

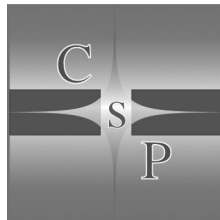
Consciousness,  
Theatre, Literature and the Arts  
2007



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Edited by

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe



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## INTRODUCTION

The essays collected in this volume were initially presented at the Second International Conference on Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts, held at the University of Wales Aberystwyth, May 5-7, 2007. The conference was organised on the basis of the success of its predecessor in 2005, and on the basis of the success of the Rodopi book series *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts*, which has to date seen seven volumes in print, with another twenty in press or in the process of being written. The conference also marked the launch of the second volume in the Intellect series *Theatre and Consciousness* with Michael Mangan's *Performing Dark Arts*. The 2007 conference and the two book series highlight the continuing growth of interest within the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies, and in the distinct disciplines of theatre studies, literary studies, film studies, fine arts and music in the relationship between the object of these disciplines and human consciousness.

Seventy-five delegates from twenty-one countries across the world attended the May 2007 conference in Aberystwyth; their range of disciplines and approaches is reflected well in this book. The keynote lecture by Michael Mangan, and his performance, scheduled at the beginning and the end of the conference, respectively, framed the conference and also provide the frame for this book. Sellers-Young draws attention to the importance practices of development of consciousness have attained in actor training within the institutional context US higher education. With direct reference to Mangan's opening keynote lecture, Pienaar discusses the actor as urban shaman, Hopkinson, Meyer-Dinkgräfe and Nair explore further aspects in relation to acting and consciousness. Honorato and Aniago analyse extreme performance (bullfight and African stick fight, respectively), while Öztürk focuses on an element central not merely to extreme performance: fear. Mangold and Angelaki look at specific play texts from a consciousness studies perspective, while Hammer considers a specific production, Williams-Witherspoon a genre. Kruger's contribution moves from human agents to puppets, while Sampey, in the final contribution in the drama / theatre / performance section, defines *metadrama*.

The keynote presentations by Youtt and Hathaway launch the section on literature, encompassing the novel and poetry. The contributions by

Haney (specifically on Hathaway's novel), Grace, Hertel, Higashi Wakana, Ngaage, Eslamieh, Pagan, Carpoulet and Powell also fall within this category.

The third section, with contributions by Stern, Ridgway, Strayer, Zorn and Yarpuzlu et.al., broadens the scope to encompass philosophy and anthropology. Strayer develops further his philosophical approach to art and abstraction, while Zorn and Yarpuzlu et.al. broaden the perspective even further to history (Zorn) and cultural anthropology (Yarpuzlu et.al.).

The paper by John Danvers starts the final section of contributions that relate consciousness to aspects of the arts—ranging from drawing (Danvers), to intuitive painting (Lawrence), sculpture (Ezaluomba), multimedia art (Heibach), visual arts and disability (Conroy), art as non-knowledge (Willatt), photography (Stahli), and the experience of lens-based and time-based art (Vossen Wood). Hytönen's paper discusses the experience of flow in jazz musicians, while Sadurska discusses the topos of music in film.

Whitehead bridges the gap between the different fields discussed so far, analysing, from a scientific perspective, addressing the question what scientific research can tell us about theatre and the arts. The final contribution is the script of the play by Michael Mangan that concluded the conference. In it he refers to his keynote that opened the conference, and plays with ideas of consciousness studies, magic, theatre and the arts.

# CHAPTER ONE

MICHAEL MANGAN

## CONJURING, CONSCIOUSNESS AND MAGICAL THINKING

### **Introduction**

Let me start with the obvious paradox: consciousness studies is both comparatively new and ages old. As an intellectual discipline or sub-discipline at the point of intersection between neuroscience, psychology and philosophy it dates more or less from the 1990s, with the 1994 interdisciplinary conference in Tucson, Arizona on “Toward a Science of Consciousness” frequently being regarded as one of the seminal moments in the discipline. As a field of inquiry it dates back at least to Plato, whose parable of the prisoners chained in the dark cave, watching the wall onto which fall the shadows of those who move outside, is one of the earliest attacks on naïve realism.

Consciousness studies as an academic subject has already had an unusually high impact on a range of intellectual fields, and has suggested a variety of interdisciplinary possibilities. The present conference is part of this broad interdisciplinary expansion: few of us here are trained neuroscientists or psychologists – or indeed philosophers. Most of us, however, are of the firm opinion that many of the debates and arguments that emanate from the conjunction of those disciplines have a bearing, perhaps a crucial bearing on our own fields of research.

My own background is that of theatre and performance studies, and it is no exaggeration to say that metaphors of theatricality permeate writings on consciousness. The walls of Plato’s cave become a shadow puppet theatre, while for later philosophers following David Hume, “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.” (Hume 1739, 439). In more recent times,

admittedly, theatre imagery is often used with a rather negative connotation within consciousness studies: following Dennett's use of the term, the phrase "Cartesian theatre" describes that special place where consciousness is experienced in the brain – but often in the context of denying that such a place, or indeed such an experience, exists at all. Conversely, questions of consciousness are having an impact in Theatre and Performance Studies in a number of ways, as researchers explore questions of the states of consciousness of the performer; of Eastern mind/body models in performer training; of the philosophical implications of self and other, and the way in which one of the central questions of consciousness "what is it like to be..." relates to the actor. My own current topic, however, is none of these. It involves the history of magic – magic in the sense of conjuring, prestidigitation and illusion.

