

MAGIC, SPIRITUALISM, AND CINEMA, CIRCA 1895

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Moving pictures appeared at the height of theatrical magic's "golden age," at a time when the magician was a ubiquitous figure in popular entertainment. Performing on the variety stage and in traveling shows, magicians were among the first motion picture exhibitors, and some of the earliest film spectators would have seen cinema as a part of a magic show. Additionally, a number of turn-of-the-century motion picture catalogues include brief filmed performances by prestidigitators like J. Stuart Blackton, David Devant, Leopoldo Fregoli, John Nevil Maskelyne, and Felicien Trewey. In *The Magician and the Cinema*, Erik Barnouw argues that stage magic's importance for film history was rather short-lived, claiming that the industrialization of cinema during the first decade of the twentieth century moved the medium away from traditional practices of stage magic. Long take displays of manual dexterity were quickly supplanted by more novel cinematic manipulations (substitution splice, trick photography) and the genre of the trick film spawned by these techniques begins to decline, according to Barnouw, by 1905.¹

Here, I would like to set aside both the cinematic work of magicians and the trick film in order to propose that the culture of stage magic had an even more fundamental impact upon early cinema through the construction and reception of the cinematic apparatus. Rather than focusing on issues of film form and content, my essay explores magic's historical relationship to the cinematic apparatus itself. Stage magic's seminal role in shaping discourse about the cinema becomes legible in mid-1890s accounts of cinema that use specific metaphors from the realm of stage magic to narrate the new invention. In these texts, camera and projector figure as marvels of photographic and mechanical technology, but descriptions of the moving images produced by the machine – that most crucial part of the "apparatus" – far exceed the language of natural science. Projected motion pictures are characterized as a rather eerie sight that resembles nothing so much as the apparent company of ghosts. Ultimately, however, cinema's apparitional quality is contained by likening it to the illusions of *fin-de-siècle* theatrical magic, in which imitations of spiritualist phenomena made up a particularly timely component of the magician's art.

Magic's full impact on cinema can thus best be gauged through consideration of the spiritualist movement. While Barnouw's pioneering history of magic and early cinema underestimates the continued significance of virtuoso performance, it also tends to underplay the critical role spiritualism played in stage magic's renewed popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, cinema's relation to magic cannot entirely be disentangled from larger cultural concerns with the startling possibilities posited by spiritualism. During the nineteenth century, spiritualists claimed to

demonstrate audible, visible, and/or physical contact with the deceased. Jeffrey Sconce points out that popular imagination of the time was sometimes prone to impute similar powers to new technologies like telegraphy that trafficked in the immaterial.² In “Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations,” Tom Gunning foregrounds the place of Spiritualism in what he terms the “uncanny” reception of photography.³ One question that results from the provocative connections Gunning makes between spirit photography, magic theater, and the trick film, however, is the following: Why did the “uncanny” reception of early cinema – despite continued and vigorous popular and scientific interest in spiritualism – never coalesce in a set of practices comparable to those of spirit photography? In other words: Why was there never such a thing as “spirit cinematography”?

Such questions require us to take seriously the cultural significance of the occult and thus fall largely outside the parameters of existing studies of the cinema. Asking them reminds us that the divide between the rational and the irrational is cultural, and emphasizes that cinema’s relation to these respective categories is the product of a historical process of negotiation. Parts of the answers, I contend, can be found in the way that the incipient cinema’s cultural associations with magic – and, in particular, with magic’s growing tradition of pseudo-spiritualist theater – worked to repress and displace the medium’s phenomenological affinities with apparent spirit phenomena. Continuities between theatrical magic and early cinema helped to disavow the seeming spectrality of moving images. Relevant here is the polemical opposition to spiritualism spearheaded by magicians who claimed that purported spirit manifestations were produced by fairly simple conjuring tricks that went undetected in spiritualist *séances* under cover of darkness. Through *exposés* in the popular press, in lecture halls, and in courts of law, professional magicians were among the most outspoken antagonists to spiritualism during the last several decades of the nineteenth century. Although most turn-of-the-century magicians denounced the substance of spiritualism as fraudulent, many nevertheless exploited popular interest in psychical phenomena by frequently performing pseudo-spiritualist manifestations as part of their magic shows.

