

## **Interrogating the Blue Room: Reflections on a Turn-of-the-Century Magic Show and the Veracity of the Senses**

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“I can’t believe my eyes!” That was the reaction of many audience members who experienced Harry Kellar’s marvelous Blue Room illusion. They watched as Kellar slowly vanished, transformed himself into a skeleton, or made a rose bush grow instantaneously from a seed; and all of this occurred with no discernible apparatus. The transformations happened in full view of the audience, under bright lights, without employing any covering. Although Kellar assured the audience members that he possessed no supernatural powers, it did not squelch their amazement. What they had seen seemed impossible.

Kellar performed his Blue Room illusion throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a time in which the relationship between vision and reality was repeatedly called into question. The century was a period of great innovation, and creations that allowed for new ways of seeing were constantly surfacing. Advancements in glass manufacturing, lens grinding, and lighting created opportunities for new, spectacular amusements and entertainments; optical “toys” such as the camera, the stereoscope, the magic lantern, and the mutoscope gave Victorians the opportunity to experience images that had been previously unimaginable; and ongoing explorations in the field of optics brought the workings of vision to the fore, so much so that in 1856, David Brewster, in his influential *Letters on Natural Magic*, felt confident in declaring, “[O]f all the sciences, Optics is the most fertile in marvellous expedients” (5). Victorian society was a society of spectacle, one that forced spectators to learn new ways of

seeing in response to the fast pace of technological advancements. As Helen Groth notes, the mid-century Victorian audience was “increasingly visually literate” (44).

A society that coveted both spectacle and science created an ideal space for promoting the talents of stage magicians. Magic shows had long featured illusions and visual effects that were accomplished through the careful understanding and manipulation of psychological principles and natural laws, and near the end of the nineteenth century magicians were able to use this as a basis for promoting themselves as men of science who employed scientific principles to amaze and entertain. As Sofie Lachapelle notes, “By the second half of the nineteenth century, scientific learning and technological developments were being moulded and incorporated into the world of conjuring where they were given an aura of mystery and wonder for the amusement of the crowd. At the hands of the magicians, the popularization of science was entering the magic shows” (297).

Magicians were also positioning themselves as moral watchdogs in relation to the rising number of charlatans that surfaced during the Victorian era. In the mid-nineteenth century, with the rise of Spiritualism, for example, many magicians took on the task of debunking phony spirit mediums by introducing audiences to the tricks and techniques used to fool unsuspecting séance participants. The magicians staged performances in which they would recreate the effects produced by spirit mediums, all the while assuring the audience that the sounds and apparitions were brought about using nothing more than standard conjuring tricks. Most stage magicians had at least a tacit agreement with their audiences that their illusions were created through sheer skill and ingenuity, and they took offense at charlatans who were employing deceits in order to take advantage of an unsuspecting populace (and who were stealing a portion of their shows’

attendants). By setting their performances up as instructive, magicians could present themselves as allies with a public that valued education and enlightenment, while still maintaining a mysterious and entertaining show. As Fred Nadis points out in his discussion of wonder shows, “Magicians found that . . . teaching audiences how to avoid cardsharps and confidence men, could align their craft with progressive forces while releasing them from the strain of directly imitating a scientist or natural philosopher while on stage (118).

Harry Kellar’s “Blue Room” illusion is one that exemplifies the affinity between science, stage magic, and some of the prominent issues circulating within Victorian culture. It involves a series of appearances, disappearances, and transformations that occur within a small, curtained chamber. The illusion was first created by John Henry Pepper and John Walker at the Royal Polytechnic in London, where it premiered under the title, “Metempsychosis” in 1879. Earlier in the century, Pepper had paired with another inventor, Henry Dircks, to create another illusion that brought discussions of ghosts and materiality to the fore. In 1862 the illusion now commonly known as “Pepper’s ghost” premiered at the Royal Polytechnic as an entertainment that was also cloaked in the guise of an opportunity to impart scientific wisdom. Pepper touted the experience as one that would enlighten audience members as to the foolishness of believing in ghosts by demonstrating the way in which physiology could affect vision:

In presenting these experiments, which I think entitle me to call the Entertainment a “*Strange Lecture*,” I shall consider myself fortunate if I have helped to shake the ridiculous belief in *Ghosts*, which still lingers in some people’s minds

If we can by optical means produce these strange effects, it is not difficult to comprehend that the exquisite organ, the eye, may become so affected by disease that, whether by the pressure of excess of blood in the minute and delicate vessels, or otherwise, certain images of things already seen may be called up and presented before us as spectra or spectres; and the moral of our experiment is simply this, that apparitions or

spectres are the results of diseases, and are best and most quickly made to vanish by the good and skilful [sic] offices of the Medical Man. (Pepper, *Strange Lecture*, 7-8)

While Pepper alleged to be using the ghost illusion as an instructional tool, he never quite got around to providing his audiences with the promised explanation as to how the effect was created.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the secret was discovered, however, and “Pepper’s ghost” quickly found its way into many other stage productions and plays on both sides of the Atlantic.