Stage magic is an ambiguous phenomenon. Seen in one light, it is one of the less prestigious of the performing arts – a collection of tricks to amuse children or to fool the gullible. From another angle, though, the conjuror's act has rich cultural resonances. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century critic Edmund Wilson suggested that there is, in the conjuror's act

more to these feats and to our pleasure in them than we are likely to be conscious of... The magician who escapes from the box: what is he but Adonis and Attis and all the rest of the corn gods that are buried and rise?  
(Wilson 1950, 147)

This is, perhaps a rather nostalgic vision of the conjuror. Wilson seems to imply that his routine contains a level of hidden symbolism which links us with a sacred past, remnants of pre-industrial beliefs, echoes of shamanic rituals and magical practices now emptied of their efficacy and re-born 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 wonder and magic.

There is some truth in what Wilson says – that there is an element of nostalgia in the pleasure an audience may take in a conjuror's act. But I want to focus on a slightly different approach to the art of the conjuror, because I would like to suggest that historically, stage magicians have tended to raise for their audiences the same kind of questions as writers on consciousness have for their readers.

## The consciousness of conjurors

In the Introduction to her authoritative textbook *Consciousness. An Introduction*, Susan Blackmore warns her readers that studying consciousness will change your life, and that “you might find that once-solid boundaries between the real and unreal, or the self and other, begin to look less solid. You may find that your own certainties – about the world out there or ways of knowing about it – seem less certain” (Blackmore 2003, 5). At the end of it she returns to the same theme, saying of the science of consciousness “the more perplexity the better ... I hope that you, like me, are now more perplexed than when you began.” (Blackmore 2003, 414). Throughout the book, Blackmore repeatedly uses the metaphors of magicians, conjurors and illusions, and one of the themes of her book – as of many books on consciousness – is that although we are tricked, fooled or conjured into believing the apparent evidence of our senses, things often are not as they seem. Since a skilful conjuror also operates by questioning the solidity of the “boundaries between the real and unreal” I shall take these images as a cue to develop the comparison between the kind of perplexity which Blackmore celebrates and the perplexity which a good conjuring trick instils in an audience. My aim in mapping some of the key topics in contemporary consciousness studies (based on Blackmore’s own textbook account) against some of the main trends in the history of conjuring will be to establish the broad validity of the proposition that a history of stage magic follows the same kind of contours as a prehistory of consciousness studies.

Chapters four to six of Blackmore’s book, for example, are about perception and attention, the theatre of the mind, and visual illusions. Here she discusses theories about the way we pay attention to the world around us, the relationship between attention and consciousness, the nature of visual illusions, and the way in which the brain “fills in” for lack of information, making perception seem far more complete, continuous and seamless than it actually is. (Blackmore 2003, 51-92). These are things that go to the heart of conjuring. The manipulation of the spectator’s attention is one of the mainstays of the conjuror’s art. That famous, clichéd conjurors phrase, “Now you see it now you don’t”, has been shown to have a basis in physiological fact. Humans and other animals do not perceive a scene in a steadily continuous way. Their eyes move around the object of their vision in a sequence of quick glimpses (“saccades”), noticing those parts of the scene which seem most significant, and building up from them a mental “map” which puts together an approximation of the scene as a whole. On average, the human eye performs three to four full

range saccades per second. The quickness of the hand deceives the eye – but the hand does not actually have to be all that quick to do it.

The manipulation of a spectator's conscious attention is one of the conjuror's basic techniques. Misdirection, as it is usually called in the trade, can take place on a physical level: using his (it is usually a "he") eyes, hands, voice, gestures, props, movement – a conjuror points in one direction while doing something with his other hand. Or it can take place on a psychological level – usually by means of verbal patter but also other aspects of body language. Either way, the point of the operation is to direct the spectator's attention away from where the trick is actually happening.

There is quite a lot of mystique amongst the conjuring community about the notion of misdirection, but scientific studies of human attention throw some interesting light on it. For example, the phenomenon of inattention blindness in perceptual psychology was wittily demonstrated in a now-famous experiment by D.J. Simons and C.F. Chabris, written up in the journal *Perception* under the splendid title "Gorillas in Our Midst: sustained inattention blindness for dynamic events." (Simons and Chabris 1999; Blackmore 2003, 89-90). The results were dramatic. In their experiment, observers were shown a film sequence in which two teams of students are throwing balls to each other. The observers were told to watch the team in white shirts very carefully, and to count the number of passes they made to each other. Afterwards the observers were asked a series of increasingly specific questions to determine whether they saw anything unusual in the film sequence. In fact there *was* something unusual: during the sequence, an actor wearing a gorilla suit walks into shot, looks at the camera, thumps her chest, and then walks off on the opposite side. It is as blatant as it sounds. The proportion of observers who failed to notice the gorilla was a staggering 50%. Directed to concentrate on one thing, half of the subjects were unable to see another. Simons and Chabris' study suggest that misdirection is rather easier to accomplish than some conjurors would have you believe.