An archetypal description of the new medium of cinema in would-be spiritualist terms is found in the 1895 *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetophonograph*, co-authored by W.K.L. Dickson and his sister Antonia Dickson.⁴ Jacques Deslandes cites the Dicksons’ *History of the Kinetograph* as the opening salvo in what he terms “the war of pamphlets,” a series of short works published before 1900, each claiming a different individual was the true originator of motion pictures (alternatively, Thomas Alva Edison, C. Francis Jenkins, or Étienne-Jules Marey).⁵ Rather than focusing on issues of primacy, I would instead like to read the Dicksons’ history as a document implicated in another discursive struggle, one that pitted the rational science of magicians and their ilk against the seeming irrationalism of spiritualist practice. Written when the experience of motion pictures would still have been hypothetical for most readers, the pamphlet describes the cinematic apparatus by invoking images of materialization as well as illusion – both highly contested terms in contemporaneous struggles between spiritualists and magicians. The *History of the Kinetograph* describes an experimental projection that would have taken place in the Edison laboratories several years before the Lumières’ legendary screening at the Grand Café. Explicitly mysterious, the Dicksons’ account of the apparatus highlights

the necessity of making an upper-story room as dark as possible in order to render visible the relatively dim projected images:

The projecting room, which is situated on the upper story of the photographic department, is hung with portentous black on exhibition evenings, in order to prevent any reflection from the circle of light emanating from the screen at the other end, the projector being placed behind a curtain of the same cheerful hue and provided with a single peephole for the accommodation of the lens. The effect of these somber draperies and the weird accompanying monotone of the electric motor, attached to the projector, are horribly impressive, and one's sense of the supernatural is heightened when a figure suddenly springs into his path, acting and talking with a vigor which leaves him totally unprepared for its mysterious vanishing.⁶

Whether or not the screening took place precisely as the Dicksons describe, the elaborate preparations made for guaranteeing total darkness as well as the attention given to enshrouding the projector behind a curtain suggest a striking analogy with a spiritualist *séance* conducted under “test” conditions. The procedural analogy with spiritualist practice becomes even more striking when one considers that, as Ann Braude notes, “materializations generally occurred at ‘cabinet *séances*,’ in which the medium withdrew to a small sealed room or closet before manifestations appeared.”⁷ In these *séances*, the “cabinet” used to separate the medium from other sitters was often little more than a heavy drape. These are the very terms of the Dicksons’ account. In it, the projecting kinoscope, confined to a curtained cabinet in a darkened room much like a *séance*, unexpectedly produces a moving figure that suddenly appears and then mysteriously vanishes – a fleeting full-form materialization.

The association between spiritualism and cinema in the *History of the Kinetograph* is, however, highly equivocal. The phenomena that had supported the emergence of modern spiritualism in the late 1840s – spirit rapping, trance speaking, and automatic writing – were primarily auditory and linguistic. More spectacular visual phenomena like spirit photography and complete materializations did not appear regularly until the 1860s.⁸ These latter forms of spiritualist practice were among the most suspect, and frequently subject to accusations of fraud. According to Janet Oppenheim, many spirit mediums avoided complete physical materializations entirely: “So glaring were the opportunities for deception in the production of full-form materializations that some mediums resented the ill repute the shady phenomena brought to the entire profession.”⁹ Thus, materializations were less frequently seen in actual *séances* than in the magic theater, where a number of magicians produced spectacular “physical phenomena” through resolutely natural means. Correspondingly, although the Dicksons’ account initially likens moving pictures to a spiritualist manifestation, the seeming apparition is subsequently explained as a deceptively realistic illusion created through photography and phonography:

Nothing more marvelous or more natural could be imagined than these breathing, audible forms, with their tricks of familiar gesture and speech. The inconceivable swiftness of the photographic successions and the exquisite synchronism of the phonographic attachment have removed the last trace of automatic action, and the illusion is complete.¹⁰

Cinema is framed here less as a new mode of spiritualist communication than as an up-to-date trick of rational magic. Though the apparent powers of the cinematic apparatus might seem to border on the supernatural, the medium's potential to access the "new revelation" of spiritualism (as Arthur Conan Doyle and other devoted spiritualists would put it) is ultimately de-emphasized. Instead, the analogy is with the pseudo-spiritualism of theatrical magicians and the technological amusements of *Scientific American* magazine.¹¹