Pepper’s deployment of the Metempsychosis illusion at the Royal Polytechnic in 1879 was also presented as an instructional production, but one that had a bit of a twist. It has been described by magic historian Simon During as “a comic overturning of the science lecture,” because in it Pepper transformed foodstuffs into unexpected objects, rather than describing their chemical constituents as was the case in most standard lectures of this type (148). For instance, oranges were changed into pots of marmalade and a bunch of sausages was transformed into a poodle (Pepper, *Strange Lecture*, 38). In Kellar’s version he would variously, transform himself into a skeleton, transform himself into his wife, make it look as if his head had detached from his body, sit in a chair and slowly disappear, transform a seed into a bush of American Beauty roses, and produce Mrs. Kellar from the center of the rose bush. An 1893 eyewitness account of the performance describes it as follows:

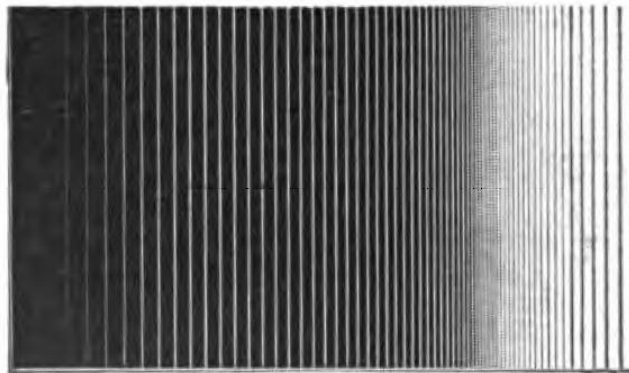
The entertainment closes with a reproduction of Kellar's blue room, and in this his work is most wonderful. He appears and disappears at will. One moment he is seated in a chair at the rear of the stage, and while you watch him he seems to fade from view, and you are looking at—nothing—or in his stead will be a grinning skeleton. It is in this part that he apparently parts with his head and while it is seen soaring skyward, Kellar appears safe and sound, and while one is

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<sup>1</sup> The illusion used a large sheet pane glass tilted at a forty-five degree angle toward the audience so that it could reflect a performer who was situated in the orchestra pit. When the pit performer, who was usually dressed in white, was hit with the bright light from a magic lantern, his image would be superimpose upon the stage scene, and it would look like he was spatially next to a performer who was on stage behind the glass.

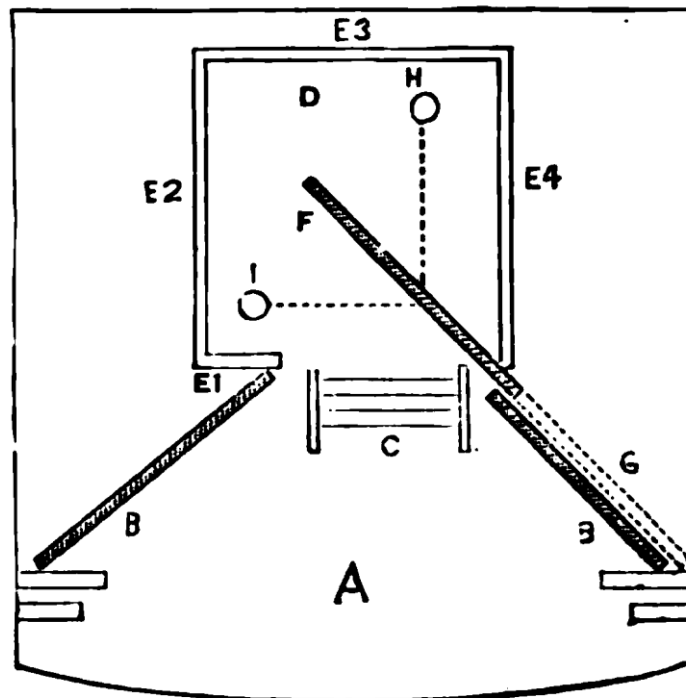
wondering at the awfulness of it where Kellar so recently lost his head, a beautiful rose bush, covered with full-bloom roses, is seen, and, rising out of it, is Mrs. Kellar, the Queen of Roses. It is all most mystifying and wonderful. (“Dramatic”)

The Blue Room and Metempsychosis transformations were created by employing a carefully-choreographed series of undetectable stage reconfigurations centered around a partially-mirrored pane of glass. The mirrored glass was carefully prepared with the silvering gradually scraped away so that the pane, from one end to the other, went from entirely transparent to entirely reflective.



