

Hans-Joachim Backe (Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany)

Disappearing acts. Stage magic and the illusion of the body

Even to people with little or no fascination for it, stage magic is a familiar discourse. The slender-fingered man in evening attire who produces rabbits from the depths of his top hat is a cultural archetype. Major artists in the field, from Harry Houdini to Siegfried and Roy, have become household names. Even routines like the linking rings, the woman sawn in half or the escape from a straight-jacket are so firmly rooted in our culture as to have become commonplace.

Although many tricks may be much older and the general practices of stage magicians, chief among them misdirection, sleight of hand and basic showmanship, have been employed for all kinds of purposes through the centuries, its organized form is comparatively new, dating back to the early 19th century. Craftsmen like the French watchmaker Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin turned a raucous and shady fairground attraction into a respected performing art – yet one that differs in one significant respect from its peers. The magician’s craft is built upon a paradox: His promise is to achieve something inexplicable by perfectly natural means. He assures us that whatever he does is no witchcraft or sorcery, but a combination of dexterity, ingenuity and perfect presentation. Yet if the magician is successful, it is only by achieving something that seems utterly impossible and incomprehensible.

The bafflement produced by a successful performance of stage magic is, therefore, an equilibrium of belief and doubt. We are asked to believe that nothing supernatural is happening, but we cannot but doubt this assurance in the face of what we witness, and thus we begin to doubt our enlightened, empiricist, ironical twenty-first century worldview. Herein lies the paradox of the stage magician: He his truthful by deceiving us with tricks which might be equally used by a card sharp, while he would be deceiving us if he was actually capable of supernatural feats.¹

¹ The same thing is true, just with exchanged initial suppositions, for the encounter with charlatans: They assure us that we will witness something miraculous, and we will try to falsify their claim, but we will be instilled with the same doubt in the validity of our basic assumptions and beliefs.

In literary treatments of stage magic, the doubt about the performer's powers becomes a placeholder for more general, fundamental doubts, calling into question essential parameters of human existence. In the 19th and even the early 20th century, the charlatan, spiritualist and fraud is still the predominant character, modeled upon historical figures such as Cagliostro and Mesmer. These characters make wide use of the stage magician's trickery, but they use it to appear as supernaturally gifted, which is why they are portrayed as a threat to personal freedom, to common sense, or to the laws of nature. E. T. A. Hoffmann's tales "Der Sandmann" and, to an even greater extent, "Der Magnetiseur" are chief examples of a literary discomfort with the impossibility of telling hypnotism from sleight of hand. In realist and modernist texts, the tendency to demonize stage magicians and their uncanny abilities remained unchanged. Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), Maugham's *The Magician* (1908) and Mann's *Mario und der Zauberer* (1929) all deal with men that may at first seem like harmless artists, but turn out to use their inexplicable powers to sinister ends.

Only in the last third of the 20th century, the paradigm shifts. Stage magicians start to appear as a mystery instead of a threat, and even if their supernatural powers are unquestionable – like those in Auster's *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) –, they are no longer human demons but rather troubled characters whose problems exemplify their time and age. Questions of identity usually have a central place in these texts, which cannot be much of a surprise considering the essential nature of trickery and misdirection in the stage magician's art.

In the following, I will give a brief overview of four relevant examples and the different, yet similar ways in which they treat identity as a destabilized concept. I will also show in which ways the magicians and their disappearing bodies are central to discussions of power in highly fragmented narratives that often emulate the trickery of stage magic. Two of the examples – Steven Millhauser's "Eisenheim the Illusionist" (1990) and Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995) – are fairly well known, if only for their movie adaptations, while the two other examples – Otto F. Beer's *Ich, Rodolfo, Magier* (1978) and Michael Schneider's *Das Spiegelkabinett* (1980) – are virtually unknown in Germany and have never been translated into English. Yet the comparison of these texts will show that for all the reoccurring motifs connected with the

literary treatment of stage magic, each text develops a highly original approach to the subject.

Identity

Already in the basic premise and the design of the protagonists, the texts show a marked interest in identity. All characters use stage names and live secretive lives, often with multiple identities. Additionally, while they do the utmost to keep their tricks secret, they expose themselves every night on stage and promise their audience a playful deceit, which relies on pretense and concealment.

Otto F. Beer's *Ich, Rodolfo, Magier* – which first appeared in 1965, but underwent significant changes for its third and definitive edition in 1978² – is the autobiography of Rudolf Kannemann, an Austrian magician who performs during and after World War II under the stage name of Rodolfo Canetti, Professeur de l'Art Magique. Canetti is not only secretive about his art, but has to disguise himself and hide several times throughout his life, for example when he is to be deported from Nazi-occupied Paris. He marries three times, but is always unfaithful to his wives. What he does not hide from the world is that he actually possesses supernatural powers. He is capable of manipulating matter, dissolving small objects in his hands and even walking through walls, and he even offers his services to the Kennedy administration as a security advisor. In the end, he fails to be secretive enough about his affairs and gets killed in a car accident caused by his jealous third wife.

