an intuitive level, the amount of skill and dedication required from an artist. This problem was especially important for magic, as an attempt to explain the complexity of the art required to reveal the secrets, which, in turn, could ruin the whole experience of mystery.

We can see two fields that had some common traits: being dependent on technology, being opened for amateurs and non-professionals and originally having one single purpose (in photography - simply capturing the reality, in magic - producing a magic effect). Artists in both fields came to asking the same question at a very similar point of time: what can be done and improved in order for this activity to be acknowledged as an art form. It looks like photography was more successful in fighting for and acquiring its art status. There are several reasons for this.

The first one is that the *emotional range*, the variety of emotions and the spectators' reaction to magic is often limited. A magician has one major task: to amaze the audience using various means of deception. This particular reaction of being surprised, fooled of baffled by a magic trick is so strong that it always negates or, at least, diminishes the value and the intensity of all other elements of the performance, often leaving them unnoticeable to a spectator.

Another factor that made it more difficult for magic to acquire art status was its inherent secrecy that led to an inability of a spectator to appreciate skills and a huge amount of work behind a performance.

Moreover, in the beginning of the 20th century, magic, unlike photography, could only be performed live and could not be reproduced. As a consequence, the public had a limited experience of magic, which made it impossible to compare and analyze works of different performers.

Notwithstanding the fact, that magic was not officially accepted as a form of art, it had many similarities with other art forms on a conceptual level. I already pointed out the philosophical debate inside photography. I will now address important cultural trends that were represented both in magic and in other forms of art.

Pursuit of naturalness

In the second chapter I have pointed out the importance of realism in magic shows. Magicians recreated impossible effects while claiming to achieve them with science. The rational exploration of the irrational and the desire to capture the supernatural with scientific precision and recreate it in a form of a believable visual experience was an important trend for various art fields.

Previously I have described the debate about the art status of photography. On the level of content, photography allowed not only to capture reality but also to alter it using various production methods. The examples of it are photographs that use the technique

of combination printing. In these pictures several elements from different pictures are combined together – a process that is extremely simple nowadays due to digital technologies. The resulting works could look impossible, yet very realistic. There were regular reports of "spirit photographs" – pictures that apparently had ghostly figures in them. The authors of these photographs claimed that they had not seen the figures when they had been taking the picture. This effect was usually achieved by a "post-production" method: two pictures, one of the real person, and another one of the "ghost" were combined together in a specific way to leave an impression of fading, transparent, "ghostly" shapes. As photography was supposed to be an exact reproduction of reality, those pictures were convincing enough to gain popularity and get published in newspapers. Although the authors were regularly exposed, the idea of capturing other worlds with the help of scientific achievements gained popularity. Magicians were offering their audience the same narrative: they recreated the supernatural with the help of science and made it look as realistic as possible.

In a similar way, magical stories became central topic for the early cinema. Unlike the spirit photography, early magical films did not pretend to be an exact reproduction of reality and yet they were supposed to look very realistic. Short films created by French director and magician Georges Méliès demonstrate short fantastic stories created with the help of montage. These early films were often based on magic shows and the most famous illusions: spirit cabinet of the Davenport brothers, the vanishing lady, appearing imps and demons. David Devant claimed in his autobiography that he was the first performer to ever be shot on camera. In this short film, he was doing a trick with rabbits. Moreover, according to Devant, he took part in the first picture of Méliès in which things were made to disappear and reappear with the help of camera cuts.[258]

We can find another example of exploring the supernatural in a very different artistic field – the symbolist movement. Symbolism – an art movement that originated in poetry in late 19th-century France, was one of the brightest examples of art forms that dealt with the irrational and the magical. Essentially symbolism was not occupied with the idea of magic *per se*, its task was mainly to explore the inner world and to interpret the things of the outer world as representations of eternal, primordial ideas.

As symbolism spread across many countries and art forms, it produced a colossal amount of works that are very different in their philosophy and meaning. Not limiting

[258] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 74.

oneself to the visual experience of the world, symbolist artists could dwell upon such subjects as dreams, hallucinations and the supernatural – topics that were also an essential part of magic performances.