Reproduced from Hopkins p. 534.

The silvered glass was set perpendicular to the stage floor at a forty-five degree angle to the front edge of the stage, and rested in a track that allowed it to slide back and forth. When this pane was slowly moved into place between the audience and an object upstage of it, it would gradually change the audience’s view from being able to see through the glass to the object behind, to seeing a reflected object that was placed in an unseen part of the room. If the objects were carefully positioned, one would be superimposed upon another; thus, as one view dissolved into another, it looked as if a transformation was occurring.



**FIG. 2.**

Diagram of Blue Room set-up reproduced from Hopkins, p.534.

One challenge of the effect, was covering the noise of the sliding glass. In order to solve this problem, the illusion was performed with music (Pepper, *True History*, 42).

In his advertising for the Blue Room, Kellar emphasized the connection between art and science. Without disclosing the specific scientific principles that were in play, he assured audiences that “It is the most astounding production of modern times, and the latest artistic addition to scientific invention.” Kellar also drew his audiences in to try and solve the visual puzzle with ads that challenged, “HOW IS IT DONE?” This challenge was also echoed in the writings of journalists who attended the production. They took up the call for audiences to test their own powers of observation and ratiocination in relation to the Blue Room illusion, while

acknowledging that even if audience members could not figure it out, they should not feel dull or disheartened, because Kellar's skillful manipulation of nature's laws was a true example of American innovation. Note, for example, the nod to the intelligence of the audience in the following description:

The novelties which Mr. and Mrs. Kellar are now able to present to their audiences in the United States, the most intelligent audiences in the world, afford problems which the scientists and the amusement-seeker alike will find fascinating. The marvelous has a deep hold on the human soul, and Kellar, who expressly disclaims any element of supernaturalism, or suggestion of the uncanny in what he does, nevertheless defies explanation of any of these new feats.

In addition to the intellectual challenge that Kellar's Blue Room illusion posed, it also tangentially referenced the debates surrounding ghosts and the nature of life and death that were circulating within Victorian society. Illusions that featured elements related to the materiality of the human body, such as ghosts, skeletons, disappearances and transformations, also activated thoughts of mortality and the meaning of life. Kellar was aware of this connection, and exploited it in his marketing as well. In early advertisements for the Blue Room it was sometimes billed as *The House and the Brain or The Mystery of The Blue Room*. The phrase "The House and the Brain," comes from the title of Edward George Bulwer-Lytton's 1859 tale of paranormal happenings in an abandoned house. In the story, a young scientist takes up a challenge to stay overnight in the haunted house in order to definitively explain the seemingly-supernatural goings-on. In a like manner Kellar invited audiences to try and explain the uncanny events they witnessed in his mysterious Blue Room. He also tacitly challenged them to consider the matter of their own impermanence. As audiences watched Kellar slowly dissolve away, or transform

into a skeleton, a sense of their own mortality might have lingered for just a moment.

While stage magicians such as Kellar were admitting their debt to science, the scientific community reciprocally acknowledged the way in which theatrical performances activated scientific principles and learning. Science publications capitalized upon the popularity of magic performances by printing explanations of how some of the large stage illusions were achieved (much to the chagrin of the magicians). An explanation of Kellar's Blue Room, for example, appeared in the September 18, 1897 issue of *Scientific American*. The productions of large illusions also found their way into settings that placed them alongside other educational offerings that were made available to the public for their edification and amusement. Kellar's illusion, for example, was one of the attractions presented in Chicago's White City Park in 1906, alongside such instructional offerings as an exhibit about the Chicago fire, and Hale's "Tours of the World."

Magicians perform acts that seem to contradict natural laws, thus foregrounding the way in which the senses can be deceived. In the learning-hungry, spectacle-laden world of the late nineteenth century, they were able to position their performances as both entertaining and enlightening. The Blue Room illusion offered Kellar an opportunity to align himself with the prevailing interest in science and to foreground the way in which optical principles can be manipulated to create seemingly impossible occurrences. It was a marvelously entertaining and timely example of the way in which the senses may be deceived, and a reminder of how discoveries within the field of optics were calling into question the conventional wisdom, and making people realize that "the connection between image and eye that most optical theory presupposed was gradually breaking down" (Armstrong 203). The Blue Room illusion also



served as a potential catalyst for discussions surrounding immortality. It exemplifies how performances of the late nineteenth century offered a great deal more to the public than just entertainment. As Jane Goodall states, “Show business intervened in the world of ideas with its own forms of expertise: in passing things off and in stretching the parameters of curiosity.” Kellar’s Blue Room is certainly a popular stage production that did just that.

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