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Performing Psychic:

The Performance of Mentalism and Psychic Arts on Stage, Screen, and in Everyday Life

Thesis presented by

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for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Throughout post-industrial societies, consumers regularly buy tickets to watch mind readers and psychic mediums, tune in to the television and radio shows of such performers, dial psychic hotlines, and visit psychics, fortune-tellers, numerologists, astrologists, tarot card readers, and energy healers. Despite the popularity of such practices, this booming performance-based industry aimed at entertainment and self-improvement has yet to be analysed in any depth within the field of Performance Studies where such performances have either been omitted entirely or conflated with conjuring tricks or shamanism. This conflation is understandable given the secrecy, artifice, and misinformation which enshroud the shapeshifting performances of mentalists and psychics. The aim of this practice-led research was to – through both embodied and theoretical knowledge – situate mentalism within theories of performance, performativity, and play, paying close attention to the ways in which these fictional performances purport to be "reality." My intention was to reach a new understanding of the practice of mentalism while also offering insights for the benefit of practitioners and contributing to practice-led research as a methodological approach. This dissertation was developed reflexively in conjunction with my practical research, during which I spent three years immersed in the social role of psychic and created 13 original performances for the stage and screen. This combination of public and covert performance provided me with a means to look behind the curtain, so to speak, and to assess the performance practices and performative behaviours by which people "do psychic" and in so doing, create the very experiences and beliefs which those actions purport to be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At this time, I would like to recount the motto of *The Left-Handed League,* co-founded by mentalist, conjurer, and actor Harry Anderson, whose guest house I once occupied during a hot summer in New Orleans, and who passed away during the writing of this dissertation. Being left-handed myself – and having spent that summer with Harry Anderson – I have long secretly considered myself to be an honorary member of this club. The motto of *The Left-Handed League* is this: 'When you're up against the wall, and if all else fails, tell them the truth. Maybe they'll fall for that.'[1] I would like to dedicate this work not only to Harry Anderson, but to Lesley Piddington, Bob Cassidy, Eugene Burger, James Randi, and Barry Wiley; all legends of mentalism who passed away during the time in which I undertook this research. The ideas in this paper would not be possible without them. I would like to sincerely thank my supervisors Dr. Marie Kelly and Dr. Robert King, and Dr. Bernadette Cronin for the years of patient feedback and support. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the financial support I received from the CACSSS Postgraduate Research Travel Bursary. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Philemon Vanderbeck – ghost hunter, bizarrist, and old friend – for surfacing the term *wink-eye*.

[1] Anderson, Harry and Turk Pipkin. *Games You Can't Lose: A Guide for Suckers.* 1988. Preface.

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PERFORMING PSYCHIC

'Dominant epistemologies that link knowing with seeing
are not attuned to meanings that are
masked,
camouflaged,
indirect,
embedded,
or hidden in context.
The visual/verbal bias of Western regimes of knowledge blinds
researchers to meanings that are expressed forcefully through
intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows, blank stares,
and other projective arts
of disguise and secrecy.'[1]

- Dwight Conquergood

[1] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 370.

Introduction

Mentalism is defined in this dissertation as a physical performance in which an actor purports to genuinely demonstrate extraordinary psychic or parapsychological abilities.[*] As a form of performance, mentalism is as misunderstood as the alleged psychic phenomena which these performances purport to be. Following more than a century of contentious debate regarding the veracity and falsity of such performances, philosopher and eliminative materialist Daniel Dennett has – in accordance with the general scientific consensus – effectively summarized the evidence in favour of psychic phenomena as being 'unacceptably low.'[2] Accordingly, I argue that performances of mentalism may be best understood as convincing performances of a *fictional idea* deeply rooted in the cultural imagination. Such abilities may be sincerely believed to be genuine by those who perform them or may be knowingly fabricated through artifice and deception.

In this dissertation, I take a skeptical and warranted position that psychic abilities do not exist outside of the social/performative/fabricated sense. My intention, therefore, is to explore the ways in which various psychic phenomena – despite not *actually* existing – are nevertheless frequently performed on stage, screen, and in everyday life, and often perceived as real by both performers and observers. Thus, it is these performative actions – the *doings* of psychic stuff – which fabricate the very experiences and beliefs which they purport to be; or, to borrow from Richard Schechner's description of performativity, 'create the very social realities they enact.'[3] Indeed, despite the lack of credible scientific evidence for these phenomena, audiences for performances of mentalism and psychic arts continue to grow.

Surprisingly, given the popularity of such performances, mentalists have – in the words of psychologist and historian of parapsychology Peter Lamont – 'been largely ignored by scholars.'[4] Richard Schechner has, for example, failed to address purported mind readers, mediums, or psychics in his prolific and virtually exhaustive 'broad spectrum approach' and 'efficacy-entertainment braid' studies of performance.[5] This is all the more surprising since, as Lamont

[*] For the purposes of this dissertation I employ the terms "psychic" and "parapsychological" interchangeably.
[2] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. Forward by Daniel Dennett. p. x.
[3] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 42.
[4] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 213.
[5] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. pp. 112 -169.

further observes, such performers 'are essential to understanding extraordinary beliefs.'[6] My research will fill this gap.

Despite this gap, Schechner's theories have usefully expanded the boundaries of performance beyond the stage, providing the necessary tools to analyse performances of mentalism and psychic arts. For Schechner, performance 'must be construed as a "broad spectrum" or "continuum" of human actions'[7] ranging 'from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race and class roles, and on to the healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media and the internet.'[8] As this research aims to address issues overlooked by Schechner, I draw heavily on his various observations and theories. However, for the purpose of engaging with the complexities surrounding performance, performativity, and play, I draw on a range of other Performance Studies theorists including Diana Taylor, Judith Butler, and Dwight Conquergood – as well as theorists from adjacent disciplines including Psychology, Philosophy, Cognitive Science, and Religious Studies – in order to expand upon, and address the limitations of, the Schechnerian approach.

The theoretical frame of Performance Studies, therefore, offers a mechanism for classifying the performance of mentalism as well as for conducting original research into the ways in which such performances operate regarding the dynamics between mentalist and audience. The duplicitous nature of mentalism performances – which, despite the frequent employment of covert artifice, can be consumed by spectators as genuine – makes it a challenging task to consistently classify these performances. Mentalism is a liminal form. It is not quite shamanism and it is not quite conjuring. Shamanism and conjuring and are both forms of magic, encompassing so-called "real" or supernatural magic, on the one hand, and pretend magic on the other. Mentalism, I argue, is *anti-magic*; it is pseudo-science. In this research, I aim to make this distinction clear.

I further argue that performers of mentalism have gone to great lengths to establish, maintain, and conceal this liminal positioning. Indeed, it is precisely this liminality which has made it difficult for observers, researchers, and spectators to reach conclusions about the nature of these performances. With the aim of filling this gap in current research, it was necessary to develop a

[6] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 213.
[7] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 2.
[8] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 2.

creative praxis which included transforming myself, not only onstage, but offstage, as well. To this end – all the while operating within a post-Cartesian anti-dualist perspective – I was broadly guided by theories of dark play, performativity, method acting, and make-belief performance. My methodological approach (practice-led) allowed me – via embodied exploration – to critically reflect on specific practices in mentalism (including my own). Through this process, I gained insight which allowed me to better identify connections between mentalism and other forms of performance, and thus, to better position mentalism along the broad spectrum of performance.

As a result of this research project, I argue that all purportedly psychic acts and experiences are performative. They come into the world by nature of being performed, enacted, or by otherwise being *done*. These experiences do not happen *to* people. They are constructed *by* people. Consequently, this research into the performativity of psychic phenomena sheds light, not only on perceptions of psychic phenomena, but also on the nature of other forms of fictional or "fake" performances – from "reality" television and professional wrestling, to "hoax" performance art – which purport to be "real."

Richard Schechner argues that 'a principal task of scholarly writing is to find discipline within or impose it on seemingly anarchic phenomena' and in so doing, 'the crossing of areas of knowledge is integral to… the very fluidity and playfulness fundamental to Performance Studies.'[9] Accordingly, through this praxis, I explored – as both performer and scholar – a complex of issues surrounding the performance of mentalism and psychic arts in a post-Cartesian context. The aim of this research was to use both embodied and theoretical knowledge to situate and critique mentalism within theories of performance, performativity, and play; paying close attention to the ways in which fictional performances may purport to be "reality." I conducted this research in order to inform my own practice of mentalism and to provide original perspectives which may help inform the practice of others. I also aimed to introduce the topics of the performance and performativity of mentalism and psychic arts into the discourse of Performance Studies. Finally, I aimed, when possible, to assess and critique the problematic aspects of these performances.

[9] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 24.

Background and Historical Context

Performances of psychic arts derived the name "mentalism" because such performances historically purported to demonstrate the hermetic principle, or law, of mentalism which posits that all experience is ultimately a subjective mental perception.[10] Popularised by scam artist A. Victor Segno's 1902 global best seller *The Law of Mentalism*, this principle gained further popularity in the anonymously written 1908 hermetic text *The Kybalion*. These texts would seem to be inspired by the philosophical doctrine of mentalism proposed by philosopher Henry Sidgwick in 1901 to describe phenomena which seemingly could not be explained materialistically.[11] Ironically, performances of mentalism inevitably employ *physical* deceptions to ostensibly demonstrate or "prove" this immaterial doctrine. In this regard, performances of mentalism are largely antithetical to the corresponding philosophy/principle/law which they historically purported to demonstrate.

In 1909, the word mentalist was first published in reference to a stage mind reader, Pearl Tangley *The Egyptian Mentalist*.[12] In 1928, Dr. Harlan Tarbell wrote *The Tarbell Course in Magic*, a correspondence course that still serves as a fundamental text for conjurers and mentalists. Tarbell wrote of 'experiments based on Super-Mentality' which include 'mind reading, mental telepathy, and all effects apparently based on remarkable mentality.'[13] Tarbell notes that he made 'two classifications of Mental and Psychic effects, although in some cases they really overlap.'[14]

In 1943, Joseph Dunninger, began his radio program *Dunninger the Master Mentalist* in the United States. In 1944, Dunninger garnered an eight-page spread in *Life Magazine*[15] and in 1948, began the first of several successful television shows. According to the mentalist Banachek, Dunninger claimed to have taken the term mentalism from *The Kybalion* (based on its meaning that *all is mind*)[16] and originally applied the term to the performance of stage mind reading. This claim, of

[10] Atkinson, William Walker. *The Kybalion.* 1908.
[11] Dellantonio, Sara and Luigi Pastore. *Internal Perception: The Role of Bodily Information in Concepts and Word Mastery*. 2017. p. 2.
[12] *Trenton Evening Times.* 28 May 1909.
[13] Tarbell, Harlan. 'Lesson 29, Divisions of Modern Magic.' *The Tarbell Course in Magic*. 1928.
[14] Tarbell, Harlan. 'Lesson 29, Divisions of Modern Magic.' *The Tarbell Course in Magic*. 1928.
[15] *Life Magazine.* 12 Mar 1944.
[16] Banachek. 'The word "Mentalist" what does it mean.' *Genii Forum.* 22 Nov 2014.

course, is not supported by historical evidence. However, it is clear that Dunninger's use of the term led the public to conflate hermetic/philosophical mentalism with conjuring/psychic arts.

My intention here is to assert that the performance of mentalism evolved as a means of fabricating *the principle/law of mentalism* which held the public's fascination. Performances of mentalism, thus, leave an opening for the audience to either believe or disbelieve. Peter Lamont has argued, however, that a binary of belief/disbelief is often entirely inadequate.[17] While it is not possible to speculate on the beliefs of audience members, it is clear that the public continues to be fascinated by pseudo-philosophy of this sort. One notable example of recent years would be the 2006 bestselling self-help book, *The Secre*t, by Rhonda Byrne in which these same pseudo-philosophies are described as 'the law of attraction.'* [18]

Despite the shifting terminology, psychic premises have long endured and can be first observed in early Greek writings and myths, including *The Odyssey*, which frequently depict seers or prophets observing omens such as shrouds of mist, fire, or blood, in advance of tragic events. The entranced prophecies of the oracles (the Pythia) at Delphi invoked similar notions of divine or unearthly foresight. Over time, these same phenomena took many guises, eventually becoming associated, not with the divine, but with the supernatural, and broadly labelled in Europe as *Second Sight*. Witchcraft followed shortly thereafter, and such abilities were then often considered demonic black magic. As the executions of witches subsided, and the Enlightenment paved the way for more rational thought, these phenomena continued in Europe largely under the quasi-scientific labels of mesmerism, animal magnetism, and mesmeric clairvoyance.

Within years, in accordance with the public loss of faith in mesmerism and the well-documented rise of the religion of spiritualism, these phenomena were reframed as being the result of spirit channelling and spirit messages. Following the decline of mainstream support in spiritualism, the phenomena were relabelled again; this time as thought reading, parapsychological phenomena, and extrasensory perception. Telepathy became the topic of many of the most intriguing case

[17] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs.* 2013.
* The Law of Attraction, incidentally, is one of the foundational principles of William Walker Atkinson's 1906 text *Dynamic Thought* and his 1908 anonymously published cryptic masterpiece *The Kybalion*.
[18] Byrne, Rhonda. *The Secret.* 2006. p. 9.

studies of that era. This categorization, in turn, was soon relabelled in the mainstream as psychic phenomena, and cases of remote viewing and psychokinesis gained prominence.

Today, paranormal experiences are often labelled within parapsychology as *psi*, or *exceptional experiences*, and indeed, many of these phenomena are now also being labelled as nonlocal quantum entanglement through the Generalized Quantum Theory (GQT).[19] As Peter Lamont notes, 'we have been having a very similar argument for a very long time.'[20] Religious Studies theorist Jeffrey Kripal, has likewise observed that 'these events happen to all sorts of people in every culture in every historical era for which we have a record.'[21] Thus, the performance of psychic phenomena has consistently evolved in order to stay in line with the public fascination. The term "mentalism" is but one label among many across the centuries which has been assigned to the performance of allegedly psychic phenomena.

Terms and Definitions

In this dissertation, mentalism is defined as: *a physical performance in which an actor purports to genuinely demonstrate psychic or parapsychological abilities*. This definition emphasizes the non-Cartesian reality that the mentalist invariably plays a role, and that the psychic abilities demonstrated are not genuine. This definition distinguishes mentalism from contemporary conjuring and illusion, in the sense that contemporary magicians and illusionists do not purport to demonstrate *genuine extraordinary capabilities* – even when performing magic tricks which pretend to be precognition or telepathy. Further – in contrast to conjuring and illusion – mentalism cannot be performed without the "live" input of an audience member or members.

This definition also distinguishes mentalism from extraordinary math, memory, and sensory demonstrations, which are not purported, but actually genuine. By emphasizing the pseudo-scientific and anti-magical nature of these abilities, this definition also distinguishes mentalism

[19] Walter von Lucadou, et al. 'Synchronistic Phenomena as Entanglement Correlations in Generalized Quantum Theory.*' Journal of Consciousness Studies.* No. 4. 2007. p. 50.
[20] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 243.
[21] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:13:30.

from bizarre magic which (emphasis added) 'favours theatrical character, storytelling, overt allegory, symbolism, and themes of the *supernatural*, *fantastic*, and *weird*.'[22]

This definition does not, however, differentiate between mind reading, secular mediumship, fortune telling, hypnosis, and energy healing. Indeed, I hold all such performances to be forms of mentalism and psychic arts. Definitions of mentalism which distinguish between such activities inevitably conflate mentalism with conjuring and illusion. For example, Todd Landman, in *Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse, and Effect*, has 'divided performance magic into three main groups: (1) magic, (2) mentalism, and (3) mystery entertainment.'[23] These categories are problematic, however, as Landman's definition of mentalism includes 'psychological illusionists and other "straight ahead" mentalists'[24] who disclaim supernatural or paranormal abilities, but it does not include traditional mind readers and psychic entertainers who claim, implicitly or explicitly, to genuinely possess these abilities.[25]

Mentalist Richard Osterlind, similarly, has defined mentalism as a 'branch of magic which deals with mysteries apparently produced using powers of the mind.'[26] This definition, too, is unnecessarily limiting, since mentalism as a form of performance may be argued to be distinct from magic and mystery. It is also not precisely clear whether Osterlind means that the effects *appear* to be produced with mental powers but are *known* to be produced through trickery (mentally themed conjuring), or if he means that the effects are apparently produced with genuine mental powers.

I have also chosen not to distinguish whether such performances are "entertaining" or not, as mentalist Bob Cassidy does when he defines mentalism as, 'a performing art in which the mentalist entertainingly demonstrates mystifying "powers of the mind."'[27] I feel that such criteria are too limiting and too subjective to be categorically useful, since some people would consider visiting a

[22] Taylor, Nik and Stuart Nolan. 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.' *Monstrous media/spectral subjects: Imaging Gothic from the nineteenth century to the present.* 2015. p. 128.
[23] Landman, Todd. 'Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse, and Effect.' *Journal of Performance Magic.* 1(1). 2013. pp. 47-68.
[24] Landman, Todd. 'Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse, and Effect.' *Journal of Performance Magic.* 1(1). 2013. pp. 47-68.
[25] Landman, Todd. 'Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse, and Effect.' *Journal of Performance Magic.* 1(1). 2013. pp. 47-68.
[26] Osterlind, Richard. *Principles of Mentalism*. 2011. p. 7.
[27] Cassidy, Bob. *The Artful Mentalism of Bob Cassidy Vol. 2*. 2013. p. 13.

psychic reader or watching a stage medium to be a form of light entertainment and others would not. Cassidy's definition also ignores the fact that the mentalist does not actually demonstrate – but, rather, purports to demonstrate – such "powers." Again, the goal of my research was not to explore alleged 'mystifying powers of the mind,' but to explore performances in which the performer claims to have these powers. By doing so, I aimed to examine the practice of mentalism and the psychic arts through new lenses in order to reach original understandings of these forms, as well as to provide practitioners with operationally significant insights.

It is worth noting that these distinctions in defining mentalism may not be readily apparent to spectators at a performance. For example, on *BBC News* in 2016, champion tennis player Dominika Cibulkova demonstrated an apparent ability to identify different brands of tennis balls using only her sense of smell.[28] If her claimed ability is genuine – and there is no reason to assume that it is not – she is not really performing mentalism. If she cheated – by peeking down the blindfold, listening to the different ways in which the cans were opened, or by feeling the writing on the tennis balls with her fingers – then she was performing mentalism. If she claimed that she was performing a magic trick with tennis balls, then her demonstration would become precisely that to spectators, regardless of whether she was peeking down her nose or genuinely using her sense of smell. Thus, the specific techniques of the mentalist are trivial compared to the contexts and frames in which these acts are performed, and the perceived credibility of the performer.

It is presentation *and* techniques, therefore, which enable the classification of a performance as either magic, mentalism, bizarre magic, or as a genuine demonstration. Spectators, however, are rarely privy to the techniques employed and are therefore not in the position to make this determination, even in spite of explicit disclaimers. For example, Landman relates an anecdote in which he overheard an audience member at a Derren Brown performance – despite numerous disclaimers – say, 'I don't care what he said, he is the real deal, he is psychic!'[29] The definition of mentalism, therefore, is inherently slippery. A performance of mentalism may be *consumed* as a genuine psychic or sensory demonstration. A genuine demonstration of sensory or mathematical ability may be *consumed* as mentalism.

[28] 'Wimbledon 2016: Dominika Cibulkova demonstrates her secret smelling skill.' *BBC.com.* 2016.
[29] Landman, Todd. 'Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse, and Effect.' *Journal of Performance Magic.* 1(1). 2013. pp. 47-68.

The difficulties in precisely delineating the boundaries of mentalism come as no surprise, since mentalism occupies, first and foremost, a liminal space. The boundaries of mentalism have historically shifted, it would seem, precisely in order to stay *outside of* established and accepted boundaries and categorizations. And it is precisely within this liminal space that mentalism flourishes; *between* science and magic, *between* the real and the overtly illusory. For instance, in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, parapsychologist George Hansen maintains that 'in playing the role of "psychic," many mentalists have come to wonder whether they might, in fact, possess genuine abilities.'[30] Marvin Kaye, in *The Handbook of Mental Magic,* likewise states that 'if one performs enough [mentalism], once may easily come to begin to believe in one's own omniscience.[31] As one example, we may even take Kaye himself, who does not appear to fully realize his own culpability in this regard. Kaye claims that mentalism 'is as much trickery as sawing a woman in half is,'[32] yet elsewhere in the same book he contradicts himself, asserting (emphasis added) that 'the mental entertainer, *even if he has had several genuine ESP experiences,* cannot count upon such an unreliable phenomenon during the course of his shows.'[33]

Despite Kaye's assertion that the mentalist 'must be certain that his effects will work, and this he can do only by employing trickery,'[34] he also claims to have used his own "genuine" ESP abilities during an occasion on which his "trickery" failed. Kaye writes: 'I might have switched to another method at that point, but suddenly the word "dog" flashed into my mind…like a neon sign… It was indeed the word he had been thinking of.'[35] Kaye also relates an instance in which: 'the word "Albany" flashed into my mind. It literally blinked on inside my head like a neon sign. It was the very word my friend was trying to send me.'[36]

Such mentalists, who come to believe in the genuineness of their performances, are commonly referred to as *shut-eyes.* Psychologist Richard Wiseman tested the claim made by those such as Hansen and Kaye, by conducting a survey with over 400 conjurers and mentalists. Wiseman reported that the findings were 'surprising' and that 'about a third of both professional and semi-

[30] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 137.
[31] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 28.
[32] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 11.
[33] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 31.
[34] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 31.
[35] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 32.
[36] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 32.

professional magicians noted that [parapsychological] experiences had taken place during a performance.'[37] According to Wiseman (emphasis added):

> These magicians reported a range of allegedly paranormal phenomena, including accurately guessing a spectator's name or date of birth, mysteriously 'knowing' which playing card they had chosen from a deck, and having a strange sense of presence during a fake séance. *The majority of these experiences came from respondents who specialise in 'mentalism' - a type of magic in which the performer uses trickery to fake telepathic, mediumistic and psychic abilities.* As such, *these performers claim to have genuinely experienced the very phenomena that they set out to fake.*[38]

Naturally, the results of a survey completed by professional deceivers must be taken with a grain of salt. Either way, however, the results are significant. If the answers are fraudulent, then it shows the willingness of mentalists to deceive even outside of conventionally accepted boundaries of performance. If the answers are sincere, then it would demonstrate a tendency toward self-deception among a group who actively deceives others. This, in turn, would be in line with the findings of evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers who argues in 'Deceit and Self-Deception' that being detected in deception 'often results in a sharp reversal of fortune for the deceiver thereby intensifying selection to deceive successfully… Selection to deceive can favor self-deception, the better to hide the deception and separately to reduce its cognitive costs.'[39]

The term *open-eye* is used to describe mentalists who are fully aware of, and in control of, their deceptions. These terms – although common and important in contemporary discussions regarding mentalism – are of uncertain origin. The term *shut-eye* was undoubtedly popularized by director Orson Welles during a 1970 television interview with David Frost in which Welles referred to the shut-eye phenomena as an 'occupational disease,' and defined the term as coming from the 'argot of those crooks,' describing the 'fellow who begins to believe himself.'[40] Welles' comment, however, may also be taken with a grain of salt since he claimed to start becoming a shut-eye on his first and only day of 'fortune telling.'[41]

[37] Wiseman, Richard. 'Magicians and the Paranormal: A Survey.' *Skepchick.org*. 23 Apr 2008.
[38] Wiseman, Richard. 'Magicians and the Paranormal: A Survey.' *Skepchick.org*. 23 Apr 2008.
[39] Trivers, Robert. 'Deceit and Self-Deception.' *Mind the Gap.* 2010. p. 374.
[40] Frost, David. 'An Interview with Orson Welles.' 5 Dec 1970.
[41] Frost, David. 'An Interview with Orson Welles.' 5 Dec 1970.

I have conducted an etymological investigation of the terms[*] and it is undoubtedly ironic, that Welles – who popularized the term – also appears to have reinvented it in the process. Nevertheless, the terms have taken on special significance post-Welles, and I would argue that Welles' usage – however and why ever it happened – unearthed a very important dimension of beliefs pertaining to those who repeatedly fabricate psychic phenomena. Welles, who wrote and directed *F for Fake* – a partly true and partly fictional 1975 documentary about a talented art forger and a fake autobiographer[42] – was acutely aware of the blurry area between reality and fiction.

Mentalism flourishes in a similar space. It is both an imaginary concept and an artificial fabrication of that concept. Nicholas Humphrey observes in *Leaps of Faith,* that the language around these issues requires precision. Humphrey writes:

> To talk of faking a psychic phenomenon can have the effect of dignifying the genuine phenomenon that is supposedly being faked. But, more insidious still, merely to talk about the possibility of any phenomenon being psychic can be enough to give the concept undeserved status – a warrant, if not of its real existence, at least of its theoretical respectability.[43]

Perhaps, then, it is simplest just to say that psychic phenomena and mentalism have been the same thing all along. This is particularly true if one includes *shut-eyes* (performers who believe in the reality of their performances) *open-eyes* (performers who don't) and *wink-eyes* (performers who do not but maintain that they do beyond conventionally accepted boundaries). Since observers of purportedly psychic demonstrations and identities are rarely in a position to accurately perceive the *actual* nature and methodology of these fabrications and simulations, a convincing fabrication of psychic phenomena can be indistinguishable from – in fact, identical to – a demonstration of "psychic" abilities which are perceived as real. Thus, one cannot talk about the performance of mentalism without also talking about that which is perceived as genuine psychic phenomena.

[*] 'Shut-Eye and Open-Eye Origin and Etymology.' See appendices:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367
[42] *F for Fake.* Dir. Orson Welles. Janus Films. 1975.
[43] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 151.

Thesis Argument and Scholarly Contribution

In his seminal text *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* Richard Schechner defines performance as 'any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed.'[44] He describes performance as consisting of a 'broad spectrum' of activities occurring in 'widely divergent circumstances' and ranging 'from solo shows before the mirror to large-scale public events and rituals, from shaman healing rituals to identity-changing trances, from theatre and dance to the great and small roles of everyday life.'[45] Schechner further specifies that 'there are no clear boundaries separating everyday life from family and social roles or social roles from job roles, church ritual from trance, acting onstage from acting offstage, and so on.'[46]

In 'What is Performance?' Marvin Carlson calls attention to a similar fact. According to Carlson, 'The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as "performance," or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself.'[47] Thus, according to Carlson, there are two distinct concepts of performance: The first involves 'the display of skills,' while the second also involves display, 'but less of particular skills than of a recognized and culturally coded pattern of behavior.'[48] Carlson notes that a third concept of performance – as in business and industry – simply indicates 'the general success of the activity in light of some standard of achievement.'[49]

Yet despite the thorough and complex nature of these broad approaches to performance analysis, a close study of the unusual tactics frequently employed by mentalists illuminates a significant gap in Performance Studies literature. Schechner, as well as other notable and relevant theorists such as Michael Mangan and E.T. Kirby – who examine conjuring and shamanism, respectively – have failed to adequately address the performance of mentalism or the relevant psychic arts. This, despite the fact that high profile clairvoyants such as Uri Geller and Kuda Bux; mind readers such as Derren Brown, Joseph Dunninger, and the Piddingtons; and mediums such as John Edward and Derek Acorah have captivated the public imagination for nearly a century on stage, radio, and

[44] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 2.
[45] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 170.
[46] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. pp. 170-171.
[47] Carlson, Marvin. 'What is Performance?' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 72.
[48] Carlson, Marvin. 'What is Performance?' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 72.
[49] Carlson, Marvin. 'What is Performance?' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 72.

"reality" television. For instance, with the exception of a single paragraph describing rituals in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* in which Schechner mentions New Age religions, good luck charms, horoscopes, and observes that 'when under stress, people who ordinarily would not do so seek out healers and seers,'[50] he does not call attention to the fact that many people – with varying levels of skepticism and awareness – routinely dial psychic hotlines and visit psychics, fortune-tellers, numerologists, astrologists, tarot card readers, and energy healers. In short, Schechner has neglected to give adequate consideration to an unusual and booming performance-based industry focused on entertainment and efficacious self-improvement.

Mentalism is certainly not the only form of performance which Schechner's introductory textbook does not address. Indeed, it would be virtually impossible to analyse *every* form of performance – from karaoke to flair bartending – in any depth. There are numerous common and complex forms of performance which Schechner mentions only cursorily, including stand-up comedy and conjuring. In his 2014 book *Performed Imaginaries*, however, Schechner does acknowledge psychic or parapsychological *experiences* such as 'flying saucers and miracle cures…and the mystery of extra-sensory perception.'[51] Yet, he falls short of acknowledging the performative aspects of these experiences.

Mentalism – and the corresponding psychic arts – are perhaps the most popular and complex form of performance which Schechner fails to situate or address *at all* within his broad spectrum of performance. In his exploration of performativity, Schechner does, however, pay considerable attention to 'believing in the role one is playing,'[52] 'make-belief'[53] performances, and 'dark play.'[54] Again, his omission of psychic arts is noteworthy, as such performances are potent examples. Nevertheless, the above designations are crucial for a thorough analysis of mentalism and psychic arts, where one may find many performers who believe in the reality of their performances (shut-eye), many that don't (open-eye) and many that don't but maintain that they do *beyond conventional boundaries* (wink-eye).

[50] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 53.
[51] Schechner, Richard. *Performed Imaginaries.* 2014. p. 161.
[52] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. pp. 181-182.
[53] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 42.
[54] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 118.

Shamanism

Despite the exclusion of mentalist/psychic performances, Schechner does refer continually to shamanism and traditional religious rituals. In *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* for instance, he addresses the varied forms of performance from which shamanism draws, describing shamans as 'expert performers and story-tellers – masters at throwing their voices, dancing, singing, manipulating objects, and constructing spectacular costumes and masks.'[55] Schechner also cites the 1974 paper of E.T. Kirby, 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments' in which Kirby notes that 'at their origin, popular entertainments are associated with trance and derive from the practices of trance.'[56] In this regard, Schechner calls attention to 'ventriloquism, acrobatics, magic tricks, playing with fire, sword-swallowing, rope tricks, clowning, etc,'[57] but he makes no mention of mentalism, spiritualism, or other psychic arts.

At one point, however, Kirby alludes not only to magic tricks, but to spiritualist feats, writing that the 'shamanistic séance… is very like the seance of a medium in modern Western culture, with its levitation of tables, strange rappings, spectral apparitions, and voices from the dead.'[58] Kirby contends that shamanism may essentially be defined as 'the practice of trance for the purpose of curing the sick.'[59] However, he also notes that 'this is a limited definition' and shamans 'may also practice such related functions as divination or contact with spirits of the dead.'[60] Kirby ultimately reiterates that 'trance-curing is fundamental and accounts, on the basis of function, for the wide distribution and independent creation of the rituals.'[61] The absence of mention of any forms of mentalism or psychic performance across the analyses of Kirby and Schechner suggests that both have misread these performances as either magic tricks or mediumship.

Schechner, as well, emphasizes the trance-curing activities of the shaman, defining shamanism in his 1988 book *Performance Theory* 'in its more general meaning' as including 'all kinds of ceremonial systems combining curing by means of spirit-journey and exorcism with techniques drawn from the performing arts.'[62] He writes: 'shamanism is the branch of doctoring that is

[55] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 200.
[56] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 14.
[57] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 199.
[58] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 6.
[59] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 6.
[60] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 6.
[61] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 6.
[62] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p 63, Footnote 4.

religious and the kind of religion, full of tricks, that is theatrical.'[63] Schechner observes somewhat vaguely that 'shamanism in its many varieties is practiced all over the world,' and that the precise nature of the shaman's work 'will vary from culture to culture'[64] yet, he never really suggests at any length what the "many varieties" of shamanism may be, and certainly makes no attempt to situate shamanism within – or connect shamanism to – contemporary developed cultures or societies. Thus, Schechner's writing on shamanism has the cumulative effect of implying that such performances are a form of sacred ritual-theatre practiced by the Other and far removed from modern or contemporary concerns.

In fact, Schechner even goes to some lengths in order to emphasize and legitimize the more mystical aspects of shamanistic performance. At one point, for instance, he writes (emphasis added): Shamans *separate their souls from their bodies* and, *aided by their spirit helpers*, venture *to nonhuman worlds in pursuit of demons* or in search of cures.'[65] Schechner does not seem to be speaking metaphorically when he writes this. In fact, he repeats such claims numerous times, defining trance acting as 'occurring when performers are taken over, or "possessed," by non-human beings – gods, spirits, demons, animals, or objects,' and subsequently asserting that 'trance performers enact actions not of their own devising.'[66] Elsewhere he describes shamanism as 'religious technique that assumes communication and transformation among several kinds of experience including the reintegration of the past and present, conscious and unconscious, dead and living, dream and waking, individual and group.'[67]

Such unsubstantiated statements – describing uncoupled souls, spirit helpers, animism, magical journeys, and demonic or talisman possessions – made seriously, rather than metaphorically, undermine, to some extent, the validity of Schechner's claims regarding shamanism. If the "actions" are not devised by the performer, then by exactly who or what are they devised? Throughout this dissertation, I contend that such actions are performative, and it is the "doing" and repeating of such codified actions which manifests – in any "real" shared social sense – the imaginary experiences which these actions purport to be.

[63] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p. 132.
[64] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 198.
[65] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 168.
[66] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 168.
[67] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1998. Classics Ed. 2004. pp. 63-64, Footnote 5.

Schechner does begin to approach a more revealing assessment of the shaman when he asserts that 'after the trance is over, an actor may or may not remember what she said and did. Whether the performer remembers or not differs from culture to culture, genre to genre, even instance to instance.'[68] He does not go further with this line of thought. Nevertheless, if amnesia can be dictated culturally, then it would seem safe to infer that he is not talking about memories *per se*, but rather, about a performer's *seeming or appearing to* remember or forget. By opening the conversation to questions of deception and self-deception in this way, it is possible to create useful distinctions between shamanism, conjuring, and mentalism.

Schechner's frequent mentions of shamanism *without any context or connections to contemporary western society* is noteworthy because such connections are undeniable. Although everyday Western life is far removed from the traditional shamanism which Schechner describes almost exclusively in the context of healing, rites of passage, trance, and "possession,"[*] many self-described shamans still operate in European and American cities.[**] Yet, these contemporary "shamans" most often perform secular purported energy-healing work, distinct from the sacred trance possession and sleight-of-hand-based faith-healing described by Schechner and Kirby.

When one accounts for the performances of psychics, mediums, spiritualists, mind readers, and energy healers, etc., previously described – none of which are addressed by Schechner – the gap in the academic literature is apparent. It is not my intention to assert that mentalism is a form of shamanism. On the contrary, while clearly connected, the two forms are essentially defined by their differences. However, the same can also be said of mentalism and magic tricks, with which Kirby appears to conflate the psychic aspects of shamanism when he writes that 'very different types of performance, such as magic acts, acrobatics, puppetry, and fire-eating can be shown to have derived from, or at least been preceded by, the phenomena of [shamanistic] rituals.'[69] Indeed, despite the unique performance strategies of mentalists and psychics, mentalism and psychic arts have, until now, been conflated by researchers – as seen in the preceding examples of Schechner

[68] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 168.
[*] Schechner makes one mention of 'seers' (2013, p. 53) and one mention of 'tell[ing] the future' (2002, p. 168).
[**] A simple Google search, for instance, revealed an almost endless list of practicing "shamans" in Cork, Ireland, of which the top three entries were: "Wanda Pratnicka PhD, Trusted Shaman Healer, Authentic Shaman, World-renowned Healer & Scholar, Best-selling Author & Int'l Speaker," "Shamanic Reiki Healing Ireland," and "Macha Shewolf Medicine Woman & Shaman."
[69] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 6.

and Kirby – either with magic and conjuring tricks, on the one hand, or with shamanism on the other.

In this dissertation, I will argue that mentalism is a distinct form of performance which – owing, perhaps, to a system of complex and secret techniques – has eluded careful analysis by Performance Studies researchers until now. It is my contention that a notable difference between shamanism and mentalism can be observed in the fact that traditional shamanism makes an appeal to sacred and supernatural (ie., Godly/Demonic) powers, whereas contemporary Western shamanism – in line with mentalism and psychic arts – makes an appeal to secular and scientific legitimacy. It is necessary to point out that despite the appeal to scientific legitimacy, these phenomena are not scientifically legitimated, and may therefore be designated as parapsychological[*] and pseudo-scientific.[**] This distinction, however, is problematised by the placebo effect, through which even fictional processes may bring about real transformations.

The contemporary popularity of mentalism in its various forms is noted in a 2018 article in *Newsweek* entitled, 'Number of Witches and Pagans Explodes In The US As Millennials Reject Christianity.'[70] Obviously, it would be a mistake to conflate mentalism with witchcraft or traditional shamanism, but neither can the connection be lightly dismissed, since, as the article explains, millennials in large numbers are: 'turning to astrology and tarot cards as they turn away from Christianity and other traditionally dominant Abrahamic religions.'[71] Astrology and tarot cards, after all, fall squarely within the domain of the psychic. The article further explains that 'Wicca has effectively repackaged witchcraft for millennial consumption,' and that 'no longer is witchcraft and paganism satanic and demonic, it's a "pre-Christian tradition" that promotes "free thought" and "understanding of earth and nature."'[72] It would seem, therefore, that millennial witchcraft is less aligned with religion than with "new age" or parapsychological beliefs. It is not my intention to interrogate the nature of religious beliefs. Such questions lie beyond the boundaries

[*] Parapsychology is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as: 'The study of mental phenomena which are excluded from or inexplicable by orthodox scientific psychology (such as hypnosis, telepathy, etc.).'
[**] Pseudo-science is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as: 'a collection of beliefs or practices mistakenly regarded as being based on scientific method.'
[70] Fearnow, Benjamin. 'Number of Witches and Pagans Explodes In The US As Millennials Reject Christianity.' *Newsweek.* 18 Nov 2018.
[71] Fearnow, Benjamin. 'Number of Witches and Pagans Explodes In The US As Millennials Reject Christianity.' *Newsweek.* 18 Nov 2018.
[72] Fearnow, Benjamin. 'Number of Witches and Pagans Explodes In The US As Millennials Reject Christianity.' *Newsweek.* 18 Nov 2018.

of both mentalism and my research. I will, however, examine parapsychological and psychic beliefs in some depth. Given the fact that performances of mentalism ultimately consist of pretending to be psychic – which, in turn, is an imaginary construct – such an examination is inevitable.

In *The Death and Resurrection Show* (1985) – provocatively subtitled: *From Shaman to Superstar* – Rogan Taylor theorized that 'showbusiness as we know it has derived directly from the performances of the ancient shamans.'[73] Taylor speculates that 'there must be a process or a combination of historical circumstances which isolated the showbiz elements in such performances, and detached them from their originally-integrated positions as parts of a greater whole: the shamanistic world view.'[74] Taylor's speculation offers an important catalogue of the similarities between modern popular entertainments and shamanic tradition. Ultimately, however, this argument is incomplete. As Michael Mangan points out in *Performing Dark Arts*, Taylor to some degree 'overstates his case.'[75] Mangan rightly suggests that 'art fulfils various kinds of functions, not all of them derived from the shamanic healing journey to the Underworld, and some forms are more susceptible to this mode of analysis than others.'[76]

It is also the case that Taylor's argument may encourage an unhelpful conflation of ultimately disparate forms of performance such as conjuring, mentalism, clowning, and rock and roll. Without doubt, these forms of popular entertainment bear similarities, not only with each other, but also with traditional shamanic practice from which they may have partially descended. However, it is my contention that any serious discussion of these similarities – which are apparent – should also be accompanied by a serious discussion of *the differences* – which have often been purposefully obscured by practitioners.

In *Performance Theory* (1988), Schechner does hint at a more nuanced approach of shamanism when he notes that 'often enough people get drawn deeply into schemes of their own construction.'[77] E.T. Kirby hints at this as well, not only by noting the connection between shamanism and western spiritualism, but also by bluntly noting the role of 'delusion' as well as

[73] Taylor, Rogan. *The Death and Resurrection Show: From Shaman to Superstar.* 1985. p. 44.
[74] Taylor, Rogan. *The Death and Resurrection Show: From Shaman to Superstar.* 1985. p. 44.
[75] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring.* 2007. p. 14.
[76] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring.* 2007. p. 14.
[77] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p 257.

'illusion and deception' in 'pseudo-shamanism.'[78] While, Kirby does not expand upon his meaning of *pseudo-shamanism*, it would seem that such a description might point toward the areas of performance now largely known as mentalism and psychic arts. According to Kirby:

> It is important to note that while the tricks [of the shaman] are essentially fraudulent contrivances, just as are the illusions of modern magicians and escape artists, delusionary experience is associated with the shamanist seance and remains associated with tricks and illusionism during the phase of pseudo-shamanism. Not only is the performer, the shaman, in trance and undergoing delusionary experience, but so, to a degree, is the audience.[79]

Through this research project, I attempt to advance Kirby's argument, looking closely at the roles of deception and self-deception in these performances. In doing so, I pay particular attention to Performance Studies theories advanced by Schechner including performativity, deep and dark play, make-belief performance, blurry boundaries, ritual, entertainment-efficacy, and proto-performance.

Conjuring

Performing Dark Arts: A Cultural History of Conjuring (2007) written by Michael Mangan is an attempt to, in Mangan's words, 'throw light on some aspects of conjuring by looking at them in the context of performance studies and to throw light on aspects of performance studies by testing them against the art of conjuring.'[80] Thus, the similarities between Mangan's research project and my own are evident. Likewise, there is substantial overlap in our historical contexts and theoretical frameworks which both include shamanism, spiritualism, liminality, play, ritual, hyperreality, and the efficacy-entertainment braid. Given, however, that *Performing Dark Arts* is a cultural history of conjuring, rather than mentalism – and that the term "mentalism" is not used even once within the text – the book escaped my attention until near the completion of my research project.

Despite the similarities in our research objectives noted above, Mangan's conclusions are problematic given the ways in which they freely combine ultimately disparate forms of

[78] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 8.
[79] Kirby, E.T. 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments.' *TDR*. Vol. 18. No. 1. Mar 1974. p. 8.
[80] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. xxii.

performance such as conjuring, shamanism, and mentalism. Despite his deep historical knowledge and fascinating application of performance studies lenses, it is also apparent that, at times – as noted conjuring theorist and historian Jamy Ian Swiss writes in *Genii Magazine* – Mangan 'quite simply, hasn't got a blessed clue as to the nature of magic and magicians.'[81] *Performing Dark Arts* ultimately serves as an example of the academic conflation between conjuring, shamanism, and mentalism which I caution against throughout this dissertation.

While Mangan does not use the word "mentalism," the related word "mentalist" is used six times. Once, in reference to 'Victorian mentalist acts,'[82] and once to 'nineteenth-century mentalists.'[83] The other four references are to Derren Brown; three of which describe Brown's 'revival,'[84] 'postmodern twist,'[85] or 'stylish re-working of the traditional mentalist's act,'[86] while the fourth describes Brown as a 'modern mentalist.'[87] Given, however, that the term *mentalism* came into existence as a philosophical term in 1901, and the term *mentalist* was first publicly used by a stage mind reader in 1909 before being popularized in that context in the 1940s, the very phrase 'Victorian mentalist' may be argued to be a contradiction in terms.

Elsewhere, Mangan asserts that 'mental magic had its heyday in the golden age of magic during the nineteenth century – although, as we have seen, the basic techniques of the "mind-reading" routine had been established several centuries earlier.'[88] On this, Mangan is incorrect. The golden age of magic is widely agreed to have occurred in the late 19th *and early 20th* centuries (circa 1880 to 1930).[89] More significantly, Mangan's claim demonstrates a conflation of terms, premises, and techniques. While the notion of clairvoyance[*] dates as far back as ancient Greece – and conjuring tricks purporting to demonstrate that premise are contained in the earliest extent conjuring texts – it is substantially incorrect to describe such premises as *mind reading*, and even more so, *mentalism*.

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[81] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'Review of *Performing Dark Arts* by Michael Mangan.' *Genii Magazine*. Nov 2007.
[82] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 47.
[83] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 47.
[84] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 177.
[85] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 178.
[86] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. xxv.
[87] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. xxvi.
[88] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 177.
[89] Steinmeyer, Jim. *Hiding the Elephant*. 2003.
[*] Possessing knowledge of the future and/or the otherwise unknown through mysterious means.

The distinction between conjuring and mind reading gained prominence in conjunction with spiritualism and parapsychological research commencing in the mid-1800s. The heyday of *mental magic* is certainly not to be found amongst the muscle readers (such as J. Randall Brown and Washington Irving Bishop) nor the spiritualists (such as Anna Eva Fay and the Davenport Brothers) of the late 1800s, but in the mentalists-proper (such as Alexander *The Man Who Knows* and Joseph Dunninger *The Master Mentalist)* who flourished during the first half of the 20th century. The experiments of J.B. Rhine into extrasensory perception during this same time-period further fuelled the popularity and ambiguity of the mentalism premise. A second "heyday" may be said to have occurred in response to the 1960s experiments in telekinesis and remote viewing, from which Uri Geller emerged as a global celebrity. Additionally, I argue that – sparked by the pseudo-psychological neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) premises of Derren Brown and fuelled by postmodern relativism – mentalism and psychic arts remain as popular today as ever.

Undoubtedly, the early spiritualist and clairvoyant – or second sight – acts which were prominent in the latter 19th century laid important groundwork for what would later crystalize as mentalism. Presentationally-speaking, however, these acts were premised on the same superstitious, magical, dark, or demonic forces as the other popular conjuring feats of the day. There was simply no differentiation made between the artificial powers of conjurers and the genuine abilities of *the mind*. If any differentiation may be argued to exist, it was between the tricks of the conjurer and the demonic powers of the witch.

To combine mentalism, which is clearly a modern and postmodern phenomenon, with conjuring, which is nearly as old as recorded history, is also to confuse methods, premises, and social roles. The fact that the term *mentalist* is used throughout *Performing Dark Arts* only to describe acts which either predate the term itself, or in reference to a contemporary 'postmodern twist'[90] on those acts, suggests that Mangan is somewhat unclear about how or where to situate mentalism in relation to conjuring. Derren Brown, for example, performed for decades as a highly original mentalist *par excellence* – and was not at all a 'stylish reworking'[91] of 19th century mind reading.[*]

[90] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 178.
[91] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. xxv.
[*] 'Derren Brown: Pseudo Reality.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

If Brown is a stylish reworking at all, it is in his psychological inversion of the psychic claims of Uri Geller.[*]

In that vein, when Mangan writes that Uri Geller – the most infamous of all living mentalists – 'perhaps… should be seen, not as a traditional charlatan but as the first truly postmodern magician'[92] he seems to be inventing terms to fill the gap where the term 'mentalist' already exists. In response to the quote above, Jamy Ian Swiss argues that Mangan 'is so far removed from any insight that he proclaims Geller to be the "first truly postmodern magician," instead of recognizing that he is merely another in a very long line of psychic frauds.'[93] Swiss further argues that 'Professor Mangan steps firmly into the just plain wrong by characterizing Uri Geller as merely a magician with "implicit" claims about magic based in reality.' Swiss suggests that 'a reading of *Magic in Theory* by Lamont and Wiseman might help the poor confused professor understand that there is a fundamental difference between the social contracts of the magician and of the psychic, and that Geller's claims to genuine supernatural power are anything but "implicit."'[94]

Indeed, in *Magic in Theory* (1999), Wiseman and Lamont – both referenced extensively throughout this dissertation – devote an entire chapter to this issue, exploring the significant similarities and significant differences between 'the magician and the pseudo-psychic.'[95] The authors note, for instance, that 'many mentalists might be regarded as closer to pseudo-psychics than magicians.'[96] Here, however, it is worth noting that in differentiating between pseudo-psychics and psychics – which are inevitably the same – Lamont and Wiseman commit the other common error which I warn against.

Nonetheless, the authors continue: 'So far as such distinctions are valid, this book is written from the point of view of magicians, rather than mentalists. While we feel the theoretical elements described are relevant to both magic and mentalism, it may well be that a mentalist would have said things differently.'[97] While *Magic in Theory* offers useful insights throughout, in this

[*] 'Uri Geller: Psychic Superstar.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[92] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 176.
[93] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'Review of *Performing Dark Arts* by Michael Mangan.' *Genii Magazine*. Nov 2007.
[94] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'Review of *Performing Dark Arts* by Michael Mangan.' *Genii Magazine*. Nov 2007.
[95] Lamont, Peter and Richard Wiseman. *Magic in Theory.* 1999. pp. 4-5.
[96] Lamont, Peter and Richard Wiseman. *Magic in Theory.* 1999. pp. 4-5.
[97] Lamont, Peter and Richard Wiseman. *Magic in Theory.* 1999. pp. 4-5.

dissertation I have aimed to pick up where that work left off; to – as the authors suggest – *say things differently* and *from the point of view of mentalists.*

On the topic of shamanism, Mangan makes similar conflations to those discussed previously. For example, discussing Schechner's entertainment-efficacy braid, Mangan writes that conjuring:

> …is entertainment masquerading as efficacy; and it is the exploitation of the ambiguity between the two which lies at the heart of the stage magician's art. Like the shaman, the stage illusionist blurs the distinctions between the two, makes magic into performance, and performs magic in the process.[98]

While stage illusions – which are often themed on destruction and restoration – are reflective of the shaman's purported journey to the "other world" and back again, to suggest that a modern conjurer blurs distinctions between entertainment and efficacy is entirely unfounded. Indeed, Mangan does go on to note that 'the conjuror's social function may be less complex than the shaman's, lacking for the most part any professed healing or cohesive power.'[99] On this, Mangan further notes that the shaman's performance:

> …depends on leading an audience/congregation into a secure belief (usually shared by the shaman him- or herself) in the performer's 'supernatural' powers… The performance of theatrical magic typically exploits an ambiguous space between the disturbing/exciting possibility that what an audience is seeing might genuinely flout the laws of nature, and the reassuring/disappointing awareness that it probably does not – that it is all really done by sleight of hand, smoke and mirrors, and the arts of deception.[100]

In other words, conjuring is *not* efficacious. A performance of conjuring may be argued to be what Victor Turner has described as *liminoid*: a voluntary and temporary departure from societal "rules" such as a rock concert, which lasts for the duration of the performance.[101] But such performances should not be held to be *liminal*, in which binding or permanent transformations may be said to occur among performers and participants. Mangan further writes that 'one of the conjuror's most potent tools is his ability to blur the distinction between what is and what is not "performance".'[102] While such a statement is largely accurate about mentalists, it is hardly true at all of conventional

[98] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 79.
[99] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 17.
[100] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 17.
[101] Turner, Victor. 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology.' Vol. 60. No. 3. 1974.
[102] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. xxvi.

conjurers; even taking into consideration the creative license and artistic liberties often taken in conjuring autobiographies, which Mangan discusses at length.[103] In *Magic in Theory* Wiseman and Lamont devote considerable attention to many 'advantages' which the "pseudo-psychic" may exploit which are unavailable to conjurers once they have, in the words of Jamy Ian Swiss, 'clearly identified themselves as honest charlatans, in the tradition of their more honorable profession.'[104] In so doing, conjurer's – unlike mentalists or shamans – forfeit their liminal positioning.

Swiss astutely points out that among the 60 or so texts on conjuring from which Mangan draws, none of those texts 'amount to theoretical books about the art, or even a significant artistic or instructional text,' resulting – in Swiss's words – in 'a work that pinball's between an inventory of the obvious and the foolishness of the just plain wrong.'[105] In this vein, Swiss suggests that 'if the academy deigns to consider our humble art, it would be well advised to avoid the funhouse mirror view offered by cultural and performance studies types, and will doubtless do better by seeking primary sources.'[106]

Mangan writes (emphasis added): 'Magicians, as we have seen, have traditionally blurred the line *between truth and reality*.'[107] This does make one wonder: Does Mangan mean truth and fiction? Or illusion and reality? Later in the same paragraph, Mangan describes the postmodern condition in which 'the real and the imaginary'[108] are continually collapsed one into the other, and his intended meaning perhaps becomes more clear. Nevertheless, such apparent errors and conflations in terminology and contexts made this otherwise fascinating approach to conjuring history, ultimately, undependable.

Some of Mangan's observations, however, are undoubtedly interesting. He calls attention, for instance, to Thomas Hill's 16th century text *Naturall and Artificiall Conclusions*, and notes that:

> …the ease with which Hill moves from one mode to the next, from health and housekeeping tips, to illusions to amaze your friends, to snippets of folk magic imply[ies] a world-view in which the boundaries between one kind of magic and another, between performance and medicine, between husbandry and divination are

[103] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. pp. xix-xx.
[104] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'Review of *Magic in Theory* by Lamont and Wiseman.' *Genii Magazine*. Jan 2000.
[105] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'Review of *Performing Dark Arts* by Michael Mangan.' *Genii Magazine*. Nov 2007.
[106] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'Review of *Performing Dark Arts* by Michael Mangan.' *Genii Magazine*. Nov 2007.
[107] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. pp. xxv and 173.
[108] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 173.

> extremely permeable: the braid of entertainment and efficacy is particularly tightly woven here.[109]

Mangan observes that 'entertainment and efficacy, in *Naturall and Artificiall Conclusions,* look less like a braid and more like a porridge: and to this extent,' according to Mangan, 'Hill states a problem which later writers about magic and conjuring will have to solve.'[110] On this I agree wholeheartedly, and this dissertation attempts to move some distance in that direction. I have attempted to accomplish this by carefully defining and delineating separate forms of performance – such as conjuring, shamanism, and mentalism – which are all too often collapsed and conflated in academic texts. By approaching the art of mentalism through practice-led research, I have tried to approach this study from the perspective of the practitioner. I have done this precisely to avoid the conflation which often arises from an overreliance on the *intentionally misleading* appearances and surfaces of these complex forms of performance.

Paraperformance

In conducting this research project, Schechner's designation of "proto-performance" proved helpful given that this category of performance points to secret and concealed performances within or around conventionally defined performances, including training, workshopping, and rehearsing. Further along these lines, Schechner contrasts *subtexts* – which he attributes to Konstantin Stanislavski and describes as 'the ongoing yet largely internal or hidden driving life force of a scene that exists behind the spoken words and the visible gestures'[111] – with *pretexts,* which he describes as 'operat[ing] secretly concealed deep within the performance.'[112] These pretexts may be further viewed in line with Schechner's observation on what might be described as *nested performances*. According to Schechner:

> Every focused public performance is nested in one or more larger events or contexts… It may not be easy to say exactly when or where a given larger event or context ends and ordinary life begins. The focused performance is usually clearly marked at its start and its conclusion; not so the larger contexts in which a given performance is nested. Despite this blurriness, it is important to understand the

[109] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 41.
[110] Mangan, Michael. *Performing Dark Arts.* 2007. p. 41.
[111] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. p. 226.
[112] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. p. 226.

> larger events and contexts because these give the focused performance at least some of its meanings...[113]

Schechner's description of nested contexts calls to mind Victor and Edie Turner's description of frames, meta-frames, and play-frames. In 'Performing Ethnography,' they write:

> Some social events are contained in multiple frames, hierarchically arranged, frame within frame, with the ultimate "meaning" of the event shaped by the dominant, "encompassing" frame. Frames, in other words, are often themselves "framed." But let's not speak of "meta-frames," except in a play frame![114]

The Turners conclude by noting that 'Framing frames perhaps makes for intensified reflexivity.'[115] For the purposes of better understanding performances of mentalism and psychic arts – and taking the Schechner and Turner descriptions of the nesting performance processes into consideration – in this dissertation I argue for the inclusion of a new category of performance, which I designate as *paraperformances*. I define paraperformances – which generally occur outside conventionally accepted boundaries of performance – as: *A performance for which the ultimate end is not the given performance itself, but rather, the manipulation of contexts in which other performances are embedded.* Thus, this research offers a contribution to modes of performance analysis which accommodates the exploration of such offstage displays and raises the issue of the blurring of boundaries between process, practice, and performance in the field of mentalism.

It should be noted that my notion of paraperformance differs substantially from what Schechner has described as 'believed-in performances' in which 'people are who they perform, playing their social and/or personal identities: judges, accused, rabbis, lawyers, doctors, teachers, activists, bus drivers, lovers, whoever.'[116] These performances, which have been extensively theorized by sociologist Erving Goffman are an end, in and of themselves, and do not exist specifically to impact the reception of more conventionally framed performances.[*] Paraperformances, in contrast,

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[113] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. p. 244.
[114] Turner, Victor with Edie Turner. 'Performing Ethnography.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 324.
[115] Turner, Victor with Edie Turner. 'Performing Ethnography.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 324.
[116] Schechner, Richard. 'Believed-in Theatre.' *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts.* Vol. 2. No. 2. 1997. p. 75.
[*] My notion of paraperformance also differs substantially from what Polish director Jerzy Grotowski described as 'paratheatre' which sought to dissolve the conventional boundaries between actor and audience, turning performances into shared experiences. (Schechner. *Performance Theory.* 1988. p. 122).

simultaneously exist as both performance and pseudo-performance; as covert performances nested within ostensibly conventional ones.

It should further be noted that mentalism is not the only form of performance to contain elements of paraperformance. Many method actors, for instance, put significant effort into playing the role of the method actor offstage, allowing their offstage paraperformances to alter perceptions of their onstage portrayals. Jared Leto's offstage tactics while preparing for the role of the Joker in the 2016 film *Suicide Squad,* for instance, attracted more attention than his onscreen portrayal.[117] Likewise, Daniel Day Lewis, who has been described by *Vanity Fair* as being 'famously method'[118] announced his retirement from acting just ahead of the release of the 2017 film *Phantom Thread* – in which he played an upscale dressmaker – resulting in a flurry of publicity and rumours speculating that Lewis intended to pursue a career in dressmaking.[119] Along similar lines, artists such as Salvador Dali or Andy Warhol seemed to devote considerable effort to playing the role of the artist. In the case of art, the process of creation often becomes part of the artistic product itself, and thus, the creation process may be approached as paraperformance.

Professional wrestlers famously engage in paraperformances off the screen and out of the ring. Until recently, in the professional wrestling industry, breaking character in public – known as "breaking kayfabe" – was a forbidden and punishable offense. Comedian Andy Kaufman also famously engaged in frame-blurring offstage behaviour which was, in fact, a series of complex paraperformances. Kaufman, for example, went to great lengths to make it appear that he and his alter ego Tony Clifton were two different people. Many rock stars are also remembered for such legendary – but calculated – offstage "antics" such as the contract stipulation of *Van Halen's* David Lee Roth requiring bowls of M&Ms in his dressing rooms with all of the brown M&Ms removed.

All such behaviour may be analysed as performance. Yet these "performances" were never intended to stand alone. Rather these paraperformances were part of a larger end-game and were primarily intended to manipulate the context of more conventionally framed performances such as wrestling matches, stand-up comedy appearances, and rock concerts. Today, the blurring of

[117] Miller, Matt. 'Can Jared Leto Shut Up About His Method Acting in Suicide Squad? We get it.' *Esquire.com*. 2 Aug 2016.
[118] Miller, Julie. 'Here's How Seriously Daniel-Day Lewis Took His Role in *Phantom Thread.*' *Vanityfair.com* 15 Dec 2017.
[119] Jagernauth, Kevin. 'Daniel Day-Lewis Has Reportedly Become A Dressmaker.' *ThePlayList.net*. 27 Jun 2017.

onstage and offstage boundaries has been accelerated by social media, websites, the ubiquity of cameras and screens, and the explosion of Orwellian post-truth concepts – such as "fake news", "alternative facts", "deep fakes" and "reality television" – all of which have contributed to the erosion of the influencing power of an apparently objective truth. This, in turn, has rapidly increased the prevalence of, and the possibilities for, paraperformance.

Practice-Led Research

Building on my thirty plus years' experience as a conjurer, my methodology employed a dual approach in which I both sincerely *became a mentalist* and simultaneously *went "undercover" amongst mentalists* for purposes of this research. Thus, the practice-led research methodology which I employed contained aspects of ethnography (studying mentalists) and autoethnography (studying myself *as* a mentalist) and contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding practice as research. Through an extended application of this practice-led research, I was able to conduct a detailed theoretical examination of performances of mentalism as well as to gain first-hand experiential knowledge of the process of *becoming* a mentalist. That is to say, I gained embodied knowledge of how it *feels* to give demonstrations of purported psychic ability with the aim of convincing spectators.