One particular artist, whose work demonstrates ideas that are very close to those of the 19th-century magicians, was a French painter Odilon Redon.

The advancement of science brought up an idea that what people had regarded as magical and supernatural before was, in fact, not magical at all. Nature, mind and body could be put under the control of a human mind. These ideas seemed to be worth exploring artistically.

Redon's series "The Secret Life of Monsters" focus on depicting supernatural creatures. Redon employed his famous technique of charcoal drawings and his black and white images are referred to as *noirs*. What is peculiar about Redon's monsters is that not only did he draw a number of magical creatures that he imagined; he also attempted to produce a highly realistic effect. Redon had a huge interest in biology, zoology and anatomy and worked on his creatures with a scientific precision. He was, in a certain way, a scientist who brought impossible creatures to life with the help of his art. Redon was inspired by the discussion on comparative anatomy and the theory of evolution that he personally witnessed at the museum of natural history. Redon argued that:

> I really took the idea of my monsters from there, and what is curious about them, hugely so – it's that they could live. They are conceived according to laws of this. Thus, any exaggeration of one part involves the diminution or atrophy of another; in a word, the equilibrium is broken or counterbalanced in another way. Thus, an enormous head, or small body, or vice versa.[259]

Monsters were a symbolic representation of a desire to control nature. With his creatures, Redon managed to create an imaginary world and at the same time, make it look as realistic as possible.[260] Redon wrote: "My originality consists in bringing to life, in a human way, improbable beings and making them live according to the law of

[259] *Interview of November 30* (Andre Mellerio Archive, Art Institute of Chicago, 1891), quoted in Barbara Larson, *Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilion Redon* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 56.
[260] Marina Van Zuylen, "The Secret Life of Monsters," in *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilion Redon*, ed. Jodi Hauptman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 57-73.

probability, by putting – as far as possible – the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible."[261]

Naturalism was an important feature of symbolism and of the decadent art in general. Redon was a perfect example of this "realism of the unreal." Jean Pierrot, an author of the book on the Decadent movement, claims that:

> We find that fantasy, the free play of imagination, is gradually moving closer and closer to reality. For an imaginative content cut off from life, elaborated in a world different from that of reality, a universe of legend, these writers are gradually substituting a fusion between the imaginary and real, between dream and life, which was to lead to the surrealist type of fantasy in which the strange and wonderful can appear at the very heart of the most familiar and humdrum reality.[262]

The drawings of Redon are peculiar exactly due to this element of ambiguity and uncertainty about them. There is a very vague and unclear border between the real and unreal, dream and imagination. This brings us back to theatrical magic as it, much like symbolist art, was always ambiguous about what really was happening on stage. A typical house somewhere in the English countryside suddenly becomes a scene for the most impossible magical transformations in the magical plays of Devant and Maskelyne. An ordinary looking box allows producing impossible magic effects; it becomes a subject of a detailed examination of a spectators' committee and is brought to court as it possesses some secret that is invisible to the eye.

Symbolists claimed that we are hallucinating the reality around us and therefore cannot study it objectively. "…art would not know how to search into the objective…"[263] – Jean Moréas claimed in the end of his Symbolist manifesto that was one of the earliest and the most important texts on the subject. We can find the same idea in performances of magic when a magician brings himself or his assistant to the state of altered consciousness. An assistant on stage could be hypnotized and then perform supernatural feats – levitation, telepathy, predictions. The magical realm of the dream could be

[261] Odilion Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, quoted in Jodi Hauptman ed., *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilion Redon* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 27.
[262] Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination,* 258.
[263] Jean Moreas, *Symbolist Manifesto* (1886). http://www.mutablesound.com/home/?p=2165.

depicted in magical sketches such as the "Artist's Dream" by David Devant.

Creating monstrous or impossible creatures on stage was often a part of a magic performance. Such illusions as a woman with a body of a spider or a woman with three heads that people could see with their very own eyes definitely remind us of Redon's mystical paintings.