The manifest appropriation of spiritualist practice in the *History of the Kinetograph* is most equivocal with respect to its juxtaposition of motion pictures and spirit photography. Alongside the Dicksons' text is an image that depicts W.K.L. Dickson slouched contemplatively in a chair as his own dim spectre hovers behind him with its arms crossed, looking down over his shoulder. Its appearance on the page immediately prior to the serial images of an early kinetographic experiment is extremely suggestive.¹² In her contemporary gloss of a similar photograph, Terry Castle writes, "this carefully staged double exposure (if that is what it is) is a kind of self-reflexive commentary on the uncanny nature of photography, the ultimate ghost-producing technology of the nineteenth century."¹³ The inclusion of a spirit photograph in one of the earliest works on moving pictures suggests that cinema too is a ghost-producing technology. Any suggestion of spirit cinematography is diverted, however, by the immediate realization that this "spirit photograph" is an obvious fake. Instead of revealing what spiritualists termed a spirit "extra" behind the sitter, this photograph shows the subject of the full-length portrait standing behind himself in double exposure; it is, in fact, a self-portrait of W.K.L. Dickson. "Spiritualists believe that Spirits can be photographed,"¹⁴ but W.K.L. Dickson, a skilled photographer, has merely borrowed a recognizable convention of spirit photography. The other examples of "photography extraordinary" that accompany the Dicksons' text – images of W.K.L. Dickson with two heads, without a head, and with his head upon a charger – place this "spirit photograph" firmly in the realm of trick photography.¹⁵ Indeed, the image appears as but another photographic effect created by multiple exposures against a black background.¹⁶

The *History of the Kinetograph* often seems at odds to construct cinema both as a rational technological marvel and as an irrational spectral manifestation. Indeed, perhaps the most compelling aspect of the text is that the struggle for meaning seems internal to the work itself. This tension may, in part, be attributable to the respective co-authors of the pamphlet, W.K.L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson. W.K.L. Dickson was a tinkerer with an interest in mechanical novelties who likely interacted frequently with magicians in his work from 1893 to 1895 for Elias Koopman's Magic Introduction Company, a New York company which sold magic equipment and conjuring paraphernalia.¹⁷ Comparatively little is known about his older sibling Antonia Dickson, although the highly ornamented writing style of their co-written works has been attributed to her.¹⁸ Gordon Hendricks claims disparagingly that, "much of the 'literary' quality of the joint Antonia-W.K.L. efforts may be attributable to Antonia, who grossly overwrites."¹⁹ Consider the conclusion of the *History of the Kinetograph*, which associates motion pictures with "nineteenth-century magic," but through a veil of mythological references:

In the promotion of business interests, in the advancement of science, in the revelation of unguessed worlds, in its educational and re-creative powers, and in its ability to immortal-

*ize our fleeting but beloved associations, the kinetograph stands foremost among the creations of modern inventive genius. It is the crown and flower of nineteenth-century magic, the crystallization of Eons of groping enchantments. In its wholesome, sunny and accessible laws are possibilities undreamt of by the occult lore of the East, the jealous erudition of Babylon, the guarded mysteries of Delphic and Eleusinian shrines. It is the earnest of the coming age, when the great potentialities of life shall no longer be in the keeping of cloister and college, sword or money-bag, but shall overflow to the nethermost portions of the earth at the command of the humblest heir of the divine intelligence.*²⁰

Largely dismissed by Hendricks and others, it is tempting to read such passages in relation to what Braude describes as the “flowing speech” and “easy eloquence” of female trance speakers.²¹ R. Laurence Moore notes that spiritualist trance lecturers would often talk for more than an hour on subjects selected by all-male juries, usually scientific questions, and “whatever the deficiencies in scientific accuracy, [the talks] usually at the very least left the audience with a healthy respect for the extemporaneous speaking abilities of the medium.”²² Although a profound lack of biographical information about Antonia Dickson makes further speculation over the authors of the *History of the Kinetograph* impossible, the ambivalence of the text has typically been read exclusively in terms of gender. Hendricks insists that credit for the invention of the motion picture should go to the “interest, perseverance, and mechanical and inventive skill” of W.K.L. Dickson while regretting that the inventor’s legacy has been obfuscated by the “airy persiflage” and “mawkish wanderings” of Antonia Dickson’s writings.²³ This construction of technology (and straightforward factual prose) as “masculine” mitigates identification of the cinematic apparatus with the “feminine” domain of the spirit medium suggested by the Dicksons’ florid text. It is also comparable to the way that historical conflicts between spiritualists and magicians were gendered. The vast majority of prominent spirit mediums – with the noted exception of Daniel Dunglas Home – were female, while nearly all of the documented magicians of this era – except for Adelaide Herrmann – were male.