My methodological approach, therefore, contributes significantly to research on mentalism and understandings of "performativity" and "dark play" as well as methodological approaches in practice-led research. On the basis of this psychophysical exploration, I argue that a new paradigm of mentalism is emerging and that this paradigm requires a shift of current discourse to one which looks beyond questions about the nature of psychic phenomena, and toward frameworks of performativity and play in which the boundaries of performance are often intentionally obscured.

Methodology

In order to gain an insider's perspective into the secretive, liminal, and ersatz field of psychic arts, both on and offstage, it was necessary to develop a specific methodological approach which would enable me to safely, ethically, and efficiently explore the psychic arts through performance and play. In *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance,* Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson assert

that today performances happen 'in many other places than in theatres' and note that audiences of such performances are often 'transformed into spectators, witnesses, observers, voyeurs and the rest.'[120] The authors argue that *practice-led research* is well suited to better understanding 'human performance practices' that are 'especially diverse and challenging in their aesthetics and cultural locations.'[121] Given the performative and paraperformative nature of mentalism and psychic arts, which often take place outside of the boundaries and locations of conventional performance, I elected to ground my methods in a praxis entailing practice-led research.

In 'Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-led Research,' Graeme O'Sullivan writes: 'In its broadest sense, practice-led research is circumscribed by an equally important emphasis placed on the artist-practitioner, the creative product and the critical process.'[122] O'Sullivan further describes practice-led research as 'a process of inquiry that involves creative action, critical reflection'[123] and 'reflexive action.'[124] Thus, in addition to the theoretical areas previously introduced, it was also necessary to conduct a thorough examination of the history and secret techniques of mentalists and psychics. These proprietary techniques – ranging from sleight-of-hand and mnemonics to psychological cold reading and muscle reading – can only be fully understood through embodied practice and phenomenological experience. Just as my theoretical exploration suggested directions for my practice, critical reflection on my practice suggested new areas for theoretical analysis. By conducting an ongoing exegesis throughout the entire period of my research, I was able to organize and make theoretical sense of my practice as my research progressed. In this way, I consider my praxis to consist of – as Hazel Smith and Roger Dean have suggested – 'research-led practice as well as practice-led research.'[125]

Despite the complexity of the reflexive relationships between practice, reflection, and theoretical analysis, my primary method was largely – as Brad Haseman proposed in his 2006 article 'A manifesto for performative research' – 'to "dive in", to commence practising to see what

[120] Kershaw, Baz and Helen Nicholson. *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance.* 2011. p. 1.
[121] Kershaw, Baz and Helen Nicholson. *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance.* 2011. p. 1.
[122] O'Sullivan, Graeme. 'Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-led Research.' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* Eds. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean. 2009. p. 47.
[123] O'Sullivan, Graeme. 'Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-led Research.' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* Eds. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean. 2009. p. 51.
[124] O'Sullivan, Graeme. 'Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-led Research.' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* Eds. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean. 2009. p. 48.
[125] Smith, Hazel and Roger Dean. *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* 2009. p. 9.

emerges.'[126] Robin Nelson, in *Practice-as-Research: in performance and screen,* has similarly noted that 'creative practices do not typically construct rational arguments and adduce evidence to support them.'[127] Likewise, Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe, in 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers' have described this reflexive process as 'one of those "artist-like processes" which occurs when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response.'[128]

Specifically tailoring a praxis for this research required a flexible methodology and a research question which evolved in conjunction with the various stages of my ongoing research. As part of my praxis, I devised and performed 13 original productions, demonstrations, or pseudo-lectures. These performances included purported demonstrations of telepathy, super-psychology, precognition, spirt channelling, and hypnosis. For one of these lecture/demonstrations, I was awarded first prize in *The Creative Mind* category at the 2015 UCC Doctoral Showcase. Another of these performances was nationally televised on *Ireland's Got Talent*. This praxis also involved countless paraperformances throughout my three-year immersion in the social role of a psychic. As a part of this immersion, for instance, I obtained certification in parapsychology through the University of Edinburgh.[*] As Marvin Kaye has noted, 'the vocabulary and techniques of genuine psychic research add an aura of authenticity to performances [of mentalism].'[129] By becoming more informed and credentialed – *in real life* – regarding the nature of the abilities which I was purporting to possess, I endeavoured to blur the distinction between performance and everyday life; to gain insight into the experience of performing from a shut-eye perspective.

The knowledge gained through this certification would also enable me to execute *Project Viola Ten,*[*] in which I – while operating as a shut-eye – aimed to convince fellow researchers of the

[126] Haseman, Brad. 'A manifesto for performative research.' *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*. 2006. p. 100.
[127] Nelson, Robin. 'Practice-as-Research Knowledge and their Place in the Academy.' *Practice-as-Research in Performance and Screen*. Eds. Ludivine Allegue, et al. 2009. p. 19.
[128] Haseman, Brad and Daniel Mafe. 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers.' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* Eds. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean. 2009. p. 219.
[*] While parapsychological research in and of itself is widely considered to be pseudo-science, the historical study *of* parapsychology is a legitimate and fascinating topic.
[129] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 31.
[*] 'Project Viola Ten.' p. 89.

possibility of telepathic-esque communication under controlled laboratory conditions. To accomplish this within an ethically sound frame, I first secured informed consent of the lead researcher and recommended that a confidential debriefing session take place at the conclusion of the project. This project, in turn, led to the creation of *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit*, a one-man show which was deeply entangled with historical and contemporary parapsychological research, as well as with my personal experience during *Project Viola Ten.*

This aspect of my research method and its immersive/liminal process is reflective of Haseman and Mafe's observations on the reflexive process of practice-led research. They write: 'Within this looping process authorial control can be fragmented, raising doubts about purpose, efficacy and control. A kind of chaos results and it is from within this chaos and complexity that the results of the creative research will begin to emerge and be worked through.'[130] The authors conclude that reflexive practice-led research is:

> …unruly, ambiguous and marked by extremes of interpretive anxiety for the reflexive researcher. It is this way *because* it is deeply emergent in nature and the need to tolerate the ambiguity and make it sensible through heightened reflexivity is a part of what it is to be a successful practice-led researcher in the creative arts.[131]

In a 2006 report for the Creativity and Cognition Studios entitled *Practice-based Research: A Guide,* Linda Candy describes practice-led research as being 'concerned with the nature of practice' and leading 'to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice.'[132] In other words, 'The main focus of practice-led research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice.'[133] Smith and Dean, likewise, assert that practice-led research 'highlights the insights, conceptualization and theorisation which can arise when artists reflect on and document their own creative practice.'[134]

Candy, as well as Smith and Dean, differentiate between *practice-led* and *practice-based* research in which 'a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge'[135] and 'the creative work

[130] Haseman, Brad and Daniel Mafe. 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers.' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* Eds. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean. 2009. p. 219.
[131] Haseman, Brad and Daniel Mafe. 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers.' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* Eds. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean. 2009. p. 220.
[132] Candy, Linda. *Practice-based Research: A Guide*. Creativity and Cognition Studios Report. 2006. Summary.
[133] Candy, Linda. *Practice-based Research: A Guide*. Creativity and Cognition Studios Report. 2006. Summary.
[134] Smith, Hazel and Roger Dean. *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* 2009. p. 5.
[135] Candy, Linda. *Practice-based Research: A Guide*. Creativity and Cognition Studios Report. 2006. Summary.

acts as a form of research.'[136] According to these guidelines, my research methodology may be clearly identified as being practice-led. My body of practice was extremely significant for my research, in that it allowed me to experientially and phenomenologically confront many of the critical issues relating to the performance of mentalism/psychic arts and to becoming a mentalist/psychic. This, in turn, allowed me to identify, view, and address my thesis question from a uniquely informed perspective.

The primary aim of my research was to define mentalism – and to identify the many ways in which people perform mentalism – in order to thoroughly position mentalism along the broad spectrum of performance. To achieve this, it was necessary to study the shrouded field both from inside and outside. Thus, my aim was not to use my 13 public performances and extensive paraperformances to experimentally confirm or refute particular theoretical hypotheses; nor were these performances intended to be products or artefacts of original knowledge. Rather, these performances and paraperformances were by-products of my learning process as I gained the experience of becoming, and being, a mentalist/psychic.

My research, thus, was concerned with advancing knowledge *about and within* the field of mentalism. My body of practice explored various technical and theoretical matters as the need arose, enabling me to better understand the process of performing mentalism effectively and convincingly. The experiences which I gained through practice – by grappling with theoretical questions both on stage and *in real life* – at times, produced insights which ran contrary to conventionally held wisdom both within and about the field. Some of these insights pointed toward not yet recognized potential social benefits of mentalism and psychic arts, while others illuminated problematic limitations and inherent risks. Ultimately, I developed an original theoretical perspective on the practice of mentalism and psychic arts as a popular form of performance which has not yet been adequately acknowledged or analysed within the field of Performance Studies.

It is my contention that this new understanding of mentalism has operational significance *within* the field of mentalism, as well as theoretical significance *about* the field. Therefore, in 'Crossing the Threshold'[*] and 'Behind the Curtain,'[**] the reflections of my 13 public performances and

[136] Smith, Hazel and Roger Dean. *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts.* 2009. p. 5.
[*] 'Crossing the Threshold.' pp. 80-92.
[**] 'Behind the Curtain.' pp. 95-122.

numerous paraperformances are presented as support for my theoretical findings rather than as evidence of those findings. In line with the practice-led research models previously discussed, it is important to note that my performances and paraperformances were the process, but not the product, of my reflexive practice-led research.

My methodology is in line with Dwight Conquergood's description of an 'emergent genre of performance studies scholarship that epitomize[s] this text-performance hybridity.'[137] According to Conquergood, 'A number of performance studies-allied scholars create performances as a supplement to, not substitute for, their written research,' using the 'the creative works' in order to 'deepen experiential and participatory engagement with materials for both the researcher and her audience.'[138] Conquergood further argues that the 'textocentrism' of academia – which elevates 'knowing about' at the expense of 'knowing how' – amounts to an 'academic apartheid' or 'epistemic violence' which subjugates (emphasis added) 'the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert – *and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out*.'[139]

Practice Overview

In order to conduct the research previously indicated, I devised 13 performances – at times, collaboratively – for stage or screen. The performances of my project, however, did not *only* take place within the conventional frames and boundaries of stage and screen. During the five years in which I conducted this praxis – three of which were spent immersed in the social role of the psychic – I endeavoured to blur the boundaries and frames of my performances and sought to make my offstage and onstage personae indistinguishable. This process included not only acting and pretence, but also what I describe as *dark method acting,* in which through repetition and consistency, I attempted to even somewhat blur these boundaries in my own mind; attempting to progress from open-eye to shut-eye. As my practice progressed in this direction, it became

[137] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 376.
[138] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 376.
[139] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. pp. 370, 377.

necessary to research not only methods for fabrication, but also the alleged phenomena which I was ostensibly demonstrating.

Thus, while I created 13 original performances for the stage or screen, from a one-man show to an educational film strip – and performed these creations numerous times in venues across the globe, ranging from Irish national television to the annual Masonic widows' luncheon – the entirety of my performances were not clearly delineated by the stage and screen. For example, *Project Viola Ten*[*] was performed for an audience of fewer than six people, over a duration of more than a year, and culminated in a series of laboratory tests and a pseudo "documentary" far removed from the environment and expectations of a "theatrical" performance. Throughout this dissertation, therefore, the term "practice" is used to indicate not only my "theatrical" performances, but also my immersion in the social role of the mentalist/psychic off stage and screen. This is not to diminish the importance of my more public performances, but rather, to give sufficient consideration to the symbiosis between my "offstage" and "onstage" processes, which served as mutually sustaining catalysts and *enablers*.

During this three-year immersion, these performances – at least in some small way – were a part of nearly every social interaction of which I took part. Dark and deep play inevitably touched nearly every facet of my life, from fatherhood to friendships. The ethical implications of such a statement are considerable. After all, performance artists, method actors, and psychics often operate within a framework of ethical ambivalence not available to the practitioner/researcher. With this in mind, I will discuss relevant ethical considerations in the coming pages. Curiously, during this period of time, I even had numerous dreams – involving friends or loved ones in different countries and continents – which were subsequently revealed to bear striking similarity to events which were transpiring in the lives of those people at that time. I have detailed the circumstances of one such dream later in 'Behind the Curtain.'[*] In saying this, I am not suggesting that my dream was *in fact* telepathic. But rather, an excellent example of the performativity of psychic phenomena and identities which I subsequently examine in 'Beyond Psychic.'[**]

[*] 'Project Viola Ten.' p. 89.
[*] 'Behind the Curtain.' pp. 95-122.
[**] 'Beyond Psychic.' pp. 211-250.

I do not consider my stage and screen performances to be of greater or lesser importance than my offstage performances. Indeed, in many instances, these offstage performances significantly altered the ways in which I viewed, not only my research subject, but even myself. I describe these dark and deep performances which took place beyond the conventional boundaries of the stage and screen – yet nevertheless were intended to impact the contexts in which my conventional performances were embedded – as *paraperformances*. Given that my thesis question, my practice, and my findings all revolved around areas at, around, or beyond the margins of theatrical conventions, throughout this dissertation I will consider these paraperformances and everyday life performances alongside my theatrical performances on the stage or screen.

In order to fill an existing gap within Performance Studies literature, I placed myself, quite literally, within that liminal gap in order to describe what I found there. My practice both guided – and was guided by – my theoretical exploration of performances of mentalism and psychic arts. The purpose of that praxis was to assist my efforts to define mentalism, to assess the various ways in which people perform mentalism, and to effectively situate performances of mentalism and psychic arts along the broad spectrum of performance. In conducting this research, I endeavoured to gain an embodied experience as well as an insider's perspective into this popular form of performance which has been widely misunderstood or ignored in the literature of Performance Studies. In so doing, I aimed to develop new knowledge about the performance and performativity of mentalism and the psychic arts. The theoretical exploration which makes up the latter parts of this dissertation is an attempt to examine the conundrums which were surfaced by my practice. I engaged in this exploration in order to *make sense of my own practice*, and by extension, the many facets of the performance of mentalism.

As previously noted, I began this research from an open-eye perspective. However – much as Orson Welles described[*] – this perspective quickly grew cloudy. For instance, in the first public performance of my praxis, *Visions and Revisions,*[**] I gave numerous demonstrations which employed genuine psychological and physiological principles such as ideomotor response, suggestion/hypnosis, cold reading, unconscious influence, and body language. While I did not find these techniques to be particularly effective or reliable, the fact remains that neither deception, nor

[*] Welles statements are discussed on pp. 17-18.
[**] 'Visions and Revisions.' p. 80.

self-deception, were involved in these demonstrations. Consequently, my open-eyed perspective was almost immediately blurred.

I subsequently attempted – through a variety of tactics[***] – to wilfully attain the shut-eye perspective. I attempted to blur, to some extent, the boundaries between fiction and reality not only in the minds of spectators, but in my own mind as well. Like Welles, I never completely abandoned my skepticism or self-awareness. I did, however, adopt an open mindset toward the possibility of parapsychological phenomena. I maintained that the findings of psychologist Daryl Bem regarding "retroactive influence," published in the highly credible *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2011, provided some legitimacy to my open-minded attitude.[140] Nevertheless, the publication of multiple replication attempts which failed to validate Bem's results ultimately led me to adopt the more objective position that no credible and replicable evidence of parapsychological phenomena has yet been produced.[141]

I describe the cloudy territory which I occupied – between open-eye and shut-eye – as *wink-eye.* Wink-eye mentalists/psychics are not shut-eyes but *play the role* – either sincerely or cynically – of shut-eyes. Wink-eyes, therefore, maintain a *pretence* of belief in the reality of their performances beyond conventional boundaries. Take for instance, mentalist Max Maven's response when asked by Donna Zuckerbrot how he responds to the fact that many people think that he *really* reads people's minds. Maven smiles coyly and smugly replies, 'Well, your question presumes that I can't.'[142]

The dark nature of this play – in my personal experience – may lead to a cognitive dissonance in which performers may paradoxically be aware of their deceptions while also believing in the existence of the phenomena which they are faking. Consequently, my praxis was impacted by the subjectivity which must accompany any first-hand phenomenological exploration of such blurred areas. This subjectivity carried a range of related biases determined by my specific positioning at the outset of this research which was centred on the exploration of techniques which could be

[***] Discussed in 'Behind the Curtain.' pp. 95-122.
[140] Bem, Daryl. 'Feeling the future: experimental evidence for anomalous retroactive influences on cognition and affect.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* Vol. 100. No. 3. Mar 2011.
[141] Wiseman, et al. 'Failing the Future: Three Unsuccessful Attempts to Replicate Bem's 'Retroactive Facilitation of Recall' Effect.' *PLoS ONE.* 7(3). Mar 2012.
[142] Zuckerbrot, Donna. *Max Maven - A Fabulous Monster.* 2006. *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* 2017. Vol. 4. 0:29:25.

successfully performed without deception. In later stages of my practice, I found it problematic to seriously critique mentalist/psychic performances, while at the same time, endeavouring to *become* a mentalist/psychic. I felt compelled to do my performances as effectively and deceptively as possible – to *make the most* of this form of performance *as it is* – rather than focussing on the problematic shortcomings. These issues are elaborated upon in 'Banishing the Spirits.'[*]

In retrospect, it is apparent that during the latter stages of my practice, my mindset was overly focussed on the positive aspects of mentalism and psychic performances within existing frameworks. My efforts during this time were directed toward learning to think and behave like a mentalist/psychic. This approach made it difficult for me to simultaneously undermine the foundations of my own performances. The ethical hazards, however, were shortcomings which I could not put off until later. Having initiated this research from an open-eye perspective, I could not ignore the ethical arguments against mentalism and psychic arts which have been forcefully asserted by skeptics and conjurers for more than a century. In time, my subjective research gave way to a more objective analysis in which I came to critique, not only mentalist/psychic performances, but also the incomplete and dogmatic arguments of skeptics and conjurers *against* these performances. Throughout the duration of my praxis, I continually questioned the ethics of my own practice, and never behaved or acted in any way which I had any reason to believe might negatively impact myself or others.

During the course of this research, I discovered that defining mentalism as "*pretending* to be psychic" is problematic, since all psychics are necessarily pretending on some level. To define mentalism as "*knowingly* pretending to be psychic" is also problematic since it cannot be said with any certainty what psychics and clairvoyants such as Uri Geller or Derek Acorah actually believe. Thus, the definition must be based on "*the claims*" of mentalists to be doing something which is in some way psychic. Therefore, I also discovered that my performances of alleged parapsychological phenomena covered only a fraction of the premises of mentalism.

It is necessary to admit that my practice was not and (for ethical reasons) could not be robust enough to cover the entire range of mentalism from first-hand experience. In other words, one thing I learned from my practice was that I was investigating something which went beyond the

[*] 'Banishing the Spirits.' pp. 124-170.

limits of my own personal practice. However, I do believe that my practice gave me enough insight to accomplish my task of defining and situating mentalism in its many facets along the broad spectrum of performance. When appropriate, I do provide examples from my practice as support for my arguments. However, I have resisted discussing my practice when it does not directly contribute to my primary arguments. Since my practice was not all encompassing, I have tried to avoid overemphasising my own practice at the expense of – for instance – shut-eye fortune telling, spirit communication, or common everyday performances of precognition or telepathy.

Marvin Kaye writes that 'the impact of [mentalism] depends on the appearance of authenticity'[143] and is 'connected with… things that depend for their potency on the possibility that they might be true.'[144] One dilemma posed by my methodology was the fact that speaking bluntly/honestly about my performances would paradoxically undermine my immersive role play and research objectives. At the same time, the failure to do so would undermine my credibility as a researcher and scholar. The need to preserve the apparent authenticity of my performance while striving to maintain my objectivity as a researcher, led to play on my part which was both deep and dark. I aimed – through the use of theories such as deep and dark play, make-belief performance, dark method acting, and paraperformance – to progress through different levels of "belief" in the "reality" of my performances. I was determined to (de)re-construct my body/mind, both psychologically and physically, so as to blur the boundaries between what I played at, and what I believed.

Literature Review

Just as those who have analysed mentalism have avoided doing so through the lens of Performance Studies, those who study performance have neglected to identify mentalism and psychic arts as a significant area of performance study. This omission is evident, for instance, in the many works of Richard Schechner. Schechner's broad approach to analysing performance covers all manner of behaviours including brushing one's teeth in the mirror and enacting gender stereotypes to professional wrestling and con games, yet performances of mentalism or psychic arts are conspicuously absent across his entire body of works.

[143] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 46.
[144] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 29.

In some regards, this omission might be explained by the difficulty in defining shapeshifting performances of mentalism which often make a claim to legitimacy by cloaking themselves in the trappings of other disciplines such as psychology, parapsychology, philosophical dualism, or quantum mechanics. This, in turn, might go some way toward explaining Schechner's emphasis on shamanism, even as he neglects to mention the hugely popular industry of stage mediumship and storefront psychics. Yet, Schechner does provide the necessary tools for conducting this analysis. His writings on play, performativity, and ritual provide the backbone for my theoretical analysis of the performance and performativity of mentalism and psychic arts. In a similar vein, I have also positioned the mentalist/psychic in and amongst the rich topography offered by sociologist Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959); the seminal theories of play in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1940)*;* and the foundational writings of Victor Turner on liminality and play.

In tandem with the anthropological approach to Performance Studies offered by Schechner and Turner – which may be argued to at times contain a problematic bias toward the Anglo-American-European positioning *vis a vis* the Other – I also give consideration to the 'hemispheric' approach to Performance Studies advanced by Diana Taylor in her monograph *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003). In this regard, I further look to the writings of, among others, Homi Bhabha on Otherness, Edward Said on Orientalism, and Judith Butler on gender and performativity. In pursuing this line of research, I frequently referred to *The Performance Studies Reader,* a diverse collection of essays edited by Henry Bial and intended as a 'companion'[145] to Schechner's introductory textbook.

In further examining performance, I found the writing of Bert O. States on the phenomenology of theatre and the modes of performance (2002) to be particularly helpful. Additionally, *The Death of Character* (1996) by Elinor Fuchs provided critical insight into the notion of character in postmodern theatre, while *The Comic 'I'* (2015) by Susanne Colleary provided critical insights about the nature of the personas projected by stand-up comedians during performance. I also found Aoife Monks' *The Actor in Costume* (2010) to be of great assistance in making sense of clothing, tattoos, and nudity in my performance and paraperformance.

[145] Bial, Henry. 'Introduction.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 3.

From mind reading and hypnotism, to fortune telling and mediumship, performances of mentalism and psychic arts take many forms. While scholarly research in these areas is scarce, the practical and autobiographical texts are virtually endless. In conducting this research, I surveyed dozens of such texts, ranging from how to fake psychic phenomena to how to allegedly develop real psychic abilities. Among the former are industry classics such as Tony Corinda's seminal *13 Steps to Mentalism* (1957) and spirit performer Eugene Burger's *Spirit Theatre* (1986). Among the latter are texts such as parapsychologist J.B. Rhine's *Extra-Sensory Perception* (1934) and mentalist Richard Osterlind's *Mind Over Matter: How to Develop Your ESP Abilities* (2010).

Among the scholarly works on various aspects of these performances, several were of value. Psychologist Peter Lamont's *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem* (2013), historian Barry Wiley's *The Thought Reader Craze: Victorian Science at the Enchanted Boundary* (2012), and religious historian and Women's Studies theorist Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America* (1989) adopted a historical approach and were useful in contextualizing various aspects of such performances.

In *Psychology of the Psychic* (1980 and 2000), psychologists David Marks and Richard Kammann examine several high-profile psychic case-studies within a psychological framework. Psychologist Richard Wiseman takes a similar approach in *Paranormality: Why We See What Isn't There* (2011) and in *Magic in Theory* (1999) co-written with Peter Lamont. In *Leaps of Faith: Science, Miracles, and the Search for Supernatural Consolation* (1996), neuropsychologist Nicholas Humphrey adopts a more complex framework, contextualizing psychic belief within a psychological framework and challenging these beliefs on philosophical grounds. Also of note is Jeffrey Kripal's 2010 *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* in which he suggests that psychic phenomena might be usefully examined through the lenses of literature or art.[146] The aforementioned texts approach performances of mentalism and psychic arts through multiple lenses and frameworks, but uniformly neglect to examine these performances *as performance*.

Jean Baudrillard's postmodern notion of hyperreality in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) provided a turning point for me, as I realized that performances of mentalism can be false, while seeming to be truer than reality. This, in turn, led to an examination of texts regarding the nature of deception

[146] Kripal, Jeffrey. *Authors of the Impossible.* 2010.

in entertainment, such as historian James Cook's 2001 *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum,* Richard Kilborn's 2003 *Staging the Real,* and philosopher Roland Barthe's 1957 essay on amateur (professional) wrestling entitled, 'The World of Wrestling.'

As I began to discover the absence of a functional distinction between performances of mentalism and performances of alleged psychic phenomena, my inquiry progressed through psychological questions of perception and belief to questions of consciousness within cognitive science. In this regard, the writing of philosopher Daniel Dennett – who occasionally discusses the topics of both conjuring and psychic phenomena – became increasingly important in terms of creating useful distinctions and definitions. Dennett's example of the "Tuned Deck" card trick in his 2013 *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking,* his 2003 article 'Explaining the Magic of Consciousness', and his forward for Nicholas Humphrey's 1996 *Leaps of Faith* all were of great assistance in providing an authoritative voice in an otherwise murky area.

I also attended several performances during the course of my praxis which I hold to be highly significant, including Ben Portsmouth's Elvis tribute *Taking Care of Elvis* (Everyman Theatre, Cork, 2015), spirit medium Derek Acorah's *The Psychic Ether* (Everyman Theatre, Cork, 2015), drag queen and Irish national treasure Panti Bliss' autobiographical one-(wo)man show *High Heels in Low Places* (Saint Luke's Church, Cork, 2016), the Celtic Championship Wrestling's *Revolution V* (Bishopstown GAA Club, 2017), Irish mentalist Keith Barry's *Hypno Magick* (Everyman Theatre, Cork, 2017), mentalist Derren Brown's *Underground* (Cork Opera House, 2018), Derek DelGaudio's acclaimed magic, storytelling, and conceptual art performance *In & Of Itself* (Daryl Roth Theatre, New York, 2018), and magician and performance artist David Blaine's *Real or Magic?* (Bord Gáis Energy Theatre, Dublin, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Dwight Conquergood has asserted that 'Performance Studies is uniquely suited for the challenge of braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing.'[147] In this practice-led research project – in addition to my first-hand embodied exploration of my subject matter – I explored a

[147] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 376.

diverse range of theories from performance studies, theatre, cognitive science, philosophy, applied psychology, gender studies, cultural studies, postmodernism, and anthropology. I contend that such a diverse approach is critical in order to identify the many diverse facets of mentalism and the psychic arts.

Debates surrounding the existence, or lack thereof, of psychic phenomena – which includes telepathy, precognition, retrocognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, mesmerism, and mediumship – have raged for centuries, both within and beyond the laboratories and halls of academia. At least since the founding of *The Society for Psychical Research* in 1882, scientists and philosophers have sought, but failed, to provide incontrovertible physical evidence of the psychic phenomena seemingly suggested by phenomenological human experience; of which many such alleged case studies were rigorously collected and categorized by parapsychologist Louisa Rhine.[148]

Today, the debate continues. While many studies have decisively failed to find evidence of psychic phenomena,[149] numerous other studies have claimed to – or seemed to – find statistically significant evidence.[150] Accusations of fraud, incompetence, self-delusion, and chance, however, have challenged the legitimacy of those findings, none of which have consistently survived independent attempts at replication.[151] In turn, those conducting the failed replication attempts have been accused of fraud, incompetence, self-delusion, and chance.[152] This progress, so to speak, is well summarized by philosopher Daniel Dennett who writes that 'only a few arguably significant but scarcely detectable statistical anomalies so far remain unaccounted for. As objective scrutiny

[148] Rhine, Louisa E. *The Invisible Picture: A Study of Psychic Experiences.* 1981.
[149] Moulton, Samuel T. and Stephen M. Kosslyn. 'Using Neuroimaging to Resolve the Psi Debate.' *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience.* Vol. 20. No. 1. January 2008. pp. 182-192; Engber, Daniel. 'Daryl Bem Proved ESP Is Real Which means science is broken.*' Slate.com*. 17 May 2017.
[150] Rhine, J. B. *Extra-Sensory Perception.* Boston Society for Psychic Research. 1934; Targ, Russel and Harold Puthoff. *Nature.* No. 252. 1974. pp. 602–607; Bem, Daryl. 'Feeling the future: experimental evidence for anomalous retroactive influences on cognition and affect.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* Vol. 100. No. 3. Mar 2011. pp. 407-25.
[151] Marks, David. 'Investigating the paranormal.' Nature. Vol. 320. No. 13. 1996; Wiseman, et al. 'Failing the Future: Three Unsuccessful Attempts to Replicate Bem's 'Retroactive Facilitation of Recall' Effect.' *PLoS ONE.* 7(3). Mar 2012; Wiseman, Richard, et al. 'Can animals detect when their owners are returning home? An experimental test of the 'psychic pet' phenomenon.' *British Journal of Psychology.* Vol. 89. Part 3. Mar 2009.
[152] Engber, Daniel. 'Daryl Bem Proved ESP Is Real Which means science is broken.*' Slate.com*. 17 May 2017; Sheldrake, Rupert. 'Commentary on Wiseman, Smith and Milton.' *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research.* Vol. 63. October 1999.

approaches, these phenomena always evaporate, leaving at most the faintest trace of a possibility of a real effect.'[153]

Consequently, it is not fair to say that evidence of parapsychological phenomena has not been found by credible researchers. Taken in context, however, the evidence has not been sufficiently replicable or robust to consider any of these phenomena to be scientifically proven or likely provable. Therefore, after more than a century of the colourful, but cyclical, inconclusions of parapsychology and psychical research, I suggest a different approach to what might be described as *the hard problem of psychic phenomena.*

Philosophy/Cognitive Science

Philosopher David Chalmers uses the term 'hard problem' to describe one of the most significant questions at the centre of dualism: The question of the subjective experience of consciousness.[154] Dennett, however, among others, has refuted the so-called *hard problem.* Dennett has likened the hard problem to a century-old conjuring trick with playing cards created by Ralph Hull, known as "the tuned deck." Dennett has selected the tuned deck because it was among the earliest card tricks to systematically cross-cancel its own techniques. In other words, the secret to the tuned deck is that there is no *singular* secret. Rather, a combination of techniques are progressively employed over six phases, in order to continuously preclude the techniques not currently in play. Dennett, in the *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology,* writes that 'the trick, in its entirety, is in the name of the trick, "The Tuned Deck", and more specifically, in one word – "The"!'[155] According to Dennett, Hull was able to conceal 'the fact that he was doing a grab bag of different tricks by the simple expedient of the definite article.'[156] On the hard problem of consciousness, Dennett similarly argues:

> …when David Chalmers talks about the *hard problem,* he is innocently playing a trick on himself and others… he is giving a name to a problem that doesn't even

[153] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. Forward by Daniel Dennett. p. x.
[154] Chalmers, David. "Facing up to the problem of consciousness." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 2(3). 1995. pp. 200–219.
[155] Dennett, Daniel. 'Explaining the "Magic" of Consciousness.' *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*. 1(1). 2003. p. 18.
[156] Dennett, Daniel. 'Explaining the "Magic" of Consciousness.' *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*. 1(1). 2003. p. 18.

> really exist. The *problems* of consciousness are how all of the various effects work. And once you've got an account of all those effects – that's what Chalmers calls the easy problems – you're home, you've explained consciousness. Because there isn't any further problem – the hard problem – there just seems to be.[157]

Dennett, however, notes that even the "easy" problems are 'still difficult enough.'[158] It is my contention that, like consciousness, purportedly psychic phenomena cannot – and will not – be explained, because numerous natural phenomena, ranging from cognitive to social, have been cross-categorically grouped in such a way as to create a non-existent and unresolvable problem.

Psychologist David Marks has noted that 'Parascience has so far failed to produce a single repeatable finding and, until it does, will continue to be viewed as an incoherent collection of belief systems steeped in fantasy, illusion and error.'[159] While psychic phenomena do not appear to be real on any empirical physical level, to many, *the phenomenological experience of psychic-ness seems to be very real, indeed.*[160] Despite the lack of evidence, the public continues to be fascinated with such phenomena, as evidenced by the continued existence of performances of mentalism and allegedly genuine psychic ability which depend upon this fascination.

I argue that this paradox may be best resolved through a *deflationary approach*[161] to the *hard problem*[162] of psychic phenomena – to borrow terms from Dennett and Chalmers – in which these phenomena are framed, not as a single psychical question, but as a series of smaller behavioural and psychological questions. The answers to these smaller problems – I would argue – may be found through numerous well-known theories spanning the theoretical areas previously noted.

I hold Performance Studies to be particularly relevant, as it provides a theoretical basis for my assessment of performances of mentalism and psychic arts as forms of performative deep and/or dark play; *a transformative enactment of the imaginary*. Given the performative and deeply, darkly playful nature of mentalism and psychic arts, I contend that the above theories may be most effectively navigated through a process of reflexive practice-led research, allowing the

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[157] Dennett, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - The Tuned Deck and The Hard Problem of Consciousness.' *YouTube*. 26 May 2012. 0:5:35.
[158] Dennett, Daniel C. *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking.* 2013. p. 310.
[159] Marks, David. 'Investigating the paranormal.' *Nature*. Vol. 320. No. 13. 1996. p. 119.
[160] Rhine, Louisa E. *The Invisible Picture: A Study of Psychic Experiences.* 1981.
[161] Dennett, Daniel C. *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking.* 2013. p. 186.
[162] Chalmers, David. "Facing up to the problem of consciousness." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. 2(3). 1995. pp. 200–219. p. 2.

researcher/practitioner to explore additional facets of the above theoretical issues in an embodied sense and in the course of "doing."

Liminality, Play, Make-Belief, and Dark Play

Ultimately, it was theories of play and performance advanced by Richard Schechner which enabled me – with the benefit of time – to make retrospective sense of my experiences and to tease out the efficacy of my practice. Without this theoretical engagement, it would not have been possible to view mentalism in its wider situated contexts, such as within the broader spectrum of performance between ritual and entertainment – and as an ultimately physical form of play – deeply intertwined with notions of liminality and performativity. In my journey into liminality, I discovered that questions of make-believe, belief, disbelief, and the willing suspension of disbelief, are less relevant than what Schechner has described as 'make-belief' in which 'there is an intentional blurring of the boundary between what is fictionalized, constructed, made to order and what might be actually real.'[163] Ultimately, Schechner's notions of 'dark play' and 'make-belief' performance provided a theoretical model which encompassed my entire body of practice-as-research both on and off the stage.

Schechner observes that dark play 'may be conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark when some or even all of the players don't know they are playing.' [164] Schechner notes that dark play continues 'even though individual players may feel insecure, threatened, harassed, and abused.'[165] In dark or 'risky' play, according to Schechner, 'the message "this is play" is intentionally omitted or disguised.'[166] Whether with eyes shut, open, or winking, the nature of dark play for mentalists is to step into the social role of the psychic; to live the role. The ethical considerations of such ideas are not to be taken lightly and I look closely at the mentalist's responsibility in this regard – both regarding the safety of spectators and the safety of the performer – in the final pages of this chapter.

[163] Brady, Sara. *Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror: "Whatever it Takes."* 2012.
[164] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual*. 1993. p. 36.
[165] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 27.
[166] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 84.

Anglo-American-Eurocentrism, Hemispherism, and Ethnoscenology

While formulating my arguments regarding the complex network of theories which I regard as inseparable from performances of mentalism and psychic arts, additional theories continually arose, threatening an ever-broadening theoretical frame. These theories did not always result from increasing specificity, but sometimes, from questioning the larger contexts in which those theories were embedded. In other words, even as I dug deeper, larger contexts appeared against which my prior judgements needed to be further examined.

In addition to the problematic traditions of patriarchy and cultural appropriation entangled with mentalism and psychic performance, it is also the case that Performance Studies is, in some regards, entangled with the same problematic traditions. To address this, I give consideration to Diana Taylor's Hemispheric Approach to Performance Studies as well as the Ethnoscenology model developed at the University of Paris VIII which rigorously seeks to 'avoid any form of ethnocentrism in the study of the performing arts and practices in their cultural, historical, social context' by refusing to privilege the "Western theatre model."'[167] Ethnoscenology, according to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'does not take text as its point of departure, but rather the "knowing body" and the corporal dimension of performance.'[168] In 'Banishing the Spirits,'[*] I reflect on these approaches to Performance Studies while interrogating the aspects of patriarchy, post-colonialism, and cultural appropriation which are embedded in performances of mentalism and psychic arts – and by extension – in my own practice.

Post-Cartesian Approach

The complex discoveries made in conjunction with my praxis largely began with a search for the physical within performances of mentalism which – it is important to note – often purport to be almost entirely mental. I began this search by embracing the post-Cartesian rejection of dualist notions of immaterial properties of the mind; a rejection that contemporary performances of

[167] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 'Performance Studies.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 46.
[168] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 'Performance Studies.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 46.
[*] 'Banishing the Spirits.' pp. 124-170.

mentalism may no longer comfortably ignore. In fact, the ramifications of this dilemma may be readily observed in the popular mentalism framework of "psychological entertainment" which encourages audience members to believe that the demonstrations of the mentalist are accomplished not through psychic or immaterial properties of the mind, but rather through advanced – but in reality fictional – psychological tactics such as subliminal influence or neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

My post-Cartesian approach necessarily dispensed with fixed notions of character and essence, or essentialist perceptions of character, allowing for – and at times calling for – fragmented or postmodern techniques. This, in turn, sits well with what Elinor Fuchs has described as 'the death of character' in 'theatre after modernism,'[169] as well as with what Richard Schechner has termed the 'double negative' in which an actor is both *not* the portrayed character and *not, not* the portrayed character.[170] Schechner has also described this as a 'denial of a denial'[171] which is an apt description of post-Cartesian performances of mentalism, which are often presented – not as being entirely real – but as *not being entirely fake*.

Postmodernism

The theoretical exploration of ritual and belief led me to investigate, for better and for worse, the theoretical connections between mentalism and postmodernism. While post-Cartesian performances of mentalism display many postmodern characteristics, psychic premises – which predate even modernism – can hardly be described as a postmodern form. Still, postmodernist ideas can shed much practical and aesthetic – if not philosophical – light on contemporary performances of mentalism. There, I found a compelling explanation for much of the seemingly absurd, or discordant, behaviour of contemporary mentalists. I propose the terms *metamentalism*, and *wink-eye*[*] to facilitate a discussion of these ideas.

[169] Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character.* 1996.
[170] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. pp. 72-73.
[171] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Restored Behaviour")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:0:55.
[*] I would like to acknowledge bizarrist and ghost hunter Philemon Vanderbeck for surfacing the term.

In writing on performance, Phillip Auslander describes 'metacomedians' such as Andy Kaufman and Steve Martin 'whose performances took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject.'[172] It is my contention that post-Cartesian and post-truth provocations have sparked the emergence of a new meta, or wink-eye, paradigm of mentalism in which some open-eye mentalists play the role of method actors taking on the role of a shut-eye, or, true believer. While these wink-eye performances may be consumed by spectators as either real or make-believe, it is not strictly necessary to do either. As Peter Lamont has noted: beliefs about paranormal experiences 'cannot be captured by a simplistic dichotomy between belief and disbelief.'[173]

While mentalism is considered by some to be a branch of conjuring, I argue that contemporary performances of mentalism may be viewed as distinct from contemporary performances of conjuring – in which the deception is overt – with regard to levels of belief and disbelief, expected and required of spectators. Performances of mentalism ultimately are, I would argue, more closely related to cheating at cards, than to the performance of card tricks, due to the imperative that the practitioners of such crafts be neither detected *nor suspected* of artifice.[**] For this, performances of mentalism/psychic arts, are all the more insidious. Viewed from the inside, the danger of mentalism for the mentalist lies in the extent that this element of cheating becomes increasingly blurred as the performer engages more deeply in dark play. These frames and distinctions are examined in 'The End of Mind Reading.'[*]

Hyperreality

As one half of the Deans, I also explored the world of reality television, reaching the final level of auditions for both *Britain's Got Talent* and *Big Brother UK*. Subsequently, I appeared solo, as Edward James Dean, on *Ireland's Got Talent* and *Ireland's Got Mór Talent.* These were challenging and illuminating experiences, opening many questions of the real and the hyperreal.

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[172] Auslander, Philip. "Postmodernism and Performance." *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Steven Connor. 2004. p. 107.
[173] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 165.
[**] S.W. Erdnase, in *The Expert at the Card Table* exhorts crooked gamblers to employ artifice in 'such a manner that the most critical observer would not even suspect, let alone detect, the action' (1902, p. 84).
[*] 'The End of Mind Reading.' pp. 173-208.

Philosopher Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation,* describes hyperreality as being 'more real than real'[174] and producing 'a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world.'[175] According to Umberto Eco, hyperreality may be observed in 'the American imagination [which] demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred.'[176]

Such a concept aligns naturally, not only with reality television, but also with performances of mentalism and psychic arts, which are inevitably intertwined with ideas of simulation, nostalgia, and desire. Mentalism is the representation of an idea, and a copy of something which appears to have never actually existed. In this way, mentalism and reality television seem theoretically compatible. In fact, purported psychics have found new audiences with popular programmes such as the "reality" shows Living TV's *Most Haunted* and UPN's *Crossing Over with John Edward,* featuring the British medium Derek Acorah and the American medium John Edward, respectively. My intention was to claim to possess – and to apparently demonstrate – genuine psychic abilities on "reality" television. The steadfast defence of my claim, no matter how absurd or extreme, constituted the foundational rule of my dark play.

Conceptual Blending

Cognitive science, and in particular, conceptual blending theory advanced by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, offers another means of understanding the process of the willing suspension of disbelief. Formulated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 in reference to reader response to poetry, the willing suspension of disbelief, was applied to drama by Konstantin Stanislavski in approximately 1936. The willing suspension of disbelief allows spectators to play along with the imaginary circumstances of a performance as if those circumstances were real. The concept is tangentially related to Stanislavski's *magic if* which encourages actors to act *as if* they themselves were in the imaginary circumstances of the character.[177]

[174] Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1981. Trans. Sheila Glaser. 1994. p. 3.
[175] Lane, Richard. *Jean Baudrillard.* 2000. p. 30.
[176] Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality.* Trans. William Weaver. 1986. p.8.
[177] Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor Prepares.* 1936. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 2013. p. 40.

According to conceptual blending theory, spectators may – rather than suspending disbelief – simultaneously perceive both actor and character; both reality and fiction. In *Upon Such Sacrifices: An Ethic of Spectator Risk*, N.R. Helms writes – citing Bruce McConachie's research into the cognitive roles of spectators at performances – that spectators, '…do not need to suspend their disbelief because they are aware of actors and characters not as wholly discrete entities but as part of a single conceptual blend, the actor/character…'[178] Helms further notes that 'the spectator is aware of this blend and can consciously manipulate it (choosing to alternate focus between the actor and the character), the cognitive processes that connect spectators to actor/characters are largely automatic and unconscious.'[179]

Theatre, according to Helms, 'does not need to hide its theatricality, hoping to affect some Coleridgean suspension of disbelief.'[180] Helms notes, for instance, that Shakespearean theatre did not hide its theatricality and that the 'naturalistic effect is what Brecht rejected in nineteenth and early twentieth-century theatre.'[181] Noting that suspensions of disbelief threaten to 'engulf the passive spectator,' Helms writes, 'to invite spectators to risk, theatre itself must risk collapse by making its theatricality unavoidable.'[182]

Regarding suspensions of disbelief in performances of mentalism, Peter Lamont has pointed out that 'to truly experience an impossible event, you must observe an event that you truly believe to be impossible [and] a willing suspension of disbelief can only diminish that experience.'[183] Accordingly, performances of mentalism reject such suspensions, always insisting on the realness of the event, inviting spectators to risk, and requiring of them an active, rather than passive, role. Richard Schechner has noted that 'sometimes the lack of theatrical virtuosity adds to the power of a ritual performance by underlining the importance of the action and of the social-sacred role of

[178] Helms, N.R. 'Upon Such Sacrifices: An Ethic of Spectator Risk.' Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism. Vol. 27. No. 1. Fall 2012. p. 94.
[179] Helms, N.R. 'Upon Such Sacrifices: An Ethic of Spectator Risk.' Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism. Vol. 27. No. 1. Fall 2012. p. 94.
[180] Helms, N.R. 'Upon Such Sacrifices: An Ethic of Spectator Risk.' Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism. Vol. 27. No. 1. Fall 2012. p. 103.
[181] Helms, N.R. 'Upon Such Sacrifices: An Ethic of Spectator Risk.' Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism. Vol. 27. No. 1. Fall 2012. p. 103.
[182] Helms, N.R. 'Upon Such Sacrifices: An Ethic of Spectator Risk.' Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism. Vol. 27. No. 1. Fall 2012. p. 103.
[183] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 45.

the ritual performer.'[184] Along these lines, I investigate whether contemporary mentalists might be able to *show their theatricality* without undermining the effectiveness of their demonstrations.

Mentalists – like stand-up comics – project personas which purport to be, for the most part, their actual personality. Richard Schechner has described the 'multiple me's'[185] which can constitute a persona in role play, and for the most part, mentalists project personas which I describe as *quasi-characters.* Schechner goes on to observe that 'the fact that there are multiple "me's" in every person is not a sign of derangement but the way things are. The ways one performs one's selves are connected to the ways people perform others.'[186] Yet, the mentalist persona is also what I describe as an *anti-character*, in that the character exists chiefly to deny the existence of the character. This relates, as well, to what I describe as *dark method acting* – in which the portrayed persona is maintained outside of the boundaries of performance – not to inform the onstage character, but rather to obscure the boundaries of the performance and to *conceal the existence of* the artificial onstage persona.

Identity: Patriarchy and Postcolonialism

Investigating the liminality of mentalists – both as theorist and practitioner – I noted the "Othering" of the body which often accompanies such liminal positioning. I therefore conducted analyses of my own practice, as well as of performances of mentalism in general, through the theoretical lenses of gender studies and post-colonialism.[*] It is interesting to note that the evolution of the male dominated field of mind reading, from the ashes of the female dominated activities of spiritualism, has been a bumpy one, and the impact of this appropriation is evident in the bodies of contemporary mind readers who attempt to cerebrally distance themselves from their physically and vocally unabashed predecessors. My extensive practice as one half of the purportedly telepathic male-female duo, the Deans, did not resolve these, or other gender related issues, however it did serve to bring such issues to the foreground of both my attention and my practice.

[184] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 191.
[185] Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology.* 1985. p. 37.
[186] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. pp. 34-35.
[*] See: 'Banishing the Spirits.' pp. 124-170.

In conjunction with the Othering of the body, mentalists have also – from turbans to crystal balls – long engaged in what today would be called cultural appropriation. Anthropologist Victor Turner has written of liminal transformations, rituals, and *rites de passage*[187] as well as the attributes of, what he calls 'threshold people' or 'liminal personae.'[188] Such people, according to Turner, 'are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.'[189] Likewise, mentalists have traditionally presented themselves as liminal people, who through travel, trauma, or occult study, have forfeited their claim to normalcy. Turner notes that the liminal state is frequently and symbolically linked to 'death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.[190] In mentalism, such symbolism is readily found, and the fact that mentalists often inhabit the liminal comes as no surprise, since the very nature of mentalism is liminal and transformative for both the performer and participants/observers. Performances of mentalism often enable audiences – as well as those who perform it – to question or reject societal norms, restrictions, and limitations.

Phenomenology

Given the fact that this research relied heavily on my own experience as a performer, it is important to acknowledge that such experience is inherently subjective and intertwined with my embodied and situated perspective. For this, I look to phenomenology – in particular, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the phenomenology of performance[191] – to better frame and understand my own experience as a performer. I believe that my experience – particularly as a performer – is not only subjective, but intersubjective, and is interactive with my own subjective perceived estimation of the audience's subjective (individual and collective) experience. Also, the reciprocal is true; the experience of the audience necessarily includes a subjective perceived estimation of the performer's experience, and what the performer takes him or herself to be doing.

[187] Turner, Victor. 'Liminality and Communitas.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 89.
[188] Turner, Victor. 'Liminality and Communitas.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 89.
[189] Turner, Victor. 'Liminality and Communitas.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 89.
[190] Turner, Victor. 'Liminality and Communitas.' *The Performance Studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. 2007. p. 90.
[191] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.* 1945. Trans. Colin Smith. 1962.

My estimation of audience response is based, not on assumptions, but derived through the close observation of individual spectators and collective audience response before, during, and after performances, the solicitation of feedback, the solicitation of 2nd or 3rd hand accounts, and discreet eavesdropping. While I describe my experience of the audiences' responses as they presented themselves to me, I do not speak for any of my spectators, and I attempt to avoid making assumptions on behalf of my audiences.

Autoethnography

Finally, in order to make sense – both for myself and my readers – of *my own* embodied experience during the three years in which I lived in the social role of psychic, I explored the benefits and hazards involved in adopting an autoethnographic approach to this research. Autoethnography – by providing researchers (particularly practice-led researchers) with an opportunity to link theoretical concepts with embodied experience – is, in the words of Sarah Wall, 'a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding.'[192] Wall writes, in an article entitled 'Writing an Autoethnography: Easier Said than Done,' that autoethnography 'might be more of a philosophy than a well-defined method,' and as such, 'there remains considerable creative latitude in the production of an autoethnographic text.'[193]

Although Wall asserts that autoethnographic research has the potential to be 'as rigorous and justifiable as any other form of inquiry,'[194] she also warns that in undertaking autoethnographic documentation, the researcher/researched runs a risk of being inappropriately subjective through 'emotional writing, a lack of honesty with oneself about motivators behind the research, and a failure to connect personal experience with theory.'[195] This issue was doubly problematic for me, given the elements of deception and self-deception inherent in mentalism and psychic arts. These risks, however, are not without potential benefits.

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[192] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 39.
[193] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 39.
[194] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 39.
[195] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 40.

For instance, in 'Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art,' Margot Duncan argues that 'although risks are taken by any researcher using a personal experience approach such as autoethnography, there is a place in scholarship for shining the light of research where one stands for attempting to know one's own experience and sharing that knowledge.'[196] Duncan concludes by asking, 'As qualitative researchers, willing to confess that reality is based on perception, why should we not examine more fully what constitutes our perceptions?[197]

Wall observes – referencing Barbara Tedlock's article 'Ethnography and ethnographic representation'[198] – that 'because there can be no return to some original experience… the writing of an ethnographic text is really a continuation of fieldwork rather than a transparent record of past experiences.'[199] Further noting that it is 'impossible for anyone to ever finalize a perfectly accurate story,'[200] Wall suggests that 'perhaps this presentation can be seen as a performance.'[201] In line with Wall's assertion, I found the exegesis process to be a critical part of making sense of my practice, and the allusion to performance calls to mind Richard Schechner's description of performance as 'twice-behaved behavior.'[202]

In 'Doing autoethnography,' Tessa Muncey suggests that the object of an autoethnography may be to present 'a patchwork of feelings, experiences, emotions, and behaviors that portray a more complete view of [one's] life… a meaningful whole that is consistent and coherent...'[203] Bearing in mind all of the above, in 'Crossing the Threshold'[*] and 'Behind the Curtain'[**] I use an autoethnographic voice at times – in addition to the reflexive praxis and exegesis methodology

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[196] Duncan, Margot. 'Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2004.
[197] Duncan, Margot. 'Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2004.
[198] Tedlock, Barbara. 'Ethnography and ethnographic representation.' *Handbook of qualitative research.* 2000. pp. 455-486.
[199] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 42.
[200] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 42.
[201] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 2008. p. 42.
[202] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 1.
[203] Muncey, Tessa. 'Doing autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2005.
[*] 'Crossing the Threshold.' pp. 80-92.
[**] 'Behind the Curtain.' pp. 95-122.

previously described – in order to express otherwise inexpressible embodied experiences resulting from my performances of mentalism and psychic arts on stage, screen, and in everyday life.

The Ethics of Mentalism

The ethical questions surrounding performances of mentalism are thoroughly complicated. This is hardly surprising, considering that the ethics of theatre are complex to begin with. Nicholas Ridout describes theatre as 'perhaps supremely, a place of ethical confusion or cross-purposes.'[204] He continues, 'Indeed, if ethics has anything to do with truth – and it is hard to imagine an ethics that has not – then the theatre might be a very strange place to come looking for it. It is, after all, the home of pretending.'[205] But yet – and this is precisely where the ethics of mentalism and psychic arts diverge from the ethics of mainstream drama and theatre – Ridout writes, '...we tend to know, in the theatre, when people are pretending and when they are not. That is to say, the theatre is a place where we know that there is a difference between how people seem and how they are, but it is also a place where we pretend not to know that difference.'[206] In mentalism and psychic performance, however, the line between pretending and not pretending is intentionally obscured. In the sections which follow, I briefly survey questions of truth and deception, claims and disclaimers, intent, and the ethics of paraperformance.

Truth and Deception

Performances of mentalism are inherently fictional on multiple levels. In addition to the imaginary nature of the content, performances of mentalism seek for spectators to accept the fictional demonstrations as real, or at least, as not entirely fake. This adheres to the statement in latter editions of *The Tarbell Course in Magic* that, '...mysteries of the mind are impressive only when cloaked in an atmosphere of genuine phenomena.'[207] Contemporary mind reader Phill Smith calls this the *mitox* or, grand lie, of mentalism. He writes, 'As mentalists we wrap our tricks up with a

[204] Ridout, Nicholas. *theare & ethics.* 2009. p. 15.
[205] Ridout, Nicholas. *theare & ethics.* 2009. p. 15.
[206] Ridout, Nicholas. *theare & ethics.* 2009. p. 15.
[207] Tarbell, Harlan. *The Tarbell Course in Magic, Volume IV*. 1941. p. 191.

single overarching methodless effect, a grand lie which permits our deceptions: this lie is, simply, that the things we are doing are not tricks. In some way...they are real.'[208]

Performances of mentalism are open to the question of the unethical; mediums and faith healers, spring readily to mind as examples. Many of these performances can be viewed as primarily financial transactions, in which the participants or spectators seek some form of personal, or spiritual guidance, gain, or comfort, in exchange for payment. The nature of the payment, however, is sometimes obscured. A popular ruse of spiritualists, for example, was to pretend to burn money as an offering to the spirits, while secretly retaining the money as a discreet compensation.

Such performances – occasionally in the name of *entertainment purposes only* – mislead audience members into investing belief, and money, into something which the performer, at least on some level, knows to be false. These types of performances insidiously deny the fictional aspects of the performance. To complicate matters, however, *the placebo effect* demonstrates that even fictional performances/rituals might bring about genuine psychophysical improvements in mental or physical health. Such arguments are often raised in reference to shamanism and faith healing, and I explore this notion further in 'Beyond Psychic.'[*]

Some performances of mentalism – such as mind reading, psychic entertainment, or spirit theatre – may be argued as ethical, from certain points of view. These performances are generally not intended to create a financial or spiritual reliance on the services of the performer. Rather, it is the experience of the performance itself which is sold. Conjurer and spirit performer Eugene Burger, for instance, observes that 'many people today *enjoy* believing in strange and mysterious powers, in ancient secrets and lost continents, in bizarre experiments and in séances in the dark with messages from the dead.'[209] He asks, 'Where is the *entertainment* in trying to "convince" them otherwise? I enjoy these things myself!'[210] Burger states that, 'a good deal of the impact of bizarre magick – or spirit theatre – is derived from the fact that the performer may not tell the audience

[208] Smith, Phill. *Mitox.* 2009. p. 4.
[*] 'Beyond Psychic.' pp. 211-250.
[209] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 76.
[210] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 76.

that this is all a fake…'[211] He continues, 'Let them figure it out for themselves. Leave it a Mystery!'[212]

Regarding the ethics of such performances, the Psychic Entertainer's Association (PEA), highlights the area of detrimental financial or personal reliance as the key to monitoring the ethics of psychic entertainment. The PEA website offers, in part, the following ethical guidelines:

> As long as no claim is made with the intent to cause detrimental reliance, either financial or personal, on its authenticity by members of the public, a performance cannot be considered unethical.... In contrast, unethical psychic entertainment is the use of the art to defraud. Those who use the techniques of our art to cause another person or persons to believe in their powers and attempt to induce action based upon that belief, are unethical practitioners, and their activities should be condemned by entertainers.[213]

Still, even ethical performances of psychic entertainment can induce action or cause harm after the spectators have left the performance. In an interview for *Genii Magazine*, Jamy Ian Swiss interrogates mentalist Derren Brown on the question of ethics in mentalism. The following nuanced excerpt revolves around Brown's admission that after a particular television performance, a 'disturbing'[214] number of people made contact requesting information on where to learn "photo-reading," the purported skill which Brown had pretended to demonstrate. (Quoted at length; emphasis added.)

> JAMY: …when you talk about people calling up the station and wanting to take a course in photo reading, that certainly seems unarguable evidence *that they are drawing education and information about the world from your work.*
>
> DERREN: Exactly. And I think it's a question of fine tuning that and taking responsibility. But also allowing for the fact that people will do that anyway. People will watch soap operas and make life decisions based on that, and mistake the characters for being real.... So it's absolutely something that I have to think about, and I have to take responsibility for, but I've been fairly good with it. *I don't want to be Uri Geller. I don't want to have to create and defend something to that extent,* that's not what life's about. *I do it because I find it fun and entertaining*, and that's what I would like people to get out of it. And *part of making it as fun and entertaining as possible is creating ambiguity, plausibility, and all the rest of it*.

[211] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 88.
[212] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 88.
[213] Psychic Entertainer's Association. 'Policies.' *http://www.p-e-a.org/policies.html*
[214] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Conversation In Two Parts With Derren Brown and Jamy Ian Swiss: Part I.' *Genii Magazine*. Feb 2005.

> JAMY: So you think ambiguity is part of the point?
>
> DERREN: If it wasn't ambiguous, it wouldn't be challenging.
>
> […]
>
> JAMY: Well, there's normally very little ambiguity I think with any other form of theater. I don't think any actor tries to actually confuse the audience about whether or not he is about to die on stage…Because once that's not the situation, once that clarity is absent, to me it's not theater at all anymore. Now it is religion. It's a cheat. It's a big cheat that mentalists have relied on through the history of mentalism.
>
> DERREN: Sure... absolutely. To me, it's an interesting issue, and it's one that I don't have a neat answer for other than the fact that *I have personal feelings on what I don't want to do*.[215]

As Brown points out, even clearly fictional performances can alter the systems of belief, moral compasses, or decision making of spectators. Indeed, fictional performances create real experiences, and those experiences alter participants. But when fictional performances purport to be reality, additional subjective ethical questions arise. Augusto Boal's *Invisible Theatre,* for example, explored and experimented with the notion that spectators who participate in a fictional event which seems to be reality, are more likely to rethink their positions on social and political issues than those who witness a clearly staged performance. According to Boal: 'In the invisible theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theatre exists, without its old, worn-out patterns. The theatrical energy is completely liberated, and the impact produced by this free theatre is much more powerful and longer lasting.'[216] Boal's theory suggests that mentalists who endeavour to blur the frame between fiction and reality must take into account ethical considerations beyond those of conventional drama and theatre. I will look more closely at the ethics of paraperformance and performances purporting to be reality in the coming pages.

Claims and Disclaimers

It is entirely too simple to say that all performances should come with warning labels or disclaimers; even more so since according to philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, art is 'the very event

[215] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Conversation In Two Parts With Derren Brown and Jamy Ian Swiss: Part I.' *Genii Magazine*. Feb 2005.
[216] Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed.* 1985. p. 147.

of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of the shadow.'[217] In *theatre & ethics,* Ridout concludes that 'theatre's greatest ethical potential may be found precisely at the moment that theatre abandons ethics.'[218] Not surprisingly, issues of ethics, claims, and disclaimers are perennial subjects of debate among mentalists.