The topics of the dream, hallucination, and imagination were also central to many magical acts. As in symbolism, in magic, these topics were inspired by the scientific exploration of the subconscious mind and dwelling upon these topics could be regarded as an escape from rational, positivist worldview.

Of course, the interest in the supernatural is not a unique feature of the late 19th century. Yet, as I have pointed out above using examples of photography and symbolism, there was certainly a trend of dealing with supernatural experiences in a particular way, exploring it as a scientist would explore nature. This corresponded with a demand of an audience for visual and believable representations of the supernatural. Offstage this experience was provided by spiritualists. On stage, magicians created their illusions.

19th-century theatre productions that dealt with the topics of magic attempted to present magical scenes in the most realistic way. Theatre directors applied many magicians' methods and illusions to add visual effects to their productions. Making ghostly figures appear on stage had been a popular idea. The theatre production "The Corsican Brothers," first produced in 1852 in London and based on the Alexandre Dumas' novel of the same title, incorporated some innovative use of trap doors and panels that allowed ghosts to appear and disappear on stage in a very convincing manner. The play was an enormous success and, according to the historian of magic Jim Steinmeyer, "the ghost's weird appearance was one of the most famous entrances in the history of the theatre."[264]

In 1868 a melodrama called "La Czarine" was produced at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique in Paris. It included an ingenious "ghost" episode arranged by Robert-Houdin that depended on the "Pepper's Ghost" illusion. An automaton chess-player designed by Robert-Houdin was also a part of the performance.[265]

[264] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant,* 24.
[265] Sharpe, *The Magic Play,* 28.

The Pepper's Ghost was used in many plays, such as dramatizations of Dickens' "Haunted Man" and "Christmas Carol," and another production of Dumas' "Corsican Brothers."

In 1902 Sir Henry Irving, an actor and a manager, produced his version of "Faust" that included witches and goblins flying over the stage, flashes of lightning, and Mephistopheles using electrical rapiers that sparked with a blue flame. In the same year, an American production of "Ben Hur" appeared on the London stage and featured the chariot race, in which real horses galloped on the treadmills built into the stage with a rolling scenery in the background to create an illusion of movement. In 1904, there was a production of "Peter Pan" that had scenes with mermaids, pirate ships, and Peter Pan flying.[266] "The Coming Race" play created by John Nevil Maskelyne, introduced landslips, rivers, airships, flying monsters and dragons that were represented very realistically.

It was quite common for theatre directors to call upon magicians to produce magic effects for their plays or variety shows. David Devant was asked by the manager of the Parisian Folies-Bergerès theatre to teach theatre comedians to perform a costume changing trick. According to Devant, it was not an unusual request and theatre directors addressed him multiple times with an offer to produce illusionary effects for their plays. Devant produced stage illusions for such London West End plays as "Kismet" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde." In "Macbeth" Devant was responsible for making the ghost of Banquo appear at the back of the chair which Macbeth was about to occupy.[267] Devant was often hired as a consultant for magic effects for operas. However, he complained that producers expected him to work miracles. He wrote: "They themselves took months to produce their plays, but expected the illusionary effects to be contrived and made in a few days."[268] This problem was clearly due to the fact that as magicians' methods were kept a secret, it would seem to people who were outside of the magic profession, that conjurers could actually quite easily produce any illusion on stage with no difficulties.

The whole chapter in the 1897 book of Albert Hopkins on magic is called "Science in the theatre" and is dedicated to the description of various devices used on a theatre stage and designed to move decorations, curtains and produce special effects of various kinds such as thunder and lightning effects.

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[266] Steinmeyer, *Art and Artifice,* 34-35.
[267] Devant, *My Magic Life,* 132.
[268] Ibid., 133.