Section Three of Blackmore's book, comprising chapters seven to nine, is about "The self". It addresses issues of personal identity, theories of self, agency and free will and asks questions such as "why does it seem that I am a single continuous self who has experiences? To what extent are my actions determined by my own autonomous decisions? Or is free will actually an illusion." (Blackmore 2003, 94-137). These weighty questions, which have obsessed theologians and philosophers for thousands of years, have also provided themes for the conjuror's act: a whole genre of magic showmanship involves routines in which the magician appears to predict a volunteer's behaviour, or to influence their choices and decisions. For the



moment I shall simply note this as a fact, since I shall be returning to it in greater detail later in this paper.

Chapters ten to twelve (Section Four) are concerned with “Evolution. Place & function of consciousness. Animal minds” (Blackmore 2003, 139-179). They explore questions about the place of consciousness in the context of our broader understanding of evolutionary theory: when it appeared in the evolutionary process and what its adaptive functions might be. These questions in turn raise some of the classic questions about the relationship between human consciousness and animal minds. What is it like to be – a bat, a snake, a frog? Do animals have what we understand as consciousness? Or anything like it? If not, can they feel pain... To what extent does consciousness depend on language? This might appear to be rather a long way from the art of the stage magician, but in fact the intelligent animal act is a rather specialized sub-branch of the conjuror’s act. One of the earliest examples we have of it is in the legendary early modern showman William Banks, who together with his bay horse, Morocco, was one of the great celebrities of Elizabethan and Jacobean popular culture (Griffith 2004). As Edwin Dawes observes, ‘there is scarcely a humorous writer between 1590 and 1620 who does not mention them’ (Dawes 1979, 27). Among those who do are Shakespeare (1997, 742), Ben Jonson (1953, 88), William D’Avenant, Thomas Nashe (1972, 275) and the anonymous author of *Tarlton’s Jests* (1611). Morocco performed a variety of tricks which the credulous were encouraged to ascribe to magic powers. Samuel Rid, writing in 1612, describes their performance. Rid, whose book is about juggling tricks, is perfectly well aware that the trick is done through subtle signals between master and horse:

As for example, his master will ask him how many people there are in the room: the horse will paw with his foot so many times as there are people. And mark the eye of the horse is always on his master, and as his master moves, so goes he or stands still. ... .. And note that the horse will paw an hundred times together, until he sees his master stir: and note also that nothing can be done, but his master must first know, and then his master knowing, the horse is ruled by him by signs. (Rid 1612, sig.Gv)

Banks and Morocco were the forerunners, but the great age of the intelligent animal act was the long eighteenth century – that period between the Restoration and the Regency which broadly coincides with the philosophical period we call the Enlightenment. And to this later age, this kind of entertainment presented a different kind of philosophical question. The great intellectual project of the European Enlightenment

movement was to synthesize ideas of God, man and nature into a coherent world-vision in which human reason, through which man understands the universe and his place in it, becomes the prime mover.

Enlightenment rationalism went hand in hand with advances in scientific thought, and scientists took an almost missionary zeal, throughout the eighteenth century, in spreading the word amongst the public. Demonstrations and explanations of scientific principles and inventions spread from London's coffee houses, to salons, theatres, halls, mechanics' institutes and scientific and literary societies both in the capital and in the provinces. By the end of the eighteenth century nearly every English town of any significance was part of a regular circuit of lectures and exhibitions: science was offered to the public in the form of performance, and successful careers might be made out of it since "knowledge", as Benjamin Martin reflected, 'is now become a fashionable thing.'" (Porter 2000, 144)

To the exhibitors of the intelligent animals, this fashion must have been a godsend, offering them the chance to subvert just that boundary between man and the animal world which scientific and theological thought looked to emphasize. Thus the Age of Reason was also the heyday of phenomena such as William Pinchbeck's "Pig of Knowledge", James Hazard's "Learned Pig", Sieur Rea's "Little Scientific Pony", Signor Castelli's Dog "Munito", the "Wonderful Intelligent Goose" and many other Learned, Sapient, Scientific, and Philosophical farmyard and domestic animals. Frequently publicised in terms which imitated, quoted and parodied the more "respectable" scientific lectures and demonstrations with which they competed for customers, these intelligent animals were exhibited not only in fairs but also in lecture rooms, arcades, halls and institutes throughout Europe and America. Some, like Munito the dog, could also be consulted

#### AT HOME

At No. 1, Leicester Square,

Where he exhibits, Daily, every Hour from TWELVE till FIVE,

His wonderful and surprising Knowledge, which last Year so greatly entertained all those who honoured his Performance with their presence.

MUNITO, besides his former accomplishments, will astonish the Public

with his vast Knowledge in the Sciences of

GEOGRAPHY, BOTANY, and NATURAL HISTORY

Like the Houyhnhnms in Swift's *Gullivers Travels* these talking animals problematize the assumptions about the primacy of man's role as "rational animal". At a level which is simultaneously playful and serious,

they threaten to blur an important boundary which distinguishes the consciousness of man from the faculties of the lower animals.

