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Recent Publications

'The Space of Stage Magic'. *Space and Culture*, Sage Publications, Vol 5, No 4, November 2002

'Spatial Pleasure'. *Space and Culture*, Sage Publications, Vol 8, No 2, May 2005.

'Carried Away: The Spatial Pleasure of Transportability', in Robert Kronenburg & Feliz Klassen (eds.) *Transportable Environments III* (London: Spon Press, 2005)

Abstract

The article suggests that "transparency" and "invisibility" are slippery concepts. It discusses a method of rendering things invisible that was an important technique in 19th century magic routines. In more recent years "seeing nothing", and being brought to an awareness that one is seeing nothing, has been used to evoke the sublime. The article reminds us that the manipulation of experiences of "seeing nothing" is part of conjuring.

SEEING NOTHING

Prologue

Some definitions of 'transparent'

1. Clear, easily seen through or understood, easily discerned, frank, open.
2. *In computing, etc:* Of a program or process: not revealing its presence to the general user. (1)

Such ambiguities are grist to the mill of the conjuror.

Thick and thin air

Magic shows used to attract enthusiastic audiences to theatres and music halls. The simultaneous decline in their popularity and the expansion of cinema are well documented. (2) Trick photography and later the movie camera were able to recreate visual illusions by manipulating time, and the editing process made the magician's techniques redundant. Magical performances themselves had no magic when captured on film, which by itself could fill the air with illusive thickenings and gatherings of matter.

But one part of the spatial disturbance – the magic that is lost by film – still lingers very close to us, for its cultural significance extends far before and beyond its manipulation in Victorian magic shows. It is the brief ecstatic (and possibly erroneous) sensation of lucidity that we feel when something draws our attention to thin air.

Imagery of thick and thin air is deep in the Western mind. Thick air lies nearer to the earth, filled with vapours and miasmas. It is here that spectres exist, in a fog of suggestion and unspecified crimes. Thick air is deceptive and suggestive; it holds germs and spreads infection. The air of cinemas is thick. (In the polio-fearing cinema of my childhood a commissionaire stalked the aisle, spraying us with a Flit gun during the performances.) Thick air is active, and promotes dissimulation.

Thin air on the other hand is free from earthly matter. Thin air is where emptiness is; the perception of absolute transparency, with no trace of the milky beam of the cinema projector or the opacity of the screen that is needed to catch the image. Here we are not 'seeing ghosts' but 'seeing nothing'.

I'm not talking about 'not seeing', as when one fails to notice some shadowy or camouflaged entity, nor about staring into velvet blackness, nor about the field behind the eyes in which our mental images may hang, nor yet about the visual hallucinations that can rise up when visual cues are cut off, as with the Ganzfeld. I am talking about the moments when, looking at something that is empty, we are aware that we are seeing an emptiness that is bounded by objects. It is a sensation that emphasizes the more-than-2-dimensionality of the world. It resonates in 17th century Dutch interior paintings, for example, or in the stereo-photographs that became so popular around the middle of the 19th century.

This date brings back the period just before the explosion in popularity of optical magic tricks that characterised the later 19th century, the heyday of Pepper's Ghost, magic lantern slides and other proto-cinematic phenomena. But at much the same time in the 1860s that Professor Pepper was patenting and staging the famous 'Ghost' illusion, another less obviously spectacular effect was also noted as a novelty that might have a future in the production of curious stage experiences.

Pepper's arrangement conjured up melodramatic spectres who seemed to walk on stage among flesh and blood actors. It worked by harnessing the ability of a sheet of polished glass to act as a semi-transparent mirror under specific lighting conditions. The actor playing the ghost, hidden out of view in a black-walled pit below and in front of the stage, would appear to be on stage behind the glass. An air of dimness in the figure of the ghost verified its insubstantiality. In theory the virtual image was being taken for reality by an audience who did not know that the glass was there. Knowing how the illusion worked did not detract from its enchantment however, indeed it was part of the charm. Audiences paid their entrance fees to see and hear the demonstration of the phenomenon, rather than to be hoaxed. For a period, the Ghost illusion found a place in theatrical pantomimes and melodramas, but the difficulties of staging it kept it tied to its cameo role, an obvious 'special effect'.

The alternative version used the same optical principles in an inversion that could not be spoken about in the same way. Rather than reflecting a ghostly presence, this arrangement reflected nothing out of the ordinary. It manifested emptiness, reflected absence, demonstrated that there was nothing at all there.