Wagner's operas are quoted to be the ones, which always used a lot of stage machinery and sometimes very innovative ideas. For example, a gradual transformation of the stage which allowed not to pull down the curtain after each act to change the decorations. Instead, successive gauze curtains were raised and lowered, and the light was gradually diminished and then increased when the new stage set was ready. In the Rheingold, three Rhine daughters were "floating" on stage, the impression was created that they were "swimming with graceful movements about the rock which supports the

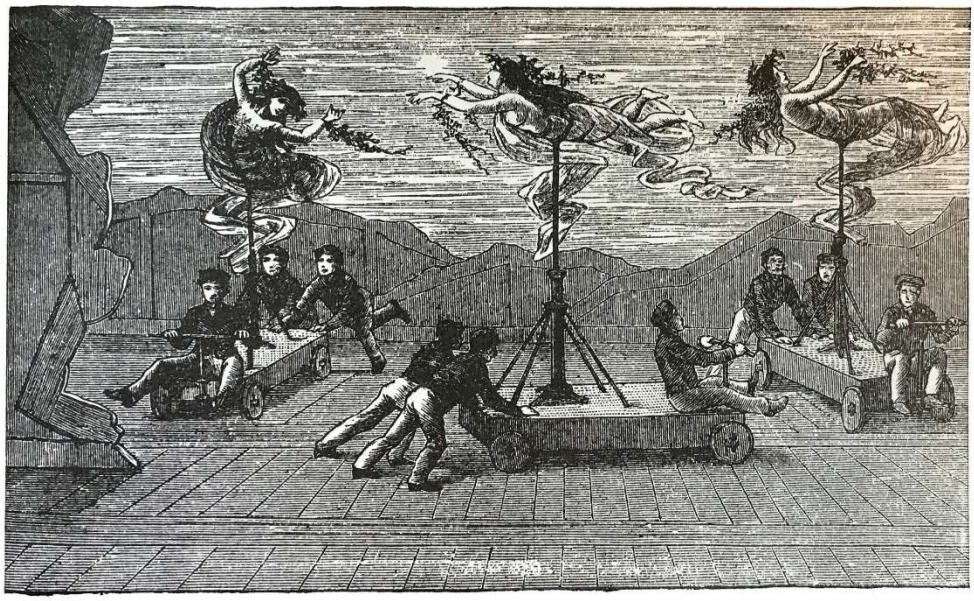

Figure 4. The floating Rhine daughters in the opera "Rheingold". Illustration from Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 314.

Rheingold."[269] In another opera, "Siegfried," spectators witnessed the process of welding of the sword on stage. Hopkins comments: "Those who have never seen "Siegfried" can form but a faint idea of the realism of this scene, which taxes the resources of the property master to the utmost."[270]

Apart from creating magic sketches and magic plays, that were also a type of a theatre production, magicians tried to produce their own complete theatre performances. Maskelyne and Devant created and performed "The Witches of Macbeth" at St. George's

[269] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 314.
[270] Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography,* 239.

Hall in London – their interpretation of the Shakespeare's play. The Wizard magazine – a periodical for magicians – provided the following report in 1908:

> The famous drawing-room entertainers present Shakespeare in an interesting light, with distinctly new scenic effects. In Act IV, Scene 1, we get the dark cave, boiling cauldron, and the three witches, exhibited under remarkable cloud and storm effects. Hecate (Miss Cassie Bruce) enters and vanishes into thin air, giving place to Macbeth, to whom the first and second apparitions, and the show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand, Banquo following, materialize from shadowy nothingness before the eyes of the audience, and fade away and disappear. Finally, the witches dance, and are instantly swallowed up in space, leaving Macbeth alone perplexed to await the arrival of Lennox. The production is a triumph of realism, with details which seem to invade the domain of the supernatural, so cleverly is the whole business put together.[271]

The production was praised by the press as innovative, mysterious and well balanced in terms of dramatic and magic effects. The "triumph of realism" seems to be exactly what the audience wanted. Using theatre conventions to present magical stories on stage was not enough, the performance had to be visually convincing.

In this chapter I have analyzed approaches to defining magic and its role in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. Although "Our Magic" contains many contradictions and it does not always present a reader with sufficient and plausible logic, for its time it presented quite an innovative approach. The authors wanted to separate themselves from the world of variety and entertainment and include magic in the field of art. Their search for artistic meaning and the "Art in Magic" shows that they believed in a bigger potential of magic and aspired to educate and inspire their fellow magicians to grow and develop and not limit themselves to simply pleasing the audience.