Eugene Burger has observed that the issue of dramatic character is 'very much linked with the *claims* [one is] making.'[219] According to Burger, 'what is at stake in this issue of claims is nothing less than the *effect* itself.'[220] For instance, Burger suggests two different claimed abilities – or frames of performance – for the same spirit writing effect: First, 'a delightful magic trick,'[221] and second, an 'actual or purported *occult experiment.*'[222] Burger also discusses the issue of post-performance claims, writing, '*After* you've done this effect people will very often stop you and ask whether it *was* a trick. Your response to this question is also an expression of your character and, therefore, your response is part – a very real part – of your *show.*' His statement is reminiscent of mystery entertainer Tony Andruzzi's observation that 'at the conclusion of a performance you're still performing.'[223]

While many mentalists choose to open or close their performances with some form of disclaimer, this is also a continually debated topic amongst mentalists. Mind reader Bruce Bernstein, in an essay entitled, 'Disclaiming Disclaimers,' writes: 'Because the tradition of adding disclaimers to [one's] act has become integral to the "magician's creed," most performers – many of whom were magicians first and mentalists later – add a disclaimer because they don't want to buck the trend and to calm their own fears. I mean, who wants to upset the "powers that be," or other members of the "brotherhood?"'[224]

Such disclaimers are usually ambiguously worded doublespeak, allowing audience members to interpret the disclaimers according to their own prejudices. Dunninger's claims and disclaims, for instance, are a case study in verbal ambiguity. Dunninger is commonly associated with the

[217] Levinas, Emmanuel. 'Reality and its Shadow.' 1948. Ed. Sean Hand. *The Levinas Reader*. 1989. p. 132.
[218] Ridout, Nicholas. *theare & ethics.* 2009. p. 70.
[219] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater* 1986. p. 75.
[220] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater* 1986. p. 77.
[221] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater* 1986. p. 77.
[222] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater* 1986. p. 77.
[223] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater* 1986. p. 76.
[224] Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2013. p. 154.

ambiguous but impressive sounding phrase: 'accomplished through the use of natural and scientific means.' Yet, sometimes Dunninger rather bluntly claimed to possess ESP, such as in the following statement: 'I read minds through the possession of extra-sensory faculties, if you will – an extra sense, cultivated, sharpened, concentrated until the accidental manifestations familiar to everyone have, in me, matured to an unfailing technique of repetition.'[225] At other times, his disclaimers craftily played it both ways – so to speak – such as the disclaimer which preceded his 1968 syndicated television show, *The Amazing Dunninger*: 'Dunninger disclaims the possession of any supernatural or psychic powers and insists that the purpose of his demonstrations is only to entertain you. Nevertheless, his telepathic mysteries have never been satisfactorily explained or duplicated.'[226]

Dunninger clashed with both scientists and conjurers over ethical considerations. In 1944, *Genii Magazine* published the concern of Dr. Richard Straussberg, that Dunninger's implicitly false claims 'will impede legitimate psychic research.'[227] In the same month, *Life Magazine* quoted Dr. Jacob Daley – an officer of the Society of American Magicians – as saying, 'Dunninger can't read the mind of a gnat. The only thing he can project is baloney.'[228] According to conjuring columnist, John Booth, Dunninger stopped short of technically claiming psychic ability, in a legal sense, but 'he went as far out onto the ice as possible.'[229]

In a similar vein, conjurer Penn Jillette – of Penn & Teller – has publicly clashed with *the Amazing Kreskin*, and other mentalists, over the ethics of mind reading. Jillette writes about the experience of watching Kreskin perform in Las Vegas:

> I think the trick he did was by that 1940s mentalist, Dunninger, just right out of his books. Kreskin even ripped off Dunninger's weasel words about his tricks being done by 'natural and scientific means' and saying 'I'm no fortune-teller.' I'm sure he considers this a disclaimer, but it does lack the important sentence 'I'm not using ESP, I'm just doing shitty fucking tricks!'[230]

[225] Wiley, Barry. "Psychic Radio: Dunninger the Mentalist." *History Magazine*. Vol. 10. No. 6. Aug/Sep 2009. p. 47.
[226] Terrace, Vincent. *Television Introductions: Narrated TV Program Openings since 1949*. 2014. p. 221.
[227] *Genii Magazine*. Mar 1944.
[228] Lincoln, Barnett. "'Master Mentalist Puzzles Radio Public with Tricky Feats of 'Thought Reading.'" *Life Magazine*. Vol. 16. No. 11. 13 Mar 1944. p. 110.
[229] *Linking Ring Magazine*. Mar 1967.
[230] Jillette, Penn. *God, No!: Signs You May Already Be an Atheist and Other Magical Tales*. 2011. p. 180.

Jillette clearly has strong opinions on the matter, and they are reasonable from a certain perspective. However, the disclaimer, 'I'm just doing tricks,' is far from effectively engaging with the shady aspects of these performances. Nevertheless, David Hoy – while performing as mind reader Dr. Faust – opened with the disclaimer, 'I'm a mind reader and a fake.'[231] Hoy's disclaimer was apparently intended to have a reverse psychological effect on the audience, which it apparently did. Hoy, who began as an evangelist, was well known among mentalists for his ability to create believers. Later in his career, Hoy worked under his own name and described himself as a 'super-psychic.'[232] Regarding "honest" disclaimers such as Hoy's, Max Maven writes:

> There are limits beyond which I don't think a performer is obligated to go, because there are people who want to draw their own conclusions, in spite of everything, and even if you say, "ladies and gentlemen, everything I'm about to do for you right now is a total fraud," there are people who decide that you are lying about that, and that what you are doing is real.[233]

For example, among the most famous disclaimers accompanying a performance is the one repeated four times by CBS Radio during the 1938 hour long live broadcast of Orson Welles' infamous adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds.* Regarding the semi-hysterical public response to the program, the producer of the broadcast, John Houseman, wrote:

> Our actual broadcasting time, from the first mention of the meteorites to the fall of New York City, was less than forty minutes. During that time men travelled long distances, large bodies of troops were mobilized, cabinet meetings were held, savage battles fought on land and in the air. And millions of people accepted it – emotionally if not logically.[234]

Two years after the event, Welles described the phenomenon as, 'the same kind of excitement that we extract from a practical joke in which somebody puts a sheet over his head and says "Boo!" I don't think anybody believes that that individual is a ghost, but we do scream and yell and rush down the hall. And that's just about what happened.'[235] This notion echoes the famous reply of Madame du Deffand when asked if she believed in ghosts: 'No, but I'm afraid of them.'[236] A powerful performance may provoke an emotional response which subverts logical responses. This

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[231] 'Do Mentalists Usually Tell the Audience that What They Do is Just Tricks?' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 2 Jun 2013.
[232] Godwin, John. *Super-Psychic: The Incredible Dr. Hoy.* 1977.
[233] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 103.
[234] Houseman, John. *Run Through: A Memoir*. 1972.
[235] 'Campbell Playhouse Presents: Orson Wells Meets HG Wells.' *YouTube.* 1940. 0:03:25.
[236] *Bartlett's Book of Anecdotes.* Ed. Clifton Fadiman and Andre Bernard. 1985.

engagement between logical and emotional response is central to a discussion about the ethics of both fictional, and purportedly non-fictional, performances.

Regarding the often-overlooked potential *destructive* power of disclaimers in mentalism, Eugene Burger relates the following thought experiment about a "haunted" maze:

> On your way in... there was a guy with a clipboard and a tie. He stopped you and said, 'If you're afraid of snakes maybe you shouldn't go in here. We borrowed some snakes from the Lincoln Park Zoo.' Stop. What are you talking about? You what? But of course in the excitement of the moment you don't go into rationality.... As if this was a lending library of reptiles? So he says, 'We borrowed some snakes from the Lincoln Park Zoo. They're not poisonous but they got loose and they are loose in the maze. So if you're afraid of snakes than maybe you shouldn't go in.' Now the disclaimer for me would be... just as we're all giddy and excited going in, to say, 'But of course the snakes are just rubber.'
>
> No! . . . No! No! No! I don't want the snakes to be just rubber. I want to get scared in the maze, right?... A show is a show.... No, don't do disclaimers. The idea of theatre is to give people an experience, and you don't give people an experience by starting with a disclaimer.... Once you tell people the snakes are rubber, then, what's the point? What's the point?[237]

In *Magic and Meaning,* Burger describes the same scenario, concluding:

> I want make believe. I don't want to disbelieve or believe. I just want to make believe for a while, with my friends and the fake snakes. And that's the fun of it. That's the excitement. That's the fun of the roller coaster. And the fun of the haunted house. I want the performer to play it as if it were real, and then afterward, if you feel it necessary, talk about it and give your disclaimers.[238]

Whether shut-eyes, open-eyes, or wink-eyes, mentalists claim to possess genuine parapsychological abilities – and often endeavour to be as convincing as possible – both on and offstage. Shut-eye mentalists do not intentionally employ deception. Open-eye mentalists intentionally employ deception, but adamantly deny and conceal those deceptive practices, using a variety of techniques including double speak, confusion, and reverse psychology. Wink-eye *meta-mentalists,* I will argue,[*] make use of a dark playfulness in an attempt to mediate their deceptions with additional and expanded layers of deception and hyperreality.

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[237] Burger, Eugene. 'Penguin Live with Eugene Burger.' *Penguin Magic*. 2014. 2:45:30.
[238] Burger, Eugene and Robert Neale. *Magic and Meaning.* 1995. p. 205.
[*] 'The End of Mind Reading.' pp. 173-208.

Intent

Ultimately, the ethics of mentalism – or anything – may be linked to intent. Switching an object is perfectly harmless in the context of a magic trick, but unethical and illegal in a jewellery store for purposes of theft. Mentalism presents a more complex situation than robbery, however, as the ethical dilemmas of mentalism relate to the blurring and obfuscation of the boundaries of the performance itself. Performance implies fiction, and this implication runs contrary to the objective of the mentalist, which is to successfully deny the fictional nature of both the projected persona and claimed abilities. Just as conjurers must conceal their methods in order to deceive, a mentalist must conceal not only the methods, but the artificial nature of the projected persona. Additionally, the mentalist must attempt to obfuscate the very nature of the performance itself. Naturally, questions of ethics accompany such obfuscations.

The very nature of mentalism is to deceive, and the adamant denial of that deception is the inviolable rule of the game. Purportedly receiving a message from deceased relatives of audience members – as I did and subsequently disclaimed in *Visions and Revisions*[**] – may be argued as either ethical or unethical, in the context of entertainment. Such interactions may have unpredictable consequences for the spectator, who may – at least on some level – consume the performance as genuine. This ethical consideration may not be lightly dismissed, and certainly the performer bears some responsibility in this regard. Similar ethical considerations would seem to apply to professional wrestlers, for instance, who – one might imagine – must consider the possibility that children may recreate some of their more dangerous seeming pseudo-"moves" such as *the piledriver* which, if executed genuinely, would likely fracture the recipient's neck.

Early in my praxis, my understanding of the ethical implications of mentalism rapidly evolved. This early evolution may be seen in several posts which I wrote on an internet forum for mentalists in reference to Uri Geller's spoon bending campaign for *Kellogg's* brand cereals.[239] Below are several notable excerpts from the online ethical discussion. Early in the discussion, I wrote in part:

> I find the idea of a video which tells children that they can bend spoons by relaxing, believing, and being positive – and behind all of this, the message to buy Kellogg's – to be, somehow, extremely hard to stomach, bordering on predatory and false

[**] 'Visions and Revisions.' p. 80.
[239] 'Uri Geller reveals his secret to bending spoons.' *YouTube.* 15 Jan 2015.

> advertising. With all due respect for Geller's charisma, passion, and hard work, this sort of messing with people's heads, outside of a theatrical context, is highly problematic for me.[240]

I was by no means alone in my condemnation of Geller or of this particular publicity campaign. Many mentalists outspokenly questioned the ethics of both Geller and *Kellogg's*. My own attitude, however, evolved quickly during the subsequent days and hours as I read dozens of defences of both Geller and the *Kellogg's* campaign including a statement from Geller himself. These arguments furthered the shift of my perspective, and introduced me to new, but logical, perspectives which I had not previously considered. For instance, mentalist David Numen responded to some of the harsher criticisms – some of which used rather strong language – writing, 'Funny, I don't see anything lame or disgusting. I see a guy that has done more to foster mystery and enigma than 90% of the people that write on here.'[241] Similarly, mentalist Mike Daniels defended Geller, arguing that:

> The real secret of Uri's success, I think, is the sheer joy, energy, surprise and sense of genuine wonder that he injects into his presentations. He focuses on selling the effect, not aggrandising himself (though that may be the unspoken subtext). He isn't saying "Look at what an amazing guy I am - I have such special powers". Rather he is saying "Look at what amazing things are possible if only we truly believe". That is a powerful (though misleading) message that strongly resonates with people.[242]

Geller himself responded[*] to the praise and criticism using a characteristically playful and positive tone:

> Hi friends, I love some of your negative comments! Thanks for talking about me! Remember what Oscar Wilde said 100 years ago? 'There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about.' Friends the secret of success is originality, and yes some of you bend spoons better than me! I do love you all! ... And do enjoy the two documentaries on my website. Much energy and love! www.urigeller.com[243]

All of these posts were insightful in ways I had not considered, and influential to the path I pursued with my praxis in the coming years. Although numerous ethical considerations remained to be addressed, my eyes were opened by the many defences offered for what I had previously believed

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[240] 'Uri Geller reveals the secrets of spoon bending.' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 15 Jan 2015.
[241] 'Uri Geller reveals the secrets of spoon bending.' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 15 Jan 2015.
[242] 'Uri Geller reveals the secrets of spoon bending.' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 15 Jan 2015.
[*] Via a well-known and respected intermediary, mentalist and historian Joseph Atmore
[243] 'Uri Geller reveals the secrets of spoon bending.' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 15 Jan 2015.

to be indefensible. Two posts written by mentalist KC Cameron affected me particularly strongly. Cameron wrote, in part:

> I have a hard time believing people have a problem with the [Kellogg's] commercial. Children live in a magical place. I wish I did. Santa and the Easter Bunny, is that distasteful too? Commercials are lies. Have you seen one that was 100% accurate?... As magicians, artists, writers – we all lie for a living. Art is a lie, most things we cherish are illusions. Who wants to live in a world without it?
>
> [W]e teach those immature brains so much trash as it is… [D]on't you think that they need the life skills to determine what is right by themselves? There are a million religions out there, tons of wacky ideas. Geez, the horoscope is in the newspaper, drip down economics is still taught, and in places like Texas people have decided to rewrite history and call creationism science - and we are worried about this [commercial]?
>
> I see this as no different than the Santa myth young children believe. They grow out of it and *hopefully* begin to think critically - at least some do anyway. Let's not take the magic out of magic. I don't see this as doing any harm. Immature brains are not taught that magic is real, that is how they come, fresh out of the box. As for the cereal, the kids don't buy it, their parent's do. That is their responsibility.[244]

Cameron's observation that horoscopes are included in *news*papers struck a particularly deep chord with me, and the Santa myth is one which I would soon explore first-hand in my practice. I ultimately arrived at the conclusion that the role of mentalists is not to be skeptics, or scientists, or educators, or religious figures. Mentalists, rather, are tricksters and disrupters. There is a human need/desire to engage with the parapsychological, and therefore, a place in our society for the performance of mentalism.

In the feedback session following *Visions and Revisions* I was significantly impacted by the comments of an audience member who admitted that during the performance he found himself 'really believing' that I possessed the abilities which I had claimed. He explained that it seemed 'completely natural' to believe during the performance, but afterward he found himself confused, since he doesn't 'really believe in those sorts of things.'[*] Following the feedback session, he expressed to me that he found it exciting to finally witness the second sight abilities of which he

[244] 'Uri Geller reveals the secrets of spoon bending.' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 15 Jan 2015.
[*] 'Discussion following Visions and Revisions.' See appendices:
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

had previously only heard and read, and felt disappointed and 'a little sad' when I described these abilities as fake.

This person's comments stood out to me as extremely significant, and it was owing to this experience that I decided to stop attempting to publicly debunk psychic phenomena. I had not previously considered that the position of the skeptic/debunker – like the position of the mentalist/psychic – could negatively impact audience members. This discovery had much in common with a paper, entitled 'The Ethics of Disenchantment,' which I would subsequently hear presented by Professor Franc Chamberlain at *The Magiculum,* a gathering of the Magic Research Group at the University of Huddersfield in 2017. In this paper, Chamberlain explored some similar 'concerns [he] still had' about performing 'as a "Gypsy" fortune-teller' at an event decades earlier, exploring the often neglected ethical dimensions of (emphasis added) 'enchantment *and disenchantment* in contemporary performance magic.'

Ethics of Paraperformance

A decade ago, I had dinner with the curator of a prominent museum.[*] We bonded over the discovery that we had both had our appendices removed in Paris. She told me that she had been friends with Uri Geller when she was younger and recounted that Uri had helped her discover that her infant daughter had psychic gifts. This was evidenced, apparently, by the fact that bent metal objects were frequently discovered in – or near – her daughter's crib and buggy. She expressed sorrow to me, that as her daughter had grown, she had stopped using, outgrown, or otherwise lost her "gifts". This woman was clearly disappointed that her daughter had failed to develop her latent psychic abilities.[**]

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To be clear – based on my research and expertise in this area – I believe that Geller himself physically bent the metal objects with his hands and allowed them to be discovered. His intent, however, is less clear than his methods. It may have been to bolster his own claim, by allowing those around him to become invested in such abilities. It might have merely been a lark to Geller. Perhaps he was trying to brighten the day of those around him. He might even have accomplished

[*] Identity withheld for purposes of privacy.
[**] This account is recalled from memory.

something positive for those involved. Or he might have been, as he claims in a recent interview, driven by a desire to escape his circumstances. According to Geller, 'I wanted to be rich and famous because I came from a poor family…by visualizing and fantasizing spoon bending, which I kind of brought into the world, I saw it as a tool to climb out of poverty.'[245]

Whatever Geller's intentions, now or then, he has shown himself in recent years to be a role model, espousing healthy living, hard work, studious behaviour, and a positive mental attitude. For instance, in 2007 Geller told *Magische Welt* magazine that he now advises children to 'Forget the paranormal. Forget spoon bending! Instead of that, focus on school! Become a positive thinker! Believe in yourself and create a target! Go to university! Never smoke! And never touch drugs! And think of success!'[246] Many of Geller's performances were – and remain – stunning, on many levels. Still, I will never forget the story of this museum curator. And I try not to be blind to the potential damage that might be – even unintentionally – inflicted on spectators, when working within a form in which blurring the frame of the performance is the goal. Throughout my praxis, I have interrogated the intentions behind my practice and sought to establish a personal and ethically sound approach for the performance and paraperformance of mentalism and psychic arts.

Performances of mentalism and psychic arts which take place on stage, radio, and screen are generally delineated *as* performances, and thus, carry implicit disclaimers. However, when one takes into account the offstage, secret, or *para* aspects of these performances, the ethical questions acquire an additional dimension of complexity. To this end, I wish to approach ethics from the specific perspective of my own paraperformances of mentalism, made possible through the unique nature of my methodology. In these paraperformances, as in all of my performances of mentalism, I have first and foremost adhered to the ethical guidelines advanced by the Psychic Entertainer's Association (PEA), noted previously.

Additionally, I have always given consideration to, and attempted to anticipate, potential positive and negative repercussions of my "psychic" activities. This is by no means a perfect science, but nevertheless, I have always given consideration to these matters which, by necessity, varied from case to case. For example, during *Project Viola Ten* I seriously contemplated the ethics of

[245] 'Uri Geller Interview.' 30 Sep 2016.
[246] *Magische Welt.* Nov 2007.

manipulating laboratory experiments, as well as misleading/deceiving researchers, friends, and supervisors both in and out of the laboratory; and I took numerous steps to ensure the protection of the parties involved.[*]

Throughout this research project, I have also endeavoured to inform and modify my ethical stance based on relevant quantitative findings. For instance, in a 2018 study funded by the by Swiss National Science Foundation, psychologists Christine Mohr, et al., report findings which show that demonstrations of pseudo-psychological principles 'did not change [the participants] beliefs in the paranormal.'[247] In their paper – entitled 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles' – the authors report that 'pre-existing beliefs determined the extent to which participants considered the demonstration to be a true psychic demonstration.'[248] The authors also point out – significantly – that 'knowledge about the nature of the performer – whether he was a magician or psychologist – did not influence people's beliefs about how the demonstration was achieved, and neither did it influence their beliefs in the principles themselves.'[249]

These findings are in line with a prior study published by Mohr, et al., which found that exposure 'to a magic trick that was framed as a demonstration in psychic powers…did not change adult's paranormal beliefs.'[250] The study further found 'no differences in how participants explained [the performance of a convincingly staged psychic event] regardless of whether they were informed that the demonstration was conducted by a true psychic or a magician who uses tricks and deception.'[251] Additionally, a further prior study conducted by Mohr, et al., found that while many participants did attribute 'psychic demonstrations' to 'genuine spiritual forces,' those 'demonstrations did not alter people's general paranormal beliefs.'[252]

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[*] 'Project Viola Ten.' p. 89.

[247] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.

[248] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.

[249] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.

[250] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.

[251] Mohr C, Koutrakis N, Kuhn G. 'Priming psychic and conjuring abilities of a magic demonstration influences event interpretation and random number generation biases.' *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2015.

[252] Lesaffre L, Kuhn G, Abu-Akel A, Rochat D, Mohr C. 'Magic Performances –When Explained in Psychic Terms by University Students.' *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2018.

Thus, Mohr, et al., conclude that apparent demonstrations of psychic phenomena – even convincing ones – have not been shown to affect belief systems of participants. The findings of these studies are in line with my own ethical stance regarding my performances and paraperformances of mentalism. I operate according to the hypothesis that while my (para)performances may induce a temporary uncertainty amongst spectators and participants with regard to the nature of *what they have just witnessed*, my performances will not alter the general belief systems of these people.

It is evident that most forms of art present alternate perspectives of the world. Many of these perspectives – such as those presented, not only by the psychic arts, but by reality television, professional wrestling, pseudo-documentaries, virtual reality, and make-belief politics – may be described as *misleading* at various levels. For example, pioneering immersive virtual reality program developer Bryan Mitchell has described the 'inability to suspend belief even with knowledge' as the Canny Valley.[253] According to Mitchell, the Canny Valley occurs in 'entertainment...so real that one could lose their ability to *suspend belief*.'[254] The inability to *suspend belief* – previously hinted at by the panic surrounding *The War of the Worlds* broadcast – introduces additional risks which must be addressed. These risks are obvious when one considers the alternate title of Mitchell's article: 'How developing an AR horror game put me in the hospital.'[255] Nevertheless, I do not advocate the curtailing or suppression of forms of theatre, performance, art, or fiction which present alternate or misleading perspectives of the world.

The authors of 'Fake Science' observe that 'in our post-truth era, the boundaries between truth and misinformation have been eroded, and it is often difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction.'[256] If this is so, then it is my contention that fictional performances which purport to be real – ie., performances of pseudo-reality – can cast much needed light on the nature of more insidious forms of misinformation and propaganda – ie., fake news, alternative facts, deep fakes, and the foreign and domestic manipulation of social media – by foregrounding these very issues

[253] Mitchell, Bryan. 'There is a second valley past the Uncanny Valley or How developing an AR horror game put me in the hospital.' *Medium.com.* 13 Feb 2019.
[254] Mitchell, Bryan. 'There is a second valley past the Uncanny Valley or How developing an AR horror game put me in the hospital.' *Medium.com.* 13 Feb 2019.
[255] Mitchell, Bryan. 'There is a second valley past the Uncanny Valley or How developing an AR horror game put me in the hospital.' *Medium.com.* 13 Feb 2019.
[256] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.

and thereby promoting critical thinking skills and expanding knowledge and awareness amongst the public. I contend that embracing performances of pseudo-reality – and seeking to more deeply understand such performances – is a more ethically sound approach than advocating for the suppression or censorship of such performances which would serve to stifle scholarship pertaining to these activities/performances and leave the general populace less prepared to assess and protect themselves from more insidious forms of misinformation and propaganda.

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In the chapters which follow, I develop and support the arguments previously indicated in this introduction. In 'Crossing the Threshold' I provide summaries of my 13 original theatrical performances and have made extended descriptions and additional analyses of these performances available in the appendices.[*] In 'Behind the Curtain' I examine my own approach to performance alongside several key practitioners, proposing the term *paraperformance* to better facilitate this examination. In 'Banishing the Spirits,' I interrogate the aspects of patriarchy, post-colonialism, and cultural appropriation which are historically present in performances of mentalism and psychic arts, and by extension, in my own performances. In 'The End of Mind Reading' I explore the darkly playful emergent paradigm of (wink-eye) metamentalism; particularly in relation to other frame blurring performance practices such as method acting and professional wrestling. Finally, in 'Beyond Psychic' I argue that performances of mentalism and psychic arts may be best viewed, not only *as performance*, but as *performative*; socially inventing the very phenomena and identities which they pretend to be.

[*]See Appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD
(Performance Summaries)

‘I WANT TO BELIEVE’

- UFO poster over Agent Mulder’s desk, X-Files [1]

[1] *X-Files.* ‘Pilot.’ Fox. Dir. Robert Mandel. 1993.

***Visions and Revisions,* December 2014**



Visions and Revisions took place as part of a residency at Corcadorca's Theatre Development Centre in the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, Ireland in December of 2014. Portions of the performance were devised with UCC Theatre students Clelia Crawford and Aisling Reardon, and alumnus Helena Reilly. In *Visions and Revisions,* I attempted to juxtapose myth (the second sight, witchcraft, and spirit channelling) with genuine psychophysical techniques (suggestion/hypnosis and body language/ideomotor response). The set and costume of the show were designed in order to be deconstructed in parallel with the pseudo premises of mentalism over the course of three acts. In Act One, I purported to genuinely perform clairvoyance and spirit channelling. Soon after, I confessed that these abilities were fictional; simply advanced psychological techniques disguised as psychic ability. In Act Two, I purported to demonstrate these super-psychological techniques. Soon after, I confessed that these abilities, too, were fraudulent; simply "tricks" masked as super-psychology. Act Three contained only genuine demonstrations of suggestion and body/mind-reading using truthful presentations built around a theme of "connection."

For additional analysis see 'VISIONS AND REVISIONS (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

***UCC Doctoral Showcase,* May 2015**



In May 2015, I was awarded first prize in 'The Creative Mind' category for my presentation in the UCC Doctoral Showcase held in the UCC Aula Maxima. In this category, I was given five minutes to demonstrate my research through performance. The nature of this category presented both a challenge and an opportunity for me, since *performing* mentalism is, generally speaking, more engaging than *talking about performing* mentalism. Yet, because this was an official academic event, and I was adjudicated by local VIPs and faculty members including the Dean of Graduate Studies, I was acutely aware of the ethical challenges surrounding the use of deception. This five-minute performance was framed as a TED Talk[*] style lecture on the importance of recognizing and appreciating the deeper levels of connection and communication.

For additional analysis see 'UCC DOCTORAL SHOWCASE (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[*] TED Talk conferences gather together experts in their field to give mini lectures, and many of these talks have gone "viral" on the internet.

***Mental Wi-Fi,* June 2015**



This solo performance took place in conjunction with the UCC Theatre Department's *Perforum Conference* held in collaboration with Cork's *Midsummer Festival* at Corcadorca's Theatre Development Centre in the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, Ireland in June of 2015. In *Mental Wi-Fi,* I contextualized mind-reading not only as a psychological phenomenon, but also as the result of certain quantum mechanical phenomena such as string theory. In this performance, I changed costumes and mannerisms during the performance and in full view of the audience, exploring a concept which I describe as the dark *verfremdungseffekt.*[*]

For additional analysis see 'MENTAL WI-FI (supplement)' at:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[*] 'The Dark *Verfremdungseffekt*.' pp. 206-208.

***Meet the Deans,* August – November 2015**



Photos by John Cornicello.

Meet the Deans was created in collaboration with Margot (Maggie) Fox[*] as part of a residency at the School of Acrobatics and New Circus Arts (SANCA) in Seattle in August of 2015. The act was included in the SANCA Staff Show, *The Circus Animal,* which ran for ten performances over a two-week period and at the 2015 National Circus Festival of Ireland at the *Siamsa Tíre* theatre in Tralee, Ireland. We also performed this act in Seattle at the *Tin Room,* the *Pink Door,* and with the *Museum of Curious Things. For additional analysis see 'MEET THE DEANS (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

[*] 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

***Two Minds with a Single Thought,* February 2016**



Two Minds with a Single Thought took place in conjunction with the UCC Theatre Department's Valentine's Day celebration at Corcadorca's Theatre Development Centre in the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, Ireland in 2016. In this performance – again collaborating with Margot Fox – we deepened our imperceptible communication techniques for the simulation of thought transference. And again – in contrast to most stage performances of mentalism – we elected to foreground the theatrical elements of the performance. In *Two Minds with a Single Thought*, we began to consciously explore concepts of postmodernism and hyperreality – as we played with notions of celebrity, shallowness, and pop-culture – adopting an ironic but joyful (Warhol-esque?) tone and aesthetic. This approach was further reflected in our staging, in which our Ikea chair stood atop a circular platform depicting the Presidential Seal of the United States.

For additional analysis see 'TWO MINDS WITH A SINGLE THOUGHT (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

***Post-Cartesian Telepathy,* March 2016**





Post-Cartesian Telepathy took place as part of the UCC Theatre Department Postgraduate showcase, *On the 71st day of the Year: A Postgraduate Research Sharing* at the Granary Theatre in Cork, Ireland. In this performance – still collaborating with Margot Fox – we showed uncharacteristic physical, comical, and sartorial restraint, no longer foregrounding the theatrical elements of the performance. Adopting a theoretically plausible academic and materialist approach to so-called telepathy, I presented a distorted reflection of pop-psychology TED Talks and examined ideas of extrasensory perception as they relate to the known senses extending beyond the classical five. After my 15-minute lecture on the topic, I spoke at length about the Deans, and our accolades, before introducing Maggie to the stage. At that point, we performed a brief and limited demonstration of our "post-Cartesian" approach to telepathy. This performance marked the beginning of my exploration of a reverse psychological tactic for establishing credibility which I describe as *the superstar approach.*

For additional analysis see 'POST-CARTESIAN TELEPATHY (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

***Unfathomable,* May – July 2016**



Unfathomable – written by and starring the Deans – was previewed at the Hayfield Manor on 22 May 2016 in Cork, Ireland, as a benefit for the local Masonic charity, *Teddies for Loving Care*. The show premiered at *The Old Bull Theatre* in London on 19 July 2016 with a touching introduction from the legendary mentalist and *International Man of Mystery* David Berglas who became a household name in England in the 1950s for his 'nationwide psychological experiments'[2] on BBC radio. His 1954 TV show, *Meet David Berglas* attracted over 19 million viewers. In *Unfathomable*, we collaborated with Martin T. Hart, the author of the 2015 book *Piddington's Secrets*. Hart produced the London performance and provided technical advice on pseudo-telepathy. *Unfathomable* was described on the online magic news magazine *MagicWeek*, as 'the most baffling two-person telepathy demonstration this side of history.'[3]

For additional analysis see 'UNFATHOMABLE (supplement)' at:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[2] 'David Berglas – interview transcript.' Theatre Archive Project. 7 Dec 2008.
[3] 'Unfathomable.' *Magicweek.co.uk.* No. 837. 9 Jul 2016.

***A Second Sight,* October – December 2016**



A Second Sight was performed at Rockboro Primary School's Halloween celebration in 2016 and at the annual Masonic widows' Christmas luncheon at the Masonic Hall in Cork, Ireland. In this performance, I claimed to give genuine demonstrations of telepathy with my (then) eight-year-old daughter Lulu Raven. In 1868, in *Secrets of Prestidigitation and Magic*, Robert-Houdin writes, '…what would my son's pretended power of divination have been without the *mise en scène* of the "second sight?" What special marvel would have been found in the "aerial suspension" without the pretended application of ether?'[4] In this performance, I adhered to the *mise en scène* of the second sight, just as Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin had done in Paris in 1846 with his young son, Emile.

For additional analysis see 'A SECOND SIGHT (supplement)' at:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[4] Robert-Houdin, Jean Eugene. *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin.* 1860. Trans. Lascelles Wraxall. 1858. p.81.

***Santa Claus,* December 2014-2017**



Photos by Patricia Klich

For three consecutive years I portrayed Santa Claus at Rockboro Primary School in Cork, Ireland. In these performances, I employed the tactics of many faith-healing evangelists from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Peter Popov. To do so, I developed an original system involving individually numbered clipboard questionnaires, concealed earphones, and a third party located in an adjacent classroom. The questionnaire was carefully designed in such a way as to appear (to the children) to be information for the photographer regarding the delivery of the photographs. This conspiratorial approach – employed in conjunction with covert artifice – made these performances particularly realistic to young children.[*] This series of performances led me to view Santa Claus visits as a form of mainstream shamanism for children; a transformative ritual with binding consequences.

For additional analysis see 'SANTA CLAUS (supplement)' at:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[*] 'Santa Claus, Thank You Letter.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

***Project Viola Ten*, May – August 2017**



(Left) Dr. Robert King, Dr. Maria Dempsey, Nurse Una Cronin. (Right) Dr. Christian Ryan, Dr. Gillian Murphy. Photo by Patricia Klich

The *Project Viola Ten Experiments* were conducted at University College Cork between May and August 2017 as part of my interdisciplinary praxis in Theatre and Applied Psychology and in collaboration with faculty from the School of Applied Psychology and the School of Nursing. Although the purpose of *Project Viola Ten* was *ostensibly* to test the limits of my intuitive/telepathic abilities under strictly controlled conditions, the *actual* purpose was to test my ability *to fake such abilities* under seemingly impossible conditions. The objective of this experimental practice/performance was to "perform" a series of experiments. Over the course of these 400+ trials with Zener cards,[*] dice, and playing cards – conducted in three locations, over two days – I obtained results against chance *exceeding a-million-to-one* under controlled laboratory conditions.

For additional analysis see 'PROJECT VIOLA TEN (supplement)' at:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[*] Zener cards were designed in the 1930s by J.B. Rhine and Karl Zener at Duke University, for the purpose of testing for, what Rhine described as, Extrasensory Perception (ESP).

***The Tangled World(s) of Quantum Physics:* September 2017**



Photo by Patricia Klich

The Tangled World(s) of Quantum Physics is an original eight-minute-long 1950s style retro faux-educational film exploring numerous concepts of quantum mechanics including the Heisenberg uncertainly principle, the Schrödinger cat thought experiment, the Copenhagen interpretation, and quantum entanglement. The film stars me along with two children, Tadhg Woodhouse and Lilly-Rose Woodhouse. I wrote the script with assistance from long-time collaborator Clifton Barnhart.[*] Patricia Klich[**] provided videography and editing. This film was first screened during the opening of *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit*.

For additional analysis see 'THE TANGLED WORLD(S) OF QUANTUM PHYSICS (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[*] 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[**] 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

***Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit,* October 2017**




Photos by Patricia Klich

Eddie Dean Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit premiered at the *Circus Factory* in Cork, Ireland as the headlining show for the first Cork Circus Arts Festival, *Pitch'd*. In this original one-man show, I publicly performed solo for the first time since *Mental Wi-Fi.* This was an important progression for me, as throughout my duo work of the previous years, I had acted primarily as presenter and "sender" and had, thus, not fully experienced "being psychic" onstage. The show was well attended, well received, and positively reviewed by Lauren Mulvhill in *Motley* magazine – UCC's official monthly magazine – in which I was described as a 'natural showman.'[5] According to Mulvhill: 'Dean's rebellious, 1950s-style look worked incredibly well with this particular set, and the entire show was thoroughly aesthetically pleasing.'[6]

For additional analysis see 'EDDIE DEAN, TELEPATHY ROCK STAR: SMELLS LIKE DEAN SPIRIT (supplement)' at: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

[5] Mulvhill, Lauren. 'Smells Like Dean Spirit.' *Motley*. Oct 2017.
[6] Mulvhill, Lauren. 'Smells Like Dean Spirit.' *Motley*. Oct 2017.

***Ireland's Got Talent*, November 2017 – March 2018**




Ireland's Got Talent was hosted by Lucy Kennedy, and featured celebrity judges, Louis Walsh, Jason Byrne, Denise VanOuten, and Michelle Visage. Portions of this performance, along with portions of a preshow interview conducted by Glenda Gilson and James Kavanagh, were broadcast on 17 March 2018 on the Saint Patrick's Day season finale of *Ireland's Got Mór Talent.* The framing of this performance was unique among my other performances. Not only was this performance recorded to be televised by a national broadcaster, but the editing of my performance and interviews was entirely beyond my control. Additionally, I would simultaneously perform in front of three essential audiences: the panel of celebrity judges, the live studio audience largely consisting of families with young children, and the wider audience of millions of television viewers. Each of these audiences had different expectations and viewed the performance with different agendas. Complicating matters further, the judges and hosts were also performing, and thus, acting in accordance with their own estimation of the expectations of *their* audiences.

For additional analysis see 'IRELAND'S GOT TALENT (supplement)' at:
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

You're wrong. She is a phony. But on the other hand you're right. She isn't a phony because she's a real phony. She believes all this crap she believes. You can't talk her out of it.[1]

- Truman Capote

[1] Capote, Truman. *Breakfast at Tiffany's.* 1958. p. 32.

(Hyper)Reality TV

On 6 December 2017, my performance and interviews for *Ireland's Got Talent* were recorded at the TLT Theatre in Drogheda. Before walking onto the stage, I had a brief but frustrating interview with Lucy Kennedy who had by then adopted the unpleasant habit of referring to me as either her 'freaky friend' or 'Ben Stiller.' After stepping onto the stage, I briefly introduced myself to the celebrity judges, stripped down to my trunks to preclude the use of concealed electronics, and began my demonstration in which I apparently read each of the judges' minds.[*]

The discussion with the judges which followed my demonstration revolved around my alleged resemblance to Ben Stiller,[**] my bespoke double-breasted suit, my decision to remove my suit, my choice of white underwear, my hair, my eyes, my tattoos, my abs, and the fact that my demonstration – which took less than five minutes – was 'slow' or 'boring' or 'took too long.' Louis Walsh and Michelle Visage voted in the affirmative to advance me to the semi-finals, while Denise Van Outen – who has been described by *DublinLive* as the 'nasty judge'[2] – aggressively voted no, describing my performance as being overly long, boring, and 'the pants.'

Since three affirmative votes are needed to advance, Jason Byrne was the tiebreaker. Byrne complimented me and my demonstration, and regarding this moment, Louise Bruton writes in *The Irish Times*, 'To quote a mystified Jason Byrne, "I was off me banger watching you."'[3] Ultimately, however, Byrne said that he felt that my demonstration would be better suited to a laboratory than *Ireland's Got Talent*, and I was not among the 24 acts which progressed to the semi-finals of the program. After stepping off the stage, I declined my follow-up interview with Glenda Gilson and James Kavanagh.

It is worth noting that edited versions of my performance and preshow interview were subsequently broadcast to an audience of millions, with no attempt whatsoever to challenge or

[*] This performance and interview may be viewed at: *https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[**] I found it curious that Lucy Kennedy referred to me numerous times as 'Ben Stiller' and when I walked on stage, this was the first comment of Jason Byrne. I find this curious because my website prominently features a photograph inspired by Ben Stiller's character in the 2001 film *Zoolander* (directed by Stiller), but in theory, Kennedy and Byrne should have had no knowledge of this photo.
[2] Pownall Sylvia. 'Denise Van Outen is the "nasty" judge on Ireland's Got Talent.' *DublinLive.ie.* 15 Jan 2018.
[3] Bruton, Louise. 'Ireland's Got Talent, Everything you need to know.' *The Irish Times.* 4 Feb 2018.

corroborate my darkly playful claims.[*] The fact that the versions which were broadcast were not even a fully accurate portrayal of what actually occurred, only presents another layer of fabrication on top of an already fabricated performance. Nevertheless, that which was broadcast – for all its lack of reality – constitutes its own hyperreality. Paradoxically, the broadcast becomes true, in a sense, by the nature of its being broadcast. Ultimately, whether I believe I am psychic or not is of little importance next to the fact that millions of people may have believed that I am, or believed that I believe I am.

Literature theorist Germaine Greer writes that 'reality television is not the end of civilisation as we know it; it is civilisation as we know it. It is popular culture at its most popular, soap opera come to life.'[4] Along similar lines, philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes the 'falsity of "reality TV shows"'[5] arguing that 'even if these shows are "for real", people still act in them – they simply play themselves... what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real.'[6] Reality TV, thus, possesses both elements of the hyperreal (despite not possessing any strong claims to reality, reality television *is* civilisation as we know it) and elements of make-belief (despite its extremely tenuous claims to reality, it purports to be, and seeks to be consumed as, real). Schechner has noted this paradoxical erosion of 'the walls once separating "entertainment," "news," and "sports."'[7] According to Schechner, 'It's all entertainment now.'[8] 'Ironically,' he continues, 'that's where "reality" is located.'[9]

Paraperformance

Describing my performance for *Ireland's Got Talent* at the TLT Theatre, Louise Bruton writes in *The Irish Times*: 'However, for the last audition of the day, the tone shifts from cheery to strange. Self-proclaimed "telepathy rock star" Eddie Dean is conducting PhD research in UCC on nonphysical communication, and for his act, he attempts to read the judges' minds using a

[*] See appendices for sub-text exercises and hypothetical interviews exploring my "constructed" attitude toward my claims and abilities: 'Backstory and Mock Interview Script for IGT.'
www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367
[4] Greer, Germaine. 'Watch with Brother.' *The Guardian.* 24 Jun 2001.
[5] Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* 2002. p. 12.
[6] Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* 2002. p. 12.
[7] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 113.
[8] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 113.
[9] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 113.

blindfold and picture cards and strips out of his tailored pinstripe suit down to his monogrammed jocks for … transparency?'[10] Although I had been quite clear that I was stripping down to preclude the use of concealed electronic devices, I did worry that my explanation may have been lost amongst the heckling, catcalls, and nonstop commentary of the celebrity judges.

Bruton concludes her article, writing that 'On *Ireland's Got Talent*, anything goes and just when you think that the smallness of Ireland might make the auditions predictable, between stripping psychics, nervous parrots, multiple magicians and a nation of tiny dancers, this show finds a way to surprise you.'[11] I'd like to call attention to two details. First, there were not 'stripping psychics' but just one *stripping psychic.* Secondly, I would argue that 'nervous parrots,' 'multiple magicians' and countless youth dance troupes are absolutely what one might expect to find in a small-town talent contest. In my opinion, the stripping psychic was the only real surprise on Bruton's list.

I was similarly singled out by *Ireland's Got Mór Talent* co-host James Kavanaugh in an interview with *DublinLive* in which he described the talent pool as follows: 'People come in with parrots and dogs, there's kids doing mime artistry. We've had a never-ending parade of dance troupes, and a lot of magicians. We saw one guy who could read minds who was brilliant.'[12] The statements of Bruton and Kavanaugh which singled me out – amidst a sea of competition – were not merely happenstance. These statements may be viewed as the result of several years of calculated effort.

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In 2016, I read a post on an internet mentalism forum discussing offstage interview techniques for mentalists. A contributor using the name Patrick Woolery – referencing the underground mentalism legend John Riggs – gave the following practical advice:

> I remember reading a long while back (perhaps it was John Riggs?) that having a good story about how you got into this can be useful. The author claimed to have been one of three performers interviewed at a big event and he was the only one who didn't talk about being the shy kid who learned card tricks to come out of his shell. He talked about his family history, fortune telling, folk magic, stuff like that. He got most of the article and all the pictures because he was interesting. I have since developed such myself. Not a single word untrue, but emphasizing certain

[10] Bruton, Louise. 'Ireland's Got Talent, Everything you need to know.' *The Irish Times.* 4 Feb 2018.
[11] Bruton, Louise. 'Ireland's Got Talent, Everything you need to know.' *The Irish Times.* 4 Feb 2018.
[12] Pownall Sylvia. 'Denise Van Outen is the "nasty" judge on Ireland's Got Talent.' *DublinLive.ie.* 15 Jan 2018.

> parts of my past that are not related to trickery. It could make good interview filler. If you have a story to tell it will be easier to stay in control of the interview.[13]

Although it would be years before I tracked down the original story, I was significantly inspired by Woolery's retelling of it. The original appears in a 1996 manuscript by Riggs entitled, *The Even Compleater Fortune Teller,* and varies somewhat from Woolery's retelling. For this reason, I am including both versions. Riggs described the occurrence as follows:

> A local paper interviewed a group of local magicians, including me, for a feature article. Predictably, one of the questions asked was how did we get into magic?... [The others] went into great detail about how they received a magic set at the age of six, and hung out in magic shops etc. Boring… I regaled the reporter with tales about my grandfather the crooked gambler, who worked 'sawdust games' and carnival cons, and the many close calls I've experienced in my checkered career before I decided that entertainment was much safer.
>
> I told them about my mother the Astrologer (true) and my grandmother the palmist and crystal gazer… I told them about how I gained the trust of the inner circle of magicians with my gambling and mindreading skills… In brief, I laid it on thick! *I gave them an interesting story about an interesting person!* I also received almost 80% of the story, and the only two photos printed were of me. Who really cares about hearing the story of a lonely kid who stayed up all night learning the diagonal palm shift? People want adventure![14]

In a 2015 lecture for magicians and mentalists, Riggs describes his family history in somewhat different terms than in his 1995 essay. In an interview conducted by Dan Harlan, Riggs apparently earnestly explains:

> I come from a family of psychic readers and mediums that go back generations. So for me, it's part of my world, it's not weird… Surveys and polls show that 60-70 and sometimes 80% of people have had supernatural experiences. So really, the minority of people have not. And I'm okay with that. If you haven't, you haven't.
>
> My mom and my grandmother and my aunts – I had a lot of people in my family who did communicate with spirits, who were psychics, and they were not frauds. They didn't sit there and cackle and say 'aha these people are gullible and I'm taking their money!' They were very sincere about it and very, very good at it. So, for me, I grew up with it and it was part of my life. Magic and mentalism stuff came later.[15]

[13] 'Most likely interview questions for a mind-reader?' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 29 Sep 2016.
[14] Riggs, John. *The Even Compleater Fortune-Teller.* 1996. p. 54.
[15] Riggs, John. 'Penguin Live with John Riggs.' *Penguin Magic*. 2015. 2:25:35.

George Hansen, in *The Trickster and the Paranormal,* has called attention to the connection between mentalists and tricksters, writing that mentalists are 'some of the most trickster-like within the magic fraternity,[16] and argues that mentalists regularly employ 'one of the most subversive manifestations of the trickster – the blurring of imagination and reality.'[17] Riggs is a fascinating mentalist, and – in line with archetype of the shapeshifting trickster – he regularly performs spirit mediumship as the Reverend Jon Saint Germain. When Harlan asks Riggs – regarding his mediumship – 'how do you feel about that?'[18] Riggs responds, 'I'm perfectly fine with it.'[19]

This might be expected from Riggs who, earlier in the lecture, recounted the story of teaching a deceptive technique to 'two professional spirit mediums…who worked at Camp Chesterfield' in exchange for $5,000 each.[20] After teaching the technique to the 'little silvery head lady' and her friend, Riggs recounts being asked by a friend whether he suffered 'a qualm of consciousness,'[21] he claims to have responded, 'No, I went to sleep that night on a big pile of money with my beautiful girlfriend.'[22] Riggs then receives an enthusiastic round of laughter and applause from Harlan and the studio audience.

Obviously, it is not inappropriate to challenge Riggs' credibility when it comes to his recounting of personal experiences. In fact, it almost seems as if Riggs has assimilated his story from 20 years earlier, which he originally described as 'laying it on thick.'[23] But whether Riggs is lying or telling the truth (or something in between) is largely irrelevant. Richard Schechner writes of 'restored behavior' which he describes as 'strips of behaviour [that] can be rearranged or reconstructed' and 'are independent of the causal systems… that brought them into existence.'[24] Schechner further notes that 'the original "truth" or "source" of the behaviour may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while that truth or source is being honoured.'[25] What matters, then,

[16] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 137.
[17] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 138.
[18] Riggs, John. 'Penguin Live with John Riggs.' *Penguin Magic*. 2015. 2:25:30.
[19] Riggs, John. 'Penguin Live with John Riggs.' *Penguin Magic*. 2015. 2:25:30.
[20] Riggs, John. 'Penguin Live with John Riggs.' *Penguin Magic*. 2015. 1:25:00.
[21] Riggs, John. 'Penguin Live with John Riggs.' *Penguin Magic*. 2015. 01:30:45.
[22] Riggs, John. 'Penguin Live with John Riggs.' *Penguin Magic*. 2015. 01:30:55.
[23] Riggs, John. *The Even Compleater Fortune-Teller.* 1996. p. 54.
[24] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 34.
[25] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 34.

with Riggs, would seem to be the effort which he invests in framing his performances, and the manner in which he succeeds at blurring the boundary between truth and fiction.*

Riggs' approach suggests that the successful performance of mentalism depends as much – if not more – on the offstage performances which transpire *around or beyond* the conventional performances than on the conventional performances themselves. In other words, the overt performances are fundamentally dependent upon the covert, or *paraperformances,* which implicitly frame them. It was with this in mind that I created and framed all my performances; devoting considerable resources to the behaviour which took place not only during, but *around,* my public performances.

While pursuing this line of inquiry, I discovered purported spirit channeler Jim Callahan, whom I would describe as a mentalist among magicians. Callahan has adopted a fascinating approach to the framing of his stage and screen appearances. In a 2009 interview with Dodd Vickers intended for magicians and mentalists on the *MagicNewsWire* podcast, Callahan discusses his youth. According to Callahan:

> When I was maybe 12 or so, we went to stay down in Cassadaga, Florida, which is a medium camp…with my aunt for a few days. My aunt was a medium… The whole vibe kind of stuck with me… I also grew up going to charismatic churches… All of that stuff has come to bear in who I am today…I was exposed to Uri Geller… And I had seen what had happened at revival meetings. And I had been exposed to the medium-movement-spirit-camp-thing. And, as a result, I wanted more depth to what I did; if I was going to do the mentalism side of things.[26]

Callahan says that he views his performances as 'creating reality,' and in a statement which illuminates his intent to blur the boundary between life and stage, he explains 'my website is really an augmentation to my live presentations.'[27] Regarding his televised altercation with conjurer Criss Angel over his mediumistic claims on the TV talent contest for mentalists, *Phenomenon,* Callahan suggests that Angel had 'fallen for my publicity and PR.' According to Callahan, Angel 'totally fell for the story and the character that I had written.'[28] Callahan's use of the words "character" and "story" are curious because they run contrary to his overall approach of frame blurring. Vickers

* It is also worth noting the way in which Riggs subtly frames a lack of paranormal experience as a shortcoming, rather than a virtue.

[26] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:05:20.

[27] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:07:28.

[28] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:35:30.

seemed to pick up on this as well, and attempted to pin Callahan down to an unambiguous denial of mediumistic abilities, stating:

> It sounds to me like you're really describing yourself as…something of a method actor; someone that puts himself into the role completely, while they're in that role, but not really claiming to be that person. And in this case, you're not really claiming to talk to the dead. You're claiming to be an actor *pretending* to talk to the dead, and not someone who is really communicating with Grandma…[29]

Callahan agrees, but then carries on with his characteristic frame blurring and doublespeak. Referencing his purported spirit guide – the deceased author Raymond Hill – he responds to Vickers:

> You have it exactly. And that's one of the major things with what I do. I don't contact anybody else. It's me and Raymond… And you do have it right with the method acting thing. But on some level… what I've done, is I've built a character on my own life. It's kind of an amplification of everything that has transpired in my life up to this point. And I found a way to take that and put it out on stage for everybody to experience it.[30]

When Vickers asks Callahan whether he really communicates with Raymond, Callahan replies, 'I don't really know for sure.'[31] When Vickers apologizes for 'coming at it from a skeptical perspective' Callahan replies, 'So am I.'[32] When Callahan describes his early performances 'without Raymond,' Vickers makes one last attempt to obtain a *non-amplified* response from Callahan asking, 'Without Raymond, though, as a character…you're using to illustrate something? Or without Raymond as someone who's giving you incorporeal help in the show?'[33] Callahan's response: 'Yeah, exactly.'[34] At the end of the hour-long interview, an attentive listener would have consistently heard Callahan make an unusual combination of fence-straddling claims. For instance, one, that he is a conjurer and regularly employs deception and role play in his performances. And two, that he believes in the possibility of spirit contact, and to the best of his knowledge, he *thinks he might* use it at times.

It is worth noting that Callahan tells a number of other stories during this interview which seem particularly far-fetched, such as his claim that he turned down a scholarship and job offer by the

[29] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:36:40.
[30] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:37:05.
[31] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:38:10.
[32] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:41:10.
[33] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:45:30.
[34] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:45:40.

FBI following a performance.[35] Callahan claimed to reject the offer because he knew that he would be very good at profiling criminals, and he knew how hazardous that would be to his happiness and mental health.[36] But as with Riggs, the actual beliefs and life history of Callahan are largely irrelevant. The fascinating aspect is the way in which these performers use autobiographical stories and other frame blurring tactics in order to create and maintain ambiguity and/or believability about their onstage performances. This approach to frame blurring is immediately reminiscent of the metacomedy of Andy Kaufman.[*]

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Inspired by the extreme examples of Riggs, Callahan, and Kaufman, I put significant effort into these lines of thought. I adopted the surname Dean in order to ostensibly reflect my family history in telepathy research,[**] and adopted the middle name James, in order to evoke the iconic method actor James Dean. I obtained a certification in parapsychology from the University of Edinburgh,[***] and went to significant lengths to blur any contradictions between my offstage and onstage "realities." I prepared and rehearsed pages of responses to hypothetical interview questions and situations.[****] I also conducted and documented *Project Viola Ten* in order to establish web credibility while also developing and assimilating the most plausible explanations (ie., subtext) for my claimed abilities.[+]

Thus, when Louise Bruton of *The Irish Times* reported on 'multiple magicians' and 'stripping psychics [sic]'[37] and when James Kavanaugh spoke to *DublinLive* of 'a lot of magicians' but singled out 'one guy who could read minds who was brilliant,'[38] it came as a result of considerable effort on my part to frame my performance in a psychic, and thereby, non-magical, and non-entertainment, context. In order to do this, it was absolutely necessary to shift from a performance

[35] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:17:15.
[36] Vickers, Dodd. 'MNW #175: Jim Callahan.' *The Magic News Wire.* 16 Nov 2009. 0:18:00.
[*] Andy Kaufman is discussed further in 'Meta-Comedy.' See: pp. 198-201.
[**] Jane Dean was the maid of the purportedly telepathic Creery sisters and was also found to demonstrate telepathic ability by psychical researcher William Barrett.
[***] See appendices: *https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[****] 'Backstory and Mock Interview Script for IGT.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[+] 'Project Viola Ten SUBTEXT / METATEXT: Parts One and Two' and '*Rogue Illustrated*, Cover Article SUBTEXT / METATEXT.' See appendices: *https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[37] Bruton, Louise. 'Ireland's Got Talent, Everything you need to know.' *The Irish Times.* 4 Feb 2018.
[38] Pownall Sylvia. 'Denise Van Outen is the "nasty" judge on Ireland's Got Talent.' *DublinLive.ie.* 15 Jan 2018.

mindset to a paraperformance one. This shift involved aggressively blurring the frame between fiction and reality; engaging in what Richard Schechner has described as 'deep disguise,' 'identity shifting,' and 'dark play.'[39]

Dark Method Acting

In the early phases of this research project, I determined the importance of creating performances which consisted of more than simply a series of consecutive demonstrations. A series of such demonstrations would be immediately reminiscent of the familiar structure of conjuring shows best captured by the well-worn cliché: 'Thank you, and now for my next trick.' Creating performances for the stage and screen that avoided this pattern – driven by personality more than by pseudo-ability – was a challenging task. I sought to discover or create overarching premises and narratives which went, not only beyond the presentational frames of my individual demonstrations, but beyond the conventional frames of the performance itself.

My paraperformance strategies were partially informed by Richard Brody's analysis of classic pre-method actors, such as Cary Grant and Robert Mitchum, who created magnetic characters precisely through the act of *actually living fascinating and exciting lives*.[*] Accordingly, I theorized that the success of paraperformances is dependent upon the extent to which the performer allows the constructed aspects of offstage life to intrude on the constructed aspects of the performance on stage and screen. Conversely, these constructed aspects may also seep unconsciously into the performer's way of being, and thus, performance. Therefore, in order to blur the frames of my performance and – with an intention of being perceived as authentic – it was necessary to discover and construct paraperformances – intertwined with "reality" – in an attempt to effectively contextualize and blur the frame of my conventional performances. I have elected to describe this dark method acting approach as a paraperformance, because of the way in which these performances manipulate the contexts and frames *around* or *beyond* other conventionally framed performances.

[39] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:02:40.

[*] This topic is discussed further in 'Meta-Method Acting.' See: pp. 195-198.

My approach to dark method acting was informed to some degree by a hugely successful 2017 Broadway production *In and of Itself: Identity is an Illusion,* a one-man conjuring show starring Derek DelGaudio and directed by Frank Oz. Although admittedly a conjuring show, this production has broken ground in terms of frame blurring. Jamy Ian Swiss notably writes:

> DelGaudio is an anti-performer of sorts. He's not quite a punk artist, who is disregarding or trying to altogether hide his artistic skills, but rather an anti-performance performer, who is trying to conceal his theater craft… he is trying hard to suppress any appearance of "performance," minimizing his delivery dynamics and range of overt expression; his expression appears more internal than external. This works surprisingly well and is particularly disarming as a counterpoint to the very nature of magic and extraordinary skills.[40]

Swiss contrasts DelGaudio's performance with mentalist Derren Brown's 2017 stage show *Underground,* arguing that in contrast to DelGaudio, 'Brown seems to use his persona as a mask' and 'comes off as polished to the point of slickness.'[41] Swiss further notes that while 'Brown is engaging and accessible, and while it may appear natural and effortless to some, he is deliberate in his intentions to charm.'[42] Swiss, concludes: 'There isn't the slightest thing wrong with that, as long as the effort isn't too transparent, and Brown does risk that at times.'[43] Swiss also observed that critics 'may hold [Brown's] practiced showmanship against him when compared to the anti-showmanship of DelGaudio.'[44]

In 2018, I attended Brown's *Underground* at the Cork Opera House, and DelGaudio's *In and Of Itself* at the Daryl Roth Theater in Manhattan. Brown's earlier television work was legendary for blurring the lines between psychic and psychological, and I have expanded elsewhere upon Brown's creations of what I describe as *pseudo-reality.*[*] Nevertheless, Brown's most recent works largely follow the conventional structure of a conjuring show. By contrast, DelGaudio's conjuring show blurred the boundaries of conjuring, storytelling, and conceptual and performance art, resulting in what *The New Yorker* describes as 'a thoughtful piece of theatre' and allowing DelGaudio to, as *The New York Times* reports, set 'himself apart from the abracadabra crowd.'[45]

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[40] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Few Nights of Magic.' *Magicana.com.* 2 May 2017.
[41] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Few Nights of Magic.' *Magicana.com.* 2 May 2017.
[42] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Few Nights of Magic.' *Magicana.com.* 2 May 2017.
[43] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Few Nights of Magic.' *Magicana.com.* 2 May 2017.
[44] Swiss, Jamy Ian. 'A Few Nights of Magic.' *Magicana.com.* 2 May 2017.
[*] 'Derren Brown: Pseudo Reality.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[45] 'Home.' *inandofitselfshow.com.*

In 2019, I also attended David Blaine's *Real or Magic?* at the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin. Blaine's self-described 'anti-presentation' and 'urban shaman' approach to his "stunts," with regard to the ambiguity of "genuineness" or "fakeness" of these stunts, differentiates Blaine from his contemporaries, and aligns his endurance, pain, and regurgitation feats more closely with mentalists, shamans, fakirs, and performance artists, than with conjurers. I further examine the notion of anti-performance in a case study on conjurer, endurance artist, and performance artist David Blaine in the appendices.[*] I found Blaine's 'anti-presentation' and 'performance artist' approach – as well as DelGaudio's 'punk artist,' 'anti-performance,' and 'anti-showmanship' – to be inspirational. I endeavoured to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction throughout my own praxis. Not by playing a character, but by merging the artificial aspects of my persona with my actual identity.

Identity Shifting

Richard Schechner, discussing "reality" TV, has observed that '*Survivor* and other reality shows where the viewer knows one thing and the participants know something else' inevitably involve some form of 'deep disguise' and 'identity shifting' and are, consequently, 'varieties of dark play.'[46] This assessment of reality TV precisely reflects my own experience on the reality programs *Ireland's Got Talent* and *Ireland's Got Mór Talent* in which footage was broadcast on national Irish television in which I used a name which was not my own, described a genealogy which was not true, and demonstrated an ability which does not exist.