Returning to Blackmore's Introduction: in Section Five, "Artificial consciousness – minds and machines" (Blackmore 2003, 181-224) she asks questions such as: "could a machine be conscious? and "could we *make* a conscious machine?" (Blackmore 2003, 197). And if animal minds present one set of questions for a consideration of consciousness, then the issue of machines and artificial intelligence, and what *they* tell us about the human mind and human consciousness is one of the key themes of the philosophy of consciousness. And this, too, presents a golden opportunity for the stage magician. One of the favourite devices of conjurors since the 18<sup>th</sup> c. has been the automaton – and again, the golden age of the automaton was during the Age of the Enlightenment. Newtonian physics – one of the cornerstones of Enlightenment thinking – laid the foundations of classical mechanics, which appeared to enable the motion of everything in heaven and earth to be described in terms of a single mechanical principle. The Machine Age which began with the Industrial Revolution had to do with more than just industrial production. The metaphor of the universe as a great machine became immensely powerful – William Paley famously described the universe as a watch found lying on a heath, and God, in a resonant image, as the great watchmaker who had made it and walked away from it (Paley 1809, 81. See also Dawkins 1990: *passim*). He articulates an increasingly common Enlightenment view of the Universe as a great and complex machine, operating according to those laws of mechanics which Newton had formulated, just over a century earlier. Thus Paley can write 'That an animal is a machine, is a proposition neither correctly true nor wholly false' (Paley 1809, 81).

This is why, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the question of the boundary between man and machine became so very important: because of the suspicion that the difference between the living organism and the mechanical device may not, after all, be so great. If the universe *is* essentially a great machine, it becomes, literally, vital to establish what, if anything, makes us *more* than machines. Is it the soul, or consciousness (the "ghost in the machine"?). It is the urgency of these questions that meant that the eighteenth-century's most famous automaton, Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen's Chess Player, also known as "The Mechanical Turk", had such a huge cultural impact. The Mechanical Turk was billed as a thinking machine, capable of rational processes sufficient to enable it to play a very proficient game of chess. The Turk toured the courts and salons of polite upper-class society in eighteenth-century Europe, publicly playing and beating a number of highly-ranked chess-players, including

Benjamin Franklin. (This was over 200 years before Gary Kasparov played, and was beaten by, IBM's computer Deep Blue.) But in fact the comparison between the Turk and Deep Blue is misleading, since the Turk was actually operated by a combination of cogs and wheels, hydraulics and air-pressure, all controlled by a hidden operator. An ingeniously-designed cabinet with a sliding seat and various folding partitions created the false impression that no human being could fit inside the mechanism; meanwhile, a set of magnets attached to the underside of the chessmen relayed information to the operator about an opponent's moves. The Turk's opponents were actually playing against a skilful, but physically diminutive, human chess player.

When the Turk played against the man generally recognized to be the best chess player in Europe, Philidor, it lost but (according to the account published by his son André) Philidor "later confessed that no game against a human opponent had fatigued him to the same extent" (Standage 2002, 52). It seems that the European champion believed that the Turk was genuinely mechanical – and he found the idea of a chess-playing machine quite terrifying. It is not surprising that Philidor was so disturbed by prospect of a chess-playing automaton: it took on human opponents at an exercise of rationality, and won – beating the rational animal at the very thing which made him most human. At some level Philidor clearly recognized that his match against the automaton had something iconic about it. This apparent challenge of the mechanical anticipated not only the Kasparov/Deep Blue match, but also, in an odd way, the Turing test, which is now recognised as one of the defining landmarks of modern computer science, AI & consciousness studies. Unlike the machine in the Turing test, the task of the Turk was to convince its opponent, not that it was *not* a machine, but that it *was*. Nonetheless, both the Turing test and von Kempelen's Chess Player explore and question the boundaries between the mechanistic and animistic. By replicating organic life in terms of machinery, automata like von Kempelen's Turk articulate an age's ambivalence about mechanistic explanations of the universe. The two contradictory claims – "that life is essentially mechanistic and that the essence of animal life is irreducible to mechanism" (Riskin 2003, 612) confront each other in all their contradictoriness in the figure of the automaton. Von Kempelen's Mechanical Turk challenges the spectator to explain its feats, and in doing so the spectator is forced to construct explanations which either leave her common-sense world-view intact (there is a human intelligence at work here), or else subvert its boundaries (a machine may have "intelligence"). And, just as the exhibitors whose learned animals posed a challenge to common-sense Enlightenment

distinctions between the human and the animal were touching on important scientific themes, so the automata raised questions about human and artificial intelligence which would be more fully explored by computer scientists of later generations. Paradoxically, the “wondrous” explanation of the Mechanical Turk, the explanation that assigns intelligence to the machine, leads to a world-view which is more modern than its alternatives.