Michael Schneider's *Das Spiegelkabinett* tells of Alfred Schäfer, a contemporary third-generation stage magician performing under the name of Alfredo Cambiani. He lives at a villa which not only has mirrors for windows to keep people from spying on him, but is also home to the eponymous cabinet of mirrors in which he rehearses. He keeps all his tricks secret, not only to protect them but also his own reputation. His career is, so to speak, built upon illusions of illusions: His first great success, achieved at age fourteen, was to conjure up sixteen balls and consequently to juggle with them – an impossible feat of dexterity only achieved by letting four of the balls disappear again before juggling. Cambiani's greatest success is a teleportation act, which is only

² Langen-Müller 1965, 372 pages, Zsolnay 1978, 343 pages.

possible because his younger brother Marco agrees to act as his double. To deceive the public, Marco has to disguise himself and start to suffer from always being the one to be hidden away in a box while Alfredo is applauded. Finally, Marco rebels against Alfredo and becomes a magician in his own right – which destroys his brother’s livelihood and even his sanity. In the end, the brothers reconcile, but Alfredo is obsessed by the *idée fixe* that he is a charlatan for never actually achieving anything supernatural. When he publicly accuses himself of being a fraud, he is arrested and put in an asylum, because the authorities take him to be an impersonator of himself.

Steven Millhauser’s “Eisenheim the Illusionist” is a twenty-two-page mock-scientific account of the eponymous magician’s career. Eisenheim is born Eduard Abramowitz in Bratislava, where he enters his father’s business as a cabinet maker. Like his real-life model, Robert-Houdin, he uses this craft to construct magical apparatus, with which he soon becomes the foremost stage performer in turn-of-the-century Vienna. He eventually opens his own theatre – also in the tradition of Robert-Houdin –, and buys a house outside of town where he maintains a well-guarded workshop, nicknamed ‘The Devil’s Factory’.

After being unable to marry the love of his life because her father won’t have a Jew for a son in law, Eisenheim completely withdraws from the public. Over a year later, he starts to appear onstage again. His act has become more disturbing than before. While he started out with traditional mechanical tricks, he soon specializes in unreal apparitions of bodies. For years, he concludes his show by ostensibly freeing a mirror-image from its frame and having it float across the stage. In his final years, he conjures up the intangible bodies of several people who move autonomously on stage and interact with the audience. In the end, Eisenheim is persecuted by the Emperor’s secret police and escapes them by actually vanishing onstage, never to be seen again, leaving no trace and no clues about his tricks.

Christopher Priest’s *The Prestige* tells of the feud between two contemporaries of Eisenheim, the British magicians Alfred Borden and Rupert Angier. Borden appears under the alias of Le Professeur de Magie, and Angier has also taken a French stage name, The Great Danton. Borden tries to hide his working-class background – he also is a cabinet maker – by affecting a French persona, quite in the same way as Angier hides that he is a nobleman, the son of the Earl of Colderdale. Their feud starts when Borden, who tries like many of

his peers to expose spiritist charlatans, disrupts a séance held by Angier and accidentally causes Angier's pregnant wife to lose the child. In the following years, they wage a private war which revolves around exposing or stealing the other's tricks, but as much as he tries, Angier can never fathom Borden's most successful trick, The Transported Man. Borden's trick is similar to that in Schneider's *Das Spiegelkabinett*: The magician enters a cabinet onstage, bounces a rubber ball towards an identical cabinet on the other side of the stage, and in the instant he closes his cabinet's door, he appears in the other. Borden's secret is the same as Cambiani's – his brother, in this case an identical twin, cooperates with him. While in Schneider's novel the egotism of one of the brothers causes their lives to fall apart because he won't share the limelight, the Borden brothers meet their demise because they share everything. They keep their secret from everyone, including their family, and share one life with unsuspecting wife, children, and mistress. Borden misleads Angier into believing that his act is based on technology developed by Nicola Tesla, and Angier uses most of his fortune – he has by now become Lord Colderdale himself – to finance his version of the trick, called In a Flash. Tesla builds a teleportation device which works perfectly except for the fact that it leaves behind a dead copy of whatever is sent through it. From that point on, Angier's biggest secret are the dead *doppelgangers* he has to stealthily remove to his family crypt after each show. In this fashion, the magician's dissolving body becomes a metaphor of ultimate dedication to one's art.