Identity shifting and deep disguise are, in my experience, no simple matter. I discovered that – for me at least – these changes took months, or years, to gradually assimilate. Naturally, one may simply play a character and make quick and extreme transformations. But playing a character is an entirely different form of play than identity shifting or deep disguise. Playing a character is clearly known to not be real, yet, inevitably, some aspects of the performer's identity may seep into the character and vice versa. In order to create and assimilate an amplified version of oneself, however – that both appears and *feels real* – the artificial aspects of that persona must be

[*] 'David Blaine: Urban Shaman.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[46] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:02:40.

thoroughly interwoven with aspects of one's pre-existing offstage persona. This process inevitably takes time and grows very gradually. This process may be viewed as distinct from "playing a character." For instance, as I began my practice-led research, I found it extremely difficult to make any form of psychic claim. In *Visions and Revisions*, although I may have momentarily appeared to purport to genuinely perform spirit channelling, I disclaimed this "fake" ability before the conclusion of the performance. I was surprised to discover, however, that I enjoyed performing the spirt channelling much more than I enjoyed disclaiming it.

When I began performing with Margot Fox, as the purportedly telepathic duo, the Deans, we played flamboyant, diva-esque, self-promoting, versions of ourselves. We displayed ironic hipster behaviour such as wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, taking selfies, and handing out *Superstar Trading Cards* featuring, on the back, a "superstar smoothie recipe" and "stats" such as:

> Names: Edward James Dean and Margot Jane Fox
> Zodiac Signs: Leo and Taurus
> Relationship: Famous

We also auditioned for both *Britain's Got Talent* and *Big Brother UK* exploring many frame blurring techniques and paraperformance strategies in the process. We stated, for instance: 'Although we're most known for our demonstrations of telepathy, we see ourselves more as fashion designers, supermodels, fitness gurus, communications consultants, rock stars. We *do* enjoy demonstrating and lecturing about telepathy, but mostly we just want to be celebrities.'[*] We were quite successful in these auditions and were among the final 50 couples to be selected from a pool of 10,000. We were ultimately not, however, among the dozen couples to appear on the show.

It is important to note that we did not consider these playful versions of ourselves to be *characters*, but simply, *playful sides of ourselves*. The rest seemed to stem naturally from our own quirky personalities and friendship. We referred to each other exclusively by our "new" names during the duration of our work together, and our colleagues in the London projects knew us exclusively by these names. This identity shifting was fun and exhilarating, but I also discovered that there can be consequences to tampering with one's personal identity. One such warning came when Maggie – after it became necessary for her to relocate to Italy to finish her Masters in Fine Arts Degree –

[*] 'Audition Script for Big Brother UK.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

chose to withdraw from the *Big Brother UK* audition process. She sent me an email which read, in part (emphasis added and reprinted with permission):

> I know not everything has to be fun, and I know not everything will be easy. All of those things are okay. And there have been as many wonderful moments in our work as there have been negative — probably more, to be fair. *But I do find that I've gotten worn out by how all-encompassing it is.* And I have tried hard to be a good sport, because I want to be a good sport. I want to play the game. I want to be excited by the prospect of doing *a living performance-art piece* where it's you and me *lying to everybody about everything always,* except maybe for when it's just the two of us together. But at the moment I don't have the stamina for that.
>
> I've tried hard to be Maggie Dean, who is *always graceful, always positive, always engaged* and *caring* and *nice* and *understanding* and *has great ideas* and *a tireless hunger for fame.* And I'm not saying that I'm not that person sometimes, but I'm not that person all the time. But I have tried to be...*but that's not me.* So, when you say things like, maybe we can spend time together and talk about life and not work... I don't know what that entails. *Because you've always made a point of collapsing the two into one another.* And that's not a bad thing. It's been really fun. But right now *that's not what I want.* I feel totally exhausted by it all.

Obviously, it was heart wrenching to lose a valued friend, creator, and partner. And obviously, we had invested a not insignificant amount of time and money into the development of our shows, *Meet the Deans, Two Minds with a Single Thought,* and *Unfathomable.* Ethically speaking, I do not feel that Maggie was harmed in any way, as her email makes clear. However – as her email also makes clear – such an immersive and darkly playful approach to performance is challenging, and ultimately difficult to sustain. Practically speaking, I faced several questions: Should I conclude my practice-based research at that point? Should I recruit and train a new partner? Or, should I adapt the work for solo performance?

Ultimately, I opted for the latter path, individually pursuing a project which had originally been intended as a collaboration. This project, "codenamed" *Project Viola Ten*, involved attempting to apparently demonstrate telepathic abilities under controlled laboratory conditions. I began a new collaboration, commissioning fellow doctoral researcher Patricia Klich[*] to film a documentary for the purpose of preserving and documenting these testing sessions. Given the extraordinary results

[*] 'Biographies of Collaborators.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

of these experiments,[*] I began devising a one-man show entitled, *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rock Star: Smells Like Dean Spirit.*

I have elected to describe this history, at this point, in order to demonstrate that performing as one half of the Deans changed and emboldened me; *stretched my identity*. So much so, that when the Deans were no longer working together, I discovered that I was not the same person as I had been prior to our collaborative efforts. I found it much easier, for instance – despite working solo – to make bold psychic claims and to be quirky, diva-esqe, flamboyant, and playfully arrogant. In other words, I remained Eddie Dean, even when I was no longer enabled and encouraged by Maggie Dean. For example, I ordered my own *Superstar Trading Cards*, featuring the same superstar smoothie recipe on the back, along with "stats" boasting:

> Name: Edward James Dean
> Zodiac Sign: Danger
> Relationship Status: Famous

All of this is to say that – in my experience – the process of identity shifting is neither quick nor simple. Rather, it is a stretching of one's identity which takes place over time. And like a wool jumper, once stretched, it does not easily return to its previous shape. This identity shifting requires, therefore, not only a projection of a constructed or amplified persona, but also a corresponding manipulation of the self into that persona. Speaking from my own experience, I argue that during instances in which aspects of these personas must be significantly fabricated – such as in claims of psychic abilities – elements of self-deception may be deployed in order to rationalize and justify those elements until they become hyperreal; a fictional portrayal which nevertheless embodies an idea more effectively than reality. Thus, over time these fake things begin to feel real, if only from an alternate perspective. It was for this reason that I began formulating the concepts of *quasi-characters*, *anti-characters,* and *meta-characters.*

This particular approach to character development has been discussed to some extent by Max Maven who describes his unique persona as a result of 'cultivation' rather than 'invention.'[47] In an interview with Donna Zuckerbrot, Maven states:

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[*] 'Project Viola Ten.' p. 89.
[47] Zuckerbrot, Donna. *Max Maven - A Fabulous Monster.* 2006. *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* 2017. Vol. 4. 0:59:20.

> All that you get from me – when you talk with, when you see me perform, when you talk with me off stage, when you interact with me in any way – *is* me. This is not a costume or a false face; it's an extension of me. It's just that I've chosen to emphasize certain qualities and minimize certain others. So I would not say I invented a character, but rather, I *cultivated* a character.[48]

The identity shifting which is inevitably intertwined with such performances is, as Richard Schechner has noted, a form of dark play. Such performances blur the line between truth and fiction, not only in the minds of spectators, but in the minds of the performers, as well. Schechner has written of 'play that conceals its purposes, even its existence' and argued the importance of 'masking, cloaking one's ordinary self just to get away from the humdrum' and further observed that 'sometimes a person puts herself at risk to test her luck, to prove her value, to enact a special destiny.'[49] Schechner further argues that 'the gratification and thrill of dark play involves everything from physical risk-taking to inventing new selves to engaging one's inner self to communion with the Other.'[50] While it remains unclear precisely whom or what the "Other" is, and how exactly one might "commune" with it, I call attention to Schechner's observations here because – speaking from experience – I do feel that aspects such as gratification, thrill, risk-taking, and personal re-invention were, and are, among the most captivating and driving forces of my performances.

Given the degree to which my experiences along these lines have blended my performances with my personal life – entangling with notions of love and health and career and fatherhood – it is difficult to determine which aspects are most appropriate to discuss. Nevertheless, when I read Schechner's description of dark play – particularly terms such as, cloaking the ordinary self, getting away from the humdrum, testing luck, proving value, inventing selves, the thrill of risk-taking, and enacting a special destiny – I do feel as through my breathing constricts, my pulse quickens, and I am profoundly *alive;* open to the infinite and malleable possibilities of the future. As Schechner has observed, 'there is something excitingly liberating about this kind of playing.'[51]

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[48] Zuckerbrot, Donna. *Max Maven - A Fabulous Monster.* 2006. *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* 2017. Vol. 4. 0:59:20.
[49] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 121.
[50] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 121.
[51] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 121.

Acting As-If

The stretching of identities – in my experience – is not always an entirely voluntary affair. There are some ideas which when entertained, even playfully, seem to have a way of "sticking." Some ideas, such as the existence of psychic phenomena, may seem quite irrational on the surface, objectively speaking. Once associated *actions* are underway, however – once one claims to genuinely believe in psychic abilities or shares one's intuitive insights or visions – the ideas might begin to appear more rational or logical than they had prior to those actions. Simply put, it seems that once an action is underway, our brains attempt to maximize on our new positions.

This idea is hardly new. Not only is this the notion underlying the popular advice to *fake it 'til you make it,*[*] but this advice dates at least back to Aristotle who writes in *The Nicomachean Ethics* that 'for things that we have to learn to do, we learn by doing them.'[52] On this, Aristotle further writes:

> [T]he virtues…we acquire by first having actually practised them…we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts…We become temperate by abstaining from pleasures, and at the same time we are best able to abstain from pleasures when we have become temperate. And so with Courage: we become brave by training ourselves to despise and endure terrors, and we shall be best able to endure terrors when we have become brave.[53]

The debate surrounding these ideas lie at the heart of the mind-body problem and extend at least as far back as the 17th century. Rene Descartes' famous starting point, 'Cogito ergo sum'[54] or 'I think, therefore I am' not only separates mind from body, but also imposes a hierarchy of mind over body, along with the idea that in the natural order of things, thinking comes first. Despite the popularity of this philosophical viewpoint, it has been continually challenged. Baruch Spinoza, for instance – a contemporary of Descartes – argued that the body and mind were one continuous substance[55] and that 'the object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body.'[56] The problematic nature of Cartesian dualism can be observed in historical performances of mentalism and psychic arts. These performances ostensibly claimed to be almost exclusively "mental" in

[*] While the origin of this phrase is somewhat unclear, it dates at least as far back as John Frasca's 1969 book *Con Man or Saint?*, and gained popularity as the motto for Alcoholics Anonymous.
[52] Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Book II. 349 BC.
[53] Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Book II. 349 BC.
[54] Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on the Methods.* 1637.
[55] Spinoza, Baruch. *The Ethics.* 1677.
[56] Spinoza, Baruch. *The Ethics.* 1677.

nature, yet the conspicuous corporeality of these performers – from costume and hair to the Othering and/or feminizing of the body – was unusually foregrounded.

In the late 19th century, William James and Carl Lange formulated the James-Lange theory which states that physiological responses to stimulus precede emotional responses. In his 1884 book, *What is an Emotion?,* James writes:

> …bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion. Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually feel afraid or angry.[57]

The James-Lange theory has recently been defended by neuroscientists. In *Looking for Spinoza*, for instance, Antonio Damasio writes, 'A feeling, in essence, is an idea – an idea of the body and, even more particularly, an idea of a certain aspect of the body, its interior, in certain circumstances. A feeling of emotion is an idea of the body when it is perturbed by the emoting process.'[58] Damasio continues, 'the mind exists for the body, is engaged in telling the story of the body's multifarious events, and uses that story to optimize the life of the organism.'[59]

Yet, despite the continual, and now definitive, challenges to its legitimacy, it remains that much of our cultural heritage and societal infrastructure is founded upon the Cartesian duality. This false dichotomy favours mental pursuits over physical ones (as if the two notions are entirely distinct) and emphasizes the mind as the site of rationality, logic, and enlightened thought, while the role of the body in thinking is essentially dismissed, at least in any positive sense. The lack of appreciation for the body in academic pursuits is humorously and eloquently captured in Sir Ken

[57] James, William. "What is an Emotion?" *Mind*. No. 9. 1884. pp. 188-205.
[58] Damasio, Antonio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain.* 2003. p. 88.
[59] Damasio, Antonio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain.* 2003. p. 206.

Robinson's observation that many academics, 'tend to look upon their bodies as a form of transport for their heads: it's a way of getting their heads to meetings.'[60]

Dualism has long been challenged in theatre, as well. The use of outward actions as a trigger for inward changes, for instance, was thoroughly explored in the technique of the *psychological gesture*[61] pioneered during the early 20th century by theatre director Michael Chekhov and subsequently embraced by his colleague Konstantin Stanislavski in his *method of physical action.*[62] This approach was effective, according to Stanislavski, because 'in the process of action the actor gradually obtains the mastery over the inner incentives of the actions of the character he is representing, evoking in himself the emotions and thoughts which resulted in those actions. In such a case, an actor not only understands his part, but also feels it.'[63] Exploring the connections between Chekhov's psychological gesture and cognitive science, John Lutterbie, in an essay entitled 'The dynamics of Psychological Gestures,' writes:

> Chekhov's understanding in practical terms of the visceral connection between movement, emotion, and cognition predates what neuroscientists are coming to accept only now: the brain cannot be divorced from the body, and reason and emotion are inseparable. The images that the actor brings to mind, the feelings they elicit, and the physical, motor responses that are triggered are all part of a complex process that is set in motion by perceptual information gained from the world around us.[64]

The psychological gesture of Chekhov has clear connections to The James-Lange theory. If an actor is able, for instance, to manufacture a perception of an 'exciting fact'[65] then according to this theory, the physiological responses of the body would automatically follow, thus creating a genuine emotion in the actor. Theatre director Katie Mitchell, in *The Actor's Craft,* explains the significance not only of psychology, but of the *physiology* of emotions. Regarding the work of Damasio, Mitchell writes:

> Damasio, like James, argues that an emotion consists primarily of a visible change in the body. This change is legible in our facial expressions, tone of voice, posture

[60] Robinson, Ken. *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*. Revised Ed. 2011.
[61] Lutterbie, John. 'The dynamics of Psychological Gestures.' *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov.* Eds. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon. 2015. p. 102.
[62] Magarshack, David. *Stanislavsky: A Life.* 1950. p. 375.
[63] Magarshack, David. *Stanislavsky: A Life.* 1950. p. 375.
[64] Lutterbie, John. 'The dynamics of Psychological Gestures.' *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov.* Eds. Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu and Yana Meerzon. 2015. p. 102.
[65] James, William. "What is an Emotion?" *Mind*. No. 9. 1884. pp. 188-205.

> and even our internal bodily processes. There is a gap of about half a second between a stimulus (seeing a bear in the forest) and becoming conscious of an emotion (fear). By the time we are conscious of what is actually happening to us we would have run several metres away from the bear.[66]

Scholars and practitioners in the field of Performance Studies have paid close attention to the discoveries of Cognitive Science, particularly with regard to the relationship between the brain and performance. Richard Schechner, for instance, has noted:

> Not so long ago, it was thought the brain is "set" early in life; that neural learning was an early-life phenomenon. But now scientists know that the brain changes throughout life…new neurons are created, new synaptic connections made, and older connections weakened or strengthened. In other words, the brain can be trained throughout life.[67]

Conscious brain "training" is an important consideration for both Theatre and Performance Studies, in that it relates, not only to acting but also to the performativity of identity and belief. According to Schechner:

> Who "I am" is no longer a given, if it ever was… Continuous alteration is possible. This promise of mutability entices people into playing more and more roles, discovering as many variations of themselves as possible. As never before people are performing their multiple selves all day, every day.[68]

The counterintuitive nature of performativity and identity, which seems almost to run in a reverse-causal direction, calls to mind the notorious free-will experiments[69] which – although contested[70] – demonstrate, according to psychologist Adam Bear, that:

> the experience of intentionally willing an action… is often nothing more than a post hoc causal inference that our thoughts caused some behaviour. The feeling itself, however, plays no causal role in producing that behaviour. This could sometimes lead us to think we made a choice when we actually didn't or think we made a different choice than we actually did.[71]

Taken together, I argue that it is feasible that psychic beliefs are not necessarily logically *chosen* to serve a specific function (ie., I fear death so I choose to believe in the indestructible soul) but

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[66] Mitchell, Katie. *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre.* 2009. p. 231.
[67] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. pp. 174-175.
[68] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 211.
[69] Libet, Benjamin. 'Unconscious cerebral initiative and the role of conscious will in voluntary action.' *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. No. 8. 1985. pp. 529–566.
[70] Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained*. 1992. p. 164.
[71] Bear. Adam. 'What Neuroscience Says about Free Will.' *ScientificAmerican.com.* 28 Apr 2016.

rather, these propositions and identities are improvised, acted out, and *tried on,* in social situations. Beliefs, and the lack thereof, may follow as a biproduct of such behaviours.

Aspects of this psycho-physical process have been long explored in psychology and psychotherapy, such as in the *Acting As If* technique developed in the 1920s by psychotherapist Alfred Adler. In an essay entitled, 'Adlerian psychotherapy as a constructivist psychotherapy' the authors, Carlson and Sperry, describe the characteristics of Adler's technique:

> When someone has difficulty acting prosaically, that is, speaking assertively or responding with some measure of empathy, the clinician might encourage [him or her] to act "as if" they were assertive or empathic several times a day…. The rationale for this reconstruction strategy is that as someone begins to act differently and to feel differently, they become a different person.[72]

Along similar lines, Stanislavsky created a technique in the early 1930s which is variously translated as the *as if* or *magic if.* Like Adler, Stanislavski, links the *if* not only to imagination, but to 'action' and 'activity.'[73] In this technique, an actor is encouraged to act as if the actor, *rather than the character*, were in the imaginary circumstances. According to Stanislavski, the word *if* 'has a peculiar quality, a kind of power' with the ability to create 'an instantaneous, inner stimulus.'[74] Stanislavski also observed that *if* 'arouses an inner and real activity, and does this by natural means,'[75] and without deception or coercion.[76]

The *as if* approach has also re-emerged in pop-psychology. In his 2012 book, *Rip it Up,* psychologist Richard Wiseman refers to 'the As If principle' as a process in which 'by acting as if you are a certain type of person, you become that person.'[77] Using the James-Lange theory as a starting point, and referencing 'decades of research,'[78] Wiseman explores the scientific findings behind this principle. The approach, despite its longevity, remains counter intuitive insomuch as it challenges conventional *thinking first* approaches to creating change. On this note, Wiseman writes, 'For years self-help gurus have preached the same simple mantra: if you want to improve

[72] Carlson, Jon and Len Sperry. 'Adierian psychotherapy as a constructivist psychotherapy.' *The handbook of constructive therapies: Innovative approaches from leading practitioners*. Ed. M. F. Hoyt. 1998. p. 73.
[73] Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor Prepares.* 1936. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 2013. p. 41.
[74] Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor Prepares.* 1936. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 2013. p. 40.
[75] Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor Prepares.* 1936. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 2013. p. 41.
[76] Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor Prepares.* 1936. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 2013. p. 41.
[77] Wiseman, Richard. 'Self help: forget positive thinking, try positive action.' *TheGuardian.com*. 30 Jun 2012.
[78] Wiseman, Richard. 'Self help: forget positive thinking, try positive action.' *TheGuardian.com*. 30 Jun 2012.

your life then you need to change how you think.'[79] According to Wiseman, 'in principle, this idea sounds perfectly reasonable. However, in practice it often proves ineffective.'[80] As an example of a more constructive approach, Wiseman suggests 'that it would be much more effective to simply ask people to change their behaviour.'[81]

The *as if* approach, in all of its various forms, suggests a performative approach to transformation. Changing what one *does,* changes what one *is.* Schechner has observed that these sorts of changes are not merely external or superficial, noting that 'humans are able to absorb and learn behavior so thoroughly that the new "performed" behavior knits seamlessly into ongoing "spontaneous" action' and can include 'extension across cultural boundaries and penetration to the deepest strata of historical, personal, and neurological experience.'[82] Performances, then, have the power to cause genuine transformations. Thus, I argue, that not only performances – but behaviour in general – may occur independently of the beliefs and identities which these actions in turn help to create and define.

The Psychic Meme

The emphasis on action and behaviour, in better understanding identities and beliefs, points to the importance of practice-led research. During my three years in the social role of a psychic, I discovered original perspectives, which in many instances, challenged my own attitudes as well as conventional wisdom. For instance, I began this journey with a bias *against* psychics. Once my purported psychic activities were underway, however – once I had performed spirit channelling and publicly and unambiguously claimed psychic abilities – these activities revealed themselves to me over time in a different light. It was only by *trying it* that I could learn how it *felt.*

My performance of spirit channelling in *Visions and Revisions* was performed as a pretext to subsequently disclaim the demonstration as a fraudulent one. But I knew *immediately* – as I was doing it – that I enjoyed giving the demonstration. Similarly, I hated debunking it, *even as* I was debunking it. This was a remarkable discovery for me, since my reaction to *doing* revealed a

[79] Wiseman, Richard. 'Self help: forget positive thinking, try positive action.' *TheGuardian.com*. 30 Jun 2012.
[80] Wiseman, Richard. 'Self help: forget positive thinking, try positive action.' *TheGuardian.com*. 30 Jun 2012.
[81] Wiseman, Richard. 'Self help: forget positive thinking, try positive action.' *TheGuardian.com*. 30 Jun 2012.
[82] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 327.

different set of beliefs and opinions than I previously thought I held. I was able to discuss this predicament with Richard Wiseman following the London debut of *Unfathomable*. Wiseman, who is also a conjurer, described having the exact same feeling during a lecture in which he performed and subsequently exposed a method for spiritualist "table turning."*

On the basis of such experiences, I began to question whether there might be something in human nature, an unconscious search for a power beyond ourselves? Nicholas Humphrey has written at length of the human tendency to 'dream about and hope for other possible worlds more to their liking – where men and women live for ever, wishes are reliably granted, God is in his heaven and all is right with the world.'[83] Or perhaps, even more simply, do humans suspect that – in Humphrey's words – 'the scientific picture of the world is incomplete'?[84] Is there a human need to engage with performances which fulfil these needs, desires, and questions?

After claiming a psychic identity and performing allegedly psychic demonstrations, I feel – in retrospect – almost as if those ideas hijacked my mind, so to speak. This is reflective of what evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has described as the operation of *memes*. According to Dawkins, 'Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.'[85] I can say with all honesty, in fact, that I don't know why I have chosen to become an expert in mentalism and the psychic arts. In fact, there seems to be little rational sense for doing so. But, fascinatingly, when describing my interest in this area to others, I often mention that I was *bitten by the bug* when I was eight years old. For these reasons, I feel that it is appropriate to briefly explore these beliefs from the perspective of cognitive science.

In the forward for Humphrey's excellent 1996 book *Leaps of Faith,* Daniel Dennett weighs in on the prevalence of psychic beliefs, asking, 'If there is a prevailing wind blowing in favour of the supernatural, what is its source? Why does it exist at all, and why are rational demonstrations so

* Table turning was the phenomena of tables moving, tipping over, or even levitating, which was often experienced during spiritualist seances. The phenomena were manifested through both unconscious ideomotor response and through conscious deception and artifice.

[83] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 55.

[84] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 51.

[85] Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene.* 1976. Ch. 11.

impotent against it?'[86] Humphrey essentially argues that the prevalence of such beliefs results from a human desire to believe in 'paranormal soul-power.'[87] This soul-power meme – although Humphrey does not use the term *meme* in his book – promises a world 'more to their liking.'[88]

Regarding memes, Daniel Dennett has written that 'part of the glory of being human' lies in fact the we are 'apes with infected brains.'[89] According to Dennett, 'Our heads are filled with memes, which are cultural items which have their own [evolutionary] fitness, and which pass like viruses, like germs, from mind to mind.'[90] Dennett also discusses memes as being a uniquely human phenomenon, observing that 'animals have beliefs but they don't have opinions.'[91] Dennett notes that opinions, or as he calls them, 'capital B Beliefs' are 'ultimately tied to linguistic expression' and consequently, 'these beliefs can spread, as it were, on their own' like an 'epidemic' or 'contagion.'[92] In Dennett's words, ideas 'can invade minds and commandeer the agents whose minds they are.'[93]

However, Dennett also discusses the value of memes, arguing that 'if we didn't have minds with all these memes in them, we would be just like animals. We wouldn't have any goals other than making more of our kind.'[94] He notes that humans, unlike animals, 'have more important things on our agenda' and explains that the human ability to 'devote our lives to an ideal' would not be possible were it not for 'these culturally borne ideas.'[95] Dennett further notes that humans 'honor the idea of being enslaved to a belief' such as 'politics, religion, [and] ethnic beliefs' in which 'the cause is more important than the truth.'[96]

Dawkins, as well, has addressed the notion of religions as prominent memes. 'God exists,' writes Dawkins, 'if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture.'[97] This statement calls to mind Jeffrey Kripal's assertion

[86] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. Forward by Daniel Dennett. p. x.
[87] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 148.
[88] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 55.
[89] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:03:50.
[90] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:04:00.
[91] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:00:50.
[92] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:01:50.
[93] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:01:50.
[94] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:04:20.
[95] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:04:20.
[96] Dennet, Daniel. 'Daniel Dennett - What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:03:20.
[97] Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene.* 1976. Ch. 11.

that paranormal 'superpowers' are, indeed, '*real* in the simple sense that people experience them all the time and have reported their effects throughout history.'[98] It is my contention – based on my praxis – that mentalism/psychic performances may be viewed as a longstanding cultural meme with high survival value. I further contend that some ideas have such power, feel so comforting, or are so fun, that to even *play* at the ideas is likely to lead to repeated and deepened *doings*.

Dan Greene – touching on several areas which I have explored – writes that only 'reality television and magic shows' have 'a more complex fourth-wall relationship than professional wrestling.'[99] Indeed, the contemporary prevalence of performances – including mentalism and psychic arts – which blur the frame between fiction and reality is of extreme cultural significance. I contend that seemingly psychic actions and identities may be largely described as deep and/or dark play. These fabricated or fraudulent psychic experiences can – over time – be interpreted by the performer as genuine psychic experiences. I describe such actions – in which a performer loses track of reality and play with regard to identity – as *dark method acting*. I further contend that this form of deeply, darkly playful acting lies behind many, if not most, purported and reported psychic experiences.

The Wink-Eye

Throughout this research project – to psychic and back again – I gained many new perspectives, not only about the world, but about myself. The discoveries which I made throughout my praxis are reflective of the words of Sarah Wall in her article 'Writing an Autoethnography: Easier Said than Done' in which she observes that through her practice-based research, she 'not only challenged the received wisdom of the field but also learned to think about [her] experience… in a way that challenged and changed [her].'[100] Almost immediately after commencing my praxis, I began to dismiss the term "mentalism" as industry jargon and to realize that what I was really researching was not so much the performances of mind reading by conjurers, but rather, the gamut of the psychic arts. I stopped referring to myself as a "mentalist," opting instead, for various terms

[98] Kripal, Jeffrey. *The Super Natural.* 2016. p. 5.
[99] Greene, Dan. 'The "Montreal Screwjob" is One of Pro Wrestling's Most Famous Incidents, But Was It All a Hoax?' *Sports Illustrated.* 7 Nov 2017.
[100] Wall, Sarah. 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography.' *International Journal of Qualitative Methods.* 1 Mar 2008.

such as non-physical communications specialist, psychic, performance artist, circus artist, parapsychology expert, or rock star. Anything *other* than "magician" or "mentalist" would suffice. This shift in terminology is worthwhile since mentalism *as conjuring* is well established, but mentalism *as psychic phenomena* is both misunderstood and of immediate cultural significance.

Although I never managed to fully become a shut-eye, in failing to do so – that is, in failing to come to fully believe in the reality of my psychic abilities – I came to discover the territory of the wink-eye. It is a largely unexplored area, but also a rich one which bridges the gulf between open-eyes and shut-eyes. To be an open-eye is to know that one's so-called psychic or parapsychological abilities are falsely claimed. To be a shut-eye, on the other hand, is to believe that one's so-called psychic or parapsychological abilities are honestly claimed. On the surface, however, both may appear the same. Given the deceptions inevitably employed by open-eyes, and the self-deception seemingly impacting shut-eyes, *there is no certain way* to distinguish one from the other. One simply cannot take a mentalist/psychic at face value, and one cannot make assumptions about the beliefs held by another individual.

Although lore tells of a progression – or depending on one's perspective, a regression – from open-eye to shut-eye, I do not view such a shift as being very likely to actually occur. But it may well *seem* to occur to onlookers. Indeed, the very essence of the open-eye is to masquerade as a shut-eye; and sometimes even as a shut-eye masquerading as an open-eye. To phrase this more simply, some fake psychics play the role of real psychics *pretending* to be conjurers, ostensibly to make their abilities more commercially palatable for the public.[101] Ultimately, only the performer *truly knows* what he or she *actually* believes, and even then – as I will argue in 'Beyond Psychic'[*] – there is still margin for error.

Some open-eye performers – through the use of particular techniques and artifice – are rather easily spotted by those indoctrinated in the mechanics of the field. Yet, those with such knowledge are very unlikely to "blow the whistle" on a fellow performer and hazard their own secrets in the process. Even psychics who have been caught cheating may still manage to convincingly claim that they only cheat in times of extreme pressure or fatigue. Counterintuitively, this masquerading

[101] Cassidy, Bob. *The Artful Mentalism of Bob Cassidy Vol. 2*. 2013. p. 84.
[*] 'Beyond Psychic.' pp. 211-250.

can also go in the other direction. In some instances, there are social and economic incentives for shut-eyes to play the role of open-eyes or skeptics. In academia, for instance, a declaration of belief in psychic phenomena places one's career in harm's way. (Curiously, the same does not appear to be true of religious beliefs.)

The above concern notwithstanding – and in the interest of providing a fuller autoethnographic perspective – I consider it relevant that in the course of writing this dissertation, I had a number of exceptional experiences which seem to defy any obvious rational, psychological, or material explanations. I will describe one such experience at the end of this chapter. I am no more willing to definitively attribute this experience to coincidence or wishful thinking than I am to attribute it to psychic ability or quantum entanglement. *All* explanations seem difficult to accept. My intention, however, is not to explain seemingly psychic experiences, but to analyse what psychics *do* and how they do it.

I am hardly alone in having experiences which conform with the psychic hypothesis. Many people share similar experiences. Nicholas Humphrey estimates, for instance, that about 30% of the British public reports having had a personal experience in ESP and about 15% report having seen or heard a ghost.[102] While I do not believe that my experience is evidence of a psychic connection, I also do not believe that it is definitively resolved by explanations of chance, coincidence, or wishful thinking. Such explanations do also seem unlikely and – as an idea – these explanations are decidedly less fun and less practical than the psychic hypothesis. As Humphrey has observed, 'it is the believers after all, who have all the best tunes.'[103]

The deeply and darkly playful secret paraperformances of those who seem to be – or seem to think they are, or seem to think they may be – psychic, make it thoroughly impossible for observers to say with any degree of certainty what such performers believe. The performers may not even know themselves. Certainly, many such performers may not even *know* that they don't know what they do or don't believe. The grandmother who seems to "truly believe in ghosts" might be darkly playing. The academic who is a "hardened skeptic" might really believe in telepathy. There is simply no way to know for sure.

[102] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 164.
[103] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. 1996. p. 183.

Thus, I argue that the distinction between open-eyes and shut-eyes is a false one; or at least not a particularly useful one. The reality seems to lie somewhere between; in a fluidity between performance, play, transformation, and belief, which is ever shapeshifting, ever playful, and ever illusive. This is the territory of the wink-eye. Winking tells others that we are playing. Yet it is sometimes with one eye-shut that we see more clearly. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that elements of performance and play are involved in every act of so-called psychic phenomena. In attempting to become a shut-eye, I discovered that the concept was a mirage. One of my eyes is shut. And one eye is open. Perhaps this liminal space – halfway between here and there – is all there ever really was. Understanding this truth about performances of psychic phenomena will better position us to make sense of the emerging post-truth condition.

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I rarely remember my dreams. On 19 August 2017, I had an unusually vivid dream. It was particularly unusual in that I remembered experiencing it. On the rare occasions on which I am aware of my dreams, they are usually very abstract, fragmented, non-sensical, and difficult to recall or recount. Further, the memories of these dreams dissolve very quickly after waking. This dream had a clear narrative. Easy to follow. Easy to remember. It involved my wife. We were separated by an ocean and only days away from signing the papers for our divorce. In my dream, our daughter Lulu, like any 8-year-old – not the best at keeping secrets – had revealed to me that her mother was dating a Patrick Swayze impersonator. My wife was very happy with this fun loving, well-muscled, well moving, broad smiling, broad shouldered, gentleman. I got out of bed and logged on to my computer and – in an unusual synchronicity – I noticed that my wife was also online. She was visiting her extended family for the month and was only rarely online during this time. I said hello. It was rare for us to connect online in this way. I told her about my dream. In a decade of marriage, I cannot recall ever telling her the specifics of a dream. But THIS dream was so humorously random. Patrick Swayze was an actor I had never given much thought to. I don't think I've ever even watched a Patrick Swayze film in its entirety. Strangely – very strangely – my wife responded by writing: 'that is freaky.' It turned out that – given the difference in time zones – at the same time that I was dreaming in Ireland, she was – for the first time – watching the film Dirty Dancing *in Indiana. Not only was she watching it – but she admitted to finding the experience to be a deeply moving one. With the signing of divorce papers looming, it was an intensely emotional time for both of us, and something about this experience – from start to finish – struck both of us as being more than just a coincidence. I later suggested, unsuccessfully, that maybe this experience was a "sign" that we should not get divorced.*[*]

[*] This account is reconstructed from memory and the noted email exchange.

BANISHING THE SPIRITS

‘MAKE MENTAL SLAVES OF YOUR SUBJECTS’

- 1970s advertisement for “hypnotic glasses” [1]

[1] Hypnotism Comic Book Ads. Circa 1970. *Retrovintagekid.wordpress.com*.

The Cultural and Patriarchal Appropriation of the Psychic

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that the 'the inclusionary spirit of Performance Studies (and the theoretical concern with what "inclusion" presumes)' makes this field of study 'particularly attuned to issues of place, personhood, cultural citizenship, and equity.'[2] It is my contention that contemporary performances of mentalism and psychic arts cannot be disentangled from notions of Otherness. Problematically, however, such ideas are inherently reductive and intertwined with histories of appropriation, supremacy, and oppression. The patriarchal aspects of these performances further prove to be problematic.

According to Mark Fortier, theoretical areas such as feminism and post-colonialism are aimed at giving a voice 'to an oppressed group by understanding and critiquing the structures of oppression and articulating and encouraging liberation and revolution.'[3] With this in mind, in this chapter I will interrogate mentalism and psychic arts, giving consideration to perspectives such as post-colonialism, cultural appropriation, and patriarchy. My intention is to use these theoretical lenses in order to provide perspectives which not only illuminate the ways in which these performances have historically reinforced social norms with regard to patriarchy and post-colonialism, but also to lay groundwork for the subversion, rejection, or resistance of these norms in such performances.

As a starting point: Is it possible that when a young girl from India or China performs mentalism she is viewed firstly by Europeans and North Americans as fraudulent, while a young American or European boy performing the same feats would be embraced as a rising star of mentalism? Is it possible – temporarily bracketing the question of religion[*] – that people of the developing world who employ the standard tricks of the trade are depicted in the developed world as frauds, whereas people of the developed world who employ those same methods are accepted and protected by their peers under the label *mentalist*? In the course of this chapter, I argue that the answer to the above questions is largely, yes. It is evident that those in the developing world who practice deception professionally are generally held to a different standard (by the developed world) than those in the developed world who do the same.

[2] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 'Performance Studies.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 51.
[3] Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre.* 2002. p. 193.
[*] This question is taken up in 'Beyond Psychic.' pp. 211-250.

Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge that performances of mentalism and psychic arts in post-industrial societies – including my own – are very privileged performances. It is not insignificant that these performances evolved from spiritualism and traditional shamanistic and mystical practices. Nor is it insignificant that today's male dominated field of stage mind reading largely arose from the ashes of the female dominated activities of spiritualism. Despite this evolution, or more likely because of it, performers of mentalism and psychic arts have cultivated a problematic attitude with relation to gender and Otherness.

Performance Studies and Anglo-American and Eurocentrism

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that the arts of performative healing and divination as traditionally performed in developing societies are best described as either shamanism or mysticism, owing to the superstitious and magico-religious aspects of the claims and consumptions of the performances. Mentalism, on the other hand, as performed in post-industrial societies – by definition – makes claims, and is often consumed, under non-magic, non-religious, and quasi or pseudo-scientific pretexts. Consequently, in defining mentalism as I have, I have also unintentionally marginalized related practices emerging from, and still popular in, the developing world. This chapter will address several limitations of this approach.

For example, in 'The Blood that Runs through the Veins,' a widely read 1993 *TDR* article, Michael Atwood Mason describes his experiences in Washington D.C. with an '*oriaté'* or 'diviner' or 'priest' in the 'Afro-Cuban religious tradition of *la Regla de Ocha*.'[4] Mason's descriptions of the casting of shells and the oracle-based readings of the diviner in relation to the queries of a sitter – all for a price of 25 dollars[5] [*] – are closely correlated with modern "psychic" readings. The difference, however, comes in the 'chanting prayers,' in the 'imbalance between the supernatural and human worlds,' and in the 'sacrifice' to sate the 'demands of the goddess.'[6] Such religious contexts, ultimately align this reading more with a supernatural mysticism or shamanism rather

[4] Mason, Michael Atwood. 'The Blood that Runs Through the Veins.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. pp. 107-115.
[5] Mason, Michael Atwood. 'The Blood that Runs Through the Veins.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. pp. 111.
[*] Approximately 40 Euros in 2020.
[6] Mason, Michael Atwood. 'The Blood that Runs Through the Veins.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 115.

than with a secular and purportedly natural psychic ability; even as the 'reflective flow'[7] between diviner and sitter that Mason describes is clearly common to both. In a similar vein, Russia's turn of the century mystical court advisor Grigori Rasputin displayed many traits of the modern mesmerist/psychic, but ultimately his religious claims regarding the source of his powers amounted to a form of performance which was similar in appearance but radically different in context.

Nevertheless, the marginalization of *non-pseudoscientific* performance practices, while ironic, also falls in line with Diana Taylor's *un*ironic observation that the "western" perspective operates in terms of a 'need to cement the centrality of its position as the West by creating and freezing the non-West as always other.'[8] In the end, according to Taylor: 'No matter who restages the colonial encounter from the West's perspective – the novelist, the playwright, the discoverer, or the government official – it stars the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown, found "object."[9] It has thus become necessary to consider whether, in using the scalpel of definition to cleave a gap between Anglo-Euro psychic/mentalist practices and those of the "Other," I have committed an act of epistemic supremacism? In essence: T*heir* psychics are superstitious, but *our* psychics pretend to be scientific.

After much consideration, I contend that my definitions are defensible, given the origins, evolutions, and contemporary popularity and political/economic impact of secular mentalism and psychic performances within North American, Central European, and Australian borders which have, for whatever reasons, been largely ignored by scholars. It does, however, remain the case that similar performances – such as those of shamans, fakirs, mystics, and diviners – transcend the borders and predate the existences of the industrialized societies in which they were later appropriated, modified, and re-labelled as mentalism.

In *The Archive and the Repertoire,* Diana Taylor asserts that 'Performance Studies emerged on the academic scene with inherited baggage,'[10] and argues that the field may do well to adopt a 'hemispheric perspective' in order to 'expand the restrictive scenarios and paradigms set in motion

[7] Mason, Michael Atwood. 'The Blood that Runs Through the Veins.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 112.
[8] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 11.
[9] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 13.
[10] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 12.

by centuries of colonialism.'[11] Calling attention to 'Eurocentrism'[12] and 'methodological limitations,'[13] Taylor argues that Performance Studies 'inherited some of the assumptions and methodological blind spots of anthropology and theatre studies even as it attempted to transcend their ideological formation.'[14]

Thus, in Taylor's words, early Performance Studies scholars 'absorbed the Western positioning of anthropology that continued to wrestle with its colonial heritage. The "us" studying and writing about "them" was, of course, a part of a colonialist project that anthropology had come out of…'[15] For example, writing of Victor Turner, Taylor asserts:

> …[H]is position as an "objective" observer looking down on the "object" of analysis sets up the unequal, and distorting, perspective that results in the double gesture that characterizes much of the writing about performance practices in contexts other than our own. First, the observer claims to recognize what is happening in the performance of/by the Other. Somehow, this event is reified and interpreted by means of a preexisting Western paradigm. Second, the recognition is followed by a subtle (or not so subtle) put-down: this performance proves a "miniature" or diminished version of the "original."[16]

Writing specifically of Turner's collaboration with Schechner, Taylor points out that 'in spite of the decolonizing sentiments of many anthropologists in the 1970s, the explanatory frameworks they used were decidedly Western.'[17] Along these same lines, Taylor argues that the claims advanced by Michael Kirby 'epitomize the period's self-conscious obsession with the new, as it forgot or ignored what was already there… prompt[ing] accusations that the nascent field of performance studies was ahistorical if not antihistorical.'[18] According to Taylor: 'Two or three decades after Turner and [Michael] Kirby, many scholars have lost the easy assumptions regarding decipherability and newness…' yet still, through an 'emphasis on seemingly disinterested observation and survey reinscribe the dominance of the critical position.'[19] Furthermore, according

[11] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. xvi.
[12] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 9.
[13] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 7.
[14] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 6.
[15] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 8.
[16] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 9.
[17] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 8.
[18] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 10.
[19] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 11.

to Taylor, 'little thought was given to the many ways in which contact with the "non-Western" had, for centuries, shaped the very notion of "Western" identity.'[20]

The questions which I pose and the theoretical areas which I explore within this chapter are questions and areas which are largely, if not entirely, absent in the literature of mentalism. Nevertheless, given the way in which I have defined mentalism – and in so doing, divided it from modern non-Anglo-American and European traditions – I have also shown the very bias which I am attempting to redress. A different researcher may have differently demarcated the boundaries and definitions. In the end, however, Taylor reminds us that Performance Studies 'is certainly no one thing.'[21] Recalling early faculty debates at NYU (with Schechner, Kirby, and others) she recounts:

> One of the things I like most about our conversations is that we never really agreed, and we still haven't succeeded in formulating a clear party, or even departmental, line. The open-endedness and multivocality of performance studies is an administrative challenge (How to devise a meaningful curriculum, or reading exam lists?), but they prove, I believe, the field's greatest promise.[22]

On one hand, the fact that my definition of mentalism effectively restricted the subject of my research to its secular Anglo-American and European variants and evolutions is justifiable given my overall aim of uncovering new and culturally relevant knowledge. On the other hand, it should be noted that – as Taylor asserts: 'Domination by culture, by "definition," by claims to originality and authenticity have functioned in tandem with military and economic supremacy.'[23] Thus, given the Anglo-American and Eurocentric implications of both my thesis question, definitions, and theoretical framework, I wish to acknowledge that within the field of Performance Studies there are multiple approaches to consider – each with corresponding trade-offs – when analysing forms of performances which are, and have been, widely practiced in non-Anglo-American and European contexts.

The conundrums posed by these lines of thought are significant. Later in this chapter, for instance, I give consideration to the legendary Indian mentalist Kuda Bux, known as the *Hindu Mystic*. It is, however, precisely *because* of the performances which he gave on American television and his

[20] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 8.
[21] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 6.
[22] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. pp. xvi – xvii.
[23] Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire.* 2003. p. 12.

engagement with the London Council for Psychical Investigation, that Bux is so considered. The logic for this inclusion, over other performances of mysticism in India which I might have analysed, is that Bux's television performances effectively relocated the contexts surrounding his performances from religious/mystic contexts to the scientific arguments of the era. In this way, Bux became more mentalist than mystic. Similarly, the Israeli mentalist Uri Geller made his contributions – for better and worse – in the United States. Geller went on to become the Western world's most notorious psychic, while his female counterpart, Nina Kulagina – who also fraudulently demonstrated psychokinesis in high level scientific studies in Russia during the same period of time – remains virtually unknown in the mainstream West.

It is necessary to admit that I am writing from a position in which I am entrenched in the literature and ideology of the developed world and the Anglo American and Central European perspectives. While I acknowledge my limitations in this regard, I have also attempted to give consideration to performances of mentalism and psychic arts falling beyond these boundaries; provided that the pretexts of those performances are more pseudo-scientific than supernatural. Later in this chapter, for example, I examine the mid-brain activation demonstrations currently prevalent in India. These demonstrations are clearly a form of pseudo-scientific mentalist/psychic performance, although the identity of the actors *behind* these performances is more complex, and the religious and cult aspects of these organizations cannot be ignored.

The Mentalist and the Other

Many enduring psychic premises originated in Asian, African, or Middle Eastern cultures. From India, for example, emerged the many feats of Hindu swamis, yogis and fakirs including: laying on beds of nails, walking on hot coals, and surviving burial, as well as purported levitations and the apparent rapid acceleration of mango tree growth. From Egypt emerged Hermeticism, along with traditions of conjuring spirits and animating statues. From West Africa emerged traditions of Voodoo and the evil eye. From turbans and fezzes, to crystal balls and all matters of Indian, Egyptian, and Chinese paraphernalia, mentalists and psychics have long taken inspiration from the so-called "mysterious east". The fact that performance traditions of Eastern and Asian cultures have long approached performance from a holistic and embodied perspective has, likewise, impacted contemporary performances of mentalism.

Early spiritualists and thought readers often approached their performances by embracing and essentialising the role of "other". In 1886, for example, when interest began to flag in his thought reading experiments, J. Randall Brown travelled to India, and soon after claimed to present 'Occult Mysteries of the Orient'[24] Likewise, Samri Baldwin was an American stage mentalist who claimed to have learned the secrets of Indian fakirs. Baldwin performed as *the White Mahatma*, and in 1895, published *Secrets of Mahatma Land Explained,* subtitled, '*Teaching and Explaining the Performances of the Most Celebrated Oriental Mystery Makers and Magicians in all Parts of the World*.'[25] In 1909, the word mentalist was first published in reference to a stage mind reader, Pearl Tangley, 'the Egyptian Mentalist.'[26] The pioneering psychic/mentalist Robert A. Nelson appeared onstage in Hindu costume as early as 1916, 'calling himself Alla Rageh.'[27]

Edward Said has illuminated the fact that the Orient, which Orientalism claimed to study, never really existed.[28] It was through such Orientalism that colonialized bodies were reductively viewed and portrayed as mysterious, hyper-sensitive, feminized, or animalistic. Homi Bhabha describes this process of 'colonial mimicry' as expressing the 'desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*'[29] According to Bhabha, 'the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence;* in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.'[30] This process – Bhabha continues – 'appropriates,' 'disavows,' and 'replaces' the Other 'with a product of desire that repeats, rearticulates "reality" as mimicry.'[31]

This process may readily be observed in psychic/mentalist performances. In appropriating the objects or rituals of the East, a Western performer might suggest travel, deep study, or the possession of secret knowledge to modern Western audiences; whereas an Eastern performer doing the same might suggest superstition, mysticism, and religion. Going further, Bhabha has written

[24] Wiley, Barry H. *The Thought Reader Craze.* 2012. p. 95.
[25] Baldwin, Samri S. *Secrets of Mahatma Land Explained: Teaching and Explaining the Performances of the Most Celebrated Oriental Mystery Makers and Magicians in all Parts of the World*. 1895.
[26] *Trenton Evening Times.* 28 May 1909.
[27] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 20.
[28] Said, Edward. 'From: Orientalism.' *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. 2004. pp. 55-61.
[29] Bhabha, Homi. 'Of Mimicry and Men.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. p. 338.
[30] Bhabha, Homi. 'Of Mimicry and Men.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. p. 338.
[31] Bhabha, Homi. 'Of Mimicry and Men.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. p. 342.

of the 'colonial fantasy'[32] which through 'phobia and fetish'[33] has reduced the "other" to 'terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy.'[34] Might not these phobias and fetishes be the same ones to which bizarrist Tony Andruzzi refers when he speaks of the 'native fears' and 'psychological elements' on which mediumship (spirit theatre) and bizarre magick depend?[35]

Although usually not malicious in intent, mentalists have long traded in colonial fantasies regarding the "Other." For example, since the beginning of spiritualism, it was a common practice for spirit mediums to claim to channel Native American spirit guides. Linda Besner writes for *Hazlitt* that 'Indian spirit guides…started showing up at séances in the 1850s, promising to help white Spiritualist mediums navigate the otherworld as they had helped colonial explorers navigate the New World.'[36] Molly McGarry, in *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* eloquently captures the complex nature of the spiritualist attitude toward Native Americans. She writes:

> On the one hand, [spiritualists] were part of a broader white American culture that variously romanticized, erased, and appropriated Indian history, rituals, and land. Spiritualists, like other reformers, spoke in paradoxical ways about the Indian question, oscillating between the language of civilization and that of savagery, invoking paternalism as well as a discourse of rights and brotherhood. At the same time, many Spiritualists labored for progressive reform and took part in concrete work undergirded by a commitment to ameliorating the damage done by white colonists.[37]

While the use of Native Americans as spirit guides may no longer be common practice, the idea of exploiting the Other as spirit guide is still prominent among spiritualists. For instance, Derek Acorah purports to partner with an Ethiopian spirit guide named Masumi, whom Acorah calls "Sam". Regardless of intent, speaking *for* the other is a path that necessarily functions along reductive and stereotypical modes of thought, illuminated by the writings of Said and Bhabha.

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[32] Bhabha, Homi. 'The "Other" Question.' *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. 2004. p. 67.
[33] Bhabha, Homi. 'The "Other" Question.' *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. 2004. p. 67.
[34] Bhabha, Homi. 'The "Other" Question.' *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. 2004. p. 67.
[35] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 86.
[36] Besner, Linda. '"Indian Guides" and White Spiritualists.' *Hazlitt.* 7 Jul 2014.
[37] McGarry, Molly. *Ghosts of Futures Past.* 2008. p. 80.

Yoga Maya, Jadoo, and Mid-Brain Activation

Between 1972 and 1974, Sam Dalal published *Swami* and *Mantra,* two low budget magazines for mentalists. Dalal has been described as India's answer to the American mentalist Ted Annemann, who in the 1930s, published a magazine for mentalists called *Jinx*. In *The Little Egypt Gazette*, Steve Bryant writes that *Swami* and *Mantra* contained contributions by 'the best of Western magicians coupled with excellent offerings by unknown (to us in remote places like Indiana) Eastern magicians…. *Swami* and *Mantra* also exposed the world to an entirely new kind of magic to Western eyes, under the classifications of Yoga Maya and Jadoo.'[38] The original 64 issues of *Swami* and *Mantra* have been collected and reprinted and are still widely read by mentalists and bizarrists worldwide. Despite the popularity of *Swami* and *Mantra*, the concepts of Yoga Maya and Jadoo – which in a contemporary context might be loosely compared to mentalism – raise complicated questions. At the time of this writing, for instance, programs claiming to teach children to see while blindfolded, by way of so-called 'mid-brain activation,' are gaining popularity across India.

In 'Opening Eyes. Looking Beyond Blindfolds: A Magician's Perspective on the Mid-Brain/Third-Eye Activation Scam,' Indian conjurer, Nakul Shenoy, writes in 2015:

> India is being taken by storm by some amazing demonstrations of young kids (mostly aged 7–13) being able to read and identify objects while blindfolded.... These kids have turned special after attending a two-day workshop to get their mid-brain activated. The power that has been unleashed in these kids is also referred as 'the third eye,' and the children themselves as Genius or Alpha kids.[39]

At least one uncritical video featuring such a child, revealingly entitled, 'Girl demonstrates Cool SuperPower (Third Eye)*'* has gone 'viral' with over ten million views in 2020.[40] According to the website of one such program, led by the swami/guru Paramahamsa Nithyananda:

> Awakening the Third Eye awakens the non- mechanical parts of the brain, allowing you to experience powers like telepathy, materialization, teleportation and many other miraculous powers.... Children with their third eye awakened show an improved sense of intuition. Many of them are able to read and see with their eyes blindfolded. Some children are able to color pictures blindfolded....Third Eye

[38] Steve Bryant. 'Swami/Mantra.' *The Little Egypt Gazette.* Vol. 2. No. 9. Jun 1997.
[39] Shenoy, Nakul. 'Opening Eyes. Looking Beyond Blindfolds: A Magician's Perspective on the Mid-Brain/Third-Eye Activation Scam.' *Medium.com.* 1 Jun 2015.
[40] 'Girl demonstrates Cool SuperPower (Third Eye).' *YouTube.com.* 30 Jul 2015.

> Awakening leads to better overall cognition, intuition, creativity, and potentially extraordinary superhuman powers & abilities.[41]

In an article entitled, *Mid-Brain Activation is Totally Fraud*, the president of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations, Narendra Nayak is quoted regarding the tactics and approaches of such programs. According to Nayak: 'In Karnataka one organisation called Mid-Brain Masters has been doing this activity of activating the mid-brain. Despite of all their hype the only tangible achievement they claim is blindfolded reading, which is just a trick...'[42] Nayak continues:

> The mid-brain activation business in Mangalore is being conducted by one enterprise...who have put up banners all over the place...They invite people for demonstrations and then lure them into enrolling their children for such courses which cost around Rs 25,000 ($375). We have challenged anyone to demonstrate the power to see through blindfolds which we shall apply. We are going to take up this issue at the national level as this fraud has been going on everywhere.[43]

In 2018, according to Nayak, the Indian government ordered the halting of 'the fraudulent activity of blindfolded-seeing' under the various names of 'midbrain activation, whole brain development, third eye (by Nithyananda), brain intuition development (Ravi Shankar's Art of Living)' and others.[44] Also, in 2018, a primary force behind the third-eye programs, Nithyananda – who claims that he and his disciples are, according to *CMH Global Times*, 'able to perform paranormal phenomena like extrasensory perception and materialisation, body scanning, distance vision, and ability to find lost objects' – was charged with a fourth count of sexual abuse or statutory rape involving the children under his instruction.[45]

Of course, it is not only in India where the line between psychic and fraud has been dangerously blurred to the point of non-existence. According to an IBISWorld report, in 2018 psychic services in the United States amounted to a 2.2 billion dollar industry.[46] In the third-eye and mid-brain activation programs, however, the manipulation and abuse of children, as well as the cost of such

[41] 'Third Eye Awakening.' *InnerAwakening.org.*
[42] Pereira, Violet. 'Mangaluru: "Mid-Brain Activation is Totally Fraud" – Rationalist Prof Narendra Nayak.' *Mangalorean*. 18 Apr 2015.
[43] Pereira, Violet. 'Mangaluru: "Mid-Brain Activation is Totally Fraud" – Rationalist Prof Narendra Nayak.' *Mangalorean*. 18 Apr 2015.
[44] Nayak, Narendra. 'Govt Orders to Stop Fraudulent Activities of Seeing Blindfolded.' *Mangalorean.* 5 Apr 2018.
[45] Raina, Ramesh. 'Religious guru Nithyananda accused of 3rd rape.' *CMH Global Times.* 20 Nov 2019.
[46] 'Psychic Services in the US.' *IBISWorld.* OD4413. 2018.

programs relative to poverty, amounts to a particularly insidious and destructive form of psychic performance.

Cultural Appropriation and Assimilation in Mentalism

Despite the existence of mysticism, shamanism, and even mentalism, beyond the borders of Europe and North America, very few performers from such areas have gained the attention of mainstream North American or European audiences. One noteworthy exception is Kuda Bux, *the Man with X-Ray Eyes*; born in Kashmir, India, around 1900. In his youth, Bux acquired the skills of firewalking and seeing while apparently blindfolded. He appeared numerous times on radio and television, and in 1950 was featured in a weekly CBS television show, *Kuda Bux, Hindu Mystic.* Although Bux performed conjuring and stage illusions, he attributed his firewalking, buried alive demonstrations, and blindfolded vision to spirituality and enlightenment or 'yogic discipline.'[47] In *X-Ray Vision: A Way of Looking*, Richard Swiderski writes that Bux, 'considered himself, and was accepted as, a stage magician but he never disclosed secrets of his tricks, maintaining his "Oriental mystique" throughout a long career.'[48]

The London Council for Psychical Investigation, along with psychical researcher Harry Price, studied Bux's firewalking abilities in 1935. The council report ultimately concluded that, 'Bux's slight 120-pound (54.4kg) frame could explain why the 165-pound researchers (75 kg) who attempted the walk were quickly and badly burned,[49] and Bux's blindfold methods have never been fully explained nor duplicated. Clearly, though, Bux was somehow able to see even when both of his eyes were covered in dough, cotton pads, and wrapped in many layers of cotton bandages, with only small openings left for his nostrils and mouth. In this state, Bux could effortlessly duplicate words and trace lines drawn upon a blackboard, accurately shoot inflated balloons with a .22 rifle, and navigate bicycles and cars through obstacle courses. At one point in his career, Bux claimed that he could see through his nostrils. Harry Price investigated the claim in the University of London's Senate House Papers.[50]

[47] Swiderski, Richard M. *X-Ray Vision: A Way of Looking.* 2012. p. 137.
[48] Swiderski, Richard M. *X-Ray Vision: A Way of Looking.* 2012. p. 137.
[49] Price, Harry. *Confessions of a Ghost Hunter.* 1936. Chapter XXII.
[50] Swiderski, Richard M. *X-Ray Vision: A Way of Looking.* 2012. p. 215.

In true mentalist fashion, Bux pointed out that he could read small print, and thread a needle, while blindfolded, whereas he would need glasses to accomplish these tasks with his 'physical eyes.'[51] Vincent J. Daczynski, who attended two of Bux's demonstrations, recounts the following nuanced exchange (included at length):

> An audience member asked, 'How can you see?' Kuda Bux explained, 'I can see due to the power of my concentration. I bring my attention to a finer level of my vision. It's my power of concentration.' Kuda Bux paused briefly then stated, 'My back was broken in three places. Doctors said that I would never walk again. With my concentration I was able to heal myself. I have no problem walking now,' he asserted.
>
> 'Can this work for blind people?' someone asked. Kuda Bux replied, 'I had once stated that this could help blind people. But, I am correcting my statement. This is not a solution for blind people.'
>
> 'Can anyone learn to do this?' someone else asked. 'Yes,' Kuda Bux affirmed. 'You can develop your power of concentration by gazing at the gap between a flame and the candle. Do this just a few seconds at first,' he explained. 'After some time you will be able to do this for much longer. It will take about twenty years of daily practice to get results.' Kuda Bux expressed his desire to teach anyone for free, but got no takers; understandably, since twenty years is just too long to be staring at candles.[52]



Kuda Bux

[51] Daczynski, Vincent J. 'Kuda Bux - The Man With X Ray Eyes.' *AmazingAbilities.com.* 2004.
[52] Daczynski, Vincent J. 'Kuda Bux - The Man With X Ray Eyes.' 2004.

While many fakirs, swamis, yogis, and gurus – such as Osho, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Sathya Sai Baba – have been widely popular for their literary and philosophical contributions, very few have emerged in popular entertainment. In this regard, Bux is rather unique. On his particular success, Swiderski writes:

> Kuda Bux's assimilation of the X-ray eyes label was part of his general transition from an imported Indian fakir to a performing magician with powers explicable only as the result of religious discipline....His widely publicized marvels renewed the X-ray eyes image and shifted it from psychic research to the performance arena, while maintaining a professionalism that insulated him from would-be Houdinis.[53]

At one point in his career, the so-called scientific mentalist, Joseph Dunninger, offered Bux $10,000 if he could perform his sightless vision act with his head simply inside of a paper bag, and Bux declined the offer.[54] The fascinating career of Kuda Bux points to the complicated appropriative and assimilative give-and-take relationship between North American and European mentalists, and their so-called "Eastern" and "mystical" counterparts.