Another area of consciousness studies is concerned with what Blackmore, in her Section Seven, calls “Borderlands: unconscious processing, the paranormal, telepathy, telekinesis, reality and imagination” (Blackmore 2003, 272-319). This section considers those experiments which have attempted to establish the reality of paranormal phenomena, including telekinesis, telepathy, ESP, and psychokinesis, as well as looking at the history of spiritualism, belief in being able to channel the voices of people who have passed over to “the other side”. The relationship between the stage conjuror and the paranormal is, of course, a particularly long-standing one. Many tribal shamans create their apparently supernatural effects – and consequently perform genuine healing rituals – by means of what we would call conjurors’ tricks or sleight of hand, convincing their subjects of their supernatural powers in order to heal them. Equally, the stage conjuror – usually with his tongue in his cheek but sometimes quite seriously – may well claim special powers, and sometimes these powers are attributed to the paranormal.

The nineteenth- and early-twentieth century spiritualist movement featured a variety of practitioners. Some of these were genuinely convinced they were channelling some kind of energy from the afterlife; others were blatant showmen who used a variety of very physical contraptions, such as strings, pulleys and levers, to create the effects of mysterious knockings and rappings and other forms of coded messages from beyond. In his later years, the great John Nevil Maskelyne claimed to have begun his own career of stage magic by unmasking the Davenports, but in truth it hardly needed someone like Maskelyne to expose the brothers’ techniques. Unmasking the Davenports became a favourite audience occupation, in both Britain and Europe, where riots tended to follow them from town to town. Yet even the Davenports had their champions – serious cultural commentators who were convinced of the genuine nature of their spiritual powers. It was frequently hard for even sophisticated observers to tell the faker from the fakir, the shaman from the sham. Indeed some of these spirit readers appear themselves to have been a little unsure of the status of their own performances, and to have

moved with comparative ease between the world of the stage conjuror and that of the committed religious movement.

The origins of the nineteenth century Spiritualist movement are generally traced back to 1848, when the Fox family of Hydesville, New York began to experience a series of random and mysterious rapping sounds around their farmhouse (Briggs 1888, Weisberg 2004). Two young daughters, Margaret (8) and Kate (6), appeared to be at the centre of it all. They called the presence that caused it ‘Mr. Splitfoot’ and seemed to be able to interpret his rappings as messages from the beyond the grave. Their older married sister, Leah, took charge of the children, formed a society to promote spiritualism – and in particular to promote the talents of her two sisters, who became instant celebrities, putting audiences and individuals in touch with the spirit world at \$100-\$150 per night, first of all in Rochester, then New York and Philadelphia, and then on tour across America and Europe, promoted by – amongst others – the great showman and entrepreneur P.T. Barnum. Child celebrity brought with it the predictable problems in adulthood: drink, depression and eventual poverty. In 1888 Margaret, feeling betrayed and exploited by her elder sister, made a public confession of the tricks she had used to produce the effects of spirit rapping, such as hidden strings, and being able to click her toe joints against the floor. By now the spiritualist craze had grown into a religious movement, however, and Margaret’s public confession was either ignored or simply discounted by many believers. The credibility of those who refused to countenance Margaret’s confession was significantly strengthened when the story emerged that Margaret and her sister had been offered a large sum of money by a reporter for their disclosures. Margaret later recanted her own confession, but neither confession nor recantation made much difference to a movement that had entirely outgrown them. Spiritualism had taken on a life of its own, and the possible fraud of an eight-year-old girl forty years earlier could have little effect on its progress.

Nor is it entirely clear that the Fox sisters always believed that what they were doing was fraudulent. What started out as a bit of a joke might well – when reinforced and encouraged by family and friends, by rapturous audiences and followers, and eventually by serious-minded scientific studies – have come to seem to the young girls themselves very much like the real thing. The messages they passed on to their audiences probably came from their own imaginations, but what was to prevent them from believing that those imaginings had themselves been prompted by the spirit world?

In any case Spiritualism thrived because “the exhibiting sort” were only one part of its wider appeal. By the 1860s it had become both a mass religious phenomenon and also an important area for scientific investigation. For a time Spiritualism appeared to offer the possibility of a reunion between a religious and a scientific world view. It arose at a time when the two great ways of explaining the universe, religion and science, seemed set on opposite paths; when each major scientific discovery made the hypothesis of a divine creator seem less and less necessary; and when Christian theologians made their strongest arguments for faith in despite of, rather than because of, scientific advances. The possibility that, through an understanding of spiritualism, science and religion might once more be reunited was a deeply seductive one.

The question provoked immense scientific controversy, the importance of which went far beyond the reputations of the Fox sisters or the Davenport brothers. Many of the greatest scientific minds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were engaged in the debate on one side or the other – and many of them like Thomas Edison, Guglielmo Marconi, Alexander Graham Bell and John Logie Baird, as committed spiritualists or defenders of the spiritualist movement.