In the last part of the chapter, I explored possible connections between magic and other art forms on various levels. First, magic was regarded to be a form of art by the most famous performers of the time. In that way, magic was not unique, as another movement – pictorialism, that demonstrated similar traits to magic, was in a very similar

[271] *The Wizard*, 6 November 1909, quoted in Sam Sharpe, *The Magic Play,* 46.

situation. Second, magic dealt with extremely important cultural topics and addressed the essential problems of perception, belief, and deception. Dealing with the supernatural and trying to visualize it was common for such artistic movements as symbolism and creating visual stage performances was a trend in the late Victorian theatre. Magic dealt with current cultural topics of the day and represented them on stage with unprecedented realism to provide the audiences with a "safe," believable experience of wonder, and attempted to attribute certain artistic and aesthetic qualities to this experience.

Conclusion

In the first chapter I argued that magic stood out from other forms of popular entertainment as it was often represented by full-scale magic shows conducted by a single performer or a team of magicians who were responsible for inventing, writing, organizing and performing the show. The Egyptian Hall became a symbolic location in London that acquired a legendary status among the general public and the magicians. John Nevil Maskelyne managed to create a long lasting tradition of magic entertainment that suggests not only that he was a highly talented performer and manager, but that there also was a growing demand for magic performances. High demand produced tough competition which, in turn, provided an incentive for magicians to constantly work on their material and invent new illusions in an effort to outgrow competitors.

Magic was a strong instrument for social mobility and was often associated with the latest scientific achievements and diplomatic missions. It made magic a respectable career choice and a great opportunity to get access to higher social circles. Due to a variety of backgrounds from which magicians came from, magic became a versatile and diversified field. Although it was dominated by male performers, there were examples of female conjurers and women also played an important part in magic performances. This part was not solely limited to being a passive object of a magical illusion. Women could take several roles and often be a central point of attention in a magic act.

Press was an essential part of the magic business. It gave magicians a chance to attract new audiences and they advertised their shows every day. Reporters reviewed magic shows and every episode from magicians' lives also became a part of a newspaper story. It allowed Maskelyne to gain a lot of publicity as he issued challenges, went to courts and regularly made public announcements in the press that increased his popularity and the recognition of his name.

In the second part of the chapter, I described the most important illusions and sketches performed by John Nevil Maskelyne and his associates. The diversity of illusions was impressive: one can find various sub-genres of magic, each representing a separate type of entertainment. Grand illusions, sleight of hand performances, recreations of spiritualistic acts, thought reading acts, automata – the audience could witness the whole range of various miraculous effects during the two hours of a magic show. I outlined the most famous magic illusions and from the analysis of magic programs it can be seen that some of them, such as the "Vanishing Lady" became extremely popular and well-known and could be copied and imitated by many performers.

A magic sketch was especially significant as it was an innovative way of performing illusions that had not existed before on such a scale. Adding theatrical and dramatic elements to a presentation of an illusion enriched magic shows. Although most magic plays were uncomplicated and easy to understand stories, they still varied in their mood, setting and narrative. Magicians such as John Maskelyne and David Devant did not hesitate to experiment with more ambitious projects and attempted to produce longer and more serious magic spectacles.

In the second chapter I focused on the cultural analysis of theatrical magic, looking at it as a phenomenon that balanced between the space of rational, represented by science, and the space of irrational, represented by spiritualism. Magic was redefined by magicians as a branch of science. This approach allowed magicians to separate magic from charlatanism and the ages of "black magic" and therefore establish magic as a representation of progress of the Western civilization. Magicians constructed the image of themselves as bearers of enlightenment.

A magician was claimed to be a scientist, a talented and skillful inventor. Magic, according to performers, was based on an innovative use of the latest discoveries of science and engineering. To underline this fact, magicians invested in the development of new theatrical appliances that allowed producing stunning, cutting-edge stage effects, such as those employed in the "Coming Race" play by John Maskelyne.