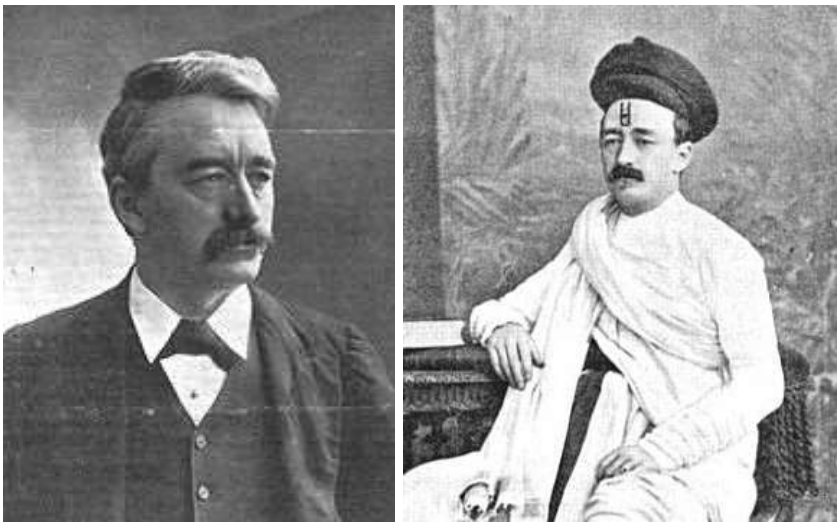
Even taking into consideration Kuda Bux's partial assimilation of Western premises, his *claims* call attention to a particular difference between Eastern and Western philosophies as they relate to body and mind. In the forward to *theatre & the body*, performance artist Marina Abromavić writes, 'In Western cultures, it is necessary to have some trauma, some terrible tragedy in your private life, to be able to make a mental leap; perhaps somebody dies, or you have an operation, or you clinically die and then recover. In Eastern cultures altered states of minds are often a matter of education and bodily practice.'[55] Fittingly, Bux attributed his abilities to his concentration whereas Dutch psychic Peter Hurkos maintained that he developed his psychic abilities at the age of 30 after falling from a ladder, suffering a head injury, and spending three days in a coma.

The gap between Eastern and Western premises has been narrowed from both sides. Performances of American mentalist Samri Baldwin, *the White Mahatma,* involved alleged clairvoyant trances for which he coined the term "Rosicrucian Somnomism." Thomas A. Sawyer writes, in *S.S Baldwin and the Press*: 'Baldwin often protested that he had no supernatural or occult powers. However, on many occasions he indicated that the explanations of his feats lay in some other

[53] Swiderski, Richard M. *X-Ray Vision: A Way of Looking.* 2012. p. 138.
[54] O'Dell, Cary. 'Kuda Bux: Mystic, Fire Walker... and TV Star!' *TVparty.com.*
[55] Conroy, Colette. *theatre & the body.* 2010. p. ix.

powers – supposedly entwining natural ones (however).'[56] This liminal space, entwining the natural and the supernatural – and spanning that which is neither empirical nor observable – is an apt metaphor for mentalism itself, which often occupies a liminal space between legitimate entertainment and fraudulent deception.

Although the boundaries of mentalism shift with the times, mentalists continually position themselves within this liminal space by claiming to demonstrate that which is not understood in the popular culture of the day, but which is held to be, on the whole, plausible or potentially possible. The use of the term "Rosicrucian" by Baldwin, reinforces the arcane, occult, secret, hidden, and thus, liminal, position of the mentalist through the use of appropriation, mimicry, and reductive notions of Otherness.



Samri Baldwin

The Colonizing Mind and the Colonized Body

In the context of the Renaissance – accompanied by the rise of Humanism – man and rational thought displaced God and superstition as the centre of the universe. During this period, alchemy underwent a transition from universally accepted, to the subject of ridicule.[57] Occult scientists such as the alchemist, hermeticist, and alleged Rosicrucianist, John Dee, found themselves increasingly

[56] Sawyer, Thomas A. *S.S Baldwin and the Press*. 1993. p. 110.
[57] Seligman, Kurt. *Magic, Supernaturalism and Religion.* 1948. p. 126.

marginalized. Shakespeare's play *The Tempest,* written in the early 1600s, features Prospero, an old-world occult scientist/magician, likely modelled on Dee. Prospero occupies an old world on the cusp of a "brave, new" one. With Prospero, we also may also observe the reductive depictions of the "sophistication" of the western mind (Prospero) and the "animalism" of the Other (Caliban).

This marginalization of occult knowledge and superstitious belief coincided with the rise of Cartesianism, the rejection of instinct, the marginalization of the body, and the fascination in the potential of the human mind. This shift created a liminal space through which mentalism would ultimately emerge as a pseudo-scientific anti-magical field, independent of alchemy, shamanism, and witchcraft. Mentalists, accordingly, have adopted a liminal position within society. Whether through training, traveling, or trauma – the liminal abilities of the mentalist often purportedly develop in correlation with the liminality of the performer.

Alleged psychic and public personality Jeron Criswell King, for example, better known as *the Amazing Criswell* was 'a flamboyant figure, best remembered for his spit-curled hair, his stentorian speaking style, and his sequined tuxedo.'[58] He was also 'the possessor of a coffin, in which he claimed to sleep.'[59] Along such lines, mentalist Max Maven claimed to have been born on 'the day with most darkness.'[60] The fact that mentalists and their abilities emerge from shadowy and liminal spaces is significant insomuch as it sheds light on the relationship between mentalists and the Other, particularly regarding the presentation of the body.

Maven, self-described as a 'fabulous monster'[61] is perhaps the most unusual looking mentalist performing today. According to Nik Taylor, Maven 'contrasts a visually cartoonish image with unashamedly intellectual and eclectic scripts. He is a stylish monster who speaks fluent Japanese and quotes theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli.'[62] With heavy eye make-up, painted widow's peak, and unusual styling of hair and facial hair, Maven's look intentionally invokes Ming the

[58] 'Who Was Criswell?' *CriswellPredicts.com.*
[59] 'Who Was Criswell?' *CriswellPredicts.com.*
[60] Zuckerbrot, Donna. *Max Maven - A Fabulous Monster.* 2006. *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* 2017. Vol. 4.
[61] Taylor, Nik and Stuart Nolan. 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.' *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imagining Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present.* 2015. p. 129.
[62] Taylor, Nik and Stuart Nolan. 'Performing Fabulous Monsters: Re-inventing the Gothic Personae in Bizarre Magic.' *Monstrous Media/Spectral Subjects: Imagining Gothic from the Nineteenth Century to the Present.* 2015. p. 130.

Merciless, the intellectual mastermind and arch enemy of Flash Gordon.[63] Although, clearly modelled along the lines of reductive Oriental stereotypes, Ming the Merciless is technically the Emperor of the planet Mongo – and has been depicted variously in print, on film and on television, as Caucasian, Asian, yellow, and green. Ming the Merciless may be further viewed as a science-fictional reductivist representation of Otherness.

Maven describes the moment when, after changing his name from Phil Goldstein, he decided to begin experimenting with his appearance. According to Maven, 'I came across the information that Annemann had a straight hairline, and that he shaved the front of his hair into a widow's peak, probably inspired by Dunninger. And this had never occurred to me; that this was an option, a possibility… I thought, wow, I could do that.'[64] Maven further explained in 2017:

> If you're going to be in the world of magic, or mentalism, or mystery performance, what you're really doing, in a sense, is exploring the world of dreams. And if you're going to do that, you may as well start with your own. And as hard as it may be to believe, I dreamt of looking like this. It was a gradual process. It's still a work in progress.[65]

In Maven's words: 'In a way, I have embraced my otherness rather than trying to hide it.'[66]



The Amazing Criswell and Max Maven

[63] Steinmeyer, Jim. 'Max Maven and the Evolution of a Mind Reader.' *Genii Magazine.* Vol. 70. No. 10. 2007. p 57.
[64] *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* Essential Magic Collection. 2017. Vol. 2. 01:48:35.
[65] *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* Essential Magic Collection. 2017. Vol. 2. 01:55:55.
[66] Zuckerbrot, Donna. *Max Maven - A Fabulous Monster.* 2006. *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* 2017. Vol. 4. 0:56:55.

As seen in the examples above, essentialising the role of Other inevitably entails the foregrounding of the body. Lewis R. Gordon writes: 'The history of colonialism [i]s one in which colonizing groups constructed themselves as minds that control the colonized and the enslaved.'[67] This association between colonizer/mind, and colonized/body, may be repeatedly observed in the corporeality of Western depictions of Otherness. As it pertains specifically to mentalism, this relationship is apparent in the iconic pop cultural figures of Mandrake the Magician and Lothar.

In 1931, Walter B. Gibson – a ghost writer for both the anti-spiritualist Harry Houdini and mentalist Joseph Dunninger – developed *the Shadow,* America's first superhero mentalist. *The Shadow*, a master hypnotist who used his ability to 'cloud men's minds so they could not see him'[68] soon became a pop-cultural icon. By 1937, the character's origins had developed to include the fact that he had learned his abilities while 'traveling through East Asia.'[69] In 1934, Lee Falk and Phil Davis introduced another superhero mentalist. Although Mandrake is technically described as a "magician," his principle weapon was his hypnotic technique, with which he could frighten, confuse, or otherwise manipulate his adversaries. The term "mentalist" – as previously noted – would not be popularized by Dunninger until nearly a decade later. Mandrake further has psychic and telekinetic abilities, as well as the ability to teleport, shapeshift, and become invisible. Mandrake is described as a 'mystic educated in Tibet by a master of magic.'[70]

Madrake's sidekick is Lothar, an African prince who wears a fez and a leopard skin singlet. Lothar is described as 'a giant who could rip a crocodile's jaws apart or break the back of an anthropoid ape.'[71] His superhuman strength (he could lift an elephant with one hand), and his imperviousness to heat, cold, magic, and manmade weapons, make Lothar America's first black superhero. It is not difficult to find the racism, reductive stereotypes, and post-colonial mind-set at work in the character of Lothar. In Lothar, the colonialist fantasy of the noble savage is elevated, literally, to superhuman levels.

Still, according to comic historian Don Markstein, Lothar is, for American comics, the 'first seriously-treated black character. Although he is by birth an African prince, Lothar prefers his

[67] Gordon, Lewis R. 'Problematic People and Epistemic Decolonization: Towards the Postcolonial in African Political Thought.' *Postcolonialism and Political Theory.* Ed. Nalini Persram. 2008. pp. 131-132.
[68] 'The Shadow.' *Radioretropolis.com.*
[69] 'The Shadow.' *Radioretropolis.com.*
[70] Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. 1998. p. 433.
[71] Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. 1998. p. 433.

position as Mandrake's valet and bodyguard.'[72] According to Markstein: 'As years went by and America's consciousness was raised, Lothar lost most of his accent and became more a friend and companion than a valet — but right from the start, he was treated as an intelligent man and a valuable ally.'[73] Still, there can be no mistake: While Mandrake represents the mind, Lothar represents the body.



Mandrake the Magician and Lothar

Gender Politics and Mentalism

Issues of gendered identities and patriarchy are also complexly present in the history, evolution, and performance of mentalism. Despite the many associations between the intuitive mind and the "divine feminine," it should be noted that – in contrast to the masculine mind – the feminine has also been long and vindictively associated with the bodily and corporeal. Silvia Federici provides an example of this erroneous association in *Caliban and the Witch,* writing: 'While the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum* explained that women were more prone to witchcraft because of their "insatiable lust," Martin Luther and humanist writers stressed women's moral and mental weakness as the origin of this perversion.'[74]

Like the colonized bodies discussed previously, the female body has frequently been perceived as mysterious, animalistic, or bestial. Barbara Creed observes, writing of horror films, that 'unlike the male body, the proper female body is penetrable, changes shape, swells, gives birth, contracts,

[72] Markstein, Donald D. 'Mandrake the Magician.*' Toonpedia.com.*
[73] Markstein, Donald D. 'Mandrake the Magician.*' Toonpedia.com.*
[74] Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. 2nd Ed. 2014. pp. 179-180.

lactates, bleeds…[and] …threatens to collapse the boundary between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized.'[75] In a similar vein, Federici notes:

> Regardless of age (but not class) in the witch trials, there is a constant identification between female sexuality and bestiality. This was suggested by copulation with the goat-god (one of the representations of the devil), the infamous kiss *sub cauda*, and the charge that the witches kept a wide variety of animals – "imps" or "familiars" – that helped them with their crimes and with whom they entertained a particularly intimate relation.[76]

While the female body has been associated with the animal/bestial, it has also been strongly associated with magic; both "real" (witchcraft and mysticism) and pretend (magician's assistants). In this latter role, the associations most often revolve around either around the display of – or the apparent mutilation and restoration of – the body. According to an article in the *Journal of Performance Magic*, however, fewer than 5% of conjurers and mentalists in 2014 were female.[77] Mentalist Peter Nardi suggests in a 2010 article in *Pacific Standard Magazine*, that women might be dissuaded from practicing magic because 'women doing magic were historically linked – dangerously – to the practice of witchcraft.'[78]

While the historical link is certainly true, it does not account for the absence of women in stage mind reading, since many women do continue to work as fortune tellers, psychic readers, and shamans or healers. In fact, many women returned to such occupations soon after the witch-hunts subsided. According to Federici, 'Once the subversive potential of witchcraft was destroyed, the practice of magic could even be allowed to continue. After the witch-hunt came to an end, many women continued to support themselves by foretelling the future, selling charms and practicing other forms of magic.'[79] Federici discusses a number of social factors which contributed to the persecution of women for the alleged practice of magic and witchcraft:

> By the 16th century, the attack against magic was well under way and women were its most likely targets. Even when they were not expert sorcerers/magicians, they were the ones who were called to mark animals when they fell sick, heal their neighbors, help them find lost or stolen objects, give them amulets or love potions,

[75] Creed, Barbara. 'Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys, and Tarts.' *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*. 1999. p. 112.
[76] Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. 2nd Ed. 2014. p. 194.
[77] Bruns, Laura C. and Zompetti, Joseph P. 'The Rhetorical Goddess: A Feminist Perspective on Women in Magic.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 2(1). 2014. pp. 8-39.
[78] Bruns, Laura C. and Zompetti, Joseph P. 'The Rhetorical Goddess: A Feminist Perspective on Women in Magic.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 2(1). 2014. pp. 8-39.
[79] Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. 2nd Ed. 2014. p. 205.

> help them forecast the future. Though the witch-hunt targeted a broad variety of female practices, it was above all, in this capacity – as sorcerers, healers, performers of incantations and divinations – that women were persecuted.[80]

Many of these same social mechanisms may be seen at play in the Spiritualist movement centuries later. In *Radical Spirits,* Ann Braude discusses spiritualism's 'appeal to men and women anxious to depart from the traditional social order and especially from existing gender roles.'[81] Accordingly, numerous women used spiritualism to gain control of their lives, in some cases even duping, manipulating, or controlling their powerful husbands. After Arthur Conan Doyle gained an interest in spiritualism in the early 1900s, his second wife Jean Leckie discovered her apparent abilities in automatic writing and mediumship. Through these spirt messages, in particular – according to biographer Russell Miller – she controlled many aspects of Conan Doyle's life.[82] W.B. Yeats' wife, George Hyde-Lees, was also an automatic writer. According to a biographer, shortly after their marriage, 'prompted by an effort to divert an unhappy husband who had been recently rejected by two other women,'[83] she began to experiment with automatic writing. Yeats documented their experiments in his 1925 self-published volume, *A Vision.*

The scandalous medium Mina Crandon, known by the pseudonym Margery, and referred to as the blonde witch of Lime Street, first became active in mediumship as a hobby. According to a biographer, the purpose may have been to distract her husband, an older surgeon, from his 'morbid obsession with mortality.'[84] Mina Crandon often performed séances while nude – even throwing herself upon male sitters[85] – and cultivated romances (not necessarily sexual) with multiple members of the psychical research committee which investigated her abilities.[86] Fraud was detected on numerous occasions, including by parapsychologist J.B. Rhine, who made formal accusations against her in a paper written for *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*.[87]

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[80] Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch*. 2nd Ed. 2014. p. 174.
[81] Braude. Ann. *Radical Spirits*. 2nd Ed. 2001. p. 3.
[82] Miller, Russell. *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle*. 2008.
[83] Harper, George Mills. *The Making of Yeats's `A Vision:' A Study of the Automatic Script Volume 1*. 1987. p. x.
[84] Silverman, Kenneth. *Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss*. 1997. pp. 326-342.
[85] Silverman, Kenneth. *Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss*. 1997. pp. 326-342.
[86] Silverman, Kenneth. *Houdini!!!: The Career of Ehrich Weiss*. 1997. pp. 326-342.
[87] Rhine, J. B. and Louisa E. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. Vol 21(4), Jan-Mar 1927. pp. 401-421.

Psychologist Massimo Polidoro has written that, 'faking the phenomena was probably more a matter of a difficult relationship with her husband than an attempt to deceive the public.'[88]

In *The Other World,* Janet Oppenheim discusses the attraction of spiritualism amongst marginalized members of society, such as housewives and servants. She writes: 'Domestic séances may have offered something of the escapism so abundantly supplied by soap operas today, but with one important difference: In the spiritualist home circle, the medium was not simply an outside observer; she was the critical participant in the unfolding drama.'[89] While spiritualism may not have evolved directly from second sight and European witchcraft, it did serve a similar function. These phenomena have, for centuries, provided a mechanism by which women could subvert patriarchal power structures. The term "witch" might mean many things, but it is a term that could be applied to women who stepped outside of traditional – but now outdated – obedient and reproductive roles. That "being a witch" (as if one could really be such a thing) was punishable by death, was a decidedly convenient way for patriarchal powers to address the threat of ambitious or impertinent women.

The fact that in the early 20th century, conjurers largely appropriated spiritualism from the spiritualists – or, witchcraft from the witches – is of rather major historical significance. This appropriation began as a process of exposing the deceptions of spiritualists. These exposures were carried out most famously by John Nevil Maskelyne and Harry Houdini, who died in 1917 and 1926, respectively. Joseph Dunninger continued the exposures, publishing *Houdini's Spirit Exposés and Dunninger's Psychical Investigations*, in 1928. That same year, Dr. Harlan Tarbell compiled *The Tarbell Course in Magic* which contained many examples of "mind reading" and "spiritualistic magic." It should be noted that the "anti" was dropped from the "anti-spiritualistic tricks" first described by Ellis Stanyon in 1901.

Although Dunninger opposed spiritualism, he fully claimed psychic abilities, and held little moral high ground over many spiritualists. Dunninger, apparently using his abilities, attempted to "assist" the police in their investigation following the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby in 1932. In 1941, the *Scientific American* ran articles referring to Dunninger as 'the world's foremost mentalist' and

[88] Polidoro, Massimo. *Secrets of the Psychics: Investigating Paranormal Claims.* Appendix B. 2003. p. 268.
[89] Oppenheim, Janet. *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914.* p. 10.

'chairman of the Universal Council for Psychic Research.'[90] The articles were in reference to the $10,000 reward offered by Dunninger to 'any dealer in the occult' whose 'supernatural feats' could not be duplicated by Dunninger through 'natural means.'[91] Yet, the following caveat can be found under the conditions of the challenge (emphasis added): 'Since experiments by Dunninger and others *have proved telepathy to an acceptable degree, demonstrations of this nature are not eligible for the award.*'[92]

Dunninger, it seems, operated according to a double standard. Lying about ghosts was wrong but lying about telepathy was fine; extorting money from the bereaved was wrong, but exploiting the bereaved for publicity was fine. In 1943, Dunninger began his radio show, becoming the world's first *Master Mentalist*. Through the discretization of spiritualist premises and the appropriation of telepathy premises, mind reading became a field monopolized by conjurers. It remains so today. It is curious why Margery has become so maligned amongst conjurers, while Dunninger is so glorified. Margery was not conning the bereaved out of money, in fact, she was married to a wealthy surgeon; she did not need the prize money. She provided, it has been argued, entertaining and thought-provoking demonstrations. In an excellent interview with Houdini expert John Cox, Margery's great-granddaughter, Anna Thurlow eloquently writes (included at length):

> Margery's mediumship began as an intimate affair for her family and close friends, and it evolved into something over which she did not have full control. There were very few intellectual outlets for women at that time, and spiritualism was a way for women to become 'explorers into the unknown' without having to leave the intimacy of their own homes. […]
>
> I have come to think of her as a performance artist whose art grew organically as a reaction to her surroundings.... I think Margery struggled at first to earn Dr. Crandon's respect and that of his well-educated, society friends. He also had a habit of divorcing his wives after a few years. It was a few years into their marriage when Margery began the séances, and...probably began them in part to keep Dr Crandon's attention as well as to alleviate his morbid fear of death.

Thurlow also provides a rare and eloquent perspective on the staging of Margery's seances:

> One of the things that made Margery's séances remarkable was that they were an occasion for joy and playfulness: table raps sounding out the musical refrain of Taps, Victrolas turning on in the dark to play European waltzes, floral scents floating through the air, a dancing table that led the entire séance group down the

[90] *Scientific American*. Volumes 164-165. 1941. pp. 210 -211.
[91] *Scientific American*. Volumes 164-165. 1941. pp. 210 -211.
[92] *Scientific American*. Volumes 164-165. 1941. pp. 210 -211.

> stairs, and all with the friendly, rough and tumble voice of Walter, Margery's dead brother.... One thing that has gotten lost in the written history is that what she produced in the séances was often quite beautiful, and fun. She took on an intellectual challenge and certainly gave the investigators a great show.[93]

I argue that the demonstrations of Mina Crandon were neither more, nor less, pseudoscientific than those of Dunninger. Dunninger's premise of "scientific telepathy" – like spiritualism – would open many avenues of exploitation to would-be charlatans. Yet, the different treatment of these two psychic performers seems to grow from the fact that a brotherhood of conjurers – led by Houdini and Maskelyne – asserted a moral claim on the right to deceive the public.

Female stage performers of psychic arts, once feared and respected, have all but disappeared over the past 100 years. Woman such as the purported mediums Florence Cook, Anna Eva Fay, Mina "Margery" Crandon, and the allegedly psychokinetic Nina Kulagina; as well as girls such as the mediumistic Fox sisters, the allegedly telepathic Creery sisters, and *the Georgia Magnet* Lulu Hurst, were foundational in the creation of the form as well as many of its most powerful and enduring premises and methods.

Gender Roles and Patriarchy in Second Sight

The history and evolution of mentalism – particularly regarding its evolution from second sight and witchcraft – is deeply intertwined with issues of gender roles and patriarchy. For example, two-person performances of clairvoyance and telepathy premises have always been bound to a patriarchal division of labour along gender lines. From the earliest stage performances in Scotland in the 1500s, two-person second sight demonstrations were always comprised of a "clairvoyant" and an "exhibitor." The clairvoyant was exclusively either a female[*] or a child. The exhibitor was exclusively a white adult male. The exhibitions rarely suggested any particular bond between the pair – but rather suggested that the clairvoyant was a psychic with peculiar abilities. The exhibitor, much like a barker at a sideshow, simply facilitated the demonstration, usually by borrowing items from audience members which the blindfolded clairvoyant would describe.

[93] Cox, John. "Interview with Anna Thurlow, great granddaughter of "Margery." *WildAboutHarry*.com. 19 Jan 2013.
[*] The only exception to this formula would appear to be Robert Heller, who temporarily used a young male assistant before switching to his wife Haidee.

The first exception to the "clairvoyant" formula appears to be Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin in 1846 who stressed a particular connection between himself and his son, Émile. He asserted to his audiences that Émile was able to see through *his* eyes, and thus, anything which *he* was to look at, Émile could describe.[94] In this way, Robert-Houdin anticipated the telepathic turn which gained popularity in the late 1800 and early 1900s, through the investigation of psychic claimants such as Blackburn and Smith and the Creery sisters, as well as through the performances of apparent thought readers such as Washington Irving Bishop and the Zancigs.

As the telepathic premise began to supplant the premise of the objectified clairvoyant, the role of "clairvoyant" began to shift to the role of "receiver," while the role of "exhibitor" shifted to the role of "sender." Thus, in all historical "telepathy" acts, the male "sends" and the female or child "receives." This relationship may be bluntly observed in the opening line of the Spencers, a telepathy act emerging from the 1950s. Ron Spencer began the act with the line, 'My wife Nancy is a mind reader. At least she can read my mind.' Nancy responds, 'Most wives can.'[95] Likewise, among the editorial cartoons reproduced in Russell Braddon's 1950 biography *The Piddingtons*, many suggest the humour which arises from a wife's knowledge of her husband's thoughts or actions. One cartoon, for instance, depicts a man – after drinking several large glasses of beer – coming home with his dog on a lead. His wife, crocheting in her armchair says, 'Just taking the dog for a walk, eh? Well I've been studying them thought-reading Piddingtons on the wireless…'[96] Another depicts a woman finding her husband at a bar, having drinks with a male companion. The man's drinking companion says, 'While I hand it to the Piddingtons, old boy – telepathy or mind-reading between married couples is by no means new.'[97]

The roles of male-sender and female-receiver, then, appear to conform with traditional patriarchal gender assignments and stereotypes. This is, indeed, curious, since telepathy suggests, by definition, a two-way, back and forth, connection. There is no reason, in terms of premise or presentation, why the sending and receiving should not go in both directions. Indeed, one editorial cartoon did reverse this stereotype for comical effect. The cartoon depicts a well-groomed, slender young man in a necktie, bringing a tray of tea to his attractive female partner while she reads the

[94] Robert-Houdin, Jean Eugene. *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin.* 1858. Trans. Lascelles Wraxall. 1859. p. 81.
[95] Spencer, Ron and Nancy. *Telepathy Personified.* 2005. p. 31.
[96] Braddon, Russell. *The Piddingtons.* 1950. Opposite p. 176.
[97] Braddon, Russell. *The Piddingtons.* 1950. Opposite p. 176.

newspaper. Implying that he "read her mind" she says, 'Oh, thank you Mr. Piddington.'[98] It is worth noting, however, that neither Sydney Piddington, nor *any other male performer,* ever read *his wife or child's mind* in a public demonstration. The only exception to this formula would appear to be Eddie Roberts, who would "switch roles" with his wife Lucille in the middle of their 1940s act, ostensibly as the result of a lovers' quarrel.

The alignment of these roles with traditional gender stereotypes is, therefore, of dubious theatrical value, as indicated by the above examples which found humour in inverting these roles. Yet, it is also important to note that such choices are also driven by practical matters. The role of the receiver requires acting ability, but does not generally require artifice, sleight-of-hand, or spectator management; the successful execution of which may require substantial practice and experience. This, in turn, aligns the role of sender with the male dominated field of conjuring.

Patriarchy and the Staging of Clairvoyance and Telepathy

The staging of clairvoyance and telepathy acts has been historically intertwined with questions of gender, power, and symbolic acts of dominance and submission. In such acts the "receiver" is virtually always a female or child – and during the course of these acts – usually blindfolded or, even in some instances, buried alive, submerged in a tank of water, or in other ways, symbolically (or actually) placed in harm's way. Accordingly, I wish to briefly critique the power relationships of such acts across the previous two centuries. The following historical critique is by no means exhaustive, but I have included the most relevant examples pertaining to the objectification, exploitation, or traumatic/dangerous circumstances.

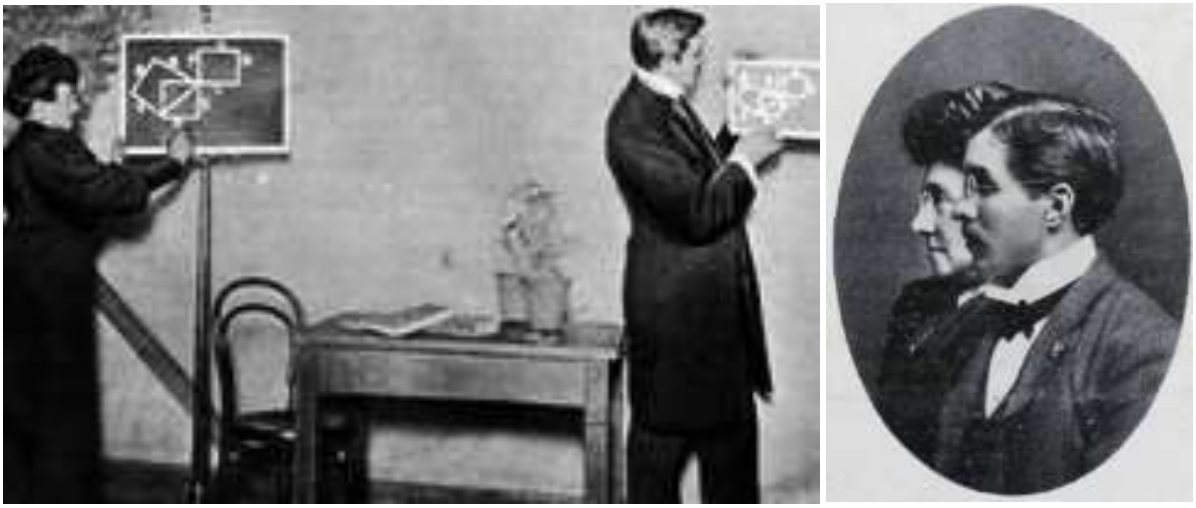
Performances of the clairvoyance premise – ie., second sight – are in evidence in Scotland as early as the 1500s. These performances were brought to the stage by conjurers and their wives in central Europe in the late 1700s. Despite the early demonstrations on stage by husbands and wives, in the early 1800s these acts would be largely dominated by apparent child prodigies such as the eight-year-old Scottish boy Louis Gordon M'Kean, known as *the Double-sighted Phenomenon,* and the daughter of Scottish conjurer, John Henry Anderson, known as *Second-Sighted Sybil*. In 1846, the

[98] Braddon, Russell. *The Piddingtons.* 1950. Opposite p. 176.

French conjurer Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin performed an act called *La Seconde Vue* in his theatre in Paris, along with his twelve-year old son Émile.

Within several years, the American conjurer Robert Heller had appropriated many of Robert-Houdin's creations including *La Seconde Vue.* Heller's original performances of *The Second Sight* featured 'a young man as the medium.'[99] Soon after, the role of clairvoyant was filled by his wife, Haidee, who performed while reclining on a sofa. Choosing to perform alongside his wife, rather than a child, may only have been a matter of convenience for Heller, but it nonetheless marks the end, for the most part, of the child clairvoyant on the stage.

According to 'The Secrets of Second Sight,' by Henry Ridgely Evans, among the post-Heller torch bearers of the second sight act were the Danish born husband and wife team of the Zancigs[100] who radically modernized the presentation by abandoning the premise of mysterious clairvoyance in favour of a pseudo-scientific one of telepathy. Julius and Agnes Zancig toured the world – from 1880 until Agnes' death in 1916 – performing for royalty on numerous occasions. The career of the Zancigs coincided with the rise of spiritualism, which provided techniques and planted seeds for the field of solo telepathy, or mind reading.



The Zancigs

One further – and particularly noteworthy – act to emerge in the 1940s, was the Roberts. Eddie and Lucille Roberts were a husband and wife team noted for a comedic presentation of second

[99] Houdini, Harry. *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin.* 1908. p. 205.
[100] Evans, Henry Ridgely. 'The Secrets of Second Sight.' *The Old and the New Magic.* 1906. p. 407.

sight. Little information is available about their act, entitled, *What's on Your Mind?* However, it is known that in this act, feigning a minor argument, the pair traded places and roles – Eddie donning the blindfold and Lucille walking amongst the audience. Providing evidence of the gender imbalance associated with performances of Second Sight, this appears to be the only occasion in the history of second sight or two-person telepathy acts on which a female has acted as "sender".



The Roberts

In 1950, the field of two-person telepathy was reinvigorated by the Australian born Piddingtons whose appearances on *BBC Radio* intentionally sparked a nationwide controversy regarding the exact nature of their abilities.[101] The staging of these performances before a live studio audience was fascinating. Often – while Lesley was on location, preparing to receive a thought over a great distance – Sydney would don the blindfold himself, engaging with the audience in "experiments" of "mass thought transference". As for Leslie, she appeared to receive these thoughts in a variety of unusual locations including a soundproof booth, a moving automobile, at an altitude of 20,000 feet, submerged beneath water in a diving bell, and under guard at the Tower of London.

[101] Braddon, Russell. *The Piddingtons.* 1950. p. 183.



The Piddingtons (left), Lesley Piddington "on location" in a diving bell (right).

By 1952, the Piddingtons had ended their contract with the BBC and returned to Australia. At that time, another duo worth noting appeared. A 1952 *British Pathé* Newsreel shows *the Great Marlo* along with his purportedly adopted daughter Georgette – who was, in reality, a 'jobbing showgirl'[102] – hired to replace his real daughter Georgina. This rather unsettling newsreel depicts Georgette being buried underground in a steamer trunk, where she appears to telepathically receive a line of text – selected apparently at random – upon which Marlo is concentrating. Scantily clad for no apparent reason, she spends a total of 17 minutes underground and appears to be in a daze when the trunk is opened. According to one report, Georgette was hospitalized for 14 weeks following this "stunt."[103]

About Marlo, conjuring historian David Britland writes: 'Judging by the obsession for big broadcast magic stunts the Great Marlo wasn't so much misguided as merely ahead of his time.'[104] This may be so, but it is also in Marlo's ideas, that the exploitation, abuse, and patriarchal domination intertwined with performances of second sight becomes most visible. Clearly in the ideas of Marlo, described below, telepathy only serves as a hook on which to hang various implausible, sensational, and scandalous tortures of his scantily clad surrogate daughter.

[102] Britland, David. 'The Great Marlo.' *Cardopolis.blogspot.ie.* 19 May 2016.
[103] Rashleigh, Norman. 'Telepathy by Pigeon Post.' *The Budget*. Sep 1953.
[104] Britland, David. 'The Great Marlo.' *Cardopolis.blogspot.ie.* 19 May 2016.

In *The Budget* magazine, in a 1953 column entitled 'Telepathy by Pigeon Post,' Norman Rashleigh describes the exploits, both real and imagined, of Marlo and his "daughter(s)". He writes (included in its entirety, emphasis added):

> David Marlo has been trying to get into television. His act, with the aid of his eighteen-year-old daughter is, we are told, 20 per cent mindreading and 80 per cent showmanship. He has performed various spectacular stunts with the idea of catching the BBC's eye. **He buried Georgette seven feet under the ground** and **let her read his mind** from there. The BBC took no notice, but **Georgette spent fourteen weeks in hospital**. **He sent Georgette 2,000 feet up in an aeroplane** and she picked up his thoughts. The BBC took no notice. Marlo is working on a new stunt. **His daughter will go out to sea in a motor-boat which will be going at a speed over 40 miles an hour** and so fast that it will be impossible to signal it. 'I shall take up my stand by a pigeon loft and the local dignitary will read out to me from any book a message of between twenty and fifty words. When the boat is two miles out at sea I shall transmit this message to Georgette by mental wave and she will write it down and send it back to the shore by pigeon. **If the BBC still take no notice I shall send Georgette up in a helicopter** at half-time over a football match. I shall transmit any chosen message to her and **she will parachute this message to the ground**. If the BBC still take no notice I am teaching my daughter to swim. **She will dive into a swimming bath** carrying the type of ball-point pen that writes under water, between her teeth**. She will stay under water long enough for me to transmit a message** and she will write that message down under water.' **The reporter says that he hopes the BBC will use Mr. Marlo's act before he sends Georgette to the moon.**[105]



The Great Marlo and "Georgette"

[105] Rashleigh, Norman. 'Telepathy by Pigeon Post.' *The Budget*. Sep 1953.

In 2015, after a long absence of two-person telepathy in the mainstream media, Thommy Ten and Amelie van Tass – *the Clairvoyants* – made numerous performances on the television talent show, *America's Got Talent*, on which the pair stressed their mysterious 'one of a kind…very strong and very special connection,' explaining that 'sometimes we even meet in our dreams…there are still two bodies, but it is like our minds becoming one.'[106] They finished the competition in second place, and their penultimate performance included a brief segment in which Amelie appeared to receive a thought while submerged in a glass panelled tank containing 250 gallons of water.



The Clairvoyants in 'The Illusionists' and on 'America's Got Talent'

In almost 200 years, the basic structure of second sight and telepathy acts has hardly changed. Regardless of intent, the fact remains that acts upon the stage are open to interpretation by viewers. Consequently, performances of second sight may be viewed as – or at the very, least remind viewers of – centuries of patriarchal subjectification and persecution of females as sex objects and exotic witches, both on the stage and in everyday life.

"Crossing" and (Anti-)Costumes in Paraperformance

Pop titan turned movie star Lady Gaga has described herself as 'a show with no intermission.'[107] I have made similar arguments – albeit on a vastly different scale – about mentalists, empaths, intuitives, and psychics who seriously purport to demonstrate psychic and parapsychological

[106] *America's Got Talent*. NBC. S11. E1. 31 May 2016.
[107] Syme, Rachel. 'The Shape-Shifter.' *The New York Times Magazine.* 3 Oct 2018.

phenomena. Performances of mentalism take place both within and outside of conventional performance settings and frames. Mentalists perform not only on stage and screen, but also in ostensibly private, everyday, or other circumstances beyond or outside of conventional frames and boundaries. In doing this, they give performances which purport to be *not performances*, but lectures, demonstrations, or simply, daily personal interactions. Many of these performances may also be examined as paraperformances. It is this push and pull between offstage and onstage performances – between overt performance and ostensible "daily life" – that led me to explore the porous boundaries of my own performances and paraperformances, as well as those of other mentalists.

Before looking at costumes, non-costumes, and anti-costumes in paraperformances, I wish to provide several examples of paraperformances of mentalism in order to clarify my argument: Early 20th century mentalist Ted Annemann – often described as the father of modern mentalism – was known, for instance, to regularly carry an icepack in his pocket so that when shaking hands with others, his hand was found to be cool and clammy and, thus, *otherworldly*.[108] Along similar lines, the Israeli purported psychic Uri Geller – both famous and infamous during the latter part of the 20th century – often "discovered" (or allowed others to discover) metal objects which apparently bent while he was nearby. Similarly, Richard Osterlind – the foremost living teacher of mentalism methods in the early 21st century – has described using magnets to wipe the hotel room keys of others in order to demonstrate the strange psychokinetic activity purportedly surrounding him.[109]

Many further examples of paraperformances by mentalists may be cited such as, for instance, mind reader Joseph Dunninger's involvement with the case of the missing Lindbergh baby or the many interventions by psychics such as Peter Hurkos (often described as a "psychic-detective") and Sylvia Browne in missing persons cases. All of the above performances – particularly those regarding life and death – *clearly* take place outside of conventional boundaries, purporting *not to be* performance. These performances are not intended to stand alone *as* performances, but rather, are designed to manipulate the contexts within which other past/future performances are embedded.

[108] Osterlind, Richard. *Annemann's Practical Mental Effects.* L&L Publishing. 2016.
[109] Osterlind, Richard. *Mind Mysteries.* L&L Publishing. 2005.

Richard Schechner writes that 'theater is a place where transformations of time, place, and persons (human and non-human) are accomplished.'[110] Along these lines, Aoife Monks asserts in *The Actor in Costume* that 'theatre is a place where we learn how to make ourselves through clothes.'[111] The dynamics of dark play, performativity, and paraperformance, however, thoroughly complicate the issue of costuming in performances of mentalism. Given that many of the performances of mentalism are paraperformances, it follows that the line between *costume* and *clothing* is frequently and intentionally blurred by these performers. One can say the same, however, about stand-up comedians and other performers who play some version of "themselves" onstage. Judith Butler, in writing on the performativity of gender, discussed the 'stylization of the body'[112] and the many ways in which one 'does'[113] and 'acts one's body.'[114] Butler, in discussing the 'the performance that one's body is,'[115] also describes the 'tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived.'[116] With this in mind, in the following pages, I explore the complex relationship between mentalists' performances and their clothing.

It is my contention that many of the costumes worn by mentalists might best be defined as *anti-costumes* which I define as: *costumes worn in public, or ostensibly in "private", which purport to be the street clothing or daily wear of the performer.* I use the term anti-costume in order to indicate that such clothing choices are *still* costumes, but ones which challenge the traditional conventions of costuming. This dynamic creates a particularly complex area to investigate since the relationship between actor, clothing, character, identity, and costume, is complex to begin with. Aoife Monks, for instance, who describes *costumes* as 'a body that can be taken off,'[117] has noted that it is 'in the porousness between actors and their costumes, and between life and performance, where the interest in costuming lies.' She has further observed that 'costume does far more than decorate the surface of the body; rather, that it comes with risks and possibilities for the bodies and psyches of

[110] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. p. 166.
[111] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 56.
[112] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal.* Vol. 40. No. 4 No. 4. Dec. 1988. p. 519.
[113] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal.* Vol. 40. No. 4 No. 4. Dec. 1988. p. 521.
[114] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal.* Vol. 40. No. 4 No. 4. Dec. 1988. p. 523.
[115] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal.* Vol. 40. No. 4 No. 4. Dec. 1988. pp. 523-524.
[116] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.' *Theatre Journal.* Vol. 40. No. 4 No. 4. Dec. 1988. p. 524.
[117] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 11.

actor and audience alike.'[118] According to Monks, 'costuming might be an act of embodiment, but that embodiment may be partial, fragmented,'[119] and costuming can produce 'bodies that are unstable, unreliable, and occasionally disconcerting.'[120]

Yet, in the academic literature on costuming relatively little attention has gone toward examining costuming in post-dramatic theatre (or post-theatre), performance art, variety entertainment, stand-up comedy, TED Talks, or other forms of 'self-expressive'[121] performance which often employ anti-costumes. It is my contention that costuming impacts the audience reception of performances of mentalism in a manner roughly similar to popular TED Talks. For that reason, I would like to briefly explore the role of clothing in these talks.

While clothing is certainly not the most important factor regarding the reception of TED Talks, it nevertheless clearly matters, as evidenced by scores of online articles and guides such as *The New York Times* article 'Dressing for TED: What to Wear to Go Viral'[122] and the *Forbes* article 'Power Wear: How to Dress for TED 2016 Dream.'[123] *The New York Times* article includes interviews with a number of TED speakers whose talks went "viral" and in nearly every interview, the speakers admitted giving serious consideration to the matter of clothing. Nearly every speaker also mentioned seeking advice from others, or the internet, regarding what to wear. This is odd, indeed, since a post on the TED *Blog* suggests that the primary advice of *The New York Times* article was 'be yourself.'[124]

In one interview, for instance, Glenn Greenwald discusses why, in his talk 'Why Privacy Matters,' he opted – one might argue – to *not* be himself and wear blue jeans and a blue button up shirt. According to Greenwald:

> I talked to people who had seen a lot of TED talks, and they all said the idea is to dress informally. They told me that to wear a suit would be conspicuously weird. My goal was to wear something undistracting, and I figured it out the day before. I wanted my clothes to be unnoticeable and inconspicuous. It was kind of weird

[118] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 3.
[119] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 12.
[120] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 12.
[121] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 24.
[122] Sankovitch, Nina. 'Dressing for TED: What to Wear to Go Viral.' *The New York Times.* 11 Mar 2015.
[123] Moore, Kristina. 'Power Wear: How to Dress for TED 2016 Dream.' *Forbes.com.* 11 Feb 2016.
[124] May, Kate Torgovnick. 'How to Dress for your TED Talk.' TED*Blog.* 12 Mar 2015.

> because I never wear those kinds of clothes when speaking publicly. I always wear a suit.[125]

Along similar lines, Amy Cuddy discusses her talk 'Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are' and suggests that she nearly presented an alternate version of herself that was not quite herself. According to Cuddy:

> I had agonized over what to wear. I went out and bought the most expensive dress I've ever bought. It was Fendi, multiple markdowns at Barneys. But a couple of days before my talk, I thought, "Why am I not going to dress like myself?" It was so not me, I wanted to be myself, not a red carpet version of myself.[126]

Toby Shapshak discusses his talk, 'You Don't Need an App for That' and explains:

> I wore what my friends call my uniform: black T-shirt, blue jeans, comfortable shoes. A friend of mine started a sock company, a friend called Nick, and so the company is NicSocks. There was a really funky range by a local designer with rockets. I love rockets. I thought this is a significant event, so I chose the rocket socks.[127]

Far from rolling out their Sunday best, each speaker, on the contrary, opted to dress with remarkable restraint, demonstrating what, in Italian, is called *sprezzatura;* a studied carelessness. And it is interesting that Shapshak puts so much emphasis on his socks which are never even seen by the public. Perhaps this is evidence that, as Aoife Monks argues – in line with the philosophy of Stanislavski – that 'costume is an external stimulus that transforms the actor's interior private self'[128] and has the power 'to shape identity and form bodies.'[129] Still, the advice to be one's self is incomplete. *Who one is* will change – both in terms of audience reception and self-perception – depending on *what one wears*. As Monks writes (and as Cuddy must have considered when she opted not to present a red-carpet version of herself): 'The actor's body is not singular and stable, but rather multiple and continually shifting in its appearance and possibilities.[130]

Every TED Talk is clearly a performance, not only for the hundreds of live audience members, but also for a global internet audience. Yet, the clothing choices of these "performers" seem to be made precisely on the basis of appearing *not* to wear a costume. It was surprisingly difficult, in

[125] Sankovitch, Nina. 'Dressing for TED: What to Wear to Go Viral.' *The New York Times.* 11 Mar 2015.
[126] Sankovitch, Nina. 'Dressing for TED: What to Wear to Go Viral.' *The New York Times.* 11 Mar 2015.
[127] Sankovitch, Nina. 'Dressing for TED: What to Wear to Go Viral.' *The New York Times.* 11 Mar 2015.
[128] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 61.
[129] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 3.
[130] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 33.

fact, to find a male speaker wearing a necktie; and this despite that fact that neckties remain a staple of formal events and business meetings. Perhaps in the context of a TED Talk, a necktie appears to be *trying too hard.* Yet, ironically, it seems that many TED speakers – like mentalists – try very hard to create the illusion of effortless authenticity. Nevertheless, as Monks has noted, 'the "authentic" body [is] clearly a product of performance.'[131]

Contemporary mentalists often dress with similar restraint to speakers at a TED conference. For the most part, one could not tell the difference – by appearance alone – between a contemporary mentalist and a TED speaker. As with TED speakers, the ambiguity of mentalists' costuming does not occur merely by happenstance. Rather, it is the result of a conscious and intentional strategy of mentalists, intended to achieve maximum credibility with audiences. For instance, in a manuscript entitled *How to be a Successful Medium,* Paul Voodini provides advice on costuming for mediumship. He writes (included at length):

> Dress in a manner that leads the audience to believe that you do not see yourself as being better than them. This does not mean that you cannot dress smartly – of course you can. But overt displays of wealth, too much jewellery, too stuffy a shirt and tie, may lead an audience to believe you see yourself as being somehow 'above' them. A smart suit and shirt is often enough. A medium (and to some extent a mentalist) can get away with wearing a new age style outfit: kaftan, open-toed sandals, etc. But be warned that this style of dress must be entirely congruent with your character. If you're just pretending, the audience will pick up on it and will know instinctively. A little bit of individuality in the mode of dress is expected, we are talking about mediums and mind-readers here. Try not to look like a bank manager… Look at how the mediums on TV dress; smart enough but still able to relate to the man on the street.[132]

Similarly, in *The Handbook of Mental Magic,* Marvin Kaye notes that 'mentalists rarely appear in formal wear (too theatrical and magical-looking) but a well-tailored business suit ought to be attractive.'[133] Kaye observes that 'there is a feeling that mind readers should be sober, somber, nontheatrical individuals with a penchant for lecturing on the scientific aspects of their art'[134] but later cautions: 'Mentalists do not have to look like morticians. If you are able to wear a "mod" suit and look attractive, then by all means do so.'[135] Kaye addresses the practical concern of pockets,

[131] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 97.
[132] Voodini, Paul. 'How to be a Successful Medium.' 2013. pp. 45-46.
[133] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 52.
[134] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 51.
[135] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 60.

before suggesting that mentalists should 'study the dress of popular singers on TV variety shows. They are almost always well-tailored and flashy.'[136]

Most mentalists – including spirit mediums such as Derek Acorah or John Edward or mind readers such as Richard Osterlind or Kreskin – dress somewhere within the continuum above. Uri Geller – a former fashion model – has always worn casual clothing such as jeans, slacks, t-shirts, and fashionable dress shirts. Moving even further from the "bank manager look", a number of new-wave mentalists such as Luke Jermay and Peter Turner, to television stars such as David Blaine, have successfully adopted a jeans and t-shirt "street" aesthetic, often with the addition of tattoos and/or jewellery, often depicting occult imagery. Blaine's use of anti-costumes to enhance what he himself has described as his *anti-presentation* style, seems to have added rather than detracted from his credibility. Fascinatingly, such performers simultaneously assert both their Otherness and their normalcy.

Also fascinatingly, in 2019 Derren Brown presented a TED talk in which he both lectured on mental wellness and performed a traditional blindfolded clairvoyant act. He went completely against convention, however, by presenting his talk in formal white tie and tails. Yet, he also employed a meta tactic, characteristic of wink-eye mentalists, by calling attention to the way in which his costume challenged audience expectations. Brown explained to the audience: 'So, there was a heyday for this kind of stage mind reading, which was the 1930s. That's why I'm dressed like this. In my most un-TED-like garb.'[137] In essence, Brown seems to be using his costume as a form of disclaimer; making an effort to frame his performance *as* a theatrical performance. In this way, Brown – despite his struggle with ethical issues earlier in his career – avoids some of the ethical complications which often accompany dark TED talks and the dark *verfremdungseffekt*.

Shapeshifting and Crossing

Lady Gaga, perhaps more than any other living celebrity, has experimented *wildly* with clothing, often blurring the line between high-fashion, costuming, and performance art. In an article for *The New York Times Magazine* entitled 'The Shape Shifter,' Rachel Syme writes:

[136] Kaye, Marvin. *The Handbook of Mental Magic.* 1977. p. 60.
[137] Brown, Derren. 'Mentalism, Mind Reading, and the Art of Getting in Your Head.' *TED.com.* Apr 2019.

> [Lady Gaga] became a walking billboard for avant-garde fashion (Alexander McQueen's ankle-bending hoof heels, a jacket covered in felt Kermit the Frogs, several gowns made of human hair, that meat dress), a fact that served to make every other artist at the time who wasn't rolling around onstage in a pool of fake blood seem, frankly, dull.[138]

Lady Gaga, according to Syme, 'read Andy Warhol's books and realized that what most people want, when they dream of fame, is not necessarily wealth or power but limitlessness: the ability to change.'[139] Consequently, Syme suggests, Lady Gaga constructed a character which 'was the physical embodiment of flux…never wore the same outfit twice, or gave an interview out of costume, [and] claimed to be a paragon of creative authenticity.'[140] Lady Gaga's shape shifting is in line with Monks' observation that 'the actor's body is produced by dressing-up, emerging as a set of shifting theatrical bodies, or modes.'[141]

Along similar lines, the Otherness which is intrinsically interwoven with credible performances of mentalism, presents an opportunity – indeed, a necessity – for reinvention and shapeshifting. Monks asserts that 'clothes are masks, enforcing social roles and status on the body.'[142] Yet, she also notes the power of clothing to subvert that status, arguing that 'clothes are central to establishing the borders of the body, which can then be crossed.'[143] Accordingly, Monks has noted the 'multiple, contradictory and uncanny bodies that costuming creates.'[144]

Throughout this research project – although I came nowhere near the extreme costumes of Lady Gaga – I experimented with clothing in ways which felt relatively *wild* given my circumstances. After all, experimenting wildly with fashion on the international stage is one thing, and doing so in the banality of one's day-to-day uncelebrated existence is quite another. Counter-intuitively, I found my offstage explorations of clothing – my anti-costumes in paraperformance – to be not only the most challenging but the most transformative as well. My discovery is in line with Schechner's observation that 'much more is permitted onstage than off. Offstage there are no conventions of the theatre to protect a drag queen from ridicule or worse.'[145]

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[138] Syme, Rachel. 'The Shape-Shifter.' *The New York Times Magazine.* 3 Oct 2018.
[139] Syme, Rachel. 'The Shape-Shifter.' *The New York Times Magazine.* 3 Oct 2018.
[140] Syme, Rachel. 'The Shape-Shifter.' *The New York Times Magazine.* 3 Oct 2018.
[141] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 35.
[142] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 75.
[143] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 102.
[144] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 12.
[145] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2nd Ed. 2006. p. 133.

Through this clothing, I explored – in both public and ostensibly "private" settings – hyper-masculinity, femininity, classic Hollywood, punk, rockabilly, grunge, and glam rock aesthetics. Often these categories were complexly interwoven and contradictory. For instance, at times I emulated the onscreen and offscreen fashion of Hollywood icons Errol Flynn, Marlon Brando, and James Dean. All three of these actors are clearly icons of hyper-masculinity, yet at the same time, all three are noted for their offstage bisexuality. Conversely, many traditionally effeminate mannerisms, such as painted fingernails, make-up, jewellery, and animal print, may take on hyper-masculine connotations within the contexts, for instance, of glam and punk rock; traditionally masculine symbols such as a pencil moustache or leather jacket, are equally context dependent.

Each of the "costume aesthetics" described above had a phenomenological effect on me, and these effects are difficult to objectively describe. However, I can say that sometimes these clothing choices affected me – and others – in ways (both positive and negative) which I would not have predicted. I became strangely self-conscious, for instance, when publicly wearing black fingernail polish with gold sparkles on one finger of each hand. Perhaps my self-consciousness might be explained, to some extent, by Monks' observation that spectators often seem to have a 'faint suspicion that actors have been altered by the act of dressing-up.'[146] Monks elaborates:

> The act of dressing-up is deeply complicated. When actors show us how to dress, they are actually showing us how to enact our bodies and our selves. Dress isn't merely the external decoration of appearance, but rather constitutes a deeply formative metaphor for being a person in the world. This metaphor is often contradictory, doesn't necessarily add up, is frequently inconsistent and is often informed by the broader tensions and struggles in the culture over what being a person might mean or be for. Dress doesn't simply reflect these tensions: it also produces them.[147]

Monks' observations regarding *crossing the borders of the body* might shed further light on issues of identity and costume in performances of mentalism. Monks notes that although 'cross-dressing is often imagined to be solely about gender' in fact, 'the theatre has been a place for a plethora of crossings, such as stage Irishness or Orientalism, which are structured by relations of power.'[148] Likewise, I contend that mentalists *cross* into an Otherness in which psychic or parapsychological abilities are claimed. Monks further notes that 'crossing is established through absence as well as

[146] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 79.
[147] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. pp. 55-56.
[148] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 80.

presence: actors are substitutes for identities that are not their own. By taking on the role of substitute or surrogate, cross-dressed actors often stand in for the fantasies, desires and anxieties of their social moment.'[149]

Fantasies, desires, and social anxieties – I would argue – are the very essence of mentalism's appeal, which rests in turn, on the appeal of psychic phenomena. In ancient Greek philosophy *psyche* means *soul*, and Nick Humphrey has asserted that appeal of the psychic is no less than the desire for souls. Humphrey writes in *Leaps of Faith*, that 'what people wanted – and still want – was, above all, to get their souls back from science. For it was and still is their possession of a soul that most people have relied on as their ticket to a better world.'[150] Monks argues that 'cross-dressing allows us to see the connection between costumed performance, and the concept of "performativity": the ability of performance not just to imitate, but also to invent and perpetuate further ways of doing the body. To tamper with the categories of clothing and make-up is to remake bodies and identities.'[151]

As I previously asserted, issues surrounding costumes and identity in mentalism are uniquely complex. The mentalist crosses identities, not by overtly playing a role, but by blurring the boundaries between self and Other; attempting to create the appearance that his or her psychic or parapsychological claims may be, at least partially, genuine. Mentalists, at times, tamper with clothing precisely by *not* tampering with clothing; by wearing anti-costumes and by disguising their performances as *not* performances.

Mentalists often serve as personifications of Otherness. Therefore, dressing "normally" is a radical act of disguise. Mentalists often – and paradoxically – assert their Otherness by asserting their ordinariness. It is a performative act which entails a double reinvention; a crossing followed by a disguise. This is in line with Richard Schechner's notion of performance as a 'double negative.'[152] Whatever costume the mentalist wears, it cannot be his or her own. Mentalists are tricksters and shape shifters; they blend. A mentalist is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Or, more accurately perhaps,

[149] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. pp. 79-80.
[150] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1999. p. 60.
[151] Monks, Aoife. *The Actor in Costume.* 2010. p. 97.
[152] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 2nd Ed. 2006. pp. 72-23.

a sheep in wolf's clothing. Thus, despite its apparent simplicity, the issue of costuming is an intrinsic, complex, and unavoidable aspect of performances and paraperformances of mentalism.

The Patriarchy and Supremacism of Mentalism





In consideration of the ethnographic and autoethnographic reflections of my methodology, I am cognizant of the fact that I am writing and researching from the privileged perspective of the white, straight, educated, male. I am also aware that mentalism has a long history of appropriating "power" along both cultural and gendered lines. In this chapter, I have attempted to elaborate on the patriarchal and supremacist undertones of the evolution of the form, arguing that the imaginary "powers" of the mentalist were once strongly associated with females as well as those from "exotic" geographic locations.

During the past century – in the aftermath of the persecution of witches and spiritualists – mentalism became a form of performance aligned with conjuring and, thus, dominated by white males. Witchcraft and spiritualism paradoxically provided both a mechanism by which females and homosexuals could claim and assert power in a patriarchal society, as well as the crime for which they were stripped of that power through ridicule, prosecution, and execution. By the mid-twentieth century, one need only look at the chauvinistic ads for hypnosis courses featured in comic books to see what had become of mentalism. The "aura" and coercive techniques of the mentalist

had been turned *against* women, offering boys and men tools to 'make mental slaves of [their] subjects.'[*] As the illustrations of slender ladies with plunging necklines make clear, the reference to slavery was overtly sexual.

In December 2019, the magic/mind reading company *Ellusionist,* crowdfunded a project called 'How to Read Minds: Ellusionist x Peter Turner.' This product is clearly marketed to boys and young men, and not surprisingly, among the five selling points listed in the ad copy are: 'Be a stud, instead of a third wheel,' 'Make meeting people easier (especially dates),' 'Captivate ANY customer,' and 'Get known as "the most interesting kid at school."'[153] The very imaginary powers which were once used to subvert the patriarchy are now mass marketed at boys and young men seeking to gain power over women.

Regarding my own practice, it was not possible for me to master mentalism and the psychic arts without being influenced by the patriarchal and supremacist history of these forms. My priority in conducting this research, however, was not to ideologically *reinvent* mentalism and the psychic arts, but rather to learn and understand these forms as they *are* and have *been*. Naturally, I attempted to avoid engaging in harmful behaviour in my practice, and to avoid any overt displays of patriarchy or chauvinism. Yet, as a white male who undertook learning and performing a craft steeped in such history, my practice was unavoidably permeated by such themes, even if my intentions remained otherwise. I realize, however, that although I had nothing personally to do with the evolution of mentalism as it exists today, by practicing the form, I am also taking on this baggage and history. If I do not confront that history, I help to perpetuate it.

The ethnographic aspects of my research involved – in a manner of speaking – "going undercover" among mentalists with the intention of gaining access to proprietary information surrounding mind reading, hypnotism, psychic readings, and mediumship. Thus, it is worth considering Clifford Geertz's description of 'doing ethnology' as being 'like trying to read… a manuscript.'[154] In response to this description, Dwight Conquergood, has pointed to the problematic limitations of this 'ethnocentrist' and 'textocentric' approach. He writes:

[*] See advertisement above.
[153] 'How to Read Minds: Ellusionist x Peter Turner.' *Kickstarter.com.* 2019.
[154] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* 1973. p. 10.

> The ethnographer, in Geertz's scene, stands above and behind the people and, uninvited, peers over their shoulders to read their texts, like an overseer or a spy. There is more than a hint of the improper in this scene: the asymmetrical power relations secure both the anthropologist's privilege to intrude and the people's silent acquiescence…. Both the researcher and the researched face the page as silent readers instead of turning to face one another and, perhaps, open a conversation.[155]

Unlike the open relationship of researcher/researched seen in Geertz's ethnography, my "cover" as a mentalist/researcher was deeply complicated by the fact that – at least for the duration of this research project – I truly *was* a mentalist with the background which I claimed to possess. In addition, I never found it necessary to hide the fact that I was conducting doctoral research on this subject. In fact, the research which I have shared with the community thus far, via *The Journal of Performance Magic* and *The Magiculum II*[*] has been well received. Nevertheless, I recognize that I had motivations driving my practice/research which other mentalist/psychics do not.

Reflecting on my practice, I do see where I might have done things differently in order to subvert some of mentalism's more insidious tropes. This hindsight, however, comes as a result of the research path which I *did* follow and the discoveries I made *through* my research. For instance, my work with Margot Fox as the Deans was driven primarily by a mutual admiration of the Piddingtons (specifically the Stratocruiser test featured on the 1950 *British Pathé* news reel).[156] Thus, we entered into the project, not from a desire to subvert conventions, but to *try them for ourselves*. We imitated, recreated, studied, updated, pastiched, and even parodied, but we did not attack. In retrospect, it is clear that we might have chosen to invert the roles of sender and receiver, becoming essentially the first male/female duo to do so. But to what end? Again, my goals were not to reinvent the form, but to attempt to understand the mechanisms which might explain its popularity and longevity. In addition, there were practical considerations. The role of sender requires more experience and confidence with artifice, subterfuge, and spectator management whereas the role of receiver depends more upon acting ability.