Works like the *History of the Kinetograph* and the Dicksons’ 1894 *The Life and Inventions of Thomas Alva Edison* may tell us relatively little about the specific timeline of technical innovations that resulted in cinematography or film projection. And readers like Hendricks may prefer the “soberer writings” authored solely by W.K.L. Dickson.²⁴ Yet, the very rhetorical excess of Antonia Dickson’s prose (if that is whose it is) provides fascinating evidence of what Yuri Tsivian terms the “cultural reception” of cinema. Cultural reception, Tsivian writes, involves a “reflective” response, “a response that is active, creative, interventionist, or even aggressive,” and, “the task of those who take up the study of cultural reception is [...] to summarise and interpret the recurrent associations and fixed ideas that each culture reads into [...] early cinema.”²⁵ By incongruously conjoining a technological device with several primarily non-technological practices, the *History of the Kinetograph* constitutes just such a reflective response. It indicates that cinema occupied an ambivalent place between theatrical magic and popular spiritualism such that debates between magicians and spiritualists took on a special importance for early cinema. It also suggests that there is another – almost entirely unexplored – discourse on early cinema that highlighted the modern medium’s links with the traditional realms of the performative and the irrational. Works like the *History of the Kinetograph* point to ways that a rational understanding

of the workings of cinematic technology could readily coexist – at least initially – with seemingly contradictory conceptions of the image-producing apparatus. This particular mode of cultural reception never seems to have been substantial enough, however, to create sustained popular interest in “spirit cinematography.”

- 1 Erik Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 85-105.
- 2 Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 1-58.
- 3 Tom Gunning, “Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography’s Uncanny,” in Patrice Petro (ed.), *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 42-71. I treat the spiritualist movement less as a full-fledged religion (“Spiritualism”) and more as a set of primarily secular practices (“spiritualism”).
- 4 William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetophone* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000 [1895]).
- 5 Jacques Deslandes, *Histoire comparée du cinéma. De la cinématographie au cinématographe 1826-1896*, Vol. 1, (Tournai: Casterman, 1966), pp. 8-10.
- 6 W.K.L. Dickson, A. Dickson, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.
- 7 Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 176.
- 8 Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 29-30.
- 9 Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 18.
- 10 W.K.L. Dickson, A. Dickson, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 11 Meryem Ersoz, “American Magic, American Technology: Visual Culture and Popular Science in the Machine Age,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon (1997), pp. 1-144.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
- 13 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 167.
- 14 James Coates, *Photographing the Invisible: Practical Studies in Spirit Photography, Spirit Portraiture and other Rare but Allied Phenomena* (New York: Arno Press, 1973 [1911]), p. iv.
- 15 W.K.L. Dickson, A. Dickson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- 16 See also Albert A. Hopkins, *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976 [1898]), pp. 425-440.
- 17 E. Barnouw, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- 18 Paul Spehr says that Antonia Dickson (1858-1903), “a child prodigy and skilled musician, was a ‘spinster’ who had lived with Dickson and his wife since they were married.” Paul C. Spehr, “Throwing Pictures on a Screen: The Work of W.K.L. Dickson, Film Maker,” *Griffithiana*, no. 66-70 (1999-2000), p. 53. I would like to thank Paul Spehr for kindly sharing his biographical knowledge of Antonia and W.K.L. Dickson with me on several occasions; he is currently writing a biography of William Kennedy Laurie Dickson (1860-1935).
- 19 Gordon Hendricks, *The Kinetoscope: America’s First Successful Motion Picture Exhibitor* [1966], p. 130; rpt. in *Origins of the American Film* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).
- 20 W.K.L. Dickson, A. Dickson, *op. cit.*, p. 52

- 21 A. Braude, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- 22 R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 113-114.
- 23 Gordon Hendricks, *The Edison Motion Picture Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 3, 7.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 25 Yuri Tsivian, *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception*, trans. Alan Bodger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 1, 3.