Magicians positioned themselves as educators. Their extensive writing on the subjects of charlatanry, fraud and card cheating demonstrated that they used their knowledge of deception for the higher good – to free people from their false beliefs and help them to avoid becoming victims of scam.

The approach to magic as a branch of science could be seen from the terminology applied in magic books and press. Digital dexterity and sleight of hand could be analysed as a scientific phenomenon, the word "trick" was substituted by "experiment" or "magical problem," magicians gave themselves such titles as "professor" or "doctor."

On stage magicians presented themselves as powerful scientists who possessed some secret, advanced knowledge. The brightest examples of those claims were the automata - anthropomorphic mechanical figures that were able to perform complicated actions and interact with the audience. Magicians never revealed the real secrets behind the work of these figures and kept providing the audience with false explanations and

interpretations of what was happening on stage. The narrative of a magician as an almighty mechanic who could go as far as to create artificial intelligence was established.

However, as science was moving forward at an unprecedented pace in the late 19th century, magicians had to put more and more effort to sustain this image. Maskelyne kept underlining the difficulties involved in a production of new effects and the fact that magic required as much original thinking as solving mathematical problems. David Devant introduced cinema in his show several days after the projector was first presented in England to attract new spectators and demonstrate that magicians were on the same page with inventors.

Stage narratives also addressed popular topics of the day related to science. Demonstrations of various illusions with the body were indirectly reflecting the current advancements of medicine and anatomy. Controlling the mind, bringing the person on stage into the state of hypnosis and reading thoughts corresponded well to the fascination with psychotherapy and studies of lunatism and hypnotic effects. A magician on stage could control nature and its core processes by making flowers grow as he wished. The scariest images of devil and death were controlled by a performer as he was producing visual effects on stage, that were, according to magicians, governed by advanced scientific principles.

At the same time, magic was tightly connected with its "real" counterpart that was by that time represented by spiritualism – a kind of religious movement that gained enormous popularity on the both sides of the Atlantic in the mid-nineteenth century. Magicians constantly criticized and exposed spiritualists and were, at first sight, in a strong opposition to this movement. Yet, the relationship between magic and spiritualism was more complex.

Spectators could be led to believe, often with the aid of spiritualists, that magic presentations were indeed real. These claims were denied by conjurers, however, they complained that it could be at times difficult to convince their audiences that they were exploiting only natural means in their illusions, as magicians could not expose their secrets.

Another important fact was that magicians were able to gain much publicity and recognition due to their unstopping dialogue with spiritualism. The career of John Nevil Maskelyne took off exactly because he managed to perform several exposures of spiritualists. Magical acts based on *séances* were a regular part of magic performances

and many feats performed by mediums inspired magicians to create new illusions such as levitation, escape acts and mind reading.

At the end of the 19th century magic was already established as a respected and popular form of entertainment and magic shows were successful at filling music halls and theatres with spectators eager to see the newest tricks and illusions. The growing popularity of magic and its association with progress and science made it a significant cultural phenomenon of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet magicians were not completely satisfied with the current state of affairs as they saw that there were certain trends of trivialization of magic in the eyes of the public. Their focus on inventions and on a technical side of magic backfired in a way that the audience could think, that there was nothing more to magic than the secret devices that it employed. Such magicians as Nevil Maskelyne believed that magic had more potential and was an inherently richer genre than any other form of show business. He desired magic to be more appreciated and wanted to demonstrate that there was much more to magic than simply a number of secrets, devices, and props. He went as far as claiming that secrets could be freely revealed because then spectators could appreciate the true nature of magic and the proficiency of a performer who can execute complicated procedures with grace and ease.

However, attempts of Maskelyne and Devant to lift the veil of secrecy were criticized by their peers who not always shared this opinion and were content with magic being a form of entertainment. This point of view is shared by many performers today and Maskelyne and Devant were unique in their philosophy as they were the only performers of their time who dedicated a complete book to the question of magic being an art form equal to fine arts.