Along similar lines, I might question numerous other choices which I made throughout my praxis. In *Visions and Revisions,* for example, why did I place myself at the centre of three young women demonstrating behaviours associated with witchcraft? I could offer a practical explanation: I put

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[155] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 374-375.

[*] Published under the name: Edward James Dean

[156] Piddingtons, the. 'The Piddingtons Keep Millions Guessing.' *British Pathé.* 1950.

out a casting call and worked with the only three people who replied, attempting to make the most, theatrically, of what I had to work with in a period of devising which lasted less than one week. Or perhaps, I might more honestly reply that as the possessor of the secrets and "powers" of the psychic arts – which is bound up in my privileges as a white male – I am able to assert these powers for my own personal gain, even at the expense of others.

Further, why did I wear a fez in *Mental-WiFi?* I began wearing a fez on stage several years earlier, during performances of conjuring in which I was attempting to "be bigger" and display more "character." During that time, I experimented not only with the fez, but with the drawn-on moustache, large pinky rings, amulets, medals, and other ostentatious displays and mannerisms. I was drawing more from the semiology of secret/masonic societies[*] than from any particular allusion to the Middle East. Yet, secret societies, including the Freemasons, are notoriously chauvinistic and discriminatory. So, while I may have intended the use of such symbolism to be humorous and ironic, such symbolism is also bound up in a tradition of patriarchy and supremacism and may be viewed as an unconscious, if not conscious, affirmation of this history. Much the same may be said for my decision to wear leopard print in every performance of the Deans. I *played with* the dark history of mentalism; but I did not publicly reject it.

By removing my hyper-masculine double-breasted pinstripe suit in *Eddie Dean, Telepathy Rockstar: Smells Like Dean Spirit,* and stripping down to my iconic Calvin Kleins, was I really attempting to subject myself to objectification, in order to understand the experience of being rendered powerless onstage? Or was I simply attempting to assert my masculinity at an even more visceral level? Reflecting back on my practice, I do see occasions on which themes of power, masculinity, patriarchy, and white privilege were exploited, rather than challenged. This may be partially explained by the fact that the focus of my practice was to create entertaining and deceptive performances which effectively and assertively explored the deep and dark play of the mentalist/psychic. Accordingly, I took many factors into consideration, and only in retrospect can I speculate about how I might have done things differently.

[*] During the course of this praxis, I joined the Freemasons and obtained the rank of Master Mason.

In reflecting on this line of thought, I considered Jill Lane's essay 'Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Post-Industrial Flânerie.'[*] In this essay, Lane discusses the path which led performance artist Bill Talen – AKA Reverend Billy – 'as a theatrical persona, to gradually take on the attributes of a "real" spiritual and social leader for public activism… even as everyone is winking when they say "Amen."[157] Reverend Billy's fake/satirical sermons on the religion of Shopping and Consumerism again call to mind the Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* and again prompt me to consider the potential for critiquing the role of the psychic in the process of portraying it.

Comedian Tom Binns, as Ian D Montfort, the psychic from Sunderland – in a manner reminiscent of Reverend Billy – spoofs the figure of the psychic while also apparently genuinely demonstrating clairvoyance. Unlike Talen, however, Binns' target is not immediately clear. Binn's approach, while entertaining, is problematic in that *the use of deceptive artifice remains covert.* Thus, Binns' performances remain liminal and open to contradictory interpretations. Binns himself notes that his performances appeal to both skeptics (who view his performances as ridiculing psychics) and believers (who view Binns as a medium who has incorporated comedy into his demonstrations).[**] This outcome, however commercial, may thus be viewed as doubly problematic; Binns essentially reinforces two reductive stereotypes at once.

A seemingly intractable problem stems from the contradictory aim of critiquing psychic performance while also *convincingly doing one*. I have experimented along these lines in *Mental Wi-Fi*, *Meet the Deans*, and *Two Minds with a Single Thought;* however, I was not able to resolve this conundrum to my satisfaction. Like the age-old riddle: *If you speak my name, I disappear. Who am I?* (Silence); in my public practice, I faced a choice between critiquing psychic performance or *doing* it. Given the nature of my definitions and methodology, I opted for the latter. I would be interested in pursuing the former in post-doctoral research, although such performances would not – strictly speaking – *be* mentalism/psychic performances.

It is not uncommon for conjurers (beginning with Houdini and Maskelyne) to perform "mental magic tricks" and ridicule or "debunk" psychics as they do so. But these performances, too, are

[*] Flânerie is French for *fooling around.* Post-Industrial Fooling Around is also an apt description of wink-eye mentalism.

[157] Lane, Jill. 'Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Post-Industrial Flânerie.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 358.

[**] Tom Binns is discussed further in 'Meta-Comedy.' See: pp. 198-201.

problematic given that the criticism is based on reductive and incomplete stereotypes. Perhaps the most noteworthy achievement in this direction was Derren Brown's 2015 stage show *Miracle* in which Brown deeply condemned the practice of faith healing while simultaneously demonstrating it with startling zealousness and ability. Such an approach bears similarity to many instances of "psychic entertainment" which begin with a disclaimer which is dissonant to the performance which follows; yet, Brown's approach is unusual in that the through lines of *skeptic disclaimer* and *zealous faith healer* run in parallel for the duration of the performance.[*] Against that clash, Brown proposes an alternative ideology as he advocates for the philosophical practices of stoicism and mindfulness. Brown delivers his message – not by *complaining about* faith healers – but by satirically and spectacularly becoming one. Like Bill Talen, Brown uses his satire as a *vehicle* to advocate for an ideology which is separate from what he is satirizing. Reverend Billy does not simply mock religion but uses the evangelical form to critique mass consumerism. Brown does not merely mimic faith healers but uses this mimicry to deliver a message about mental wellbeing.

Dwight Conquergood argues that Performance Studies is triangulated around 'three pivot points: Artistry, analysis, activism' or 'creativity, critique, civic engagement.'[158] As a practicing mentalist/psychic, I found the third point (activism/civic engagement) to be the most difficult to effectively undertake. The baggage which accompanies notions of the psychic can make the subject difficult to speak or lecture about, given the conflicting and dogmatic sides of the debate. Likewise, the secret techniques of the mentalist/psychic create conflicting perspectives which can be difficult to resolve. Publicly exposing those techniques might go some way toward resolving this conflict, but such exposure would be considered gratuitous, harmful, and unethical by the standards of the community which I am researching and to which I (have) belong(ed).

In the Adult Continuing Education courses which I consistently offered throughout this research project,[**] I sought a balance between these various trade-offs. My courses were well attended and

[*] It is perhaps worth noting that the approach taken by Brown in *Miracle* is not radically different than the approach I took in my 2014 production *Visions and Revisions.* One critical difference, in retrospect, is that the final act of my production used only psychophysical demonstrations which did not involve deceptive artifice. Given that spectators cannot readily distinguish between "genuine" and "artificial" demonstrations, I limited my options unnecessarily, where Brown did not.

[158] Conquergood, Dwight. 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. pp. 376-377.

[**] 'Mind Reading and Mind Control: Perception and Persuasion' and 'Tune in to Your Potential: Mind, Body, Intuition.'

received positive feedback from the participants, but I always *struggled* to maintain what I considered to be a stable balance between skepticism and sensitivity. Ultimately, I believe that my greatest opportunity for civic action lies in the publication and dissemination of the arguments in this dissertation which provide a uniquely informed and balanced consideration of this marginalized set of and performance practices and performative behaviors.

I am not, however, suggesting that mentalism and psychic arts are so intractably entrenched in oppression or exploitation that they should be relegated to history alongside blackface minstrels and midway freak shows. Psychic performance has been used throughout history across cultural and gendered lines to subvert and comfort as well as to oppress or exploit. The longevity and popularity of these practices and behaviours – in the face of substantial evidence to the contrary – suggests that these performances somehow offer something of value. I have done my best to identify this value in 'Beyond Psychic.'[*]

Having now completed the practical phase of my research, creating performances which attempt to subvert the shortcomings and dark history of mentalism strikes me as a valuable pursuit. In fact, I have already gone some distance toward exploring this approach in my current personal practice. For instance, in my most recent disclaimer, I explained:

> What you are about to see will almost undoubtedly leave you feeling as though you have witnessed something supernatural, and that I possess weird and awesome powers. But the truth is: Everything I do is accomplished through a combination of psychology, body language, subliminal influence, mass hypnosis, string theory, patriarchy, and white privilege.

Still, in critiquing this issue in a comical way, I unintentionally also reduce the issue to a subject of ridicule. The simple fact is that *anything* I do in performance will be bound up in the dark history of patriarchy and cultural/racial supremacism. The lesson which I draw from Talen, Brown, and Binns is that perhaps the most effective way to critique the role of the psychic will be to satirize these performances while focussing my activism on *a different but relevant issue.* In preparation, I have attempted to identify the areas in which the issues of patriarchy and supremacism are interwoven, uniquely and particularly, with mentalism and psychic arts. I have further attempted to identify times at which these insidious biases may have consciously or unconsciously surfaced

[*] 'Beyond Psychic.' pp. 211-250.

in my own practice thus far, despite my efforts to avoid them. Such a process has been challenging and painful at times, but also enlightening and humbling.



THE END OF MIND READING

Dear Great Pumpkin,

I am looking forward to your arrival on Halloween night. I hope you will bring me lots of presents. Everyone tells me you are a fake, but I believe in you.

Sincerely, Linus Van Pelt

P.S. If you really are a fake, don't tell me. I don't want to know.

- Charles Schulz [1]

[1] Schulz, Charles. *Peanuts.* United Artist Syndicate, Inc. 13 Oct 1962.

The End of Mind Reading

Advances in contemporary neuroscience have formally debunked Cartesian mind/body dualism, ending, in the process, the possibility of mind reading as it has long been imagined by the public and depicted in popular culture.[2] Gone, now, are the tantalizing possibilities of mental radio waves, psychic vibrations, and disembodied minds, frequently brandished by the mediums, mind readers, and mesmerists of decades past. These post-Cartesian and post-truth provocations, I argue, are leading to the emergence of a new meta paradigm of mentalism in which – in contrast to classical mentalism – *the lies are less interesting than the lying.* I use the term *wink-eye* to describe this new paradigm of metamentalism, and the term will be explored in the course of this chapter. But what are the properties of this new paradigm, and where will it lead?

To answer these questions, I will explore the relationship between mentalism and several theories advanced by the field of Performance Studies such as play, role play, dark play, make-belief, liminality, and meta-performance. I will further examine the curious relationships between mentalists, professional wrestlers, method actors, rock stars, and stand-up comedians; paying specific attention to what is known in the professional wrestling industry as *kayfabe*.

Many contemporary mentalists, such as Banachek and Derren Brown, have adapted to the post-Cartesian climate by turning their attention toward premises which appear – at least on the surface – to be more psychological than psychic, implying the use of neuro-linguistic programming, subliminal influence, and advanced body reading techniques. Others, such as *The Amazing Kreskin* and Richard Osterlind, have simply soldiered on, staying true to the – by now – retro premises of classical mentalism, such as clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and telepathy.

Others still, have adopted an unlikely combination of psychological and psychic premises. For instance, I witnessed a stage show in 2017 in which the Irish mentalist Keith Barry correctly called out, while blindfolded, the serial number on a 20 Euro note which was sealed in an envelope. Barry claimed to accomplish this demonstration via the "vibrations" of the bill. This absurd claim is all the more fascinating since Barry publicly claims to accomplish his demonstrations through the use of neuro-linguistic programming.[3] How can one make sense of this?

[2] Moulton, Samuel T. and Stephen M. Kosslyn. 'Using Neuroimaging to Resolve the Psi Debate.' Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience. Vol. 20. No. 1. Jan 2008. pp. 182-192.
[3] Harrington, Katy. 'Keith Barry reveals the secrets of a brain hacker.' *The Irish Post.* 23 Apr 2015.

It is my contention that contemporary mentalists are reacting – both intentionally and unintentionally – not only to the anti-dualist realities confirmed by neuroscience, but also to what is quickly becoming known as the *post-truth condition*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'[4] Unlike the total subjectivity of postmodernism, or the total objectivity sought by modernism, at the heart of the post-truth paradigm, there seems to lie an interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, and the precise boundaries of that interplay are frequently blurred.

In an article entitled 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the"Post-Truth" Era' in the *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, Stephan Lewandowsky asserts that 'the post-truth world emerged as a result of societal mega-trends such as a decline in social capital, growing economic inequality, increased polarization, declining trust in science, and an increasingly fractionated media landscape.'[5] This era of post-truth discourse has been described by Linguist Nick Enfield as 'our new normal' in which 'experts are dismissed, alternative facts are (sometimes flagrantly) offered, and public figures can offer opinions on pretty much anything. And thanks to social media, pretty much anyone can be a public figure.'[6] Enfield goes on to observe that 'in much public discourse, identity outranks arguments, and we are seeing either a lack of interest in evidence, or worse, an erosion of trust in the fundamental norms around people's accountability for the things we say.'[7]

The post-truth paradigm is best captured, perhaps, by the creation of the word *truthiness*, by satirist Steven Colbert, who observes that the United States is a nation 'divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart.'[8] Indeed, according to Lewandowsky, 'a notable segment of the American public now subscribes to a non-standard epistemology that does not meet conventional criteria of evidentiary support.'[9] Thus, the post-truth turn has radically

[4] *Oxford English Dictionary Online.*
[5] Lewandowsky, Stephan. Et al. 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the"Post-Truth" Era.' *The Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. Vol. 6. 2017. p. 353.
[6] Enfield, Nick. 'We're in a post-truth world with eroding trust and accountability. It can't end well.' *The Guardian.* 16 Nov 2017.
[7] Enfield, Nick. 'We're in a post-truth world with eroding trust and accountability. It can't end well.' *The Guardian.* 16 Nov 2017.
[8] Andersen, Kurt. 'How America Lost Its Mind.' The Atlantic. Sep 2017.
[9] Lewandowsky, Stephan. Et al. 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the"Post-Truth" Era.' *The Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. Vol. 6. 2017. p. 362.

altered the playing field for mentalists, who have always played with notions of truth, lies, and surface.

The Trivialization of Mentalism

In 1928, Dr. Harlan Tarbell commenced the creation of *The Tarbell Course in Magic,* a correspondence course which contained many examples of 'mind reading,' 'psychic effects,' 'super-mentalism,' and 'spiritualistic magic.'[10] Such tricks were first described as 'anti-spiritualistic tricks' in 1901[11] and later codified as mentalism in 1957 with the publication of Tony Corinda's seminal *Thirteen Steps to Mentalism*. In the 1947 edition of *The Tarbell Course in Magic*, conjurers are exhorted to understand the:

> ...psychological difference in the appeal, in the manner of presentation, between what we call two branches of the mystic art – 'magicians' and 'mentalists'. While both accomplish their effects by trickery, the mentalist rarely admits it. There is an important reason for this attitude of the mentalist. His mysteries of the mind are impressive only when cloaked in an atmosphere of genuine phenomena.[12]

Perhaps this distinction is what mentalist Theodore Annemann was referring to, in 1934, when he described mentalism as 'a grown up phase of magic and mystery.'[13] Or perhaps not. In *Principia Mentalia,* Bob Cassidy writes that 'careful reading of Theodore Annemann's *The Jinx*, the leading source of so-called "mental magic" in the 1930s and early 40s, reveals that most contributors practiced an almost ironic approach to mentalism, cloaking their presentations with the same patter stories and obvious props used by conjurors.'[14] Cassidy goes on to discuss what he feels to be the distinct roots, as well as the true forbearers, of modern mentalism:

> …the fathers of mentalism weren't Robert-Houdin, Alexander Hermann or Harry Kellar. They were performers such as the Davenports, Washington Irving Bishop, Anna Eva Fay and Eric Hanussen. The exploits of such notorious and noted mediums as Henry Slade, Daniel Dunglas Home and Arthur Ford created the backdrop before which the art grew. Men such as the Comte Saint Germain,

[10] Tarbell, Harlan. 'Lesson 29: Divisions of Modern Magic.' *The Tarbell Course in Magic*. 1928.
[11] Stanyon, Ellis. *Magic.* 1901.
[12] Tarbell, Harlan. *The Tarbell Course in Magic, Volume IV.* 1941. p. 191.
[13] Annemann, Theodore. *The Jinx*. 1934-1941.
[14] Cassidy, Bob. *The Compleat Principia Mentalia.* 2002. p. 5.

> Cagliostro and Rasputin provided the legend. They were the godfathers of our art. (Which would, I suppose, make Madam Blavatsky the fairy godmother.)[15]

In 1976, Max Maven wrote that 'mentalism is the one area of magic that seems real to a lay audience. They not only suspend their disbelief... they believe...'[16] Today, however, Cartesian, or dualist, mentalism is undergoing a delegitimization reminiscent of the delegitimization of superstitious magic a century ago. Indeed, the 'trivialization of mentalism' is a commonly discussed topic amongst both shut-eye and open-eye mentalists who are concerned that an increasing number of conjurers and would-be-mentalists are overtly presenting mentalist premises as "tricks".[17] Perhaps the two issues run hand-in-hand. As the premises of mentalism become less scientifically legitimate and, consequently, more camp, those premises are in turn being increasingly adopted by mainstream performers and performed casually for mainstream audiences. Still, there is no reason to believe that imaginary paranormal forces – or those who claim to wield them – will lose their power.

Play

According to Richard Schechner, 'performance is amoral…this amorality comes from performance's subject, transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become – for worse or better – what they ordinarily are not.'[18] This transformation, brought about through pretending, or playing, is a very important aspect of mentalism, and the popular assertion that mentalism is a "grown-up" form of magic,[19] runs contrary to the fact that many popular children's games – such as, *Hangman*, *20 Questions*, *I Spy*, and *Which Hand* – are based on mind-reading premises. Yet, while performances of mentalism often employ premises of "play" and games, these performances are not *fair play*, because the games are frequently, and deviously, rigged in favour of the mentalist.

Nevertheless, despite the childish and childhood connotations of the word "play", it is a serious concept with the potential to create as well as destroy – such as when one decides to *play for keeps.*

[15] Cassidy, Bob. *The Compleat Principia Mentalia.* 2002. p. 5.
[16] Goldstein, Phil. (Max Maven.) *The Blue Book of Mentalism.* 1976. p. 2.
[17] 'How to Stop the Trivialization of Mentalism.' *TheMagicCafe.com.* 13 Dec 2015.
[18] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 1.
[19] Annemann, Theodore. *The Jinx*. 1934-1941.

Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens* – a seminal analysis of culture and play – that 'play is the direct opposite of seriousness.'[20] He immediately explains, however, that '[a]s soon as we proceed from "play is non-seriousness" to "play is not serious", the contrast leaves us in the lurch - for some play can be very serious indeed.'[21] According to Huizinga, play 'is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex… In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.'[22] Yet, Huizinga also notes that 'the *fun* of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation. As a concept, it cannot be reduced to any other mental category… it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind.'[23]

Building on such theories of play, Richard Schechner has noted that 'playing and ritualizing are closely related to each other.'[24] Schechner writes (emphasis added):

> …play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviors which in humans continue undiminished throughout life; that play creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms; *multiple realities* that are *slippery, porous, and full of creative lying and deceit*; that play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing; that the perils of playing are often masked or disguised by saying that play is 'fun,' 'voluntary,' 'a leisure activity,' or 'ephemeral' – when in fact *the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies;* that play is performative, involving players, directors, spectators, and commentators in a quadrilogical exchange that, because each kind of participant often has his or her own passionately pursued goals, is frequently at cross-purposes.[25]

According to Schechner, 'ritual has a seriousness to it, the hammerhead of authority. Play is looser, more permissive – forgiving in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid.'[26] It is not a stretch to find the connections between play, as described by Schechner – with all its 'creative lying and deceit' – and mentalists, mediums, and psychics, who are inevitably as seedy as they are fascinating.

[20] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1949. p. 5.
[21] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1949. p. 5.
[22] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1949. p. 1.
[23] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1949. p. 3.
[24] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 2nd Ed. 2006. p. 42.
[25] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. pp. 26-27.
[26] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 2nd Ed. 2006. p. 79.

In *The Ambiguity of Play,* Brian Sutton Smith suggests that 'the breadth of play [Schechner] suggests for these secular nonnmythic times provides a *broad play* rhetoric.' In this broad approach, writes Sutton Smith, 'everything is play that is clearly not of an immediate adaptive usefulness.[27] In considering this broad spectrum of play, it may be observed that the liminality which exists between "real" and "play" imbues those who play at transforming – often through rituals or rites of passage – with tremendous but ambivalent powers. These powers are reminiscent of those of the archetypal tricksters, who, according to George Hansen in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, 'are boundary crossers; they destabilize structures; they govern transitions. They also embody paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity.... Tricksters are marginal characters; they live at boundaries, with uncertain, ambiguous statuses.'[28] Roman Gladiators, for example, who enacted ritual combat – which Schechner has described as 'real events fictionalized by virtue of their being acted out'[29] – were both celebrities and slaves. Professional wrestlers, who also enact ritual combat, are similarly celebrated as heroes and derided as fakes.

Mentalists are, in a sense, psychic gladiators enacting a form of ritual shamanism which, like ritual combat, has primitive origins related to survival. Mentalists, too, are celebrated for their abilities as much as they are derided for their lies. Mentalist Derren Brown, for instance, has described the way in which mentalists and magicians face, '...the unavoidable problem that one is engaging in a childish, fraudulent activity.'[30] Magic, according to Brown, 'has both feet planted in cheap vaudeville and childish posturing; in dishonesty and therefore not in art. The magician cheats and this truth runs cold through the craft's bloodless veins.'[31] I would suggest that this dilemma is intensified for mentalists who, unlike conjurers, make a claim toward truth and legitimacy. But while Brown's observation is astute and elegant, it is also incomplete.

The deceptions carried out by mentalists run contrary to the subjective "truth" often sought by artists, but there is no reason to believe that art and dishonesty cannot co-exist. In fact, quite the reverse is true. In *The New Yorker*, for instance, Amanda Petrusich notes that 'many of our most

[27] Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play.* 1997. p. 58.
[28] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 46.
[29] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. p. 109.
[30] Brown, Derren. *Confessions of a Conjurer.* 2010. p. 24.
[31] Brown, Derren. *Confessions of a Conjurer.* 2010. pp. 80-81.

prized artworks goof around with form, testing the permeable membrane between fact and fiction, between art and something else.'[32]

Role Play

The processes by which mentalists engage with role playing in order to create and project a persona are seemingly unique to the field of mentalism. Yet, the performance of mentalism has rarely been addressed in the academic context. Conversely, contemporary academic post-Cartesian approaches which dispute the entity of character, remain largely unexplored in the field of mentalism. Popular conceptions in western society – and, indeed, among mentalists – also largely conflate the many and varied approaches to acting with one specific approach, namely, psychological realism. Representing the general attitude of many mentalists toward issues such as character and subtext, influential mentalist Bob Cassidy writes, '...unless you have prepared, and thoroughly assimilated, the subscript of a "psychic" *persona*, astute audiences will sense your insincerity.... Ultimately, you must be able to walk out onstage and *become* the character you have created.'[33] Still, it is limiting to equate acting with psychological realism and associated, but ultimately misguided, Cartesian notions that an actor is able to, or should endeavour to, "become" the "character."

In 1996, Elinor Fuchs academically declared the 'death of character'[34] which depends upon a Cartesian ability to mix and match, as it were, bodies and minds. On this, Fuchs writes:

> It is not difficult for actors to discover for themselves, without benefit of sophisticated philology, that imagining an Oedipus at the level of individual psychology does not so much enhance him with lifelike detail as dissipate his moral force. On the contrary, it is the actor's difficult task to inhabit the actions of an Oedipus with such concentration that, in effect, no 'excess' of character is left over. The actor seeks the actions, not the coherent personality that commits them.[35]

Such an idea – with its emphasis on concentrated action over coherent psychology – is far removed from the dualistic hierarchy of mind over body posited by Descartes. Fuch's notions, rather, align

[32] Petrusich, Amanda. 'Out of Nowhere, New Music from John Lurie's Made-Up Outsider Artist.' *The New Yorker*. Nov 2017.
[33] Cassidy, Bob. *The Artful Mentalism of Bob Cassidy Vol. 2*. 2013. pp. 80-81.
[34] Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character.* 1996.
[35] Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character.* 1996. p. 24.

more closely with the phenomenological modes of perception put forward by the 20th century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who noted that '…we perceive the world with our body'[36] and asserted that the body is '…our general medium for having a world.'[37] The philosophy of mind and body advanced by Merleau-Ponty also aligns with contemporary neuroscience which has established that, in the words of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, 'there is no such thing as a disembodied mind. The mind is implanted in the brain, and the brain is implanted in the body.'[38] In a similar vein, theatre director Jacques Lecoq has observed that 'the body knows things about which the mind is ignorant.'[39]

As progressive and useful as Lecoq's observation is, even this line of thinking reinforces a mind-body duality, which indeed, is hard to avoid. In *Theatre & The Mind,* Bruce McConachie writes:

> Current practitioners and theorists of acting can be divided into two broad camps – those who emphasize the mental and psychological aspects of the art and those who explore the physical and kinaesthetic side of acting. Within the general dichotomy there are two extremes – theorists who continue to worship at the shrine of Method Acting and others who preach the necessity of Physical Theatre. Most near the psychological end of the continuum believe that the proper "internal" psychological exercises will draw the body along with the mind, while those near the other end believe that "external" physical work can bend the mind to the body. It would be nice to be able to say that the truth lies somewhere in between. But in fact both positions are misconceived; both depend upon a dualism that does not exist. Nonetheless, this dualism is difficult to escape or even consciously resist.[40]

Contemporary mentalists further complicate the mind-body problem, inasmuch as they *pretend* to be masters of body language and non-verbal communication, yet in their performances, bodies are neglected in all but the most rudimentary of ways. The height of physical activity in many contemporary performances of mentalism might be said to occur when the actor touches his/her temples with two fingers and closes his or her eyes tightly in a *pretence* of strenuous mental activity; or, perhaps, when the mentalist employs a large shift of his body and focus, in order to misdirect attention away from the execution of some secret artifice performed at the fingertips.

Nevertheless, these *pretenses* of mentalism remain powerful, no matter how false they may be. In his 1969 book entitled *Magic and Showmanship,* theatre director and conjurer Henning Nelms,

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[36] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.* 1945. Trans. Colin Smith. 1962. p. 239.
[37] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.* 1945. Trans. Colin Smith. 1962. p. 169.
[38] Brown, Eryn. "Digging into our consciousness." *Phys.org.* 2011.
[39] Lecoq, Jacques. *The Moving Body.* 1997. Revised Ed. 2002. p. 8.
[40] McConachie, Bruce. *theatre & mind.* 2013. pp. 29-30.

without necessarily intending to, implies that premises of mentalism, which blur the boundaries of role and performance, are more effective than the roles and frames of traditional conjuring performances. Nelms writes:

> You can make your task much simpler by limiting your claim to something more plausible than magic…. At the same time, you must be doubly careful not to overdo your characterization. If the audience becomes consciously aware that you are not literally being yourself, all hope of conviction is lost.... Plausible roles offer better prospects....[41]

The persona created and projected by a mentalist in performance, therefore, is not fully a character, but what I describe as a *quasi-character* formed in part from the multiple selves of the actor. Richard Schechner has observed that in addition to playing a role, or behaving as somebody else, an actor may also behave 'as if I am "beside myself" or "not myself," as when in trance.'[42] According to Schechner, 'this "someone else" may also be "me in another state of feeling/being," as if there were multiple "me's" in each person.'[43] In this regard, the personas cultivated by mentalists bear a resemblance to the personas constructed and projected by stand-up comedians whom, Schechner notes, 'play aspects of themselves… [while] the audience teeters between knowing it is being put on and glimpsing brief, but deep, looks into the "real person."'[44]

Jiři Veltruský, has argued that, 'all that is on stage is a sign.'[45] On stage, everything is a performance and necessarily a representation of something else. On stage, one is not, and cannot be, *just* one's self. Schechner has likewise written that while an actor playing Ophelia is 'not Ophelia' she is also 'not not Ophelia.'[46] This is an apt description, as well, of the projected persona of the mentalist who is at once, both not a psychic, and not not a psychic, given the liminality of belief in which the audience may be situated. Thus, in contemporary mentalism, the distinction between the actor, and the projected persona, is an elusive one.

Bert O. States writes of the three modes 'in which [the actor] may speak to the audience… the collaborative, the self-expressive, and the representational.'[47] States describes the collaborative

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[41] Nelms, Henning. *Magic and Showmanship.* 1969. pp. 50-51.
[42] Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology.* 1985. p. 37.
[43] Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology.* 1985. p. 37.
[44] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. p. 50.
[45] Veltruský, Jiři. "Man and Object in the Theatre." *Prague School Reader on Aesthetics: Literary Structure and Style*. 1964. p. 84.
[46] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 2nd Ed. 2006. pp. 72-23.
[47] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 24.

form as breaking down 'the distance between actor and audience… to give the spectator something more than a passive role in the theatre exchange.'[48] In this sense mentalism must operate, at least in part, on the collaborative level. Bob Cassidy writes that, 'mentalism may be the most interactive of the performing arts.'[49] This collaborative nature, however, does not determine whether the collaboration takes place with actors in a self-expressive or a representational mode.

Characters portrayed by mentalists are usually not representational, insomuch as such characters are understood to be characters, and thus, are entangled with the willing suspension of disbelief, which mentalists, for the most part, endeavour to avoid. Generally speaking, if the character portrayed is clearly other than the actor, then the abilities of the character will most likely be subsumed into the dramatic production as special effects, rather than credited to the personal ability of the actor. It is, therefore, the self-expressive mode which primarily concerns the personas projected by mentalists.

In the self-expressive mode, according to States, the audience perceives the self of the actor – apart from the character being portrayed. States refers to opera, dance, and mime (stand-up comedy, conjuring, and mentalism could be safely added to the list) as the 'major self-expressive forms of theatre.'[50] He humorously observes that the opera soprano 'is not expected to "disappear" into her role as a dying tubercular because it is impossible to sing properly and die properly at the same time.'[51] States notes that in these forms it is the 'display of the artist's ability'[52] which is primarily offered. Thus, the self-expressive mode amounts to the 'audience's awareness of the actor,'[53] in the act of playing a role.

While the mentalist's persona is a quasi-character, it is also an *anti-character*, insofar as the mentalist projects a persona which actively denies being a persona, and gives a performance which actively purports to be, at least in part, a genuine demonstration. The persona of the mentalist must extend beyond, and obscure, the traditional boundaries of the performance. In an interview conducted by Eugene Burger in *Spirit Theatre*, Tony Andruzzi speaks of the importance of

[48] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 29.
[49] Cassidy, Bob. *The Artful Mentalism of Bob Cassidy, Volume 2: Fundamentals.* 2013. p. 12.
[50] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 25.
[51] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 25.
[52] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 26.
[53] States, Bert O. 'The Actor's Presence: Three phenomenal modes.' *Acting (Re)Considered.* 2nd Ed. 2002. p. 26.

remaining in character, 'twenty-four hours a day!'[54] adding, 'At the end of a performance, you're still performing. You're still making believers.'[55] Burger enquires about going out to lunch with friends, and Andruzzi replies, 'Even then. They must know that you are a little weird.'[56]

Mentalists must, to some extent – either intentionally or inadvertently – conflate their onstage and offstage personas. In many ways, this process may be viewed as an inverted method acting process by which an actor places him or herself in the daily routines of a given character – not to inform the onstage persona – but rather, *to conceal the existence of* the onstage persona. Max Maven, for example has discussed wearing earrings and eye make-up 'every day to walk down the street.' According to Maven, 'when I think back to that and how that must have registered to most ordinary people in the 1970s, it's amazing that I wasn't killed. But I chose to do it.'[57]

Dark Play

Anthropologist Victor Turner has written that 'in liminality people "play" with familiar elements and defamiliarize them.'[58] Richard Schechner has further noted that 'sometimes playing is anti-structural, with the main fun being how one can get around the rules or subvert them.'[59] Accordingly, the characteristics of post-truth might be effectively analysed by interrogating issues of play – dark play, in particular – which deal precisely with questions of liminal and in-between states, wherein the boundaries between real and not real are intentionally blurred. About dark play, Richard Schechner writes:

> Once play is underway, risk, danger, and insecurity are part of playing's thrill. Usually there is a safety net, or a chance to call 'time out,' or appeal to an umpire or other nonplaying authority who takes care of the rules. But in informal play, and in what I call 'dark play,' actions continue even though individual players may feel insecure, threatened, harassed, and abused.[60]

[54] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 85.
[55] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 85.
[56] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 86.
[57] *Max Maven: Kayfabe.* Essential Magic Collection. Luis De Matos. 2017. Vol. 2. 01:56:50.
[58] Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play.* 1982. p. 27.
[59] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 92.
[60] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 27.

According to Schechner, play is dark when 'we are playing and only one of the parties knows that we are playing.'[61] He further notes that dark play may 'be dangerous, psychologically, physically, and so on,' but inevitably involves 'deep disguise…identity shifting…a kind of free shifting of who you are and how you do things.'[62] In other words, dark play intentionally suppresses the meta message "this is play" – which Gregory Bateson describes as indicating that 'these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote.'[63] Thus, mentalists of all sorts, from spirit mediums to pseudo-psychological masterminds, engage in dark play. The mentalist knows that the performances are rigged in some regard, but the audience, ideally, is not made fully aware of the nature of the deception.

The preceding ideas are quite significant in that they suggest that mentalism is not only play for the mentalist, but spectators, as well, whether they intend for this to be the case, or not. Some spectators may not believe the claims of the mentalist but may *play along* for enjoyment, or as an alternative to spoiling the game by pointing out that it isn't real. Other audience members may play unwittingly, taking at face value the claims of the mentalist. Regarding dark play, Schechner writes (emphasis added):

> Dark play may be conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark *when some or even all of the players don't know they are playing*. Dark play occurs when *contradictory realities coexist*, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out, as in the double cross…Or *dark play may be entirely private*, known to the player alone. Dark play can erupt suddenly, a bit of microplay, seizing the player(s) and then quickly subsiding – a wisecrack, a flash of frenzy, risk, or delirium. *Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed*, as in spying, con games, undercover actions, and double agentry. Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns, and so on (whose agendas are public), *dark play's inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification*.'[64]

The play of mentalists is often dark. Schechner has observed that 'if play acts themselves are not necessarily "fun," neither are the processes that generate play acts always playful.'[65] In *Psychology*

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[61] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:02:05.
[62] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:02:40.
[63] Bateson, Gregory. 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 142.
[64] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 36.
[65] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 96.

of the Psychic, a skeptical analysis of parapsychological research, David Marks and Richard Kammann confront the ethical implications of Uri Geller's dark play. They write:

> Some people have argued that it doesn't matter if Uri Geller is only a magician, because in that case he has played an excellent and entertaining joke on society. Perhaps. But it seems wrong to me to wink at deception used in support of a false, pseudoscientific theory… We expect a magician to deceive us, but we do not expect him to carry out the game when he goes off stage, thus misrepresenting himself as a person and the meaning of what he is doing. It is not clever magic to say that one's magic is not magic, it's just lying and cheating.'[66]

This may or may not be so. It might also be argued that it is not clever magic to say that one's magic is just silly tricks. In fact, the authors contradict themselves. Earlier in the book they write:

> If Geller simply billed himself as a magician, then his ability to bend spoons, start watches, and guess colors would be considered a dull routine offered for public entertainment. Geller's originality is to take a collection of simple effects, requiring almost no modern technology and gimmicks, and mold them into a total psychic image. He takes one giant step further by being a psychic both onstage and off, a step that many magicians consider beyond the ethics of their profession. Geller is the only magician performing today whose public image goes *up* by failures, because these help convince people that he is *not* a magician.[67]

The authors are seeming to say – perhaps without meaning to – that as a magician, Geller would have been 'dull,' but as a psychic he is brilliant. Mentalist Luke Jermay has praised Geller, describing him as 'the best magician on Earth because he's the only one that's managed to keep a secret.'[68] Likewise, Eugene Burger has said that 'aside from government workers magicians are the worst secret keepers on the planet. Well good for Uri Geller, he hasn't told anything yet. I have great respect for him.'[69] And Max Maven describes Geller as having 'significantly advanced the world of mentalism.'[70] According to Maven, 'No matter what your opinion may be concerning Mr. Geller's career, there is no question as to the magnitude of his impact on the field.'[71]

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[66] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. 2nd Ed. 2000. p. 294.
[67] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. 2nd Ed. 2000. p. 71.
[68] 'Uri Geller Trilogy (Signed Spoon & Box Set) by Uri Geller and Masters of Magic.' 2017.
[69] 'Uri Geller Trilogy (Signed Spoon & Box Set) by Uri Geller and Masters of Magic.' 2017.
[70] 'Uri Geller Trilogy (Signed Spoon & Box Set) by Uri Geller and Masters of Magic.' 2017.
[71] 'Uri Geller Trilogy (Signed Spoon & Box Set) by Uri Geller and Masters of Magic.' 2017.

Geller, in fact, had a fascinating exchange with magician and illusionist David Copperfield on television in the early 1970s, in which Geller acknowledged being a magician, but in *the old sense of the word*:

> Copperfield: I am not out to expose you. I really think you're fantastic, and anything I say that you might feel is derogatory, is purely out of the admiration from one magician to – I'm sorry, I have to call you a magician.
>
> Host: He won't like that!
>
> Geller: No, I don't mind it if he calls me a magician, because I think of it in the old sense of the word. You know, in the past there were the real magicians. What is a magician? The word magician is –
>
> Copperfield: That's true.[72]

Geller, here, draws a distinction between magicians, and "real" magicians, which is quite similar to the distinction I am drawing between magicians and mentalists, whom I argue are in fact pseudo-scientific anti-magicians. This distinction is in line with what Schechner suggests when he refers to the modern 'debased sense'[73] of the word "magic". Contemporary magic and contemporary mentalism are entirely different forms of play. The distinctions have little to do with plots, premises, tricks, techniques, or effects, but with how these performances are framed and the perceived abilities and credibility of the performer.

Make-Belief and Liminality

The blurring of boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity suggests that when people engage in serious forms of play, they often enter states which go beyond what is described by terms such as pretend, make-believe, or suspension of disbelief. Schechner, has written of what he calls, 'make-belief performances'[74] in which 'there is an intentional blurring of the boundary between what is fictionalized, constructed, made to order and what might be actually real.'[75] He explains that, 'in actually performing the rituals… these actions, these performances, actually create the

[72] 'Uri Geller and David Copperfield.' *YouTube.* 31 May 2017. 0:01:10.
[73] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. p. 63.
[74] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. pp. 42-43.
[75] Brady, Sara. 'Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror: "Whatever it Takes."' 2012. p. 109.

belief.'[76] Make-belief performances, according to Schechner, are ones in which "performers" enact 'the effects they want the receivers of their performances to accept "for real".'[77]

When people play, they play at what is not real, yet in doing so, they often place themselves in unusual, vulnerable, altered, or even dangerous states – and those states are absolutely real. To examine whether play is real or fake, is to largely miss the point. Play is both real and fake; fake and real. It is a liminal activity and facilitates transformation. Play allows people to explore areas without full commitment; but this is not to say that there is no risk. Play (and rituals) allow people to take part in something which may, or may not, exist. Performances of mentalism enable observers to exist between order and chaos; to choose to play.

The liminal positioning of many contemporary mentalists, with regard to the powers they claim to possess, can be observed in the statements of alleged psychic Uri Geller in a recent interview. The interviewer mentioned that Geller now seemed to be 'winking an eye'[78] at the magic community. Geller responds to the host:

> …when I was very, very young, I called myself a psychic. Then, I did a little twist and I called myself a paranormalist. Today, if you ask me, I call myself a mystifier. Because it's not there and it's not here. I'm sitting on the fence… If any person today, any interviewer, journalists, television, whatever, they ask me, "Now, Uri, tell us the truth. Are you real? Or are you not real? My answer will stay exactly the same as it was 48 years ago. I say, "You make up your own mind." I am more careful not to switch into that it's supernatural, and it's psychic, but, hey – there's only one person that really, really believes in Uri Geller, and that's Uri Geller.[79]

Geller's comments are immediately reminiscent of the performances of the Piddingtons on *BBC Radio* in 1950. The Australian husband and wife team presented what appeared to be genuine demonstrations of telepathy, but took care to neither claim, nor disclaim, any specific abilities during their radio broadcasts. Instead, they continually reminded their listeners that, 'you are the judge.'[80] The Piddingtons did not always sit on the fence, however. Off the air, Sydney Piddington was less ambiguous about the nature of their abilities, claiming for example, that his wife Lesley

[76] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Make Believe/Make Belief.' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:01:45.
[77] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. 2002. p. 43.
[78] 'Uri Geller Interview.' *YouTube.* 30 Sep 2016. 0:11:00.
[79] 'Uri Geller Interview.' *YouTube.* 30 Sep 2016. 0:11:55.
[80] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs.* 2013. p. 221.

can 'read an average of seventy per cent of my thoughts when I am deliberately transmitting – and a disturbingly high percentage of my thoughts when I am not trying.'[81]

Indeed, while sitting on the fence is one approach, straddling the fence is another. Mentalist Derren Brown has written that he enjoys 'finding new ways to have [his] cake and eat it at times.'[82] An even blunter example of fence straddling can be seen in the case of *The Amazing Kreskin* who appears ahead of his time with regard to his use of post-truth tactics. Rather than avoid claims which go too far in one direction or another, he bluntly makes contradictory claims, firmly placing himself in both camps at once. Such tactics are both completely illogical, and disturbingly effective, as individual spectators – via selective perception/confirmation bias – are able to hear what they wish to hear.

In the 1980 edition of *The Psychology of the Psychic*, Marks and Kammann look closely at Kreskin's claims. They write, 'Throughout Kreskin's entire book, *The Amazing World of Kreskin,* and throughout everything he says or writes, Kreskin retains his secret behind a barrage of double talk and verbal flip-flops. In fact, he contradicts himself so freely that finding the truth from him is like finding your way out of a hall of mirrors.'[83] The authors cite Kreskin's stage program which contains, for example, the following contradictory statements:

> Kreskin is the enemy of all professed psychics, mind-readers, mediums and charlatans, who attempt to guide people's lives.
>
> Kreskin has been successful in applying his special abilities to help dentists, doctors, expectant mothers, golfers and the police.[84]

They also cite the following contradictory statements from Kreskin's autobiography.

> Perhaps some of what I do fits into the category of the "psychic," so-called, under certain conditions…. I do pick up information through a kind of telepathy…. In using ESP as a form of communication, I receive information in images…
>
> I am not a psychic.[85]

[81] 'The Piddingtons.' *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research.* Vol 35. 1949. p. 84.
[82] Aitkenhead, Decca. "Derren Brown: 'I'm being honest about my dishonesty.'" *The Guardian*. 17 Oct 2010.
[83] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. p. 43.
[84] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. p. 43.
[85] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. p. 43.

Geller, as well, has often taken this have-it-both-ways-at-once approach. In a 2007 interview with a German magic magazine, Geller said, 'I'll no longer say that I have supernatural powers. I am an entertainer. I want to do a good show. My entire character has changed.'[86] When skeptics, such as James Randi, pointed out that Geller had reversed his position, he responded with another interview in which he said:

> …so what I did say? That I changed my character, to the best of my recollection, and I no longer say that I do supernatural things. It doesn't mean that I don't have powers. It means that I don't say "it's supernatural", I say "I'm a mystifier!" That's what I said. And the skeptics turned it around and said, "Uri Geller said he's a magician!" I never said that.[87]

This two-sided approach to truth and fiction is not unique to performances of mentalism. A clear precedent exists, for instance, in the genre described by historian James Cook as 'artful deceptions.'[88] Among the most prominent examples of artful deceptions are many of the less-than-entirely-genuine exhibitions of the great showman P.T. Barnum. In *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum,* Cook writes that 'artful deception was never a hard and fast choice between complete detection and total bewilderment, honest promotion and shifty misrepresentation, innocent amusement and social transgression.'[89] Rather, according to Cook, such deceptions:

> First…routinely involved a calculated intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and momentary suspension of disbelief. Merely offering one or another of these things was not simply bad form; it also usually lowered the door receipts.
>
> Second, as Barnum often noted in his own self-defense, no producers of such entertainment who wanted to stay in business for long simply fooled their viewers without also drawing attention to the act of fooling – or at least the possibility thereof. There is little question that most contemporary consumers of artful deception entered the exhibition hall looking for fraud.
>
> And third, none of the tricksters in Barnum's milieu simply peddled deception as an end in itself…. the deception always involved at least a modicum of narrative – an entertaining story that delivered the trick.[90]

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[86] *Magische Welt.* Nov 2007.
[87] *Magische Welt.* Nov 2007.
[88] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001.
[89] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 16.
[90] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 17.

Cook further observes that it was 'precisely the blurring of these aesthetic and moral categories that defined [Barnum's] brand of cultural fraud and generated much of its remarkable power to excite curiosity.'[91] Performances of mentalism are closely related to artful deceptions such as Barnum's exhibition of the alleged *Feegee mermaid* and Johan Malelzel's exhibition of *the Turk*, a pseudo-automaton which seemed to expertly play chess. Exhibits such as these, in the words of Cook, contained a 'sort of built-in perceptual fuzziness'[92] and were viewed 'as both representation and substance, counterfeit and currency.'[93] The widespread popularity of exhibits such as these, according to Cook, 'grew directly out of [their] capacity to be both things at once, an ambiguity that was never fully solved.'[94]

Performances of mentalism – like other artful deceptions – exist in a state of play, and are therefore liminal. Anthropologist Victor Turner noted the liminality of play, describing it as being ultimately undefinable. Play, according to Turner 'does not fit in anywhere in particular; it is a transient and is recalcitrant to localization, to placement, to fixation – a joker in the neuro-anthropological act.'[95] Schechner points out that Turner's invocation of the joker card calls attention to both the 'creative and untrustworthy' aspects of play. [96] Similarly, the joker is suggestive of the archetypal trickster figure discussed previously. It is worth noting that P.T. Barnum is, according to Cook, 'one of the most (in)famous trickster figures in Western cultural history.'[97]

Professional Wrestling

Richard Schechner has written about the professional wrestling industry, claiming that (as of 2002), '…everyone knows that the outcome of American Wrestling is determined in advance, that the lawlessness is play-acting – it's pretty much "all a show."'[98] Yet, Schechner also notes that 'what's true of wrestling is also true of the performing arts, political demonstrations, the roles of

[91] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 16.
[92] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 16.
[93] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 15.
[94] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 16.
[95] Turner, Victor. 'Body, brain, and Culture.' *Zygon* 18(3): 1983. p. 233.
[96] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 80.
[97] Cook, James. *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. 2001. p. 6.
[98] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 37.

everyday life (doctor, mother, cop, etc.), and all other performances.'[99] Indeed, all performances are real – *and* fake – on some level. But the precise boundaries between the real and unreal, between truth and fiction, can be difficult to parse at times. Particularly, when the unreal creates impacts which are undeniably real. For instance, while fans are largely aware that professional wrestling is "fake," it is not *entirely* fake. The laws of physics are not suspended in these "fake" wrestling matches; force still equals mass times acceleration, the athleticism is impressive, and injuries, substance abuse, and pre-mature death, are common.

Erving Goffman, in his ground-breaking 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* calls specific attention to the performances of professional wrestlers. Addressing the "real-ness" of the notoriously "fake" professional wrestler, Goffman writes:

> When we watch a television wrestler gouge, foul, and snarl at his opponent we are quite ready to see that, in spite of the dust, he is, and knows he is, merely playing… We seem less ready to see, however, that while such details as the number and character of the falls may be fixed beforehand, the details of the expressions and movements used do not come from a script but from command of an idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little calculation or forethought.[100]

Philosopher Roland Barthes makes a similar observation about amateur wrestling (which, ironically, would later become known as professional wrestling) in his 1957 essay 'The World of Wrestling.' Describing the passion of wrestlers in the ring, Barthes writes that 'it is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself.'[101] Barthes notes that 'people wax indignant because wrestling is a stage-managed sport,'[102] which he notes ought really 'mitigate its ignominy.'[103] Yet, he immediately goes on to say that 'the public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.'[104] Just as mentalism points less to a real world than an ideal one, wrestling according to Barthes, portrays:

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[99] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 37.
[100] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 80-81.
[101] Barthes, Roland. 'The World of Wrestling.' *Mythologies.* 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. p. 18.
[102] Barthes, Roland. 'The World of Wrestling.' *Mythologies.* 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. p. 15.
[103] Barthes, Roland. 'The World of Wrestling.' *Mythologies.* 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. p. 15.
[104] Barthes, Roland. 'The World of Wrestling.' *Mythologies.* 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. p. 15.

> an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a universal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction.[105]

The professional wrestling industry has not achieved this 'view of a universal Nature' as Barthes calls it, without taking extreme efforts. Mentalism, by way of similarly extreme effort, obscures it's fake-ness behind or within layers of reality. And like all other art forms, mentalism has the potential to reveal – whether by accident or design – truths about society and the human condition and enable audience members to question or challenge many aspects of established societal norms. Performances of mentalism, like other performances in the theatre, are shaped by surrounding contexts and in particular, the demands of the audiences who pay for these performances or services. To this extent, the audience controls the content.

And while performances of mentalism may not be entirely real, they may *feel* entirely real to some observers. These performances, then, have the potential to confirm what many may want to believe, or hold to be true: that despite the absence of evidence, we have a deeper capacity for connection and communication than we exploit in our daily lives; that we seem to possess souls or a collective consciousness which transcends matter and death; or that time, space, and matter can bend around powerful human connections. These performances may also be seen – by nature of being thoroughly deceptive in a thoroughly deceptive society – as a true reflection of the zeitgeist. In 2016, the *Oxford English Dictionary* named *post-truth* as the word of the year. By foregrounding questions of truth and deception, the lies of mentalists are in some ways, perfectly suited to a post-truth society, in which subjective truths are given more weight than objective facts. Contemporary mentalists – whether intentionally or not – have a particularly strong claim to the truth when it comes to reflecting the lies of a post-truth society.

Kayfabe

In 1984, investigative journalist John Stossel told the wrestler David Schultz (Dr. D) that he thought wrestling was fake. Schultz replied – as he twice knocked Stossel to the ground with open

[105] Barthes, Roland. 'The World of Wrestling.' *Mythologies.* 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. 1972. p. 25.

hand slaps, injuring him in the process – 'You think it's fake? What's that? Is that fake?'[106] As a counterpoint, footage of one middle-aged wrestling fan, David Wills, went viral in 2006 when he sobbed at a Q&A event, 'It's still *real* to me, dammit!'[107] In a reflection on that experience, Wills recalled realizing '…how much reality there is in wrestling.'[108] He refers to the happiness of being a fan, the joy of meeting his favourite wrestlers, and the memories and passions of fans, which according to Wills 'are all very real,' concluding that 'sadly, the injuries and the problems with substance abuse are all too real also. So much for this being a "fake" sport.'[109]

The professional wrestling industry has long used the term *kayfabe*[*] to describe the rigid and often absurd defence – both on and off stage – of not only the genuineness of the matches, but also of the nature of the feuds and rivalries between "heels" and "babyfaces". Wrestler Nick Rogers recently discussed kayfabe in the *New York Times,* describing it as an 'unspoken contract between wrestlers and spectators.'[110] Rogers describes the nature of this unspoken contract as follows: 'We'll present you something clearly fake under the insistence that it's real, and you will experience genuine emotion. Neither party acknowledges the bargain, or else the magic is ruined.'[111] Rogers further writes that the 'artifice is not only understood but appreciated: The performer cares enough about the viewer's emotions to want to influence them. Kayfabe isn't about factual verifiability; it's about emotional fidelity.'[112]

I find it interesting that Rogers describes kayfabe as an unspoken contract between performer and spectator. The very nature of kayfabe has clouded its own evolution, but it would seem to have clearly evolved as an internal secret agreement *within the industry* with the pragmatic purpose of concealing the artificial nature of the form which did, indeed, remain a dirty little secret for many years. It was not until 1989, that World Wrestling Federation (WWF) CEO Vince McMahon –

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[106] Kaplan, Peter W. 'TV Notes; ABC Reporter May Sue Wrestler who Hit Him.' *The New York Times.* 23 Feb 1985.
[107] Wills, David. 'It's Still Real To Me...Damn It! Dave's Story of Spartanburg.' *WorldWrestlingInsanity.* 26 Jan 2006.
[108] Wills, David. 'It's Still Real To Me...Damn It! Dave's Story of Spartanburg.' *WorldWrestlingInsanity.* 26 Jan 2006.
[109] Wills, David. 'It's Still Real To Me...Damn It! Dave's Story of Spartanburg.' *WorldWrestlingInsanity.* 26 Jan 2006.
[*] The origin of the term is uncertain, but it is thought to possibly be derived, etymologically, from a backward pig-Latinization of "be fake"
[110] Rogers, Nick. 'How Wrestling Explains Alex Jones and Donald Trump.' *The New York Times.* 25 Apr 2017.
[111] Rogers, Nick. 'How Wrestling Explains Alex Jones and Donald Trump.' *The New York Times.* 25 Apr 2017.
[112] Rogers, Nick. 'How Wrestling Explains Alex Jones and Donald Trump.' *The New York Times.* 25 Apr 2017.

tired of regulation, oversight, and taxation from State Athletic Commissions – announced that 'professional wrestling should be defined as "an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest."'[113] And with that, the form of 'sports entertainment' was born.[114]

McMahon's decision to lift the veil was widely derided within the professional wrestling community[115] but it did not destroy the industry. On the contrary, the deregulation allowed for previously unprecedented promotions, events, and financial success.[116] And thus, the unspoken agreement between fans and wrestlers was an evolution of kayfabe; from, what I would describe as a *closed kayfabe* to an *open kayfabe*. In fact, it is the open nature of modern kayfabe which makes contemporary professional wrestling such a fascinating form of performance.

It is my contention that mentalism currently sits on a precipice similar to the one occupied by professional wrestling decades ago. But where the kayfabe of professional wrestling was forced to evolve in response to taxation and regulation, the kayfabe of mentalism is now pressed to evolve in response to the anti-dualist, post-Cartesian paradigm. Nick Rogers eloquently summarizes open kayfabe: 'to a wrestling audience, the fake and the real coexist peacefully. If you ask a fan whether a match or backstage brawl was scripted, the question will seem irrelevant. You may as well ask a roller-coaster enthusiast whether he knows he's not really on a runaway mine car.'[117] According to Rogers, while, 'their athleticism is impressive, skilled wrestlers captivate because they do what sociologists call "emotional labor" — the professional management of other people's feelings.'[118]

Andrew Weymes' 2013 documentary, *Kayfabe Lives: It's Still Real to Me, Dammit!,* concludes that in professional wrestling, 'The person is the character. The character is the person. That is kayfabe at its core. What separates a wrestler from an actor is that no matter what, there is no break in scene.'[119] The kayfabe of wrestlers is often poignant, and sometimes winking, as they must

[113] Hoy-Browne, Richard. 'Historic Moments in Wrestling part 6: Vince McMahon admits wrestling is predetermined.' *Independent.* 30 May 2014.
[114] Hoy-Browne, Richard. 'Historic Moments in Wrestling part 6: Vince McMahon admits wrestling is predetermined.' *Independent.* 30 May 2014.
[115] Hoy-Browne, Richard. 'Historic Moments in Wrestling part 6: Vince McMahon admits wrestling is predetermined.' *Independent.* 30 May 2014.
[116] Hoy-Browne, Richard. 'Historic Moments in Wrestling part 6: Vince McMahon admits wrestling is predetermined.' *Independent.* 30 May 2014.
[117] Rogers, Nick. 'How Wrestling Explains Alex Jones and Donald Trump.' *The New York Times.* 25 Apr 2017.
[118] Rogers, Nick. 'How Wrestling Explains Alex Jones and Donald Trump.' *The New York Times.* 25 Apr 2017.
[119] *Kayfabe Lives: It's Still Real to Me, Dammit!* Dir. Andrew Weymes. 2013.

seriously defend – both in the ring and out – outrageous, bizarre, and sometimes ludicrous premises in the face of overwhelming public skepticism. Despite the unique nature of open kayfabe, it is not without a noteworthy historical precedent. P.T. Barnum wrote in 1855 that 'the public appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived.'[120]

Rogers analysis of kayfabe uses language which resembles Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality is that which is 'more real than real'[121] and produces 'a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world.'[122] Such concepts are inevitably intertwined with ideas of simulation, nostalgia, and desire. Mentalism, for example, appears to be a representation of an idea; a copy of something which appears to have never actually existed.

Regarding the post-truth consequences of this hyperreality, Amanda Petrusich writes in *The New Yorker* that 'our hunger for the authentic or the unmediated has mostly begotten us a cavalcade of deeply unreliable things, such as Donald Trump, laminate flooring, fake-fake news, artisanal moonshine, and reality television.'[123] I argue that the notions of kayfabe and hyperreality walk hand in hand with contemporary notions of post-truth. The example set by professional wrestling suggests that the deceptions of mentalists – even if acknowledged – will be ignored or excused by spectators who depend upon the emotional labour carried out by performers of mentalism and the psychic arts.

Meta-Method Acting

It is not only professional wrestling that employs a form of kayfabe or emotional labour – mentalists, politicians, comedians, and rock stars, do this, too. Although, it seems that only in professional wrestling does a clear term exist to describe it. David Lee Roth, the front man for the rock band *Van Halen*, for instance, has been noted for such "antics". About this, Mick Brown, in *The Guardian*, writes:

[120] Barnum, P.T. *The Life of P.T. Barnum: Written By Himself*. 1855. p. 171.
[121] Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1981. Trans. Sheila Glaser. 1994. p. 3.
[122] Lane, Richard. *Jean Baudrillard*. 2000. p. 30.
[123] Petrusich, Amanda. 'Out of Nowhere, New Music from John Lurie's Made-Up Outsider Artist.' *The New Yorker*. Nov 2017.

> …the stipulation in their performance contract that the promoter remove all brown Smarties in the bowl in their dressing-room… Roth's two black-belt midget bodyguards – such things, [Roth] suggests, are imperative for 'overall ambience'.
>
> [Roth] says: 'I was always disappointed when I was a little kid when I found out that other people were faking me out – they didn't really dress like that, or look like that or behave like that off stage. And I believe in leaving the door open and letting everybody have a look. A fantasy is no fun unless everybody shares it.'[124]

"Method" actors, as well, often employ such processes, blurring the line between truth and fiction offstage. While the aim and intent of so-called method actors is entirely different to that of wink-eye mentalists – who deny the use of trickery beyond conventional boundaries – many similarities may be observed in the ways in which these performances *spill over* off the stage and screen. In many ways, I consider the wink-eye mentalist to be a method actor playing a single role – on stage and off – sometimes for decades. Accordingly, it is worth looking more closely at the roles method actors play offstage and offscreen.

The processes of the method actor, in some instances, undoubtedly allow actors to better portray their roles on stage or camera. It seems apparent, however, that at times the process is – as Angelica Jade Bastién writes in *The Atlantic* – used as much as 'a marketing tool as it is an actual technique – one used to lend an air of legitimacy, verisimilitude, and importance to a performance no matter its quality.'[125] Indeed, over-the-top processes, such as maintaining character even while off stage may, at times, be counter-productive or even dangerous. Bastién describes some of Jared Leto's behaviour on the set of the 2016 David Ayer film *Suicide Squad,* including gifting cast members with 'used condoms, a dead pig, a live rat' and watching 'footage of brutal crimes online.'[126] Leto purportedly used this process in order to get into his role of the Joker.