Section Eight of Susan Blackmore’s introduction to consciousness studies deals with “Altered states – drugs, sleep, dreams and hypnotic states – exceptional human experiences”. While many kinds of these altered states lie outside the purview of a history of conjuring, those associated with hypnosis have a clear historical relationship. Not all conjurors are happy with the association that exists in the popular imagination between conjuring and stage hypnotism, however, and would insist on a clear distinction between the stage hypnotist and that tradition of mentalist acts, such as mind-reading, which are actually effected by conventional conjurors’ techniques such as misdirection, sleight of hand and secret communications with an accomplice. The need for such distancing has been particularly sharply felt by conjurors in recent years, since stage hypnotism as a branch of entertainment has undergone a sudden and serious decline, at least in the UK. A series of incidents in which subjects suffered real-life psychological disturbances after being involved in a stage hypnosis act, culminating in the legal case of *Howarth v Green*, have dealt a body-blow to the profession. What had been a thriving branch of show business in the early nineties, when hypnotist Paul McKenna was one of Britain’s best-paid and most successful television entertainers, is now struggling for survival. Interestingly, McKenna himself, who was a successful defendant in one of these negligence cases, has successfully re-launched his career, not as an entertainer, but as a life

skills guru. His book *Change Your Life in 7 Days* (including free mind-programming CD) was a best-seller. (McKenna 2004). A broadly sensible self-help book, which says little that has not been said by self-help books before it, *Change Your Life in 7 Days*, along with McKenna's books and DVDs on weight loss, smoking and self-confidence, show us the showman changing back into shaman, healer and therapist.

### **Derren Brown: prediction, paranormal, telepathy, hypnosis and “Mind Control”**

A particularly postmodern twist has been added to mentalism by Derren Brown, whose ‘Mind Control’ act skilfully skirts round the muddled waters of both stage hypnotism and telepathy, re-inventing old routines for a new audience. Brown insists that he does not *read* his subjects’ minds, nor does he send them into deep hypnosis, but rather he influences their thoughts in a scientific way – a framing of the traditional mentalist act which takes us back to the questions of free will and mental “influence” which were touched on earlier.

One of the most memorable routines in his television show *Mind Control* a couple of years ago was one in which he used as voluntary subjects two men from the advertising industry. They had been asked – under closed conditions -- to come up with a logo for a particular firm (of taxidermists). When they produced their designs, Brown opened an envelope to demonstrate that he had predicted precisely that design on their part. Then – to explain how it had been done – he played back to them parts of the programme which had been shown earlier, to demonstrate that earlier on they had been subject to a series of subliminal messages. In the taxi on the way to the experiment, and in the lobby of the building in which it had been carried out, they had been deliberately exposed to images which subconsciously they had then incorporated into their final design because he, Brown, had manipulated them into doing so. It was particularly sweet to see advertising executives on the receiving end of such manipulation!

It was explained to the advertising executives that they had been influenced by subliminal advertising – that form of hidden persuasion whereby the public can be coerced into making certain decisions by means of images and messages which do not even register with the conscious mind. The term “subliminal advertising” comes from the late 1950s, and the work of James Vicary, who conducted a series of experiments on cinema viewers in a New Jersey movie theatre in order to prove that by flashing advertising suggestions (‘Drink Coca-Cola’ and ‘Hungry? Eat



Pop-Corn') onto the screen during the playing of the movie, for just 1/3000<sup>th</sup> of a second at a time, below the threshold of conscious perception, the audience could be coerced into buying these products. Vicary's experiment seemed to result in a 57.8% rise in popcorn sales and an 18.1% rise in Coca-Cola sales.

Derren Brown drew on this for a similar routine in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, his 2005 live touring show. By a series of something like 12 separate stages, each one seemingly unconnected to the others, random members of the audience ended up choosing one word out of an infinite number of possible choices. The night I saw it the word 'executive' was selected – and when a sealed envelope, locked in an untamperable suitcase, was finally opened, that turned out to be the one word that was written on a single piece of paper inside it!

And again, by way of a finale, Brown again 'explained' the trick. He played back videotaped moments from earlier in the show to demonstrate that during the course of the routine he had secretly implanted similar subliminal messages in our minds, continually repeating to us key words (at odd times and in unlikely contexts) in order to influence us. We, the audience, acting both communally and individually, had made a series of unconscious choices which took us to the point where the word 'executive' on that piece of paper was (Brown explains) the inevitable choice. We, like the advertising executives, had been manipulated into choosing what Brown wanted us to choose. The detailed explanation of how we had been fooled forms the climax to the show. All is revealed, and Brown's powers – not as a psychic, not as a prestidigitator, but as a 'Jedi Master' of mass psychology – are confirmed. We go home, no longer asking how he did it, but knowing how it was done -- and both amazed and disturbed. We, like the advertising executives on the television show, had been the victims of a form of subliminal advertising. Our private consciousness has been invaded and manipulated.

That, at least, is the narrative which we are asked to accept. The video camera, after all, never lies... And we all know about the subtle ways in which late capitalism seeks to manipulate us as consumers, we know that mass media has the power to influence us at levels which we ourselves do not perceive. Subliminal advertising clearly works.