In the third chapter, I conducted a detailed analysis of "Our Magic" – the first book on magic theory and philosophy. As I demonstrated in my analysis of "Our Magic," the formal logic behind the philosophical procedure undertook by the authors, lacked clarity and unity. The attempt to define a work of art in magic using Devant's approach led to contradictions connected with the problem of spectatorship. The most important problem turned out to be the relativity of the art status of magic. The main weak point of Devant and Maskelyne's definition of magic was its link to the effect produced on the spectator, which can vary significantly depending on who is witnessing a magic show. Therefore, magic can be art and not art at the same time if it fails to create a mysterious effect.

Notwithstanding the outlined complications, the further analysis of the book finally reveals its actual goal and the main point that authors attempted to express. Trying to incorporate formal philosophical definitions and academic language served the purpose of demonstrating that magic does have its theory and is based on certain artistic principles that are similar to those used by artists in other fields.

It seems that authors' intention was not in providing a proper formal definition but outlining a direction in which magic should move to be treated on the same level as other art forms. The most important concept of the book turns out to be not the art *of* magic, but the art *in* magic. This concept is centered around an idea that magic is complex, and its complexity – intellectual, aesthetical and spiritual – can be compared with the complexity of other art forms.

In the last part of the chapter, I attempted to find similarities between magic and other art forms on various levels.

First, I argued that the claim for magic to be an art form was not unique to magic. I showed it in my analysis of a very different artistic movement – pictorialism. Photographers created pictorialism – a new way to approach photography as an art form – as a reaction to simplification of the photographic process and its increased availability to amateurs. Much like magicians, photographers wanted to demonstrate that cameras and optics are just tools and not the actual purpose of the process.

Second, I demonstrated how other art forms interpreted the concepts of the natural and the supernatural in ways similar to magic. Symbolist painters, such as Odilon Redon, created their dream and magical worlds with scientific precision in an attempt to give a realistic feeling to the impossible phenomena. In the same way, the scenic culture of the late Victorian theatre was strongly based on the idea of visual effects – presenting magical stories on stage with an unprecedented realism. Many theatrical productions featured illusion effects that were intended to look as convincing as possible. The pursuit of naturalism, of capturing the impossible and bringing it in a safe environment of an art gallery or a theatre space – was an integral part of the general process of disenchantment, bringing magic and the supernatural under control and allowing audiences to enjoy it in a safe way.

Even if we think about modernity as being completely disenchanted and free from superstition and magic, it is not always true. It was certainly not true in the period that I analysed. Although magic shows were perceived as an entertainment, theatrical magic, in

fact, attempted to replace "real" magic and replaced one set of magical narratives with another. A magician remained a powerful figure, much like in earlier times, just on different terms.

Offstage he was a man of a simple origin and had a mysterious fate full of stories and anecdotes. He possessed significant skills in mechanics, science, and engineering, and his ability to think outside the box allowed him to create unsolvable mysteries.

Onstage he demonstrated magical abilities that allowed him to control bodies, nature, and mind.

Magicians tried to use their skills to assist progress and educate people. They had an honorable aim of creating artistic productions that had to generate an aesthetical response from the audience.

Theatrical magic always deals with the concept of the unknown. If at first the unknown was associated with the supernatural, magicians of the 19th century were still presenting the unknown – just in a form of science on the border with wonder.

As soon as the unknown becomes the usual, a magical performance loses its power. The essence of magic is its ambiguity; its essential task is to bring a spectator to a state where he is not completely sure about what he witnesses. Although he knows that what he sees is not real, it still *looks* real and there is no possible explanation available. In that way, theatrical magic is essentially a performance about certain aspects of our nature, about our vulnerability, about us living in the world where we seem to know everything yet we do not have the answers to the most essential questions. Magic is about providing us with a possibility to enjoy being vulnerable, being in a state of not knowing, which, at first uncomfortable, might reward us with new insights about our world and our existence.

Albert Einstein wrote: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed."[272]

[272] Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1960), 11.

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Anlage 11.15.

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Hauspostfach 145
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