Bastién further notes that 'the underpinning of this strategy is the belief that to create great art one must suffer.'[127] Examples of this suffering can readily be found: Christian Bale's weight loss for the 2004 film *The Machinist,* Shia LaBeouf's self-inflicted tooth pulling for the 2014 David Ayer film *Fury,* Leonardo DiCaprio's endurance of extreme conditions for the 2015 film *The Revenant,* or Joaquin Phoenix's disastrous and short lived career as on overweight, substance abusing hip-

[124] Brown, Mick. 'Van Halen's David Lee Roth: "I've always been a show-off" – a classic interview from the vaults.' *The Guardian.* 4 Jan 2012.
[125] Bastién, Angelica Jade. 'Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting.' *The Atlantic.* 11 Aug 2016.
[126] Bastién, Angelica Jade. 'Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting.' *The Atlantic.* 11 Aug 2016.
[127] Bastién, Angelica Jade. 'Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting.' *The Atlantic.* 11 Aug 2016.

hop artist in Casey Affleck's 2010 hoax/documentary *I'm Still Here.* It is worth noting that despite the reputation of method acting as a psychological approach, these psychological aspects cannot be separated from extreme changes in *physical behaviour*, which become a part of the actor's daily life. Sidestepping the debates of what "method acting" may or may not be, it seems to concern itself, in general, with a quest – however extreme – for sincerity or authenticity.[*] About this authenticity, actor James Franco writes in an editorial in *The New York Times* that '[Marlon] Brando's performances revolutionized American acting precisely because he didn't seem to be "performing," in the sense that he wasn't putting something *on* as much as he was *being.*[128]

In an article in *The New Yorker*, entitled, *Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?*[129] Richard Brody describes a very different process employed by some pre-method actors such as Cary Grant, Robert Mitchum, or John Wayne. These actors, Brody writes, 'seem not to become the roles they play but to turn the characters into versions of themselves. Their roles aren't put-ons, but they do put them on: they don their roles like costumes while continuing, manifestly and even brazenly, to be – themselves.'[130] Brody points out that pre-method actors also lived 'strange or even riotous lives' but notes that 'the reason was altogether different: it's precisely because of the way their private lives flowed into their onscreen personae.'[131] Brody writes:

> The private extravagances and excesses, the "experience" that in [that] day came with a whiff of immorality, made the actor's life seem bigger, grander, wilder, more exciting than that of the viewer—and that expanded emotional spectrum was more than a source of the actor's imaginative sympathy for a wide range of characters; it was the very life force with which the actor invested the character. The allure of the classic actor is, essentially, sex. The classic stars' exotic, sybaritic life is part of their charm. Mitchum was, in effect, wilder than his characters; he endowed them with his own fury for life. The actor herself inflated roles to her own bigger-than-

[*] I wish to note that the "authenticity" sought through method acting has been challenged for being – as Rhonda Blair writes in 'Reconsidering Stanislavsky: Feeling, Feminism, and the Actor' – 'overly subjective and conditioned, and therefore suspect.' This process, according to Blair, 'reifies a nonexistent "self" at the expense of ignoring socially conditioned aspects of identity,' 'colludes in mechanisms of representation,' and reinforces 'an ahistorical, non-critical, sentimentalized, or sensationalized view of experience.' Blair further argues that the process confines the actor 'to a naive, anti-intellectual investment in narrative closure, "realistic" mimesis, and continuity that erases difference and ignores social critique' and 'is inherently patriarchal and misogynist.' (Bial, 2007. p. 251)

[128] Franco, James. 'Why Actors Act Out James Franco on Shia LaBeouf's Recent Antics.' *The New York Times.* 19 Feb 2014.

[129] Brody, Richard. 'Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?' *The New Yorker.* 21 Feb 2014.

[130] Brody, Richard. 'Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?' *The New Yorker.* 21 Feb 2014.

[131] Brody, Richard. 'Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?' *The New Yorker.* 21 Feb 2014.

> life dimensions. Now, in the post-Method* age, actors seem expected to inflate or stretch or shrink or compress themselves to fit the character.[132]

I argue that acting in general, and film acting in particular, is entering into a self-referential *post-method* era in which some actors – which I would describe as *meta-method actors* – appear to be playing, while offstage, the role of method actors imminently capable of playing a role.

Meta-Comedy

In *Postmodernism and Performance*, Philip Auslander points out that in the 1960s, some metacomedians such as Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman 'took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject.'[133] According to Auslander, in the 1960s, 'the very notion of comedy itself had become problematic under postmodernism. Comedy by definition requires stable referents, norms against which behaviours may be deemed humorous. In the absence of such norms it is impossible to define comedy.[134] Among the most radical of the metacomedians, writes Auslander, was Andy Kaufman. Auslander describes how, in the course of a single performance, Kaufman adopted the persona of a foreigner who did not fully understand his jokes or the format of stand-up comedy, impressively impersonated Elvis, and then seemingly played '"himself," a nasty and aggressive figure.'[135] Auslander continues, 'This persona, while seemingly closer to the "real" Kaufman, was yet another construct, no more real than The Foreign Man or Andy as Elvis. In place of a consistent comic persona, Kaufman created a hall of mirrors in which no persona ever turned out to be a dependable representation.'[136]

* Brody seems to use this term to indicate coming chronologically after the popularization of method acting; the opposite of the pre-method age.

[132] Brody, Richard. 'Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?' *The New Yorker*. 21 Feb 2014.

[133] Auslander, Philip. 'Postmodernism and Performance.' *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Steven Connor. 2004. p. 107.

[134] Auslander, Philip. 'Postmodernism and Performance.' *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Steven Connor. 2004. p. 107.

[135] Auslander, Philip. 'Postmodernism and Performance.' *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Ed. Steven Connor. 2004. p. 108.

[136] Auslander, Philip. 'Postmodernism and Performance.' *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. 2004. p. 108.

Kaufman also appeared at times 'as himself'[137] on late night TV 'staging conflicts that were then treated as real in newspaper reports.'[138] According to Mark Fortier in *theory/theatre,* 'In each case, Kaufman presented his performance as reality.... One assumes it was all an act and that Andy Kaufman didn't hold in private the views he presented in public. And yet, in a strangely postmodern play on appearance and reality, it doesn't make much difference....'[139] According to Fortier:

> Two of Kaufman's longest running performances were as the offensive night club performer Tony Clifton and as a... male chauvinist wrestler.... In each case, Kaufman presented his performance as reality – going to great lengths to make it appear that Tony Clifton was a real person, for instance.... One assumes it was all an act and that Andy Kaufman didn't hold in private the views he presented in public. And yet, in a strangely postmodern play on appearance and reality, it doesn't make much difference.... What is most striking is Kaufman's enthusiasm – his embracing of the game – he leaps in the way a mudwrestler leaps into the mud. To ask why seems pointless.[140]

Spectators knew that Andy Kaufman was *really* Tony Clifton, just as they knew that he was *not really* the Women's Wrestling Champion of the World. The fun, for spectators – and presumably for Kaufman – came from the extremes to which Kaufman went to defend such absurd premises. Does the post-Cartesian mentalist face a similar post-truth problem? Are contemporary mentalists engaging in – either with or without intending to – a form of metamentalism which both ridicules and embraces the impossibility of being a post-Cartesian mentalist?

Internationally acclaimed comedian Tom Binns, for example, sometimes performs satirical spirit mediumship and mind reading as Ian D. Montfort, *the Psychic from Sunderland*. Cleverly billing himself as a 'spirit comedian'[141] and with posters which boast 'not for entertainment purposes only – actually psychic',[142] his internationally successful shows are, on the surface, a send up of spirit mediums. Take for instance, one of Montfort's typical spirit messages: 'I've got a message here, very much in spirit, and it's for a lady here tonight. This is for a lady who has either just lost

[137] Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre.* 2002. p. 190.
[138] Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre.* 2002. p. 190.
[139] Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre.* 2002. pp. 190-191.
[140] Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre.* 2002. p. 160.
[141] Arthur, Tim. 'Tom Binns: Interview.' *Timeout.com*. 2010.
[142] Arthur, Tim. 'Tom Binns: Interview.' *Timeout.com*. 2010.

weight, is thinking about losing weight, or has been talking to someone about losing weight. Does this make sense?'[143]

Like all buffoons, Montfort has his little victories and his moments of anarchic genius. Yet, in the same performance, moments later, he correctly identifies the name of a spectator's first boyfriend, as well as the name of her childhood pet. 'You're not laughing now,'[144] Montfort points out to the audience. Montfort's successes establish him as something more than a buffoon, but as something less than a shaman. Binns, as his alter ego Montfort, steps onto the stage in order to entertain the audience, of course, but also to deceive.

Consequently, in a postmodern turn of events reminiscent of Andy Kaufman, Binns reports that despite the outlandish nature of his performance, many people accept his mediumship as genuine. According to Binns:

> After the third or fourth show there was a guy about my age in absolute tears because he believed I was really contacting the dead. His girlfriend asked me to go and explain to him it was just an act. I've had audiences who were petrified to talk to Elvis through me because they genuinely believed I was talking to him. There are quite a few people who just think I'm a spirit medium who's added a comedy spin to it. What I find interesting is where some people will draw the line; they'll accept that I'm talking to dead people, but not to famous people.[145]

Binns is relatively unique in the field of mentalism, in that he may shift freely between self-expressive (Tom Binns) and representational (Ian D. Montfort) modes of performance. On a related note, mentalist Max Maven has suggested that some audience members will see his own performances as credible, virtually regardless of circumstances. In *The Art of the Con,* R. Paul Wilson discusses Maven's theory: 'After thousands of shows, [Maven] made the observation that even if [he] were wearing a bright red nose, someone would eventually approach him after the show and ask for a personal "reading".'[146]

This provocatively suggests that the performance of mentalism may disrupt the semiotics of the body. For example, signifiers of "not to be trusted" may be ignored in circumstances where extraordinary "mental" powers are said to be exercised. This is fully in line with notions of the

[143] Binns, Tom. 'Ian D Montfort is a character by Tom Binns: The Psychic Comedian.' *YouTube*. 2014. 0:00:55.
[144] Binns, Tom. 'Ian D Montfort is a character by Tom Binns: The Psychic Comedian.' *YouTube*. 2014. 0:03:40.
[145] Arthur, Tim. 'Tom Binns: Interview.' *Timeout.com*. 2010.
[146] Wilson, R. Paul. *The Art of the Con.* 2014. p. 91.

trickster who, according to George Hansen, 'lives in the liminal area betwixt and between the signifier and the signified.'[147]

Meta-Mentalism

Richard Schechner asks: 'When a performer does not "play a character" what is s/he doing?'[148] The personas projected by mentalists are both *quasi-characters* (formed in part from the multiple selves of the actor) and *anti-characters* (created specifically to conceal their own existence). It is further possible, I argue, for the persona of a mentalist to function as a *meta-character*, aware of, and acknowledging, its own status as an artificial construct. In metaperformance, according to Schechner, 'the story of "how this performance is being made" replace[s] the story the performance more ordinarily would tell. This self-referencing reflexive mode of performing – as previously noted – is an example of what Gregory Bateson called 'metacommunication.'[149]

Metamentalists have the powerful advantage of being able to perform their demonstrations ironically to part of their audience, while performing sincerely to another. Ian D Montfort, for example – the mediumistic alter ego of Tom Binns – is described as 'a psychic medium loved by believers and sceptics alike.'[150] His promotional materials point out that 'Whether you think he's a spoof or real you'll be in no doubt that the demonstrations of Ian's gifts are hilarious and mind-blowing.'[151]

Self-described "paranormalist" Jim Callahan provides a subtler example. On the TV program *Phenomenon* – hosted by purported psychic Uri Geller and magician Criss Angel – Callahan performed a mediumistic demonstration, allegedly with the assistance of deceased author Raymond Hill. For better and for worse, Callahan is a mentalist among magicians. His website boldly states: 'JOB OPENINGS FOR THE DEAD (Sign up now before it's too late!)'[152] According to his website, Callahan 'is seeking individuals who desire employment after death.'[153] The

[147] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 382.
[148] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p. 44.
[149] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p. 131.
[150] 'Archived: Tom Binns As Ian D Montfort.' *HeartOfTheCity.co.nz.* 2013.
[151] 'Archived: Tom Binns As Ian D Montfort.' *HeartOfTheCity.co.nz.* 2013.
[152] 'Job Openings for the Dead.' *JimClass.com.*
[153] 'Home Page.' *JimClass.com.*

website further notes that such people 'will be compensated for [their] participation and time' at the rate of 25 dollars per show.'[154] Presumably this payment is made to a designee nominated by the deceased, prior to their death.

A further example can be seen in the mischievous spirit performer Eugene Burger, who frequently described his persona as 'naughty Santa.' Burger stresses the importance of maintaining claims even off stage. In a statement reminiscent of Tony Andruzzi's observation that 'at the conclusion of a performance you're still performing,'[155] Burger writes, '*After* you've done [an] effect people will very often stop you and ask whether it *was* a trick. Your response to this question is also an expression of your character and, therefore, your response is part – a very real part – of your *show.*'[156] Yet, Burger is also unusually flexible in this regard. He refers to his ability to perform séances in a range of 'modes and moods.'[157] According to Burger, 'I can be serious, I can be tongue-in-cheek, I can just be comic. I can go any range I want. And I can just pick the range for the audience I'm working for.'[158]

In his seminal book, *Spirit Theatre,* Burger reminds his readers that their roles, characters, and even "selves" can be 'comic…slightly tongue in cheek…serious…very serious… Or, at different times, all of the above.'[159] He adds, 'God knows you can play laugh séances, and sometimes I do, but if you want to do something more serious, then it *really has to be* ***serious.***'[160] Burger also relates that even while performing in a tongue in cheek mode, he has been asked, 'Was that *really* the spirits?' According to Burger, he will sometimes 'look at the questioner a bit incredulously, smile, and say: "Are you on drugs?".' [161] Burger notes that this both 'gets a laugh and answers the question.'[162] Burger serves as an excellent example of Richard Schechner's paradoxical observation that 'to perform acts that are otherwise forbidden – punished, taboo, unthought of – is a way of "making fun."'[163]

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[154] 'Employment after Death.' *JimClass.com.*
[155] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 185.
[156] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 76.
[157] Burger, Eugene. 'Penguin Live with Eugene Burger.' *Penguin Magic*. 2014. 2:07:30.
[158] Burger, Eugene. 'Penguin Live with Eugene Burger.' *Penguin Magic*. 2014. 2:08:30.
[159] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 163.
[160] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 163.
[161] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 76.
[162] Burger, Eugene. *Spirit Theater.* 1986. p. 76.
[163] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p. 237.

While many premises of mentalism have not significantly changed over the past century, the context in which these dualist claims are presented has shifted radically. This, in turn, has cast an almost farcical shadow over a number of the mentalist's claims, such as psychokinesis, precognition, mediumship, and psychometry. Even the super-psychological premise – which would seem on the surface to be less absurd than claims of psychic abilities – is regularly taken to absurd or parapsychological extremes. Contemporary mentalist, Colin Cloud, for example – widely referred to as 'a real-life Sherlock Holmes'[164] – has implied publicly that he is able to identify specific car models driven by spectators via the observation of car keys through the pockets of skinny jeans.[165] It is as if these performers are pandering to one portion of the audience while winking an eye at another.

A further approach to wink-eye performance can be seen in much of the theory of "Andy," the anonymous author(s) of the popular blog, *The Jerx.* While "Andy" is a self-described magician often critical of mentalism and mentalists, *The Jerx* is clear send-up of Annemann's 1940s mentalism periodical, *The Jinx,* and his performance theory is most closely aligned with the wink-eye meta philosophy. For instance, in *The Jerx: Volume One,* he writes:

> My goal is never to have [observers] believe. My goal is to have them intrigued and enraptured and swept up in the moment, *despite knowing it's not real.* What makes a trompe-l'oeil painting engaging is that it seems so real, even though we know it's not. I strive to perform trompe-l'oeil of the fantastic. And what I've found is when people don't have their defences up against your phony bullshit of trying to come off as "real," it becomes much easier to create feelings of amazement, joy, fear, lust, nostalgia, and poignancy that **are** real.[166]

Along similar lines, Dr. Todd Landman, has argued that 'in its appeal to rationality, body language, subliminal suggestion, among other pseudo-psychological accounts…contemporary or 'mainstream' mentalism has *explained away the mystery...*'[167] As such, Landman argues for 'a post-pseudo-psychological paradigm for mystery entertainment;' which he describes as the 'meta-premise' of 'metaphysical magic.'[168] According to Landman, metaphysical magic 'uses the

[164] Garnar, Caroline. 'Real-life Sherlock Holmes' reveals how you CAN read someone's mind - including how to tell if someone is having an affair and even guess their PIN code.' *DailyMail.co.uk.* 15 Oct 2015.
[165] Garnar, Caroline. 'Real-life Sherlock Holmes' reveals how you CAN read someone's mind - including how to tell if someone is having an affair and even guess their PIN code.' *DailyMail.co.uk.* 15 Oct 2015.
[166] Andy. *The Jerx, Volume One.* TheJerx.com. 2016. p. 2.
[167] Landman, Todd. *Épistémentalogie.* 2013. p. i.
[168] Landman, Todd. *Épistémentalogie.* 2013. p. i.

methods, tools, and skills of the modern magician and mentalist to create a series of physical and psychic manifestations that relate to deeper questions concerning the human condition and the realms of human existence.'[169]

These shifting frames of performance and modes of communication, further call to mind the Brechtian de-familiarisation effect (*verfremdungseffekt*). According to Henry Bial, 'Rather than disappear into the role, presenting character only from the inside, Brecht called on the actor to present the entirety of the character by engaging the role critically, letting the audience see that the actor and the character are not one and the same.'[170] Susanne Colleary has previously linked this approach to the performance of stand-up comedy. She writes:

> The American comic Jerry Seinfeld has stated that the gift of the comic is a sense of detachment, which feels Brechtian and allows the comic to view everyday situations from an ironic distance.... On one level, what Seinfeld is describing may well be considered as running parallel to de-familiarisation processes.... And not only because stand-up comedians speak directly to the audience, thereby acknowledging the performance context, but because of stand-up comedy's ability to make that which seems familiar, strange or dislocated.[171]

The de-familarisation effect in the performance of mentalism seems to me to be even more pronounced than in the performance of stand-up comedy, since much observational comedy suggests a *sameness* shared between actor and audience, while much mentalism suggests an *Otherness* which foregrounds unfamiliar – but uncannily familiar – experiences. Clearly, the political intentions which lie behind Brecht's approach to theatre fall beyond the scope of this chapter, which remains to examine the emerging post-Cartesian paradigm of metamentalism. In this regard, the de-familiarisation effect of Brecht may prove a useful point of consideration.

In a meta paradigm, mentalists might effectively mask their projected persona through the use of a de-familiarisation effect, which – rather than attempting to conceal the artifice of the performance – calls attention precisely to the artificiality and theatricality of the event. In so doing, metamentalists may avoid counterproductive suspensions of disbelief, *while still concealing the artificial nature of their persona.* This may be accomplished, counterintuitively, by openly acknowledging the artificial nature of the performance. Such admissions may act as a form of

[169] Landman, Todd. *Metaphysical Magic: Essays for the Discerning Mystery Entertainer.* 2010. p. 17.
[170] Bial, Henry. 'Performing.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 217.
[171] Colleary, Susanne. *Performance and Identity in Irish Stand-Up Comedy: The Comic i*. 2015. p. 110.

psychological misdirection which enhances credibility by subtly implying that the performer is not trying to hide anything. An example of this can be found in the BBC Radio broadcasts of the Piddingtons in which Sydney Piddington occasionally refers to 'the script.'[172] Many actors and open-eye mentalists have played the role of shut-eye psychics or mediums, but a meta/*wink-eye* mentalist introduces an additional layer of artifice by subtly acknowledging the playful nature of their role play. A wink-eye mentalist may thus be viewed as *an actor playing the role of a method actor lost in the role of a shut-eye*. I argue that the wink-eye paradigm is fundamentally a meta form of mentalism.

When considering meta/wink-eye performances of mentalism, it is worth examining a number of recent uncanny marketing campaigns featuring mentalists. Self-described "paranormalist" Uri Geller has provided lessons in mental spoon bending as part of a *Kellogg's* personalized spoon promotion in which he claims that the first three steps to mentally bending spoons are: 'Open up your mind. Do not be skeptical. Be positive.'[173] Similarly, mentalist and hypnotist Keith Barry has been featured in (ironic?) hypnotic radio ads for the kebab chain, *Abrakebabra*, in which he (ironically?) attempts to hypnotize listeners into craving a kebab. These claims and promotions venture so near absurdity – with an almost self-referential irony – that it can be difficult to describe them without invoking the term meta.



Uri Geller for Kellogg's and Keith Barry for Abrakebabra

[172] 'The Piddingtons.' *BBC Radio*. London. 1949-1950.
[173] 'Uri Geller reveals his secret to bending spoons.' *YouTube.* 15 Jan 2015. 0:0:37.

The ironic foregrounding of the surface, evident in many contemporary performances of mentalism, such as Jim Callahan's presumably playfully ironic advertisements for the dead, would appear to aim at some end other than critique and deconstruction. Richard Schechner has described such performative actions as 'extreme but recognized by everyone, including the performers, as a "playing with" rather than a "real doing of."' Schechner notes that this "playing with" is not weak or false, it causes changes to both performers and spectators.'[174] These extreme performative actions open possibilities of dark play and make-belief performances, in which the boundaries of the performance are blurred, and the rules of the game become impossible to decipher. In contemporary performances of mentalism, the line between ironic and sincere is becoming increasingly blurred. It is as if one eye is open while the other is shut.

The Dark *Verfremdungseffekt*

During the creation of *Mental Wi-Fi*, I began to experiment with meta-theatrical techniques such as the use of bizarre or eccentric costumes/mannerisms and switching costumes and personas (from "Apprentice" to "Professor") in full view. In this regard, this performance was unique, not only among my own performances, but amongst performances of mentalism, in general. Both personas – one a low-status assistant, and the other a high-status expert – were not characters *per se*, but rather, high-status and low-status quasi-variations of myself; symbolized, perhaps, by the fact that these personae remained unnamed.

I affected the change in persona in full view of the audience by altering my voice, mannerisms, and costume. I began the performance as the Apprentice, wearing a red bellhop style jacket. To portray the Professor, I changed into a powder-blue vintage tuxedo jacket, velvet bowtie, red fez, and, using a standing full-length mirror placed on the stage, I drew on a pencil moustache with a permanent marker. As the Professor, I spoke and moved with a deeper tone and more deliberate pace and demeaner, conceptualizing the Professor as Dean Martin to the Apprentice's Jerry Lewis. By calling attention to the artificial nature of the performance *as* a theatrical performance, I intended to misdirect suspicion from the artificial nature of my demonstrations and claimed

[174] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classics Ed. 2004. p. 190.

abilities. In formulating the notions of quasi, anti, and meta characters, I was inspired by Brecht's approaches to the so-called "suspension of disbelief."

Beginning in the 1930s, Brecht employed the *verfremdungseffekt* in order to allow audiences to observe actions in a dramatic performance with a critical, rather than passive, eye. To achieve this effect, Brecht argued that his actors must do more than 'just get into' character, rather, they should 'show the character'[175] and in so doing, pass judgement, or critically comment, on the intentions of the character from the perspective of the actor. Brecht, according to Schechner, sought 'to drive a wedge between the actor, the character, the staging…so that each is able to bounce off of, and comment upon, the others.'[176] In Brecht's own words, 'no attempt was made to put [the audience] in a trance and give it the illusion of watching an ordinary unrehearsed event…the audience tendency to plunge into such illusions has to be checked by specific artistic means.'[177] Among these artistic means – in addition to the techniques of the actors for simultaneously playing and critiquing a character – Brecht advocated for the exposure of the mechanics and stagecraft of the production. He writes:

> It's more important nowadays for the set to tell the spectator he's in a theatre than to tell him he's in, say, Aulis. The theatre must acquire *qua* theatre the same fascinating reality as a sporting arena during a boxing match. The best thing is to show the machinery, the ropes and the flies. If a set represents a town it must look like a town that has been made to last precisely 2 hours… The materials of the set must be visible. A play can be performed in pasteboard only, or in pasteboard and wood, or in canvas, and so on; but there mustn't be any faking.[178]

Before Brecht, Vsevelod Meyerhold had conducted similar experiments in Russia in an attempt to challenge the dominance of the naturalistic approach then being pioneered, with much critical success, by his colleague Stanislavski. According to Susan Bennett in *Theatre Audiences,* 'Meyerhold demystified the technical apparatus of theatre. All the trappings of commercial theatre were eschewed in favour of non-illusionistic staging.[179] Actors who expose rather than "become" their characters – and sets which expose rather than conceal the stagecraft – invite audience members to view the characters and situations of the play from a critical distance. Brecht argued

[175] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht on Theatre.* 1958. Trans. John Willett. 1964. p. 193.
[176] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 180.
[177] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht on Theatre.* 1958. Trans. John Willett. 1964. p. 136.
[178] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht on Theatre.* 1958. Trans. John Willett. 1964. p. 233.
[179] Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences.* 1997. p. 6.

that the function of the de-familiarisation effect was to turn 'something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected.[180]

It is necessary to note that Brecht's theatre developed under particular social and political conditions in 1930s Germany and his aims were decidedly political. Similarly, Meyerhold's theatre developed during the early 1900s and he was tortured and executed under Stalinism for his controversial approach to theatre. I admit that I have not yet taken on board the full political subversive potential of these techniques, particularly with regard to critiquing *the role of the psychic* as I portray it. Although I am currently exploring this critical approach in my own personal practice, during the early stages of my research, the Brechtian influence was predominantly aesthetic.

In fact, I maintain that the objectives of my performances on stage and screen were opposed to the Brechtian ideal. I did not wish to invite additional scrutiny or skeptical judgment on the deceptive aspects of my performances, as Brecht sought to do. On the contrary, I theorized that by exposing the stagecraft of the performance – by calling attention, for instance, to the costumes, the make-up, the set pieces, the choreography, the mannerisms, the script, and the delivery – I might *suppress skepticism* through the dark use of a meta aesthetic which foregrounded the artificial aspects of the performance elements and stagecraft. Following *Mental Wi-Fi,* I would no longer project such abstract personas – bordering on conventional characters – within the course of a performance of mentalism. I did, however, endeavour to build on this experience by working to develop a larger than life persona both onstage *and off.*

[180] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht on Theatre.* 1958. Trans. John Willett. 1964. p. 143.

BEYOND PSYCHIC

Calvin: Do you believe our destinies are determined by the stars?

Hobbes: Nah.

Calvin: Oh. *I* do.

Hobbes: Really? How Come?

Calvin: Life's a lot more fun when you're not responsible for your actions.

- *Bill Watterson* [1]

[1] Watterson, Bill. *Calvin and Hobbes.* Universal Press Syndicate. 9 Apr 1988.

The Performativity of the Psychic

I have previously elaborated upon the necessity for examining performances of mentalism concurrently with performances of purported psychic phenomena and identities. Indeed, such performances are to a large degree indistinguishable. Given the absence of evidence that psychic phenomena objectively exist, it is my contention that psychic phenomena and identities are best explained by theories of performance and performativity. Richard Schechner has observed, for instance, that 'the performative occurs in places and situations not traditionally marked as "performing arts,"' foregrounding the notion that 'social reality is constructed through and through.'[2] Schechner calls attention to the 'provisional' and' '"made up"' nature of various 'constructed social realities' including 'gender, race, [and] what-have-you.'[3]

Along these lines, I argue that psychic phenomena are fabricated – either consciously or unconsciously – through the very act of being performed, enacted, related, framed, defined, or otherwise psychophysically constructed through social discourse. Thus, psychic experiences appear to result – not from verifiably psychic *happenings* in nature – but rather, of alleged psychic *doings* by people. Thus, there is no psychic phenomena in existence, prior to its designation as such. According to contemporary scientific consensus, one cannot really *be* psychic. One can only *do* what psychics are imagined to do. And it is only through the *doing,* that such phenomena and identities may even be alleged to exist in the first place.

The performativity of purported psychic phenomena, however, does not occur in a vacuum, and I argue that repeated performances of these phenomena over time, leads to the social construction of psychic identities in shared negotiated spaces. Schechner has further argued that 'play is performance (when it is done openly, in public) and performative when it is more private, even secret – a strategy or reverie rather than a display.'[4] Accordingly, it is my contention that psychic phenomena are rooted in performance, as well as performative, and are ultimately approachable as both social roles and "secret" performances.

Although these issues are inevitably entangled with philosophical, sociological, and psychological questions, it is my contention that the field of Performance Studies is particularly – and uniquely

[2] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 24.
[3] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 169.
[4] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 92.

– suited to cast new light on the longstanding debate regarding the nature of psychic phenomena and identities. To this end, I adopt theories from the field of Performance Studies as the main theoretical frame for this chapter and draw on support from other disciplines as the need arises. Although diverse, these theories converge on a common theme which may be described as performativity*;* a *becoming* initiated by repeated *doings*.

The phenomenology of seemingly psychic experiences presents a rather unique conundrum for researchers in this area, since for centuries many people have reported – and continue to report – experiences which are at odds with the empirical laws of nature. A 2005 Gallup Poll indicates, for instance, that 71% of Americans hold at least one paranormal belief; extra-sensory perception (ESP) being the most common (41%), and haunted houses close behind (37%).[5] And according to Nicholas Humphrey, polls in Britain indicate that the likelihood 'of a man marrying a woman who is a believer is 79 per cent, the chance of his having at least one parent who believes is over 90 per cent, and the chance of his finding himself sitting with a believer when he joins two other couples at a café table is 99 per cent.'[6]

From a broader perspective, Jeffrey Kripal, a professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought, has observed that 'in every culture of which we have some adequate historical record, we encounter spiritually radiated individuals with miraculous healing capacities, telepathic gifts…precognitive abilities…clairvoyance…even, believe it or not, apparent literal floating or flight...'[7] Kripal argues that 'these 'superpowers' are not only universal, but also '*real* in the simple sense that people experience them all the time and have reported their effects throughout history.'[8]

The concept of performativity presents a potential solution to the paradoxical nature of these experiences, calling to mind Nietzsche's assertion that 'there is no being behind doing.'[9] It is worth recalling, as well, Sartre's assertion that 'existence precedes essence.'[10] Although human essence is, itself, precluded by the contemporary cognitive scientific knowledge which holds that the

[5] Moore, David W. 'Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal.' *Gallup.com*. 16 Jun 2005.
[6] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1999. p. 182.
[7] Kripal, Jeffrey. *The Super Natural.* 2016. p. 5.
[8] Kripal, Jeffrey. *The Super Natural.* 2016. p. 5.
[9] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals.* Essay I, Section 13. 1887.
[10] Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Lecture 2. 1946.

identity of an essential self is a user illusion created by the mind, [11] [12] Sartre's statement is still worth considering. It is the *doing* which creates the *being*. There is no psychic *essence*. There are only *actions* and *identities* which pretend to be, seem to be, or are believed to be, psychic.

Given the lack of robust or replicable evidence of psychic phenomena, it may be objectively concluded that these phenomena do not exist independently of the human actions which designate them as such. They are created as they are defined in social interactions in negotiated social spaces. In other words, psychic experiences can be said to be fundamentally performative. These experiences do not happen *to* people. They are constructed *by* people in shared negotiated spaces. I consider this an important – and as far as the conversation on psychic beliefs goes, even radical – statement. Consequently, in this chapter, I will take time to establish both the reasons for, and the utility of, this statement.

The history and psychology of psychic beliefs has been thoroughly investigated by psychologist and parapsychology historian Peter Lamont in his excellent book *Extraordinary Beliefs.* I hope to build on Lamont's work by examining the performativity of fabricated psychic phenomena and identities. I am particularly interested in the ways in which these phenomena are psychophysically manifested, performed, or *done* by bodyminds.[*] A longstanding line of questioning regarding psychic beliefs interrogates whether beliefs in psychic phenomena facilitate apparently psychic experiences, or whether apparently psychic experiences lead to psychic beliefs. Both approaches prove paradoxical, however, as skeptics may easily explain away exceptional experiences as coincidences, and as believers may easily perceive coincidences as psychic experiences. [13]

As an alternative to this chicken-egg paradox, I propose a different area of exploration. I suggest that purported psychic phenomena originate, not from belief or experience, but performative behaviours which *fabricate* the very experiences and beliefs which they allege to *be*. Thus, a purported psychic experience would seem to be – given the current state of scientific knowledge – a normal experience which has been actively constructed into a seemingly paranormal one. Over time, I suggest, these performances and identities are *tried out* and *tried on* socially. The personal

[11] Damasio, Antonio. *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain.* 2003.
[12] Dennett, Daniel. 'Explaining the "Magic" of Consciousness.' *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology.* 1(1). 2003. p. 19.
[*] I examine performances of mentalism along these lines in my paper '(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism,' published in the *Journal of Performance Magic*, 4(1). 2016.
[13] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs.* 2013.

costs and benefits of these actions are felt by the performer, who then – on the basis of rewards and punishments – retreats from, or progresses deeper into, corresponding networks of belief. Schechner has described such performatives as *make-belief,* observing that 'playing professional roles, gender and race roles, and shaping one's identity are not make-believe actions… The performances of everyday life…"make belief" – create the very social realities they enact.'[14] This process calls to mind the well-known moral of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s novel of double-agentry, *Mother Night*: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.'[15]

The Constructiveness of Identity

Peter Lamont has written about the *constructiveness* of psychological beliefs. According to Lamont, psychological knowledge 'can be constructive of people, as it has not only been shaped by, but also has shaped beliefs about the paranormal'[16] and is often 'inextricably linked to those who produce it.'[17] In other words, according to Lamont, 'in constructing and maintaining particular beliefs about particular phenomena, we have been in the business of constructing ourselves.'[18] This view is consistent with philosopher John Searle's claim that beliefs are derived in part from what one knows 'otherwise…what seems reasonable…what evidence'[19] one has. Lamont's notion of *constructivity* is closely related to notions of performativity.

It should be noted that the term "performativity" is – as Henry Bial has observed – 'layered with multiple meanings.'[20] Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have further noted that 'while philosophy and theater now share "performative" as a common lexical item, the term has hardly come to mean "the same thing" for each.'[21] The root of these differences seem to stem from primarily two different definitions. The first, refers to 'a performance without the connotations of

[14] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 42.
[15] Vonnegut Jr., Kurt. *Mother Night.* 1962. Introduction.
[16] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 233.
[17] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 233.
[18] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs.* 2013. Back Cover.
[19] Searle, John. 'What is Belief?' *Closer To Truth. YouTube.* 25 Jul 2016. 0:02:45.
[20] Bial, Henry. 'Performativity.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 175.
[21] Parker, Andrew and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. 'Introduction to Performativity and Performance.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 201.

artifice or superficiality that accompany the word "theatrical."'[22] The second, is rooted in J.L. Austin's 1955 *How To Do Things With Words*, and refers to 'an utterance that does not make a statement… but, in fact performs an action'[23] such as the statement, 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*'.'[24]

Henry Bial has described Judith Butler's 1988 essay 'Performative acts and gender constitution' as a 'remarkable synthesis of these two meanings.'[25] Butler argues, according to Bial, that 'gender is not a condition which one *has,* but is in fact "an identity tenuously constituted in time" – that is, a social role which one *performs.*'[26] Bial also notes that, according to Butler's argument, 'the acts which constitute gender are not expressive of a reality; they constitute that reality through their performance.'[27] Butler's framing of gender as a performed social role makes it possible to examine purported psychic abilities in the same light.

Looking at psychic identities through the lens of gender studies does shed new light on the ways in which psychic identities are constructed, performed, and maintained through repetition over time. Butler, for instance – echoing the sentiment of Simone de Beauvoir,[28*] who was, in turn, building upon the sentiment of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty,[29**] –writes that gender is 'an historical situation rather than a natural fact.'[30] I would argue that one could say *precisely* the same for psychic identities. And just as Judith Butler writes of the 'doing of gender'[31] one may talk of the *doing of psychic*. Indeed, since one cannot truly, quantitatively, or demonstrably *be* psychic, nothing remains but to *do* psychic.

It is my contention that purported psychic abilities serve as an example of a *purely* performative activity; an expression of abilities and identities which are brought into existence through – and

[22] Bial, Henry. 'Performativity.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 175.
[23] Bial, Henry. 'Performativity.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 175.
[24] Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things With Words*. 1962.
[25] Bial, Henry. 'Performativity.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 175.
[26] Bial, Henry. 'Performativity.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 176.
[27] Bial, Henry. 'Performativity.' *The Performance Studies Reader.* 2nd Ed. 2007. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 176.
[28] de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex.* 1949. Trans. H. M. Parshley. 1997. p. 295.
[*] 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.'
[29] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception.* 1945. Trans. Colin Smith. 1962.
[**] 'Man is a historical idea and not a natural species.'
[30] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.' *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader.* 2nd Ed. Eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts. 1996. pp. 121 -122.
[31] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.' *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader.* 2nd Ed. Eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts. 1996. p. 123.

only through – actions or doings. These abilities and identities are generally supposed to exist *prior* to expression, but in fact, the opposite is the case. People aren't really psychic; they simply act as psychics are imagined to. If this is so, and if it is psychic doings which precede psychic-ness, then how, exactly, are these psychic performatives manifested and managed in shared social spaces?

While I contend that psychic identities are performative – that they are created through the very process which purports to *express* them – I also argue that this performativity extends into the sphere of social interactions. Indeed, without social interactions to legitimize these performances – to co-create what sociologist Emile Durkheim described as a 'social fact'[32] – the performances will not have created anything which might said to be *real* in any *real* sense. It is only through agreements in social settings that these purported abilities and identities might be said to be *socially real*.

It is also important to note the degree to which spectators, observers, and participants, may collude in the construction of alleged psychic performances and identities. Mind readers and psychics are prominent across theatre, television, and particularly the internet. Clearly, such performances are colluding to feed the demands and appetites of the consumers of these performances. In *Self and Others,* psychiatrist R.D. Laing describes the collusive process through which many aspects of identity and self-identity are negotiated in shared public spaces. Laing observes that collusion shares the same Latin root (ludere) as delusion, illusion, and elusion, and notes that collusion has 'resonances of both playing at and of deception.'[33] Yet, Laing also notes that when one party is 'predominantly "victim"…of a trick or manoeuvre or manipulation, the relationship will not be called collusive.'[34] Thus, Laing's description of collusion is similar to – but distinct from – Richard Schechner's description of dark play, which includes numerous one-sided deceptive performances such as confidence games and espionage.[35]

Laing further emphasizes the symbiotic nature of collusive play and explains that collusion 'is a "game" played by two or more people whereby they deceive themselves. The game *is* the game of mutual self-deception.'[36] Laing also alludes to the potential for dark play in collusive relationships,

[32] Durkheim, Emile. *'What is a Social Fact?' The Rules of Sociological Method.* Ed. Steven Lukes. Trans. W.D. Halls. 1982. pp. 50-59.
[33] Laing, R.D. *Self and Others: Selected Works of R D Laing Vol 2.* 1998. Ch. 8.
[34] Laing, R.D. *Self and Others: Selected Works of R D Laing Vol 2.* 1998. Ch. 8.
[35] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 36.
[36] Laing, R.D. *Self and Others: Selected Works of R D Laing Vol 2.* 1998. Ch. 8.

writing that '…each plays the other's game, though he may not necessarily be fully aware of doing so. An essential feature of this game is not admitting that it is a game.'[37] In collusion, according to Laing, multiple parties are 'caught between trust and mistrust, confidence and despair, and both settle for counterfeit acts of confirmation on the basis of pretence. To do so both must play the game of collusion.'[38] Performativity, then, requires – to some degree – collusive social collaboration. In *The Construction of Social Reality*, John Searle differentiates between 'brute facts' and 'institutional facts.'[39] Searle argues that institutional, or social, facts 'are only facts by human agreement.'[40] As examples, Searle offers money, property, governments, and marriages, and argues that social facts 'in a sense…exist only because we believe them to exist.'[41]

Social Beliefs and Cultural Performances

My argument for the performativity of purported psychic phenomena and identities was suggested by my practice, in which I employed what I described as *dark method acting* in an attempt to explore the territory of the shut-eye mentalist. After formulating my argument on the performativity of the psychic, it came to my attention that a similar argument had been previously advanced by anthropologist Abby Day regarding the performativity of religious beliefs. In a 2010 article entitled, 'Propositions and performativity: Relocating belief to the social,' Day discusses, what she describes as 'culturally performed belief'[42] and 'performative belief.'[43]

In this chapter, I have by necessity, bracketed off religious beliefs from psychic beliefs. Given the extent, however, to which Day uniquely examines the performativity and performance-related aspects of religious beliefs, I am electing to explore these arguments at this time. It is worth noting that both of our arguments – despite radically different methodologies and subject areas – reached

[37] Laing, R.D. *Self and Others: Selected Works of R D Laing Vol 2.* 1998. Ch. 8.
[38] Laing, R.D. *Self and Others: Selected Works of R D Laing Vol 2.* 1998. Ch. 8.
[39] Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality.* 1995. p. 1.
[40] Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality.* 1995. p. 1.
[41] Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality.* 1995. p. 1.
[42] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[43] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.

similar conclusions; albeit with differing social implications. Day, herself, in fact, has advocated for further research along the lines of the praxis which I conducted, writing that:

> …an inter-disciplinary approach can better illuminate shades of meaning about belief. What I term "performative belief", stresses belief's social and relational location and how it can produce identities that actors strategically create to adapt to and integrate themselves into various social situations.[44]

Day notes that it was the sociologist Emile Durkheim who first 'disrupted forces of power, authority and legitimacy by relocating belief in the social.'[45] Durkheim described beliefs as 'social facts,'[46] and made the case, according to Day, that 'beliefs were unrelated to supernatural beings but were created through collective, intellectual effort classifying that which was sacred and profane.'[47] Following from Durkheim, Day argues that people 'actively construct…new understandings of their world and their God to 'do theodicy'[48] and that 'assertions of belief are expressions of belonging.'[49] Day ultimately contends that 'beliefs and related practices' are best understood 'not as propositional, but as collective, political' and, she suggests, 'performative.'[50]

Regarding these performative beliefs, Day writes that 'belief is not separate from identity or social context but a way of creating who "I" am relative to "you" here and now. Through the quality of emotion and corporeal experience in human relationships, performative belief is how people can adjust to given social contexts, expectations and aspirations.'[51] Day also builds on anthropologist Thomas Kirsch's notion of 'wilful' and 'pragmatic' beliefs, [52] observing that many such beliefs serve a pragmatic function, particularly with regard to social relationships. For instance, in a

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[44] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[45] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[46] *Durkheim, Emile. 'What is a Social Fact?' The Rules of Sociological Method.* Ed. Steven Lukes. Trans. W.D. Halls. 1982. pp. 50-59.
[47] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[48] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[49] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[50] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[51] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[52] Kirsch, Thomas G. 'Restaging the Will to Believe: Religious Pluralism. Anti-Syncretism, and the Problem of Belief.' *American Anthropologist.* Vol. 106. No. 4. 2004. p. 707.

discussion of 'the ritual of theatre-going' director Anne Bogart asserts that people go to church, 'Not to pray to God, but rather, to stand, sit and kneel simultaneously.'[53] [*]

Along these lines, Day notes that in the interviews and surveys which she conducted in her research, people tended to avoid giving simple answers regarding matters of belief, and opted instead to respond with 'often long descriptions of a person or situation that would illustrate what they are trying to say.'[54] Day notes that most of the stories which she witnessed 'concerned beliefs that were about the values people trusted – or longed for – in their human relationships, drawn from those relationships, replicated through them and embodied through them. Beliefs about belonging to other people are those,' Day suggests, 'which may largely explain why people identify themselves with a religion…'[55] As I have previously argued, psychic beliefs – while different than religious beliefs – offer similarly pragmatic relationship-oriented functions. It is important to note, however, that these apparent beliefs are not created through a purely rationally pragmatic process, but rather constructed through an ad-hoc process which Day describes as 'strategic improvisation'[56] or 'working out the details…in practice.'[57] These improvisations are then, according to Day, 'further personalised by life experience and interaction with other people.'[58]

Day – along with professor of modern Theology Gordon Lynch – in an article in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* entitled, 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance' further explores the performance related aspects of religious beliefs. Arguing for the importance of 'thinking about belief in terms of social and cultural practice,'[59] the authors argue:

> To express belief, in this sense, is to locate one's emotions, meanings, values, and concerns in relation to networks of intimate relationships as well as patterns of

[53] Bogart, Anne. *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. Routledge. 2007. p. 71.
[*] Although Bogart attributes this quote to Elias Canetti's 1984 book *Crowds and Power,* this appears to be incorrect.
[54] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[55] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[56] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[57] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[58] Day, Abby. 'Propositions and Performativity: Relocating Belief to the Social.' *Culture and Religion*. 11(1). 2010. pp. 9-30.
[59] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.

> belonging with wider, imagined communities. It can be a statement of affiliation with particular people, but exemplified in abstract, and sometimes idealized, understandings of a group identity which a person wishes to embrace.[60]

Day and Lynch describe the 'hard cultural work that is involved in internalising belief as a consistent centre for one's way of living in a pluralist society'[61] and examine 'the ways in which religious belief can be understood in spatial, historical, relational, and performative/aesthetic ways.'[62] The performative aspects of such beliefs, however, according to the authors, are often 'masked by public discourse that conceives of religion in terms of propositional belief'[63] as well as by 'academics [who] privilege propositional belief in their predominantly quantitative research.'[64]

Day and Lynch ultimately conclude that 'young people are not drifting through an a-moral universe or are unable to cope with life's challenges in the absence of grand meta-narratives, but that they are informed and sustained by the social relationships and contexts in which they felt they belonged.'[65] Young people are, in other words, 'looking for religious resources with which to make sense of their lives in a rapidly changing social milieu.'[66] This 'religious capital'[67] is, in turn, used to 'negotiate the challenges of their lives'.[68] Fascinatingly, according to Day and Lynch, when changes occurred in the religious beliefs of young people, 'it was always mediated by changes in social relationships.'[69] The inevitable interconnectedness between social relationships and systems

[60] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[61] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[62] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[63] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[64] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[65] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[66] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[67] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[68] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.
[69] Day, Abby and Gordon Lynch 'Introduction: Belief as Cultural Performance.' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 28(2). 2013. pp. 199-206.

of belief was something which I discovered first hand during my three-year immersion in the social role of psychic.

Philosopher Neil Van Leeuwen, along similar lines, has argued that 'religious credence is not factual belief'[70] and 'not responsive to evidence.'[71] Van Leeuwen's arguments amount to the claim – according to philosopher Barry Lam on the award-winning podcast *Hi-Phi Nation* – that 'most people who are religious don't actually believe the tenets of their religion.'[72] In the interview with Lam, Van Leeuwen notes that:

> People don't pray for limbs to grow back, typically. They'll pray for their friend's cancer to be cured. They'll pray for financial success in the future. They'll pray for things that don't obviously contradict ordinary factual beliefs. If you factually believed God is omnipotent then why not pray for your limb to grow back?[73]

Van Leeuwen – referencing a 2001 article by Justin Barret in *Cognition and Culture,* 'How Ordinary Cognition Informs Petitionary Prayer'[74] – observes that 'people will pray for god to intervene psychologically, even biologically, when something is biologically possible, like getting over sickness. Almost never will they pray for a mechanical/physical intervention.'[75] Van Leeuwen continues, 'You have to ask, without being cynical or sarcastic, why does that prayer not occur to them?'[76] Van Leeuwen argues that – in contrast to factual beliefs – religious credences 'tend to guide behaviour only in special settings or special times, or in the case of religious credence, when [one's] identity is in question.'[77]

Daniel Dennett, in *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* has made similar observations. Dennett writes:

> [T]he transition from folk religion to organized religion is marked by a shift in beliefs from those with very clear, concrete consequences to those with systematically elusive consequences – paying lip service is just about the only way you can act on them…If you really believe that your tribe's god has made you

[70] Van Leeuwen, Neil. 'Religious credence is not factual belief.' *Cognition*. No: 133. 2014. pp. 698–715.
[71] Van Leeuwen, Neil. 'Do religious "beliefs" respond to evidence?' *Philosophical Explorations*. No. 20(1). 2017. pp. 52-72.
[72] Lam, Barry. 'Creed and Credences.' *Hi-Phi Nation Podcast*. S2 E7. 1 May 2018. 0:21:10.
[73] Lam, Barry. 'Creed and Credences.' *Hi-Phi Nation Podcast*. S2 E7. 1 May 2018. 0:22:40.
[74] Barrett, Justin L. 'How Ordinary Cognition Informs Petitionary Prayer.' *Journal of Cognition and Culture*. No. 1(3). 2001.
[75] Lam, Barry. 'Creed and Credences.' *Hi-Phi Nation Podcast*. S2 E7. 1 May 2018. 0:22:30.
[76] Lam, Barry. 'Creed and Credences.' *Hi-Phi Nation Podcast*. S2 E7. 1 May 2018. 0:22:35.
[77] Lam, Barry. 'Creed and Credences.' *Hi-Phi Nation Podcast*. S2 E7. 1 May 2018. 0:25:50.

> invulnerable to arrows, you readily run headlong into a swarm of deadly arrows to get at your enemy. If you really believe that your God will save you, you cut the rope. If you really believe that your God is watching you and doesn't want you to masturbate, you don't masturbate.[78]

Nicholas Humphrey makes a similar observation in *Leaps of Faith*, noting that 'no one can sensibly run their lives on the basis of hopes and expectations that run counter to common-sense experience; and no one sensibly does.'[79] Humphrey observes:

> A substantial number of people in our own society, for example, say they believe in the possibility of telepathy: nonetheless, when they themselves want to communicate with a distant friend, they play safe and write or call them. They say they believe in the power of mind-over-matter: but, when they themselves want to achieve a physical effect, they make sure of using physical means. They say they believe in survival after death: but (in contemporary Europe anyway) they make no practical allowance for the deceased returning when they put them finally to rest.[80]

Although Van Leeuwen and Day are discussing *religious* – rather than psychic – beliefs and identities, it is my contention that these arguments apply equally in both cases, which ultimately have quite little to do with factual belief. On this, Abby Day cites poet Wallace Stevens who in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' asserts that 'the final belief is to believe in a fiction…The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.'[81]

Along these same lines, in a poem entitled 'FUN,' songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen, playfully points to the fun of *trying out* religious beliefs:

> FUN
> It is so much fun
> To believe in God
> You must try it sometime
> Try it now
> And find out whether
> Or not
> God wants you
> To believe in Him[82]

[78] Dennett, Daniel. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. 2006. p. 227.
[79] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 55.
[80] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 55.
[81] Stevens, Wallace. 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.' *Collected Poetry and Prose*. 1997. p. 903.
[82] Cohen, Leonard. 'FUN.' *Book of Longing.* 2006.

Richard Schechner has noted that 'to perform acts that are otherwise forbidden – punished, taboo, unthought of – is a way of "making fun,"'[83] and the fact that playing at controversial psychic beliefs can be *fun*, I argue, is an extremely underexplored consideration.

The Presentation of Psychic in Everyday Life

In 1940, theatre director Bertold Brecht wrote in his journal, that 'kinds of everyday theater' and 'examples of theater in real life' should be 'described' and 'identified.'[84] Brecht offers, as examples, 'the erotic sphere, in business, in politics, in the law, in religion, etc'[85] adding that 'the kind of everyday theater that individuals indulge in when no one is watching should be studied, secret "role-playing."'[86] On such performances, Richard Schechner writes:

> More and more people experience their lives as a connected series of performances: dressing up for a party, interviewing for a job, experimenting with sexual orientation and gender roles, playing a life role such as mother or son, or a professional role such as doctor or teacher. The sense that 'performance is everywhere' is heightened by the increasingly mediatized environment we live in.[87]

Noting the genres which Brecht and Schechner have chosen to identify, it is apparent that this 'secret role-playing'[88] is in no small way related to the forms of performance which Schechner has identified as 'dark play,' and 'deep play.' Deep play was first proposed by philosopher Jeremy Bentham and adapted by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in order to distinguish play 'in which the risks to the player outweigh the potential rewards.'[89] Play is *deep*, according to Schechner, when it becomes 'so serious we risk our whole life with it.'[90] Schechner describes deep play as occurring 'when you get involved in something which you don't have to get involved in, but you're playing, and it gets very, very, very serious and you can't find your way out.'[91]

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[83] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 237.
[84] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht Journals.* 1940. Ed. John Willett. 1993. p. 115.
[85] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht Journals.* 1940. Ed. John Willett. 1993. p. 115.
[86] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht Journals.* 1940. Ed. John Willett. 1993. p. 115.
[87] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 42.
[88] Brecht, Bertold. *Brecht Journals.* 1940. Ed. John Willett. 1993. p. 115.
[89] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 92.
[90] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:00:50.
[91] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 01:01:25.

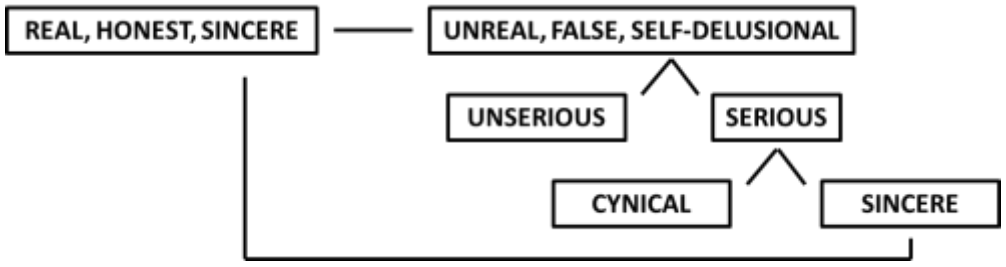
Schechner observes that 'the self is created by the roles even as it plays them.'[92] Consequently, according to Schechner, 'a person's sense of self is very much tied to her ability to believe in the roles she plays' and 'how well a person plays a social role usually depends on how much the person believes in the role.'[93] This observation is in line with Nietzsche's assertion that 'if someone obstinately and for a long time wants to *appear* something it is in the end hard for him to *be* anything else,'[94] since, 'in the act of deception, with all its preparations, its enthralling voice, expression, and gesture, in the midst of the scenery designed to give it effect, they are overcome by *belief in themselves.*'[95] Following this line of thought, and in order to better understand the nature of psychic identities as social roles, it is necessary to examine the ways in which these performances might be received and negotiated as social facts – or social fictions – in shared social spaces.

Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his seminal 1959 text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* relates human social interactions to theatrical performances. Goffman uses the term *performance* to describe 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers.'[96] Often, according to Goffman, the part one plays takes the form of a pre-defined social role, which he defines as 'the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status.'[97] It is my contention that mentalists and psychics – from shut-eye mind readers to open-eye mediums – fill longstanding social roles.

Goffman subdivides social performances into two 'common-sense models' which he describes as 'the real, sincere, or honest performance; and the false one that thorough fabricators assemble…'[98] While Goffman's analysis of these social interactions are virtually exhaustive, I wish to look specifically at his analysis of deception and self-deception in social interactions, as it is my contention that the social performances of the mentalist/psychic must occupy at least one of those two categories. Goffman subdivides these false, or 'contrived'[99] performances into *unserious*

[92] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 217.
[93] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 217.
[94] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. 1878. pp. 39-40.
[95] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. 1878. pp. 39-40.
[96] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 13.
[97] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 27.
[98] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 76-77.
[99] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 76-77.

performances (such as the actor's) and *serious* performances (such as the confidence man's). Those latter performances are further subdivided as being either *cynical* (or deceptive) or *sincere* (or self-delusional).[100] I have charted the relationship of Goffman's categories for deceptive performances below:



Goffman's categories, therefore, are somewhat cyclical and problematic since a sincere performance might be real and honest, or self-delusional, and therefore, unreal and false. Nevertheless, Goffman's work is invaluable in understanding what takes place during performances of psychic phenomena and expressions of psychic identities in social interactions.

According to Goffman, 'society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way' and conversely, that the individual 'ought in fact to be what he claims he is.'[101] Social performances, then, request the audience to 'believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.'[102] It is in this way, I would argue, that social performances manifest as what Durkheim and Searle describe as social facts.[103] [104]

This 'sign-accepting tendency' Goffman continues, 'puts the audience in a position to be duped and misled, for there are few signs that cannot be used to attest to the presence of something that

[100] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 28.
[101] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 24.
[102] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 28.
[103] Durkheim, Emile. 'What is a Social Fact?' *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Ed. Steven Lukes. Trans. W.D. Halls. 1982. pp. 50-59.
[104] Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality*. 1995. p. 1.

is not really there.'[105] And indeed, at times, according to Goffman 'the individual does of course intentionally convey misinformation.'[106] Regarding this giving of misinformation in everyday life – in addition to outright lying, fabricating, and deceit – Goffman notes that, 'it is usually possible for the performer to create intentionally almost any kind of false impression without putting himself in the indefensible position of having told a clear-cut lie.' Noting 'communication techniques such as innuendo, strategic ambiguity, and crucial omissions' Goffman explains that 'mis-informers' may 'profit from lies without, technically, telling any.'[107] Goffman's words are particularly relevant to a wide range of performers of mentalism and psychic arts for whom fence straddling, doublespeak, and ambiguous claims are fundamental tactics.

Goffman notes that deceptive performances are characterized by a 'discrepancy between fostered appearances and reality'[108] and goes on to observe that, 'there is hardly a legitimate everyday vocation or relationship whose performers do not engage in concealed practices which are incompatible with fostered impressions.'[109] These false performances, according to Goffman, may further be 'meant to be taken unseriously, as in the work of stage actors or seriously, as in the work of confidence men.'[110] Using Goffman's categories, I would describe the performances of contemporary conjurers as unserious, while the performances of the contemporary mentalist are intended to be taken *seriously*.

Goffman describes the two extremes of serious false performances as 'sincere' and 'cynical.'[111] He describes the cynical individual as having 'no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience.'[112] Sincere individuals, on the other hand, according to Goffman 'believe in the impression fostered by their own performance.'[113] Thus, he writes, 'at one extreme, we find that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality…. At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine.[114] Accordingly, amongst mentalists

[105] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 65.
[106] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 14.
[107] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 69.
[108] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 66.
[109] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 71.
[110] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 76-77.
[111] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 28.
[112] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 28-29.
[113] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 28-29.
[114] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 28.

and psychics, one can find cynical fortune tellers and sincere mediums, or vice versa, and nearly everything in between. The terms cynical and sincere, in fact, carry extra significance within the discourse of mentalism, mapping perfectly, as they do, onto the terms *open-eye* (cynical) and *shut-eye* (sincere).

According to Goffman, serious false performances also frequently involve 'dark secrets' which he describes as 'double secrets' wherein 'one [secret] is the crucial fact that is hidden and another is the fact that crucial facts have not been openly admitted.'[115] This is reminiscent of what mentalist Phill Smith has described as the *'mitox'* – or the 'grand lie' – of mentalism.[116] Smith writes, 'As mentalists we wrap our tricks up with a single overarching methodless effect, a grand lie which permits our deceptions: this lie is, simply, that the things we are doing are not tricks. In some way...they are real.'[117]

Goffman takes care to point out, however, that not 'all cynical performers are interested in deluding their audiences for purposes of what is called 'self-interest' or private gain.'[118] A cynical performer, he writes, may also 'delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community, etc.'[119] This, indeed, is worth noting, as the primary complaint against psychics – both historically and today – involves their infamous use of predatory tactics to defraud the gullible or grieving. Goffman, however, calls attention to other less egregious forms of cynical performance:

> In service occupations practitioners who may otherwise be sincere are sometimes forced to delude their customers because their customers show such a heartfelt demand for it. Doctors who are led into giving placebos, filling-station attendants who resignedly check and recheck tire pressures for anxious women motorists, shoe clerks who sell a shoe that fits but tell the customer it is the size she wants to hear – these are cynical performers whose audiences will not allow them to be sincere.[120]

While some of his examples are out of date, the sentiment has not gone out of style. Many fortune tellers and psychic advisors, for instance, are faced with similar social pressures, often providing a service not entirely dissimilar to the prescription of placebos. Other forms of arguably psychic

[115] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 141.
[116] Smith, Phill. *Mitox: The Falsely Spoken Word.* 2009. p. 4.
[117] Smith, Phill. *Mitox: The Falsely Spoken Word.* 2009. p. 4.
[118] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 29.
[119] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 29.
[120] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 29.

work, such as reiki and energy healing are in demand, and there is a sizable market for quasi-quantum-mystic theory, as indicated by the popular success of Rhonda Byrne's best-selling self-help book *The Secret*, and by the popularity of figures such as Deepak Chopra. In many ways, the social role of the psychic creates and sustains what is essentially, in many cases, a secular form of shamanism.

Pertaining to shamanism, Richard Schechner has written that the shaman is 'honored for her or his tricks, style, and ability to heal. But this honor is ambivalent because the shaman's normative status or caste is often very low.'[121] The social role of psychic is comparable in status to shamans. Goffman usefully points out that 'while it is felt to be an inexcusable crime against communication to impersonate someone of sacred status, such as a doctor or a priest' the public is 'often less concerned when someone impersonates a member of a disesteemed, non-crucial, profane status.'[122] Thus, those who take up the social role of psychic, especially when it is for reasons other than purely personal gain, may be deemed by many to be useful members of society.