Except that it doesn't. While subliminal *perception* is a well-substantiated psychological phenomenon (our senses can indeed take things in which our conscious attention does not register), there is no evidence to suggest that such sense-impressions can be used to influence us directly – to make us buy, choose, vote in a particular way (Neuberg 1988, 207-30). James Vicary's experiment was a fraud: subsequent

attempts to duplicate it failed to establish any increased pattern of purchasing, and Vicary himself eventually admitted that he had falsified his original experimental data. The power of subliminal advertising is nothing but an urban myth.

It is, however, a very potent one. In a culture which is saturated by advertising, it is hard *not* to believe in the almost limitless power of the hidden persuaders to creep beneath the thresholds of our consciousness and tinker with our minds. Derren Brown's explanation – his apparent *demonstration* – of his power to do this, is satisfying to us on a deep cultural level. The routine – and, most importantly, his explanation of it – offers a satisfactory explanation for otherwise amazing phenomenon because it mobilizes our expectations of being manipulated by mass media, by the advertising industry, by politicians, by industrial/military complex etc. And, by his use of the video camera, and the instant editing it affords, Brown wittily employs the technology of the mass media to do it. Witty, self-referential and ironic – it is a very sophisticated routine, and one well-suited to the postmodern age of late capitalism. Like most conjurers, Derren Brown is in the business of manipulating the *zeitgeist*. The question of what it is to be human in a particular age. Just as the 18<sup>th</sup> c intelligent animal acts and automata asked questions about the limits of the human in the context of that age's self-image and its official beliefs about rationality, so Derren Brown's Mind Control brings into play 21<sup>st</sup> century anxieties about the autonomy of the individual consciousness.

And if, later on, we start thinking – how plausible is all this *really*? If this guy really has got this sort of power why is he doing TV shows and playing the variety circuit rather than running IBM – or the country, or the world? Do I really believe in this stuff? – well, that's all part of the fun.

### **Magical thinking**

Brown's act asks the audience to accept a certain kind of mumbo-jumbo – the urban myth of subliminal persuasion. But with another hat on Derren Brown is himself an enthusiastic debunker of mumbo-jumbo. He belongs to an interesting tradition within conjuring – a tradition based firmly in rational scepticism – which involves the exposing of what Houdini called “Miracle Mongers and their Methods” (Houdini 1993) – i.e. the whole apparatus of belief in the paranormal. Harry Houdini was perhaps the most famous of a whole series of high-profile conjurers that have gone about “unmasking” those who claimed to have actual psychic or occult powers. Houdini's later years were spent in a campaign exposing the techniques of fraudulent mediums (he is particularly well-known for

his run-ins with a medium called Margery). In the late twentieth century, the spoon-bending, watch-stopping performances of Uri Geller drove fellow magician James Randi to run a campaign exposing Geller's "telekinetic" feats. Randi's contempt for superstition eventually led him to launch the James Randi Educational Foundation – a website-based educational resource aimed at debunking the paranormal, the occult and everything New Age. Derren Brown's book *Tricks of the Mind* (Brown 2006) contains a large section devoted to exposing the paranormal industry and some particular charlatans and exploring why some people feel the need to believe in the first place. More spectacularly, one of Brown's one-off TV specials was called *Messiah*. In it he went to America to "meet five influential people behind certain belief systems upon which people are encouraged to base their lives" (Shakeshaft 2006, n.p.). These included new age groups and charismatic Christian sects. He approached each of them anonymously under a pseudonym, and then he used his conjuring and "mind control" skills to try and convince them that he has special abilities in their fields, asking each of these people if they would endorse him. The rule was that if anybody challenged him directly, or even asked him if he was using trickery, he would own up. Nobody did challenge him, and all but one agreed to endorse him as totally genuine.

The sceptical conjuror exposing the miracle mongers and their methods is rather like a satirist. And there is a lot out there to satirise. Because there has been an extraordinary contemporary revival of interest in the paranormal. I spoke earlier of the reaction against rationalism in the age of the Enlightenment in terms of a kind of cultural equivalent of Newton's third law of motion: that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Something similar is true of our own age. Within the most technologically advanced society the world has ever known, in the age where the efficacy of the rational materialist world view is daily manifested in the technologies of communication, production, transportation, all of which are based on the scientific advances of the last 300 hundred years there is an extraordinary fascination with the paranormal. We may think of ourselves as living in the age of science and technology, and of course we are. Yet to think of our culture as being only that is to oversimplify things – especially if we then assume that scientific/technological thinking has somehow made irrational belief impossible. The present age is actually schizophrenic – or more accurately, multiphrenic – in its attitude to questions of magic, wonder, the irrational. If the dominant mode of modern knowing is rational, sceptical and scientific in tone, there is also a rich alternative culture. Magic is certainly in the air: the popular culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first

century is saturated with images of magic and the paranormal. There is of course the fictional magic of *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Narnia* stories and those descendants of eighties “Swords-and-Sorcery” fictions which survive in so many digital role-playing games. Television and films seems once again to be particularly fascinated by people with special powers: not only the predictable superheroes, but those with paranormal powers, as in *Ghost Whisperer* (where the heroine communicates with Ghosts) and *Next* (in which Nicholas Cage can see into the future). Equally significant, and equally prevalent, though, are the ways in which the paranormal is presented as fact in documentary-style television series such as Living TV’s *Most Haunted*.