Jim Steinmeyer, a modern designer of conjuring apparatus, has described the second ensemble as creating for nineteenth century magicians 'an optical formula for invisibility' (Steinmeyer, 2003, p.77). Variations on the technique were the basis of many great optical conjuring illusions of the later 19th century. Basically, mirrors were arranged to reflect a continuation of normality - perhaps something as dull and undifferentiated as the pattern of the carpet or a blank wall. Innocent observers, unaware of the presence of the mirrors, would not realise that the space they were looking through was actually a virtual image of emptiness laid over the true space behind. (3)

And of course behind the mirrors was the thing that must not be seen - the "vanished" assistant or object - concealed in a wedge of space that was rendered invisible by appearing to be transparent. The edges of the mirrors, which are going to give the trick away, would be incorporated in the overall setting, so that their junctions were masked by plausible horizontals and verticals, such as the legs of a table, the grid of floor tiles, the rectilinear framework of a cabinet or a box. The illusion of emptiness was created by the apparent extension of normal perspective through and beyond the invisible volume. It needed careful lighting, but unlike illusions where spectres were conjured up out of darkness, it was an illusion in which light, clarity, transparency and emptiness were incredibly and emphatically present, bound up in a disingenuous manipulation of the relentless Renaissance linear perspective that places the vanishing point at infinity.

One acclaimed early version was called *The Sphinx*. In this routine, the conjuror carried a small box to a bare table. The box was opened to reveal that it contained a living human head which opened its eyes and carried on a conversation with the conjuror despite its lack of corporeal existence from the neck down. All the while the audience could clearly see the bare floor below the table stretching back to the rear curtain. When the box was closed and re-opened, it revealed only dust, the disembodied head having now compounded its impossibility by disappearing into the clear and empty air.

In another larger and more complex illusion known as *The Walker Illusion* or *The Blue Room* (4), it was again the brightness and the 3-dimensional emptiness of the space that struck one observer:

“This is the best illusion I have ever seen.... [Objects] evolved out of empty space, afterwards changed into other shapes, and finally vanished altogether in full sight of the audience and under a brilliant gaslight....On an empty chair a human being was gradually evolved, who would, after coming to the footlights and performing his part in the sketch, return to the chair and gradually disappear. The chair was picked up and examined.”
(Hercat, 1903, 96-7)

The interplay between real and virtual images constructed and reinforced the sensation that boundaries between worlds had been dissolved. To audiences accustomed to the fadings and dissolvings of the images thrown in darkness by a magic lantern, it was the substantiality and fleshiness of the performers that left them dumbstruck, not their ghostliness. In the routines that were invented to display the illusion, the characters often drank from real glasses of wine, lit cigars that could be smelt, or left some object behind them when they departed, leaving a visibly transparent emptiness charged with their absence.

Transparent emptiness

What is it like to see nothing? Not a fog, or a blur, or a shadowy form but clear, see-through, nothing?

A few years ago I set up a version of the Sphinx illusion at home in order to film it. (In case anyone is still confused, the assistant is kneeling under the table, with his/her head through a concealed opening. Mirrors set between the legs of the table are hiding the body of the assistant from view.) My version was the simplest of all, using one mirror. Its effect on me was surprising and unexpected. Even when the occupant was not in place, and no head was on the table, the space between the legs of the table took on a quality of heightened reality – it was brighter, more lucid, more *empty* than seemed natural. I imagine that part of this quality was due to the sparkling cleanliness of the mirror's surface which is essential for the trick to work because any mark on the glass reveals the plane of the mirror. Part was due also to the demands of the lighting, for in order for vision to flow without a check the real and virtual spaces must appear to be in a natural balance of illumination, This can look unbalanced through the lens of a camera, which picks up the mirrors as bright spots that suck the light of the room in to them, or as dark voids. Stage magicians often surround mirror tricks with shimmering materials which seem to contain their own fields of light and darkness to distract attention from these inconsistencies in the web of reality that they present. I, working by trial and error, adjusted the lighting so that the effect was working for the camera, and then found that I had created a cube of hyper-clarity. It sat in my room like a prism of crystalline air, marginally brighter and more real than the reality around it.

The effect was disturbing. The volume of vacant space seemed to be set outside of everyday time and filled with the plenitude of emptiness. It was so compelling that several times I would reach to it and be slightly surprised to re-discover that it wasn't really there, but just a trick of the mirror reflecting the emptiness around it. It had the liquid clarity of the sensations that are called up by certain phrases - 'The Lark in the Clear Air', perhaps – effortless, endless, ungraspable, constantly happening but never moving. It was not a fleeting sensation, it was there every time I

glanced at it, and each time it left me with the sense that my eyes had been pleasantly released from some unnoticed state of tension.

It was beautiful. It was a trick. It was beautiful. It was a trick.

Too sublime

In 1865 the Sphinx illusion was received by its audience as an exquisitely baffling and disturbing one. This was not because of the fiction of the bodiless head - no-one thought for one moment that a horrendous medical experiment had taken place. Rather than being sensational in a lurid sense, it aroused exquisite feelings of hesitation, uncertainty and fascination; a struggle to grasp something at the edge of comprehension, a brush with infinity or with the 4th dimension. Reviews spoke of the silence that followed the act, before the applause (Steinmeyer, 2003, 84).