Reflecting the progression from open-eye psychic to shut-eye psychic publicly discussed by Orson Welles,[*] Goffman notes that some performers might start out cynical and become sincere over time.[123] However, Goffman also notes that 'the cycle of disbelief-to-belief can be followed in the other direction, starting with conviction or insecure aspiration and ending in cynicism.'[124] By way of example, Goffman describes public service members and faith workers, who over time may come to the 'slow realization that they are deluding their audience'[125] and come to see their efforts as wasted or deceitful.

One might imagine that a psychic working for a psychic hotline, or a medium conducting home seances, might follow a similar path from shut-eye to open-eye. Some individuals likely pursue psychic careers because they feel that they – or have been affirmed to – possess a psychic "gift." Commercial pressures and inevitable failures, however, might lead the performer to compensate with the use of deceptive tactics. Over time their "gift" could be entirely forgotten. Goffman

[121] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 159.
[122] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 67.
[*] 'Shut-Eye and Open-Eye Origin and Etymology.' See appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*
[123] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 31.
[124] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 31.
[125] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 31.

ultimately, and helpfully, concludes that there often occurs (emphasis added) 'a natural movement *back and forth* between cynicism and sincerity.'[126] Accordingly, sincerity is a complicated proposition in terms of performances, which are inherently always artificially constructed on some level. Conversely – as previously indicated in Goffman's description of professional wrestling – even false performances are partially sincere.

In explaining the relationship between sincerity and 'self-illusion,'[127] Goffman contrasts performers who 'sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the real reality,'[128] with the performer who 'may be taken in by his own act, convinced at the moment that the impression of reality which he fosters is the one and only reality.'[129] Thus, Goffman calls attention to the fact that self-delusional performers 'may be sincere – or be insincere but sincerely convinced of their own sincerity.[130] On these self-delusional – or falsely sincere – performances, Goffman writes:

> In such cases we have a sense in which the performer comes to be his own audience; he comes to be performer and observer of the same show… In these cases it will have been necessary for the individual in his performing capacity to conceal from himself in his audience capacity the discreditable facts that he has had to learn about the performance; in everyday terms, there will be things he knows, or has known, that he will not be able to tell himself. This intricate manoeuvre of self-delusion constantly occurs.[131]

According to Goffman, whether a performance is *truly* sincere or not, is less important than how that performance is *perceived* by both performer and onlooker. He writes:

> Some performances are carried off successfully with complete dishonesty, others with complete honesty; but for performances in general neither of these extremes is essential and neither, perhaps, is dramaturgically advisable. The implication here is that an honest, sincere, serious performance is less firmly connected with the solid world than one might first assume.[132]

In other words, one may sincerely believe, for instance, that they are Napoleon, or that they were abducted by aliens, or any assortment of cult beliefs or conspiracy theories. But these claims are

[126] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 31.
[127] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 31.
[128] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 77.
[129] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 77.
[130] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 77.
[131] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 86.
[132] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp 77-78.

unlikely to be taken seriously, even if the individual espousing the beliefs appears to be entirely sincere. Similarly, an actor may truly seem to "lose" him or herself in a role, but if the audience doesn't accept the performance as sincere, then for all intents and purposes, it was not.

An example can be seen in Jared Leto's performance as the Joker in the 2016 film *Suicide Squad* in which Leto was either "lost" in the role – or playing at being "lost" in the role – and his offstage behaviour was by all accounts disturbing.[133] Nevertheless, his performance was widely ridiculed,[134] and his "method" tactics were treated dismissively in news reports, such as Matt Miller's article in *Esquire,* entitled, 'Can Jared Leto Shut Up About His Method Acting in Suicide Squad? We get it.'[135]

This sincerity/cynicism/self-delusion complex does indeed create a complicated situation when psychic performances are claimed to be "real" by those who perform them. These performances cannot be fully real, yet may be sincere, and thus, remain socially "real" to the extent that performers and onlookers believe them to be real. In this regard, Goffman addresses shamanism, calling attention to the following passage by Alfred Kroeber:

> Probably most shamans or medicine men, the world over, help along with sleight-of-hand in curing and especially in exhibitions of power. This sleight-of-hand is sometimes deliberate; in many cases awareness is perhaps not deeper than the foreconscious. The attitude, whether there has been repression or not, seems to be as toward a pious fraud. Field ethnographers seem quite generally convinced that even shamans who know that they add fraud nevertheless also believe in their powers, and especially in those of other shamans: they consult them when they themselves or their children are ill.[136]

The 'pious fraud' argument – which calls to mind Claude Lévi-Strauss's well-known account of the Kwakiutl skeptic turned shaman, Quesalid[137] – goes far to explain the otherwise confounding activities of shut-eye mentalists/psychics, some of whom appear to be entirely sincere, and some of whom, despite their apparent sincerity, were known for a proclivity toward 'help[ing] the

[133] Sperling, Nicole. 'Suicide Squad: Jared Leto's Joker is no laughing matter.' *Entertainment Weekly. EW.com.* 9 Jul 2016.
[134] Shamsian, Jacob.'Jared Leto tried to outdo Heath Ledger's Joker in "Suicide Squad" — and failed spectacularly.' *uk.BusinessInsider.com*. 3 Aug 2016.
[135] Miller, Matt. 'Can Jared Leto Shut Up About His Method Acting in Suicide Squad? We get it.' *Esquire.com*. 2 Aug 2016.
[136] Kroeber, Alfred. *The feature of Culture.* 1952. p. 311.
[137] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 'The Sorcerer and his Magic.' *Structural Anthropology.* Basic Books. 1963. Ch 9.

spirits'[138] by 'resort[ing] to "manipulation" when the Power does not "arrive".'[139] Goffman also addresses the case of purported spirit possession in West Indian Voodoo ceremonies, observing:

> [T]he person possessed will be in just the right social relation to those who are watching; that possession occurs at just the right moment in the ceremonial undertakings, the possessed one carrying out his ritual obligations to the point of participating in a kind of skit with persons possessed at the time with other spirits. But…this contextual structuring…still allows participants in the cult to believe that possession is a real thing and that persons are possessed at random by gods whom they cannot select.[140]

The preceding cases and descriptions of sincere and self-illusory performances are immediately reminiscent of Butler's assertions on the unconscious performativity of gender in which she argues that people methodically act out certain social roles and patterns without realizing that they are doing so.[141] In a similar vein, Goffman quotes at length from Robert Ezra Park's book, *Race and Culture,* in which Park agues in part: 'in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality.'[142] Park's 1950 assertion that social masks represent the ideal self may be challenged on the ground that often these masks are not always – if ever – freely chosen, but 'inscribed'[143] or 'clamped'[144] or written[145] on bodies by societal norms, conventions, assumptions, and pressures. Nevertheless, his description of masks as the truer self, and the process whereby repetition leads to identity, is elegantly and usefully stated.

The social performance of psychic phenomena and psychic identities – like all effective performances in social situations – are by no means fixed, but fluid, and negotiated on a case-by-case basis. These performances, further, are characterized by acts of self-awareness, self-delusion, seriousness, unseriousness, sincerity, and cynicism in a constant and delicate balancing act.

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[138] 'Mr S. C. Hall and Mr Foster.' *Spiritual Magazine*. Vol. 3(2). 1862. p. 91.
[139] Kalush, William and Larry Sloman. *The Secret Life of Houdini.* 2006. p. 383.
[140] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. pp. 80-81.
[141] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.' *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. 2nd Ed. 1996.
[142] Park, Robert Ezra. *Race and Culture.* 1950. p. 250.
[143] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.' *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. 2nd Ed. 1996. p. 127.
[144] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 65.
[145] Butler, Judith. 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.' *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. 2nd Ed. 1996. p. 203.

Perhaps this explains the problematic use of the term *sincerity* in Goffman's analysis. Self-delusional performances, and what Goffman calls performances of 'real reality,'[146] are not opposite on a spectrum of social interactions, but rather, adjacent in a complex network of social interaction strategies.

Performance as Transformation

Theatrical performances are complexly overlaid with – built upon, perhaps – notions of play and transformation. Richard Schechner, for instance, has written that 'just as a farm is a field where edible foods are grown, so a theater is a place where transformations of time, place, and persons (human and non-human) are accomplished.'[147] Theatre, obviously, is a place of make-believe transformation, but the transformative power of theatre also extends beyond the boundaries of the 'temporary *rearrangement* of [the] body/mind'[148] enacted by actors for entertainment purposes. To this end, Schechner observes that these transformations include not only the actors – but also audiences – and notes that the 'changes may be either temporary (entertainment) or permanent (ritual).'[149] According to Schechner, performances exist within a binary – or 'braid' – of entertainment and efficacy. [150] He elaborates:

> Performance originates in impulses to make things happen and to entertain; to get results and to fool around; to collect meanings and to pass the time; to be transformed into another and to celebrate being oneself; to disappear and to show off; to bring into a special place a transcendent Other who exists then-and-now and later-and-now; to be in a trance and to be conscious; to focus on a select group sharing a secret language and to broadcast to the largest possible audience of strangers; to play in order to satisfy a felt obligation and to play only under an Equity contract for cash. These oppositions, and others generated by them, comprise performance: an active situation, a continuous turbulent process of transformation.[151]

Efficacy/ritual results, most often, in life-changing transformations and can be observed in weddings, christenings, birthdays, and religious ceremonies, whereas entertainment/theatre shifts

[146] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1959. p. 28.
[147] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 186.
[148] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 191.
[149] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 191.
[150] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. Ch. 4, pp. 112-169.
[151] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 157.

moods, thinking, ideas, and emotions. Schechner argues – perhaps ironically – that ritual, 'by helping people accomplish change in their lives,' in fact, 'provides stability.'[152] According to Schechner, 'no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment.'[153] Many performances of mentalism and psychic arts are heavily weighted in the direction of theatre and entertainment; although this is not entirely so. Indeed, for some audience members, questions of psychic ability seem to be no laughing matter at all. Some forms of psychic performances, such as séances, have clear – almost perfect – ties to ritual/efficacy.

I attended, for instance, spirit medium Derek Acorah's stage show *The Psychic Ether* in 2015. By the end of the performance some audience members, for whom no messages had come through, were in tears and demonstrably angry and/or distraught. Clearly the efficacy of the performance was an important consideration for those audience members. Other audience members, on the other hand, were clearly there for a lark, or had been dragged along by their partner or friends as part of a "night out". This, then, suggests that the same performance may be entertainment for one portion of the audience and efficacious for the other. The performative and liminal nature of psychic phenomena depends upon negotiated interactions in shared social spaces. Psychic phenomena and identities do not occur in social isolation. What would be the point? A hermit or monk may privately practice his or her faith until death, but it does not seem that psychic beliefs could be sustained – or indeed, experienced – in this way. These phenomena are too entangled with social evidence to exist outside of social interaction. Consequently, all performances of mentalism require collaboration in order to test and/or assert the veracity or falsity the performer's claims.

Accordingly, what Schechner describes as 'collective creativity'[154] and what Turner describes as 'communitas'[155] are largely related. It is a *being swept up in* which occurs not only between spectators during liminal experiences, but also between performer and participant. Imagine, for instance, spectators collectively waiting for a message from the spirits to be brought forth *for them* by the medium; or the querent at a private reading discussing the lines on *his* palm; or the Tarot cards or visions in the crystal which concern *her* future; or the so-called "trance-state" entered into by participants in hypnosis performances. All of these situations depend upon a collective

[152] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 81.
[153] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 80.
[154] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 130.
[155] Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre.* 1982. p. 44.

creativity to function. While communitas does many things, it undoubtedly encourages acceptance in – and discourages resistance and scepticism of – the liminal experience.

In addition to mediums, fortune tellers, and hypnotists, a purported psychic in a laboratory also offers a performance which is more closely related to efficacy than to entertainment. As with a seance, there is an appeal to mysterious paranormal forces, and with it, an associated trance state. Uri Geller, for instance, according to Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, spent significant amounts of time in the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) laboratories waiting to 'feel it.'[156] While these performances would seem to be offered only for a small group of researchers, the video documentation of the experiments – along with the potential for public dissemination of the research – creates the potential for these performances to be witnessed worldwide. In the event that the purported claims of the psychic are endorsed by researchers as being worthy of further research, as was the case with Geller at SRI, then these performances can be transformative on a global scale.

Based on my praxis, I argue that liminal experiences are inscribed with meaning – this is to say, are transformative – not on the basis of the experience itself, but on the basis of the *reframed version* of the experience. It is the *re-experiencing of the experience* which frames, or recasts, the ordinary event as an exceptional one. For instance, take the undoubtedly common experience of thinking about someone prior to receiving an email or phone call from that person. When the experiencer declares, 'Wow! This is crazy! Every time I think of you, I get an email or a phone call from you!' they have performatively reframed the event in a not-necessarily factual way. This idea is immediately reminiscent of Schechner's definition of performance as 'twice-behaved behavior.'[157] Regarding this 'restored behaviour,' Schechner explains that 'the original "truth" or "source" of the behavior may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted…unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition.'[158] These performed versions of apparently genuine experiences, then, lean heavily toward efficacy. The performance transforms the very experience being performed.

[156] 'Uri Geller - SRI Part 2.' Stanford Research Institute: Experiments with Uri Geller. *YouTube.* Nov/Dec 1972.
[157] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 1.
[158] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. p. 34.

While Schechner suggests that transformations are permanent in ritual and temporary in theatre, this is not always the case. For instance, he notes that people 'use theater as a way to experiment with, act out, and ratify change.'[159] He also calls attention to the transformative potential inherent in *all* performances – theatrical and otherwise – writing that 'performance marks identities, bends and remakes time, adorns and reshapes the body, tells stories, and provides people with the means to play with, rehearse, and remake the worlds they not merely inhabit but are always already in the habit of reconstructing.'[160] Performance *is* transformation. Not only in the sense of actors playing roles, but also in the sense of bending the identities and perceived identities of those who play, those who participate, and those who observe.

Schechner has also 'tentatively' defined performance as 'ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play.'[161] Playing, itself, is a form of ritualized behavior which alters players, even if the game is only "for pretend." Accordingly, performance is a form of play which enables people to change themselves and to change their perceived world and, in doing so, to recreate themselves and create a world of meaning. This 'startling ability,'[162] as Schechner calls it, to become what one is not, goes hand in hand with performances of psychic phenomena and identities, which necessitate such a transformation. A psychic must transform into an individual allegedly in the possession of extraordinary mental or intuitive abilities.

It is worth noting that in order to have power, these pretend transformations – in order to become real transformations – must be accepted as, at least potentially, real. Again, returning to the example of receiving an email or phone call from a recently thought of person: One becomes pre-cognitive by reframing the experience as, 'Wow! I think I can see the future.' One becomes telepathic by sincerely reframing the experience as, 'Wow! I think I'm telepathic, because whenever I think of you, you call me.' If one reframes the experience as, 'What a coincidence, I was just thinking of you,' then no transformation takes place.

Peter Lamont has astutely noted that 'to truly experience an impossible event, you must observe an event that you truly believe to be impossible [and] a willing suspension of disbelief can only

[159] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 191.
[160] Schechner, Richard. *Performed Imaginaries.* 2014. p. 7.
[161] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 99.
[162] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 1.

diminish that experience.'[163] This transformation without a willing suspension of disbelief is in alignment with efficacy. Schechner explains that 'in rituals there is no "suspension of disbelief." Rather, he writes, there is "deep play."'[164] Consequently, according to Schechner, 'the problem remains: How do animals (and persons) tell the difference between play and "for real"?'[165] He answers that 'ritualized behavior, including performances, are a means of continually testing the boundaries…'[166]

It is my contention that performances of psychic phenomena – both those which are known by the performer to be fraudulent, and those held by the performer to be genuine – are boundary testing forms of play; dark play, in particular. This dark play is a form of ritual. These rituals are forms of performance. These performances are transformative. Additionally, it is my contention that even a fraudulent or fabricated psychic experience can – over time – come to be interpreted by the "player" as a genuine one.

Deception and Storytelling

Play – and by extension performance – enables those who play and perform to rebuild themselves, and to reconstruct the perceived world in which they live. Consequently, play, performativity, and performance are tools for transformation; tools which are often used unconsciously. At other times, achieving transformation through play and performance is a conscious endeavour. Jeffery Kripal has observed that 'the relationship between fraud and fact, and trick and truth, and paranormal events is much more complicated than we realize.'[167] Similarly, Nicholas Humphrey notes, in *Leaps of Faith*, that 'we all know that men and women were deceivers ever. And some of us may even have come across theoretical justifications for it as an optimal strategy in life.'[168] On this, Humphrey in turn cites Evolutionary Biologist Robert Trivers, who argued:

> The most important thing to realize about systems of animal communication is that they are not expected to be systems for the dissemination of truth. Instead, they are

[163] Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs*. 2013. p. 45.
[164] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. p. 106.
[165] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 105.
[166] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 105.
[167] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:17:55.
[168] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 147.

> expected to be systems by which individual organisms attempt to maximize their fitness by communicating to others things that may be true or false.[169]

Humphrey concludes that while some may view such deceptions and self-deceptions as 'a forgivable exaggeration' or 'a white lie,' the 'tragic' fact remains that the search for extraordinary 'paranormal soul-power' simply resulted in the discovery of 'further evidence for normal human untrustworthiness.[170] He further argues that the existence of paranormal abilities may largely be ruled out from a logical and philosophical perspective on the grounds that psychic and parapsychological phenomena – were they to actually exist – would have prevented the established evolutionary processes of natural selection for both species and ideas. As Humphrey puts it, 'we would probably not be here if [the soul hypothesis] were true.'[171] Indeed, he astutely observes that the effectiveness of eyesight examinations, for instance – not to mention all other forms of testing – would be greatly impeded if one were to allow for telepathy, clairvoyance, collective consciousness, or other psychic phenomena.

The second reason, according to Humphrey, for ruling out 'paranormal soul power'[172] is on the logical grounds that such a hypothesis violates the 'elementary rule of scientific method' known as Occam's Razor, which discourages the unnecessary 'multiplication of entities,'[173] and which Humphrey translates as: 'No more things should be presumed to exist than are absolutely necessary.'[174] Thus, he argues that 'paranormal soul power' is a needlessly complicated hypothesis. On this, he writes: 'If it appears that someone or something is playing paranormal games with us, we had better assume that the party responsible is a normal human prankster rather than a paranormal spiritual one.'[175] Humphrey further observes that:

> We have independent evidence – from many other contexts – of human trickery and human error of the kind that could produce just such surprising phenomena as the soul apparently displays. We know for a fact that it is within the normal powers of human beings to bamboozle others and themselves. But we have no independent evidence of the soul behaving in any of these ways.[176]

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[169] Trivers, Robert. 'Sociobiology and Politics.' *Sociobiology and Human Politics.* Ed. Elliot White. 1981. p. 33.
[170] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 148.
[171] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 224.
[172] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 148.
[173] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 74.
[174] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 31.
[175] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 74.
[176] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 75.

In a 2019 episode of *Last Week Tonight*, host John Oliver made a similar observation in a segment discussing the 2.2-billion-dollar American psychic industry. Referring to self-proclaimed psychic medium Tyler Henry's conversation with television host Matt Lauer – in which Tyler apparently received impressions from Lauer's deceased father – Oliver pointed out that 'Maybe Tyler Henry genuinely accessed the afterlife, an action which would fundamentally change our understanding of everything on Earth, or maybe he just Googled "Matt Lauer dad" and hit the fucking jackpot.'[177]

Humphrey argues: 'If the evidence suggests that supposedly paranormal phenomena show up only in what we might call fishy circumstances, the case for these phenomena being genuinely paranormal would be difficult to sustain.'[178] Given the complementary nature of his research and my own – particularly as it pertains to the question of deceit and self-deception – I am electing to quote Humphrey at length below. He writes:

> Whatever anyone's particular views about the paranormal, we all know that almost everybody – ourselves included – will on occasion exaggerate, dissemble, embroider the truth, be 'economical with the actualite' as an ex-Defence-Minister so nicely put it. We know that most people will cheat if they can get away with it – at least on a small scale… we know of famous frauds and hoaxes, in art, in letters and in science: the Piltdown skull, the Loch Ness monster photographs, the Turin Shroud, the Hitler diaries, and so on. We accept – even expect – that respected figures in business and politics will withhold vital information or make misleading statements without turning a hair.

He continues:

> We know too, probably from our own experience, some of the temptations that may lead to such semi-casual deception. The desire to please, to show off, to draw attention, to win favours. But especially, perhaps, in the context of the paranormal, the desire to gain what I have elsewhere called 'witness power': One of the basic principles of social life is that society accords a special place to the person who has something to say. To have been present at, or even intimately linked to a newsworthy event makes one a valuable resource to the community. One becomes the person who was there, who has information to impart… No wonder that we are sometimes tempted to assert that we have been present at events where we were not.[179]

[177] Oliver, John. *Last Week Tonight.* 'Psychics.' *HBO*. S6 E2. 24 Feb 2019. *YouTube.com.* 0:10:20.
[178] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 75.
[179] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. pp. 146-147.

Jeffrey Kripal has observed that both 'the psychical and the paranormal…are often wrapped up with profound narrative dimensions' and that such events are 'on some level at least, very much about *story.* One might say,' Kripal concludes, 'that paranormal phenomena possess *mythical* dimensions.'[180]

The Psychic Placebo Effect

Previously, I related psychic identities and behaviours to other types of performers such as professional wrestlers, rock stars, method actors, and metacomedians. I argued that psychic identities and behaviour may not only be viewed as performative, but that the mechanisms behind these kayfabe, meta, hyperreal, post-truth, or *wink-eye* performances are not unrelated to the well documented *placebo effect*. It is my contention that *the beliefs which we construct and maintain through play have the power to create real transformations.*

Elaborating on the psychological and physiological impacts of placebos, Nicholas Humphrey has neatly described the paradox embedded within placebos, arguing that 'to say that these cures have a normal explanation…is not to deny that they may often rely on the idea of a paranormal explanation. In fact, it is often quite clear that they do rely on it.'[181] He continues:

> It is for most people, including the healer, extremely hard to imagine how the voice or the touch of another person could possibly bring about a cure unless this other person were to have paranormal powers. It follows that the more the patient believes in these powers, the more he will be inclined to take the suggestions seriously – and the better they will work. Equally, the more the healer himself believes in his powers, the more he can make his suggestions sound convincing – and again the better they will work. The consequence is that a kind of virtuous circle can be established. Success in bringing about a cure feeds back to the healer, boosting both his image in the eyes of the world and his image of himself.[182]

Jeffrey Kripal has also previously explored connections between paranormal experiences and the placebo effect. He writes:

> The placebo is essentially a fraud. It is a lie. And it works. It works really well. Somehow it tricks the mind into extraordinary capacities to deal with the human

[180] Kripal, Jeffrey. *Authors of the Impossible.* 2010. p. 26.
[181] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 111.
[182] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 111.

> body. And paranormal events are a lot like this. Their visual quality, their mythical quality, somehow tricks the mind into extraordinary capacities…[183]

Playfully claiming that 'myth happens,'[184] Kripal explains that parapsychological experiences or events are 'subjective and objective at the same time'[185] and 'mediated not just by the five senses, but by the sixth sense – the super sense – of the human imagination in very extraordinary circumstances.'[186] The *Oxford English Dictionaries Online* defines the sixth sense as: 'a supposed intuitive faculty giving awareness not explicable in terms of normal perception,'[187] and historically, of course, the sixth sense was thought to be the psychic sense, which operated independently of the five classical senses. It is revealing that Kripal describes the sixth sense as the imagination, not so subtly suggesting that psychic phenomena and identities were, all along, driven by the imagination.

Kripal relates these experiences to storytelling and notes that 'once we adopt such a narrative approach to paranormal experiences a lot of things suddenly make a lot of sense.'[188] He argues that such an approach provides an explanation for the fact that apparent parapsychological experiences are common in the real world, but non-existent in laboratories. Along the lines of performativity, Kripal explains that 'we are all born into cultures and languages and belief systems that may or may not serve us, and yet they define what we can think, what we can imagine, who we can become. We are in fact all written. We are all being played in some way.'

Kripal suggests, therefore, that a parapsychological experience is 'not just a story, but it's a story waking up to its own authorship; to its own author, ie., us.'[189] According to Kripal, 'if we can start to think of these experiences with the tools of literature and art, my hope is that these sorts of events can be treated with more curiosity, with more generosity, and they can become what I think they actually already are: Real world invitations to become our own authors of the impossible.'[190] I feel that Kripal's message is both elegantly stated and extremely useful. However, the question

[183] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:18:00.
[184] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:07:30.
[185] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:03:45.
[186] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:04:30.
[187] *Oxford English Dictionaries Online.*
[188] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:15:30
[189] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:14:50.
[190] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:14:30.

remains: is it possible to become 'authors of the impossible'[191] without entering into pathological self-delusion?

A 2017 paper in the *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine* entitled, 'Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis'[192] as well as a 2017 article in *The Guardian*, entitled, '"I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic" – the rise of open-label placebos,'[193] assert the existence of an *open-placebo effect* by which placebo treatments remain effective *even when those treatments are known to be placebos*.[194] The open-placebo effect demonstrates that real psychophysical transformations can be triggered even by beliefs which are *known to be* imaginary.

Calling attention to the 'reputation problem'[195] of placebos, *The Guardian* article states: 'It is widely believed [that placebos] are only effective when those taking them are deceived into thinking they are taking real drugs. As such, prescribing dummy or fake treatments is unethical.'[196] However the article goes on to describe a 260-patient review over five studies, which found 'that "open-label" placebos – *those that patients know contain no active medication* – can improve symptoms in a range of conditions.'[197] According to the article, 'this growing body of evidence raises a number of important questions. How do open-label placebos work? Which conditions do they work for? And should doctors prescribe them?'[198]

Although the mechanism behind the success of open-label placebos is not yet fully understood, the article suggests a combination of theories including Pavlov's *conditioning effect*, 'conscious

[191] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube.* 16 Jan 2013. 0:18:55.
[192] Howick, Jeremy, et al. 'Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis.' *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine.* 10(2). 2017. pp. 97-107.
[193] Fleming, Nic. '"I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic" – the rise of open-label placebos.' *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.
[194] Howick, Jeremy, et al. 'Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis.' *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine.* 10(2). 2017. pp. 97-107.
[195] Fleming, Nic. '"I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic" – the rise of open-label placebos.' *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.
[196] Fleming, Nic. '"I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic" – the rise of open-label placebos.' *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.
[197] Howick, Jeremy, et al. 'Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis.' *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine.* 10(2). 2017. pp. 97-107.
[198] Fleming, Nic. '"I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic" – the rise of open-label placebos.' *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.

expectation of improvements,' and 'embodied cognition' as potential contributing factors.[199] All the same, the success of open-label placebos shines light precisely on the way that psychic belief and intellectual integrity may coexist.

Along similar lines, a 2018 paper entitled, 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles' expresses a concern that even information which is known to be fictional 'can potentially influence our beliefs…and attitudes.'[200] According to the authors: 'A recent meta-analysis concluded that there was no significant difference between the persuasive effect of factual and fictional narratives, which shows that misinformation in the context of fiction can influence attitudes and beliefs.'[201] The authors draw what they describe as a 'clear and somewhat unnerving' conclusion that 'even when people know that what they are seeing may not be real, it can have a profound impact on their beliefs.'[202]

Along similar post-truth lines, it is worth recalling the 1972 *Philip Experiments* which stand out as a unique – if not intentional – examination of deep and dark play in allegedly psychic occurrences. In these experiments – conducted by the Toronto Society for Psychical Research – a group of eight subjects was assigned the task of creating an imaginary spirit with which they would later attempt to communicate. The purpose of the experiment was to determine whether it was possible 'to communicate not with a spirt entity, but with the *idea* of a spirit?'[203] In other words, could spirit contact be made by *human will* – or, expectation, desire, and imagination – alone?

Over a period of weeks, the group constructed an entirely fictional backstory of 'Philip, the imaginary ghost.'[204] I will not give the full tawdry story here, but it involves an English aristocrat with a distinguished war record, a frigid wife, and an affair with a gypsy girl. The wife discovered the affair and accused the gypsy of witchcraft. The girl was promptly burned at the stake.[*] Philip

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[199] Fleming, Nic. '"I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic" – the rise of open-label placebos.' *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.
[200] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.
[201] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.
[202] Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. 'Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people's beliefs in psychological principles.' *PLoS ONE. 13(11).* 2018.
[203] Colombo, John Robert. 'The Philip Phenomenon.' *Ghost Stories of Ontario.* 1995. p. 122.
[204] 'The Philip Experiment – did a 1972 scientific experiment conjure a spirit or create a real ghost?' *AlteredDimensions.net.* 8 Apr 2014.
[*] A forgivable historical inaccuracy – In England witches were hanged.

then committed suicide at the age of 30. For several weeks the group reported no extraordinary experiences. In the following weeks, however, the group experienced many instances of spirt rapping, table tipping, and other seemingly "ghostly" phenomena.

Many different conclusions – from ideomotor response* to 'playful' spirits[205] – were drawn from these experiments, which, it must be noted, were not scientifically controlled and 'offer proof of nothing.'[206] However, as John Robert Colombo writes in *Ghost Stories of Ontario*, 'This episode in parapsychological history offers promise of a better understanding of the dynamics of group interaction, of the psychological consequences of belief, if not of contact with the "spirit world."[207] My own hypothesis on these experiments is not among the commonly offered explanations. I suggest that rather than playful spirits, one or more members of the group playfully decided to *liven things up a bit* for the researchers and the rest of the group. If this is the case, it is hard to fault the decision. A failure to do so, would have resulted in a boring and forgettable – rather than exciting and infamous – series of experiments.

Parapsychologist George Hansen, in *The Trickster and the Paranormal,* has written extensively on the 'deep connection between liminality and deception,' noting that 'shamans were often seen as tricksters'[208] and have 'been observed in trickery.'[209] Such shamanic/trickster activities may, nevertheless, have played a critical role in evolution and survival, acting as psychological placebos, or what Professor Franc Chamberlain has described in the *Journal of Performance Magic* as 'a set of potentially transformational practices or perhaps healing fictions.'[210] Chamberlain argues that 'It would be an error…to assert that magic is either full of supernatural power or it is a shell of empty tricks and that wonder and enchantment (even dark enchantments) cannot co-exist with the knowledge that our senses are being deceived.'[211]

* Ideomotor response may be defined as: *the psychological phenomenon of subtle and involuntary physical movement triggered by thinking about that movement.*
[205] Nason, Rachel. 'The Philip Experiment.' *YouTube.* 2014. 0:05:40.
[206] Colombo, John Robert. 'The Philip Phenomenon.' *Ghost Stories of Ontario.* 1995. p. 123.
[207] Colombo, John Robert. 'The Philip Phenomenon.' *Ghost Stories of Ontario.* 1995. p. 123.
[208] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 31.
[209] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 31.
[210] Chamberlain, Franc. 'Editorial for JPM Issue 5.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 5(1). 2018. p. 2.
[211] Chamberlain, Franc. 'Editorial for JPM Issue 5.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 5(1). 2018. p. 2.

Hansen, in discussing shamanic trickery, has observed that 'placebo healing is one of the benign uses of trickery,'[212] and Nicholas Humphrey has written extensively on the importance of such issues in contemporary philosophical debates, asserting that 'so-called "faith-healing" is no longer regarded by most doctors, theologians or parapsychologists as being strictly paranormal.'[213] According to Humphrey, 'it is now widely recognized by the medical community that the course of many kinds of illness, of the body as well as of the mind, can be influenced by the patient's hopes and expectations and thus by the suggestions given him by an authority figure whom he trusts.'[214]

Taken as a whole, the implications of the ideas discussed above may throw light upon numerous critical contemporary post-truth issues such as fake news and alternative facts, not to mention health and fitness fads, reiki, faith healing, neuro-linguistic programming, self-help gurus, and the homeopathic and health and wellness industries. As Jeffrey Kripal has noted, 'the well documented medical placebo, after all, is a fake that has real effects.'[215]

Luck, Love, and Psychic

What do we talk about when we talk about psychic? [*] Richard Schechner writes:

> We need to stop looking so hard at play, or play genres, and investigate *playing*, the ongoing, underlying process of off-balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming – the permeating, eruptive/disruptive energy and mood below, behind, and to the sides of focused attention.[216]

Much effort has been spent attempting to quantify, or *prove*, psychic phenomena, but it is equally important to investigate the motivations and impacts – for better and for worse – of the purported performance, and performativity, of these phenomena. Attempts to measure psychic phenomena seem to always miss the target. Perhaps the very act of measuring has pointed researchers in the wrong direction. Searching for evidence of psychic phenomena is like searching for evidence of

[212] Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal.* 2001. p. 89.
[213] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 110.
[214] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1996. p. 111.
[215] Kripal, Jeffrey. *Authors of the Impossible.* 2010. p. 52.
[*] This is a repurposing of the title of Raymond Carver's 1981 short story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.*
[216] Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual.* 1993. p. 43.

luck or love. It is unlikely to be found. But this is not to say that luck or love are not real, or at least, that the effects of these ideas cannot be measurably real. Psychic phenomena, like luck and love, are liminal. Such phenomena are resistant to quantification. Admittedly, it is the hindsight provided by a century of scientific inquiry that makes this understanding possible. Mentalists and psychics in contemporary western societies, I would argue, help to fulfil a basic and ancient human need for storytelling and meaning making – whether they intend this or not.

In *The Luck Factor,* psychologist Richard Wiseman discusses superstition, luck, and ritual, concluding that 'superstition doesn't work because it is based on outdated and incorrect thinking [and] comes from a time when people thought that luck was a strange force that could only be controlled by magical rituals and bizarre behaviors.'[217] Rather, according to Wiseman, so-called lucky people tend to create their own luck by being outgoing, positive, flexible, attentive, and hard-working.[218] Wiseman points out that his research 'is not simply about debunking superstitious thinking and behaviour. Instead, it is about encouraging people to move away from a magical way of thinking and toward a more rational view of luck.'[219] Wiseman states that he hopes to use 'science and skepticism to increase the level of luck, happiness, and success in people's lives.'[220] Yet, despite his call for an end of magical thinking, Wiseman's research highlights the fact magical thinking can achieve real results.

This is not entirely surprising given the ways in which play and ritual enable people to change themselves and to change their perceived world – to recreate themselves and to create a world of meaning. In the case of Wiseman's subjects, he found that people who self-identify as lucky can actively transform themselves – or, at least, perceive themselves as being transformed – into habitually lucky people. Wiseman found that those who believe themselves to be lucky, among other things (emphasis added), '[listen] to *their intuition*, *create self-fulfilling prophesies* via positive expectations, and adopt a resilient attitude that *transforms bad luck into good*.'[221] Note the use of magical language in Wiseman's so-called rational explanation of luck.

[217] Wiseman, Richard. 'The Luck Factor.' *Skeptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.
[218] Wiseman, Richard. 'The Luck Factor.' *Skeptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.
[219] Wiseman, Richard. 'The Luck Factor.' *Skeptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.
[220] Wiseman, Richard. 'The Luck Factor.' *Skeptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.
[221] Wiseman, Richard. 'The Luck Factor.' *Skeptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.

The massive success of self-help books promoting the apparent magical powers of positive thinking – from Mentalist Al Koran's 1965 bestseller, *How to Bring out the Magic in your Mind* to the 2006 mega-bestseller *The Secret*, written by Rhonda Byrne – suggests that these magical ideas, while clearly not scientific, resonate with people in a powerful way. It would further seem to suggest that these ideas even resonate powerfully enough to enable a significant number of people to create tangible changes in their lives. For this reason, I believe that Wiseman's call for scepticism misses the target to some degree. So, of course, do the endorsements of Koran and Byrne for the magical *law of attraction*; not to mention the centuries of diverse superstitious practices such as 'sympathetic,' 'homeopathic,' and 'contagious' magic detailed by James Frazer in his seminal anthropological text, *The Golden Bough*.[222] The conflict between skepticism and magical thinking, is in many ways, a false dichotomy.

It is my contention that purported psychic ability – along with luck and love – is a form of play which is frequently ritualized through ceremonies, behaviours, objects, and paraphernalia. Further, these forms of highly transformative ritualized play have, for centuries, enabled people – sometimes wilfully and sometimes unwittingly – to escape or change their circumstances, if only psychologically. Uri Geller, for instance, has remarked, '…by visualizing and fantasizing spoon bending, which I kind of brought into the world, I saw it as a tool to climb out of poverty.'[223]

Deep play can also be associated with both superstition and the paranormal when, for example, people make life decisions or gamble their savings based on advice drawn from horoscopes, fortune tellers, hotline psychics, tarot cards, dowsing rods, or other such oracles. Yet, deep play can also provide hope and be a vital source – if not always entirely harmless – of meaning making and storytelling. Richard Schechner, speaking on deep play, explains that 'sometimes in human relations – in love relations especially – we find ourselves very, very, involved in deep play.'[224] On love and deep play, Diane Ackerman, in her book *Deep Play* writes:

> When lovers isolate themselves from others, desperate to be alone together, indeed when they decide to become 'a couple,' they escape to the sacred kingdom of their love affair, a private world with its own customs, dialect, values, and rules. Love is a voluntary mysticism. They become a cult of two…. The lover is like a shaman

[222] Frazer, James G. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion.* 1890. Chapter III.
[223] 'Uri Geller Interview.' *YouTube.* 30 Sep 2016. 0:11:55.
[224] Schechner, Richard. 'Performance Studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")' *YouTube.* 17 Dec 2012. 0:01:35.

> who rises into steep ecstasy and thus is able to see into the heart and soul of the beloved. If one lover breaks up with the other, their secret world is shattered, its reality is disavowed, and in a sense the leaving partner becomes what children like to refer to as 'a spoilsport,' someone who ruins the game by rejecting its reality, essence, and appeal. Disavow the illusion and the game is over.[225]

I argue that contemporary performances of mentalism and psychic arts are not consumed by spectators according to the binary of *either* real or fake. Rather, these performances offer spectators a range of options from which to choose. Spectators may also, for instance, invest in the performance *as if* it is real, or disbelieve the performance but believe that *the performer believes* it to be real. The most appropriate areas of inquiry with regard to contemporary performances of mentalism, I would therefore argue, are not belief, disbelief, or even the willing suspension of disbelief – but rather, make-belief, performativity, ritual, and play.

Beyond Psychic

After a century of psychical and parapsychological research has failed to find robust, replicable, or credible evidence of what it has searched for,[*] it is time I argue, to expand the discourse to one which questions, not only the nature of purported psychic phenomena and beliefs but looks *beyond psychic* to questions of the performance and performativity of psychic phenomena and identities in shared social spaces. This expanded discourse would look at psychic beliefs – not as a result of flawed cognitive processes or misguided science – but as a by-product of the human need for storytelling, transformation, and play. This discourse might further investigate ways in which these time-honoured rituals and forms of deep and dark play might be engaged with safely, effectively, and with awareness and intention.

Although the shelves of bookstores are full of books about love, not one of those volumes would attempt to find proof of love in a laboratory. Love is a concept, an idea, a ritual, a game, a paradigm, a way of seeing ourselves and each other. So, too, are psychic phenomena. Psychic phenomena point to deep connections, rapport, soulmates, higher planes of existence, and a purpose for our lives. As Peter Lamont has noted, people have, through psychic beliefs, 'constructed and

[225] Ackerman, Diane. *Deep Play*. 1999. p. 20.

[*] This expression is widely derided in the field of parapsychology owing to the comparatively small amount of resources and funding devoted to this area. However, I see no reason to amend this statement.

maintained [their] beliefs about the world in which [they] live, not only about what is possible in the material world, but also about what matters in the social world.'[226] When psychic phenomena are discussed in the psychological context, as they are in Richard Wiseman's *Paranormality* or Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things,* these beliefs are often framed as pareidolia[*] run amok or as 'nonsensical'[227] and sometimes 'dangerous'[228] flaws in our thinking.

The alternative view – *that people rationally adopt beliefs in psychic phenomena* for the benefits that such beliefs provide – has only rarely been proposed. On one of the few occasions on which I have seen this concept proposed, the authors immediately passed it over in favour of a more conventional approach. In, *Psychology of the Psychic,* Marks and Kammann describe what may be referred to as the *motivational hypothesis*:

> One likely explanation is motivational. We seem to have a profound yearning for a magic formula that will free us from our ponderous and fragile human bodies, from realities that will not obey our wishes, from loneliness or unhappiness, and from death itself. This idea is especially compatible with the broader occult spectrum including astrology (which relieves us from responsibility for our actions and moods), spiritualism, reincarnation, and faith healing. In this sense, the occult serves as a sort of underground religion…[229]

Yet, the authors immediately claim to 'move on to firmer ground' pursuing the more conventional 'cognitive hypothesis that psychic belief follows from natural fallacies of human thought.'[230] The authors continue, 'Our starting point is the common experience of stumbling onto a mysterious event that defies explanation and seems supernatural.[231] In other words, Marks and Kammann suggest that psychic beliefs are more likely to grow from the cognitive misattribution of coincidences and anomalous events, rather than from the desire or motivation to hold such beliefs for a particular purpose. Based on my praxis, I hold the *motivational hypothesis* to be the more compelling – albeit incomplete – explanation.

I would assert that – on the whole – the constant and enthusiastic embrace of psychic phenomena throughout history is not fuelled by cognitive biases, schizotypy, psychosis, or personality

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[226] Schechner, Richard. *Performed Imaginaries.* 2014. p. 259.
[*] Pareidolia may be defined as: *a psychological phenomenon in which patterns are perceived where none exist.*
[227] Shermer, Michael. 'Why People Believe Weird Things.' 2002. Back Cover.
[228] Shermer, Michael. 'Why People Believe Weird Things.' 2002. Back Cover.
[229] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *The Psychology of the Psychic.* 1980. p. 156.
[230] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *The Psychology of the Psychic.* 1980. p. 156.
[231] Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *The Psychology of the Psychic.* 1980. p. 156.

disorders, but by the unique ability of humans to play, and in the process, to escape their realities or to transform themselves and their world into a better or more meaningful one. The *cognitive hypothesis*, therefore, is not necessarily the firmer ground. Richard Schechner has observed that 'people make what isn't there, combine elements from fantasy, actualize situations that occur only as art or performance. These actualizations in the service of social organization, thought, ritual, or rebellious anti-structure contain, transmit, and (dare I say it?) create the very circumstances they purport to depict.'[232]

Ackerman elucidates the reality that the transformative power of rituals comes not so much from belief in the illusions, but from a decision to play at these illusions. 'The word *illusion*,' she writes, 'literally means "in play." When the game of love is no longer in play, we say "the magic is gone," some of our best illusions have been shattered, and we return to the all-too-ordinary world.[233] Accordingly, the theories of Performance Studies, specifically theories of ritual and play – and in particular, practice-led research, such as my own interdisciplinary research in Performance Studies and Applied Psychology – may ultimately provide the firmest ground of all from which to study the motivations, benefits, consequences, and performativity of mentalism and psychic arts.

In 1897, Virginia O'Hanlon wrote to *The New York Sun*, asking if there was there a Santa Claus. The eloquent response, penned anonymously by Francis P. Church, read in part:

> …Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight.
>
> …You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.[234]

This editorial from *The New York Sun* perfectly captures the psychological benefits of *performing* belief in the imaginary. Having spent several years performing psychic phenomena, on stage and off, in laboratories and in lecture halls – not to mention portraying Santa Claus himself, in

[232] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory.* 1988. Classic Ed. 2004. p. 263.
[233] Ackerman, Diane. *Deep Play*. 1999. p. 21.
[234] Church, Francis P. 'Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus.' *The New York Sun.* 21 Sep 1897.

performances which I have come to view as a mainstream form of secular shamanism for children – I have come to believe that luck, love, and psychic phenomena are three ideas of a similar nature.

Psychic phenomena, however, are embraced fervently by some and dismissed aggressively by others. Love and luck are not treated so extremely. Rather, they are widely accepted as amorphous metaphors, both for better and for worse. I contend that it would be a step forward for society if psychic phenomena were to be approached in this light. One can understand that love is merely an idea, and still engage in love with complete passion and total commitment. One may understand that luck is merely a superstition, and still throw the salt over the left shoulder for good luck.

Similarly, one may acknowledge that psychic is a game we play to healthily challenge the completeness of science and the accuracy of its borders. Or to reaffirm our belief in our interpersonal connections. Or to rise above – or step outside of – the limitations of our social roles. Or to simply, in the words of psychologist Jordan Peterson, 'overcome the terrible limitations of existence.'[235] One may understand all of this, and still engage with the psychic premise with a playful conviction.

It is my contention that psychic phenomena is *play*, often deep and dark. Although, serious people have sought to find it in serious places, psychic phenomena has always been playful, and the scientists themselves were unwitting players in the game. Psychic phenomena is a ritual; performative, transformative, and liminal. It is an imaginary force that has bent, shaped, formed, and twisted this world and those who inhabit it. It is an imaginary force to be reckoned with.

[235] Peterson, Jordan. 'Potential.' TEDx. *YouTube.* 27 Jan 2016. 0:19:30.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

'I am body entirely, and nothing beside;
and soul is only a word for something in the body.'[1]

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Richard Schechner has called attention to the logical incompatibility of performativity and soul, asking: 'If one wears and can to some degree change what one "really is," then what about the existence of a settled identity or an indwelling eternally abiding soul?'[2] In discussing the soul, Nicholas Humphrey has noted the capacity of 'the soul hypothesis'[3] – however false it may be – to oppose the so-called 'nightmare' scenario of a world without 'paranormal soul power.'[4] Humphrey describes this "nightmare" as follows:

> What it comes down to is the fact of our inescapable embodiedness…That we can achieve nothing at all external to us by means of purely inner unexpressed mentation. That thoughts without causally sufficient action by the body must inevitably fail in their ambitions. That we have no magic powers. That prayer and spells are ineffective… And so on.[5]

Humphrey continues: 'Perhaps, instead of pining for our lost souls and absent psychic powers, we shall have to begin to take pride and pleasure in the facts of our embodiedness, our mortality and individuality.' He acknowledges that doing so will require: 'a revolution in our typically obsequious attitude towards the paranormal: the attitude of "even if it isn't true, I wish it were".'[6]

The fact, however, remains that transcending our embodied and ephemeral limitations through ritual, play, and drama has been a core function of performance from the earliest recorded histories of humanity. Thus, it is my contention that performances of mentalism and psychic arts are a prime example of the ways in which people have paradoxically celebrated their embodied limitations by acting/playing as-if these limitations don't exist.

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[1] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. 1883. 1969. pp. 61-62.
[2] Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. 3rd Ed. 2013. pp. 153-154.
[3] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1999. p. 218.
[4] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1999. p. 148.
[5] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1999. p. 218.
[6] Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith.* 1999. p. 219.

The inability of cognitive science and neuroscience to provide evidence of psychic abilities would appear to close a century-long chapter into parapsychological research. Yet, at the same time, this lack of evidence provides a way out from the protracted debate regarding alleged demonstrations of psychic abilities in the laboratory, opening a new chapter in the process. If psychic abilities may now be confidently described as imaginary, then the persistence of these performances may be examined through new lenses. In fact, this examination is particularly timely in the contemporary post-truth era of reality TV, fake news, deep-fakes, conspiracy theories, and alternative facts, in which matters of deception, self-deception, and the manipulation of beliefs have taken on a profound new social significance. I argue that the field of Performance Studies is particularly well placed for such an examination, and I have attempted to initiate that examination throughout the course of my practice, as well as within this dissertation.

In 'Performing Psychic' I called attention to the lack of analysis of mentalism and the psychic arts through the lens of Performance Studies despite the widespread popularity of these performances and argued that performances of mentalism and psychic arts are distinct from performances of both conjuring and shamanism, with which they are often conflated. In 'Crossing the Threshold' I provided images and summaries of my 13 original theatrical performances.[*] In 'Behind the Curtain' I examined my performance process alongside the process of several key practitioners, proposing the term *paraperformance* to better facilitate the analysis of such frame blurring performances. In 'Banishing the Spirits,' I interrogated the aspects of patriarchy, post-colonialism, and cultural appropriation which are historically present in performances of mentalism and psychic arts – and by extension – in my own practice. In 'The End of Mind Reading' I argued that a darkly playful and meta form of mentalism is emerging which contains elements of the hyperreal and relates to other frame blurring performance practices such as professional wrestling and method acting. Finally, in 'Beyond Psychic' I argued that performances of mentalism and psychic arts may be best viewed, not only *as performance*, but as *performative*; socially inventing the very phenomena and identities which they pretend to be.

Viewed through the lens of performativity my practice-led research has led to the following:

[*] Extended descriptions and additional analysis of these performances may be viewed in the appendices: *www.researchcatalogue.net/view/676366/676367*

- *A new way of understanding and classifying mentalism and psychic arts as a form of performance.*

For example, my darkly playful appearances on *Ireland's Got Talent* demonstrate the difficulties in distinguishing open-eye and shut-eye performances by observation alone. Thus, a new approach for understanding and classifying such performances is needed.

- *A new mode for analysing performances of mentalism and psychic arts.*

My paraperformances surrounding *Project Viola Ten,* for instance – which took place beyond the conventional boundaries of performance – demonstrate the ways in which social performances may be intended to manipulate the contexts in which other performances are embedded.

- *Demystifying performances of mentalism and psychic arts.*

The playful wink-eye performances of the Deans in *Unfathomable,* for example, were intended to play-it-straight, so to speak, while also foregrounding the artificial and theatrical elements of the performance. By doing so, we were able to frame these performances *as* performances.

- *A reclamation of the body in performances of mentalism and psychic arts.*

The spirit channelling which I performed in *Visions and Revisions,* as well as the exposure of my body on *Ireland's Got Talent,* attempted to reconnect the contemporary cerebral post-Cartesian performances of mentalists/psychics with the corporeality which was often an important part of traditional mentalism/psychic performances.

- *Identification of the social efficacy of performances of mentalism and psychic arts.*

In *Eddie Dean Telepathy Rockstar: Smells like Dean Spirit,* I created opportunities for the public, both individually and collectively, to ostensibly test (and perhaps "confirm") their own psychic abilities. Although, such an audience-centric approach is rare in performances of this nature, I hold that such activities strongly appeal to many members of the public who wilfully collude, finding pleasure or solace in acting as-if humans have the ability to transcend the limitations of our physical bodies and material existence.

As noted throughout the Introduction, my research involved numerous limitations. Most notably, perhaps, was my intention to objectively document my own subjective experience in playing darkly with my performances and behaviours. This limitation was both addressed and intensified through my use of practice-led research and autoethnography as methodologies. However, as I have previously argued, such areas are unlikely to be successfully explored otherwise. I have endeavoured to be as objective as possible during the writing of this dissertation.

Another limitation which I have refrained from addressing until now, involves my decision not to reveal my own secret techniques or the secret techniques of other performers. While I do not believe that the inclusion of such information is necessary, given the parameters of my argument, I must admit that this decision was driven in part by the conjurers' code of conduct which prohibits the gratuitous exposure of "secrets," as well as by the practical realities of mentalism which renders such exposure counterproductive. This counterproductivity may have consequences on future performances and performances of others, who depend upon secret techniques for successful performances.

Nevertheless, hundreds (if not thousands) of books are available which explicitly detail these techniques. If the reader wishes to learn these secret techniques, they are free to do so using my literature review as a starting point. Yet, there are no books available which attempt to analyse the performances of mentalism and psychic arts from the perspective of Performance Studies, as I have attempted to do here. In so doing, I defend my decision to avoid the sensational digression of revealing secrets at the risk of blurring the more important and less commonly considered areas explored throughout this dissertation.

***

In a 2018 *Newsweek* article entitled, 'Number of Witches and Pagans Explodes In The US As Millennials Reject Christianity' Benjamin Fearnow describes the tendency for young Americans to turn away from traditional religion and toward new-age shamanism.[7] This new-age millennial shamanism/witchcraft may be best described, perhaps, as a secular pseudo-scientific shamanism,

[7] Fearnow, Benjamin. 'Number of Witches and Pagans Explodes In The US As Millennials Reject Christianity.' *Newsweek.* 18 Nov 2018.

more aligned with parapsychology than with traditional shamanism and witchcraft. If science has killed God, it has also opened the door for flexible, personalized, pseudo-scientific religions.

In line with the shift, in a 2019 segment of *Last Week Tonight*,[8] late night talk show host John Oliver discussed the 'problem' of psychics, citing 2018 Pew Center research which found that 6 out of 10 Americans hold at least one major 'new age' (ie., parapsychological) belief, and 4 out of 10 believe specifically in psychics.[9] Although Oliver strongly asserts that psychics are not real, he also points out that whether 'they are real or not is incidental. What matters, is a lot of people think they are.'[10] Oliver observes that while 'it is easy to dismiss psychics as a joke – really easy – fun too,' he also points out that 'the psychic industry is both larger and grimmer than you might assume'[11] and calls attention to an IBISWorld report which found that psychic services accounted for 2.2 billion dollars in 2018 in the United States alone.[12] Oliver observes that 'this surprisingly large, often predatory industry relies on popular culture to lend it credence and validity,' and calls out daytime television talk shows and reality shows for providing a platform for the performances of so-called mediums and psychic detectives.[13]

Indeed, despite its visibility, popularity, and economic significance, the psychic industry remains virtually untouched in academic discourse, where the psychic arts – and mediumship, in particular – have been seemingly quarantined; as if this industry is its own special brand of unspeakable evil or dismissible ignorance. Whatever the explanation, the absence of this massive performance-based industry across Richard Schechner's broad spectrum analysis of performance, serves as evidence of this prominent gap.

Performances of mentalism and psychic arts offer clear examples from multiple perspectives of how the human mind may be consistently, simply, or devastatingly mis-led. Mentalists and psychics, as I have argued, operate on a plane of social manipulation which is largely unknown to the contemporary conjurer who deceives within conventional and acceptable boundaries. The persistence of – and sustained belief in – such performances, despite a complete lack of convincing

[8] Oliver, John. *Last Week Tonight.* 'Psychics.' *HBO*. S6 E2. 24 Feb 2019.
[9] Gecewicz, Claire. '"New Age" beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans.' Pew Research Center. 1 Oct 2018.
[10] Oliver, John. *Last Week Tonight.* 'Psychics.' *HBO*. S6 E2. 24 Feb 2019. *YouTube.com.* 0:02:10.
[11] Oliver, John. *Last Week Tonight.* 'Psychics.' *HBO*. S6 E2. 24 Feb 2019. *YouTube.com.* 0:02:15.
[12] 'Psychic Services in the US.' *IBISWorld.* OD4413. 2018.
[13] Oliver, John. *Last Week Tonight.* 'Psychics.' *HBO*. S6 E2. 24 Feb 2019. *YouTube.com.* 0:17:55.

scientific evidence, can cast much needed light on the nature of deception and self-deception. It is my contention that performances of psychic arts – by nature of the high visibility of these performances – may provide a key toward a greater understanding of other forms of social fakery which are similarly insidious, invisible, or concealed.

On the other hand, I also argue that mentalism and psychic arts provide certain social benefits which are only rarely discussed. For instance, in a review of mentalist Derren Brown's skeptically minded 2007 book *Tricks of the Mind,* Hilary Mantel, writing for *The Guardian,* criticizes Brown's dogmatic approach, arguing that he completely disregards the potential 'social utility'[14] of psychic beliefs. Mantel criticizes Brown for not seeing the difference 'between explaining and explaining away, between clutching at a delusion and embracing a metaphor.'[15] Mantel writes:

> The psychic trade (a stench in the nose of rationalist piety) is full of frauds, for sure, and lottery tickets are a government-sponsored racket. But the sentiment that 'It Could Be You' is incontrovertible, and hope keeps people going. Psychics are soft targets and there seems no point in attacking them and their audiences, or any other group of believers, without noting the social context in which belief flourishes.
>
> […] Superstitions unite and demarcate communities. A group of people praying together, or telling each other ghost stories, are engaged in an emotional bonding exercise of considerable social utility. Brown does not see this, and thinks religion is just for poor saps who need comfort.[16]

Mantel's argument is reminiscent of Anne Bogart's assertion that people go to church, 'not to pray to God, but rather, to stand, sit and kneel simultaneously.'[17] It is worth noting, however, that Brown's views on this matter have significantly evolved since 2006. In 2018, at the behest of a journalist for *The New Yorker*, Brown visited a 'clairvoyant named Chrissy Bee, who does readings and Reiki healings out of her house.'[18] Following the visit, Brown asked the journalist, 'What role is she filling?'[19] Brown proposes an answer to his own question, suggesting: 'On a basic level, we all like a bit of guidance and a bit of advice. But I think, more deeply, we all yearn for something

[14] Mantel, Hilary. 'Magical Thinking.' *The Guardian.* 16 Dec 2006.
[15] Mantel, Hilary. 'Magical Thinking.' *The Guardian.* 16 Dec 2006.
[16] Mantel, Hilary. 'Magical Thinking.' *The Guardian.* 16 Dec 2006.
[17] Bogart, Anne. *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. Routledge. 2007. p. 71.
[18] Green, Adam. 'How Derren Brown Remade Mind Reading for Skeptics.' *The New Yorker.* 7 Oct 2019.
[19] Green, Adam. 'How Derren Brown Remade Mind Reading for Skeptics.' *The New Yorker.* 7 Oct 2019.

that will kind of magically relieve our sense of isolation, and she's giving a lot of what we sort of want from our loved one.'[20] Several days later, Brown reflected on his visit, adding:

> She had an aspiration for something beyond herself, which is wonderful, isn't it? We all have it. I have it. And my rational, sort of cosmopolitan version may give me a snooty feeling of superiority sometimes over somebody's more suburban version, which is just very unpleasant of me. It's easy to be amused by, or put in brackets, somebody's attempts at transcendence that are different from our own, but we're all trying to find that thing that's bigger than ourselves.[21]

Brown also joked – reflecting his current preference for theatricalized approaches to psychic performances – that 'a little bit of ectoplasm would have been appreciated.'[22] In alignment with the approaches suggested above, I argue for a demystification of psychic traditions; one which acknowledges the imaginary and performative nature – as well as the potential benefits and risks – of these darkly playful performances.

The aim of this practice-led research, therefore, was to – through the use of embodied and theoretical knowledge – situate mentalism within theories of performance and play, paying close attention to the ways in which these fictional performances purport to be "reality," and examining the various ways in which people "do psychic" on stage, screen, and in everyday life. To do this, I drew from a wide range of theories across the fields of Performance Studies, Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, Phenomenology, Philosophy, Cognitive Science, Postmodernism, Gender Studies, and Post-Colonialism. As a result of this research, it is my contention that these "psychic" performances, activities, and behaviours can be understood as performative actions which invent – in a social sense – the very experiences and beliefs which they pretend to be. Although these performances are not reflective of reality, they are nevertheless entangled with the real; real transformations, real consequences, real affects.

Many "real life" experiences may be viewed as dark and deep play – a secret form of role playing – wherein the reality of the performance is concealed not only from others, but sometimes the performers themselves. Clearly, such forms of play often have high-stakes, and can involve everything from relationships, partnerships, business deals, spiritual and scientific beliefs, and even life and death. While navigating this liminal area, I did my best to both learn from, and

[20] Green, Adam. 'How Derren Brown Remade Mind Reading for Skeptics.' *The New Yorker.* 7 Oct 2019.
[21] Green, Adam. 'How Derren Brown Remade Mind Reading for Skeptics.' *The New Yorker.* 7 Oct 2019.
[22] Green, Adam. 'How Derren Brown Remade Mind Reading for Skeptics.' *The New Yorker.* 7 Oct 2019.

honestly reflect upon, the performance of mentalism and psychic arts as well as my own practice. In so doing, I attempted to be, as Jeffrey Kripal suggests, 'subjective and objective at the same time.'[23]

It is important to acknowledge that embodied and enacted psychic ideas – regardless of the beliefs of the performer – in reality, are performances of the imaginary. Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that imaginary ideas have power. Performances of mentalism and psychic arts have the ability to connect and unite; to entertain and to provide meaning; to create wealth and success; to facilitate growth and gratitude; and to heal and protect, both ourselves, and those we love.

Psychologist Stanley Milgram observed, regarding his legendary experiments on obedience: 'It may be that we are puppets – puppets controlled by the strings of society. But at least we are puppets with perception, with awareness. And perhaps our awareness is the first step to our liberation.'[24] Throughout this dissertation I have argued that by viewing and approaching such performances *as* performances, we can demystify much of that which is currently mystified, in order to better understand, manage, control, and reflect upon performances of mentalism and psychic arts on stage, screen, and in everyday life.

[23] Kripal, Jeffrey J. 'Authors of the Impossible.' TEDxHouston. *YouTube*. 16 Jan 2013. 0:03:45.
[24] Milgram, Stanley. 'We are all obedient.' *The Listener*. 31 Oct 1974. p. 568.

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