5

Fragmented Narratives

The narratives of all four texts mirror the questionable nature of bodies in them. Just like the magicians duplicate, dissolve and change places, their narratives disrupt conventions of coherence and reliability.

Although *Ich, Rodolfo, Magier* is ostensibly an autobiography, it is no monolithic depiction of events, but incorporates testimonies from a number of other characters. Rodolfo reproduces letters and memoirs of his mother, father, wife, lover and psychiatrist. Although he comments each one of them, often ridiculing or correcting the author, he claims not to have redacted them in any way. That he nonetheless has edited them becomes apparent when he mentions in passing that he has translated his lover's account from the French (Beer 216). Furthermore, the penultimate chapter is an Austrian secret service

report on Rodolfo for which he neither offers an explanation nor a comment. Obviously, by combining his highly subjective account with the sometimes openly critical opinions of others, all perspectives are exposed as equally fragmentary and one-sided. Through this juxtaposition, Rodolfo's rambling narrative is exposed as a failed effort to manipulate the reader and, at the same time, as a long-winded memoir that only gives real insight when it tries to obscure facts. For all of Rodolfo's explanations and justifications, the most telling passages are his derisive and defensive reactions to the comments of his wife and his psychiatrist. He does not even try to disprove the allegations of exuberant hubris or flagrant egotism, but dismisses them as ridiculous – an opinion the reader most likely will not share. This laziness of argumentation is indicative of his whole personality, and it mirrors his continuous choice of the path of least resistance. As a stage performer as well as in his private affairs, Rodolfo increasingly trusts his supernatural powers to win the day, never even considering the alternatives or the repercussions. His narrative thus exposes him to an even greater extent than the mere recounted facts as the ruthless character he is. At the same time, it stresses the metaphorical dimension of his abilities: As a man who can make matter disappear and walk through walls, he loses all respect for property, privacy and, consequently, the emotions of others. The person who cannot be stopped or incarcerated, but who can potentially appear everywhere at any time, cannot but become so self-centered as to ignore the rest of humankind.

The story of *Das Spiegelkabinett* is also being told in the first person, but not by one of the protagonists. Its narrator is the chairman of the Magic Circle, and even in the first paragraphs, he stresses that he has been deeply affected by the events of the 'Cambiani Affair'. On the one hand, one could take this as an emotional statement, because both brothers tell him their stories and thus pull him into their conflict. On the other hand, his actions are crucial for the ending, because he urges the brothers to reconcile, causing in effect Alfredo's breakdown and arrest. On another level, he is affected by the affair because it shatters his belief in his art so much that he resigns from the Magic Circle. Throughout the novel, he reflects upon the actions and thoughts of the brothers, drawing conclusions about the morality of stage magic from them. In accordance with the 1980s fear of cults and gurus, he criticizes Alfredo's flirting with omnipotence and spiritualism and insists that he himself belongs to an

older generation of magicians interested in “Aufklärung” in both meanings of the German term, an enlightened worldview as well as a desire for discovery and ascertainment of facts. Yet, as with Beer’s Rodolfo, his narrative is far from unambiguous. In an ironical twist, the narrator frequently admits his incomprehension, although his specialty is a mind-reading act. His understanding of both Alfredo’s tricks and his psyche leaves much to be desired, and so he reproduces the accounts of both brothers verbatim, which, in the end, make up more than half of the narrative. Even though the narrator seems not to gain much insight into the brothers and their motivations, his position vis-à-vis the reader becomes well defined. Between Alfredo’s talent and hubris on the one hand and Marco’s dedication and hard work on the other, he is the mediator and the epitomized middle ground. One could even go so far as to doubt his reliability and take the whole ‘Affair Cambiani’ as an allegorical account of a stage magician’s loss of faith in his craft.

Eisenheim’s story is told in an equally vague fashion. The narrator purports to write a factual person’s biography, but the available data are of a questionable nature: “For the scant facts we are obliged to rely on the dubious memoirs of magicians, on comments in contemporary newspaper stories and trade periodicals, on promotional material and brochures for magic acts; here and there the diary entry of a countess or ambassador records attendance at a performance in Paris, Cracow, Vienna” (Millhauser 216). It doesn’t surprise, then, that the ‘facts’ recounted are almost universally apostrophized as rumors, hearsay or speculation. The most reliable source is, ironically, Eisenheim’s nemesis, Walter Uhl, the Chief of Vienna’s police. It is from Uhl’s notes that the narrator takes most information about Eisenheim’s shows, and although we learn nothing about the policeman but his thoughts on the magician, his personality becomes more well-defined than Eisenheim’s. Uhl practices some stage magic as a hobby, and he is torn between his fascination with Eisenheim’s performances and his responsibility as an imperial magistrate. In the end, he gives a compelling argument for the necessity to stop Eisenheim’s show, which violates unquestionable distinctions:

Art and life constituted one such distinction; illusion and reality, another. Eisenheim deliberately crossed boundaries and therefore disturbed the essence of things. In effect, Herr Uhl was accusing Eisenheim of shaking the foundations of the universe, of

undermining reality, and in consequence of doing something far worse: subverting the Empire. For where would the Empire be, once the idea of boundaries became blurred and uncertain? (Millhauser 235)

Through this narrative sleight of hand, Millhauser's narrative appears, if anything, even more fragmented and vague than the other texts. The kaleidoscopic survey of Eisenheim's career does little more than show how rumors and half-truths in time create a legend. It surely is not the historic record it professes to be. Quite on the contrary, the narrator frames Eisenheim's story with two remarks about the inadequacy of historiography: "Stories, like conjuring tricks, are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams [...]" (Millhauser 217), he says in the beginning, and the story ends with the statement that Eisenheim "had passed safely out of the crumbling order of history into the indestructible realm of mystery and dream" (Millhauser 237).³

Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* is not only the longest, but also the most complex of the texts discussed here. It is divided into five parts, three of which are set in the present, dealing with the great-grandchildren of Borden and Angier and their search to uncover the truth about their ancestors. The second and fourth part are Borden's memoirs and Angier's diary, but that is not the whole extent of the text's fragmentation of perspective. The Borden twins share not only one life, but also one memoir, and many oddly self-reflexive sounding sentences are actually conversations of the brothers by means of their notes. What renders these exchanges almost incomprehensible is that both refer to each other in the first person singular. When one of them discovers his brother's notebook, he adds the following lines: "I said nothing of this to me! What is it? How far is it to be taken? I must write no more until I know!" (Priest 44). This practice results in a narrative that mirrors the Bordens' life-situation for the reader, because we can never be quite sure which of the brothers 'speaks'. They misdirect their readers in the same way they keep their secret even from their family, and even after understanding that Borden's memoir is actually written by two characters, some questions remain open.

³ "Eisenheim the Illusionist" is a part of Steven Millhauser's 1990 short story cycle *The Barnum Museum*, which is in itself constructed as a riddle, a series of stories that reflect upon each other. The book's title story is an account of a surreal museum in the tradition of Borges' inexplicable places, and among its exhibits are central objects of the other stories in the volume. The connections remain tentative, though, and even where they appear less obscure, they only introduce more questions.

When, for example, different stances towards a problem are pondered, one can never be sure if the conflict is internal or external, if it's one person's deliberation or a fight between brothers.

For very different reasons, Rupert Angier's notebooks mirror the double identity of the Borden brothers. One night, Borden comes to see Angier's electrical transportation act. He manages to get backstage and is so scared by the flashes produced by the apparatus that he shuts it down in mid-performance. Instead of producing one living and one dead version of Angier, this time, two weakened individuals come into existence: One who looks normal but weighs too little and has too thin blood, and one who seems almost transparent and has trouble interacting with objects. The weakened one takes up Rupert Angier's old life, and keeps on writing his diary, chronicling his retirement from magic and his slow death from cancer. After a while, paradoxical sentences like "I am unable to move any part of my body" (Priest 324) begin to occur, and the reader starts to realize that, again, two individuals share one notebook and the first person singular pronoun.

9

Conclusion

It should have become apparent that in all four texts, the dissolution of the magician's body plays a central role, both as a catalyst for events and as a metaphor. On a content-level, this could be said to turn the human body from its subject-position as the center of our experience of the world into a foreign object, making it the ultimate object by shedding it from its physicality and thus from its capability for action. On the narrative level, the magician is obviously a metaphor for the author – and, in most cases, the narrators are magicians, after all. By the same token, the texts assume properties of magic tricks, giving them a markedly poetological dimension, but one that is well hidden, as becomes an illusion. In the words of Albert (or Frederick) Borden: "The very act of describing my secrets might indeed be construed as a betrayal of myself, except of course that as I am an illusionist I can make sure you only see what I wish you to see. A puzzle is implicitly involved" (Priest 32).

Works Cited

Millhauser, Steven: "Eisenheim the Illusionist." In: *The Barnum Museum*. Springfield: Dalkey Archives Press, 1997.

Priest, Christopher: *The Prestige*. Gollancz, 2004.

Beer, Otto F.: *Ich, Rodolfo, Magier*. Munich: DTV, 1978.

Schneider, Michael: *Das Spiegelkabinett*. Munich: DTV, 1980.