No illusion could sustain at such a pitch of emotional tension for long; later versions became comedic and self-parodying. The Sphinx ended up in the funhouse. By the end of the century it was 'probably the most common of all the illusions which depend upon mirrors' (Hopkins, 1898, 69). Other mirror illusions that worked on the same basic principle became incorporated in acts that had their audiences in fits of laughter, as wilder and wilder transformations, vanishings and appearances were achieved. (5)

Watching a magic show

In contrast, there can be something stultifying about sitting through an old-style magic show in a small theatre today. Most tricks are based on the laws of physics though they may appear to demonstrate the conquering of such laws, so the magician's routine is at its heart a string of demonstrations, like a contortionist's act. The tricks have no location other than the stage. The curious props arrive, are exploited, and returned to the wings and to oblivion.

For pragmatic reasons, the classic acts are often carried out in front of a curtain or backdrop whose indeterminate surface may be participating in the act by concealing something behind it, camouflaging objects in front of it, or confusing our sense of depth by its pattern and texture. It marks the back wall of its own reality, the world in which this logic applies. The space of the conjuror's stage appears shallow, like a low-relief or a frieze. The conjuror and assistant face front while gesturing sideways, spreading their act out in front of us like a screen for the eyes of the audience to scan laterally, rather than probing into the occluded depths.

In such a context, the moment when we are called on to look deep into a bright emptiness brings a startling shift of orientation. The eye skids forward, unstopped, momentarily piercing the thick folds of our immediate field of vision and escaping beyond, as the conjuror invites us to look into the proffered empty cabinet and see nothing. The moment is brief, but the ecstatic sensation hangs in the memory like an afterimage.

It is a moment when we are quite vulnerable to manipulation.

The conjuror appears to fade

The persona once created by an old-fashioned illusionist no longer seems relevant for today. We haven't much interest in conspiring in a pretence that we are watching a demonstration of unnatural powers. We acknowledge that the performer is dextrous and ingenious, but we don't really want to watch routines. We would prefer to be left alone with the apparatus and the sensations, and not distracted by all that patter.

What are the differences between then and now? One is that what was once kept secret - the method, the apparatus, the technology - is now brought forward and examined. A trick that might once have been considered to work by deceiving the senses is now recast as a way in which we may perceive ourselves perceiving, which at this moment in history is considered to be a profound experience. Consequently a surprising amount of the physics and the "philosophical

toys” that once underpinned the illusionist’s work have shifted into the relative silences of the art gallery.

In the category of “seeing nothing”, several recent, thoughtful, proposals for contemporary memorials have used the experience of emptiness to touch on the sublime (in the Kantian sense) by reflecting, or reflecting on, emptiness itself. I’m thinking here of specific works in which the exposure of concealment, extraction and erasure must inevitably, given their context, be interpreted as references to the magnitude of what has been lost, as the moment of initial perception opens the observer to an oscillating flood of complex thoughts. The risk, acknowledged by the artists, is that their redemptive limpid beauty may paradoxically be obscuring the ugly and terrible things that should not be hidden. For example, some proposals for Holocaust memorials have been accused of being almost too beautiful conceptually, bringing closure to wounds that perhaps should never be allowed to heal. (6) These works are big things, in every sense, and no laughing matter.

Between the extremes of the old conjuror’s secretive trickiness and the grandiose beauty that can make some of the new sublime overbearing, sit brief enchantments and smaller epiphanies in everyday moments. The small mirror, hung just high enough so that it never reflects the person, might give something to be going on with, a glimpse of empty air.

Notes

(1) Paraphrased from the 1993 edition of *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*

(2) The most comprehensive survey is still *The Magician and the Cinema* (Barnouw, 1981)

(3) Steinmeyer (2003) attributes the first articulation of the general principle of using a mirror to hide something to Joseph Maurice in 1865, in one of many patents that followed the *Ghost* illusion in 1863. The first specific description of its application was in Tobin and Pepper’s 1865 *Protean Cabinet*. Tobin and Stodare patented the *Sphinx* illusion later the same year. For an outline of the developments in optical conjuring illusions through the patents that were filed for them, see also Rees and Wilmore, 1996.

(4) Also known as *Metempsychosis*, it was developed by Pepper and Walker and patented in 1879. It includes elements from both the *Ghost* and the *Sphinx* illusions.

(5) These were the type of magical skits that George Méliès was presenting on stage in the 1890s.

(6) Specifically, proposals by practitioners such as Dan Graham, Rachael Whiteread or Daniel Libeskind for Holocaust memorials. The dilemma is discussed in *At Memory’s Edge* (Young, 2000)

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