In a similar vein, but with a much broader frame of reference, the magazine *Fortean Times*, the ‘monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents’ (*Fortean Times*, title page) is thriving. It covers such topics as ghosts, mythical beasts, crop circles, flying saucers, psychic healing, alien contact, urban myths, calendrical customs, symbology and earth mysteries, while maintaining “a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and the unorthodox” (ibid.) which often amounts to a drily ironic attitude. Both television and the printed media have found a substantial contemporary market which both exploits and perpetuates folkloric beliefs in the uncanny. A surviving mystical strand of New Age thinking remains popular enough to ensure that few English towns are without a shop in which you can buy crystals, charms, amulets, potions and books of spells for all sorts of purposes. A recent article in *New Scientist* by Richard Koch and Chris Smith (the former UK Minister of Culture) talks of the “widespread western, and especially American, descent into superstition... There is an apparent belief in magic that has no parallel since the Middle Ages.” (Koch and Smith 2006, 25).

The reasons for this are almost certainly plural rather than singular. They probably include an element of nostalgic reaction against scientific orthodoxy and the sceptical secularism of the rational, technological age which characterizes late capitalism, and perhaps an element too of protest against the alienation of contemporary urban life. They may have something to do with changes in traditional roles relating to notions of authority in general and intellectual authority in particular, and may well have been encouraged by intercultural encounters on a spiritual level due to immigration and travel. There is certainly an observable disenchantment with the established mainstream churches, and if –as some argue – there is also “an innate human drive for spirituality” (Forman 2004, 132), then perhaps this leads inevitably to a more eclectic approach to belief.

But whatever its causes, the effects go extraordinarily deep. And much as the rationalist strand within stage conjuring would seek to distance one from the other, there is a good deal of overlap between the cultural fascination with boy wizards and teenage witches, with astrology and *grimoires*, and the recent revival of interest in conjuring and stage magic. For example, *Fortean Times*, as well as reporting and investigating paranormal and psychic phenomena, also has a healthy interest in the doings of conjurers, prestidigitators and stage illusionists: thus the July 2004 issue contains an interview-based article on Derren Brown. The current appetite for magic and occult phenomena in the more general sense has coincided with a general revival of interest in magic in the sense of conjuring and illusion, especially among the young. Television programmes on magic are thriving like never before. Particularly successful at the present time are performers whose work suggests something rather more ambiguous than the traditional skills of *legerdemain* associated with the conventional stage conjuror.

And this should alert us to some of the complexities of the function of performed magic in the present day. It seems natural to identify our 'own' culture with the values of reason and science, and cultures of the past (or the distant present) with superstition and magic. Yet we too have our magical beliefs and the complexity of present-day culture allows for many strands.

Magical thinking in children has been studied in quite some detail. Magical thinking in contemporary Western adults has received rather less attention. It is, however, a widespread phenomenon, and one which is thrown into sharp relief when brought up against stage magic and conjuring tricks. Magical thinking, in the broadest sense of the phrase, is not limited to "primitive" cultures; nor is it simply the false beliefs of pre-literate peoples. Indeed, it is by no means incompatible with an informed understanding of modern technology: Wiccans and other pagan groups can claim a high percentage of university-educated members, many of whom work in fields such as information technology, electronics and new media. Magical thinking is not merely something which mankind is destined to transcend as rationalism and science triumph: that linear/progressive view which was once the accepted ethnological wisdom, appears to fly in the face of experience.

And the conjuror, as always, exploits it in two apparently contradictory ways: debunking mysticism in the name of rationalism, while simultaneously offering tantalising glimpses of wonder which suggest that perhaps, after all, there are possibilities that lie beyond the everyday realities of 'common-sense'. It is a double-game which

magicians have played through the ages. The conjuror's act is made out of sleights of hand, trick equipment, lies and misdirections. We know that. And yet its effectiveness depends on its ability to make suckers of us nonetheless. At its most effective it leaves us in two minds and in an imaginative space somewhere in-between wonder and scepticism: what Sir Thomas Browne, writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century described as "betwixt jest and earnest" (Browne 1981, 17).

It is betwixt jest and earnest that the conjuror engages in a kind of cultural boundary work: in the name of entertainment or wonder, he (it is usually a 'he') brings us up against the limits of a culture's beliefs and knowledge, and of its habitual ways of understanding the world. The author of the *Fortean Times* article on Derren Brown concludes "I for one am looking forward to being further deceived and enchanted – but Brown's version of magic is not merely entertaining; it challenges you to examine your own beliefs." (Phoenix 2004, 32). And this is the point. Stage magic inhabits the epistemological boundaries of the age in which it finds itself – and the present age is one in which those boundaries are already problematized. By manifesting the apparently impossible, the uncanny, the marvellous or the grotesque, the conjuror challenges the spectator's sense of reality, bringing him or her up against their habitual assumptions about how the world works, creating conflict between the spectator's perceptions and the cognitive structures and frameworks which allow those perceptions to make sense. At its most extreme, the magician's act asks the spectator to re-evaluate his or her sense of the limits of the human – and of human consciousness.