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LUCY FISCHER

The Lady Vanishes:

WOMEN, MAGIC AND THE MOVIES[1]

"Woman is the other, she is all man aspires to be and does not become . . . Therefore he endows woman with her nature; the Other—opposition whom he can touch, conquer, possess, take comfort from, be inspired by, and yet not have to contend with. She is mystery."

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

In October and November of 1896, Star Film Company's first year of production, Georges Méliès shot a film entitled *The Vanishing Lady*, which is credited as displaying the director's first use of a cinematic "substitution trick."[2] The "plot" of the film is simple: a lady, in full Victorian garb, is seated in a chair, against the background of an ornate, elaborately-molded wall. A magician (played by Méliès) drapes her body with a fabric cover. When the cloth is removed, the lady has disappeared, and much to our horror, in her place is a skeleton.

Though the occurrence portrayed is, of course, extraordinary, there is nothing exceptional about the film. It is one of hundreds of such magic films that Méliès produced between the years of 1896 and 1912, films that were imitated by Pathé in France and by Edison in the United States.

It is, in fact, precisely the *commonplace* quality of the film that is at issue—its status as a cinematic archetype, or even cliché. By 1896 the trick film paradigm had been established: such works would involve a *male* magician performing acts of wonder upon a *female* subject. To make a lady vanish was, after all, Méliès's first idea for a substitution trick. In subsequent films he would elaborate upon this basic situation. Thus, in *Apparitions Fugitives* (1904) Méliès would levitate a female subject and in *Extraordinary Illusions* (1903) reconstitute her out of a mannequin's parts. In *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas* (1903) Méliès would conjure women out of flames and in *Extraordinary Illusions* turn them into men. From film to film the superficial persona of the male magician figure would tend to vary—from the traditional nineteenth-century stage magician in *Ten Ladies in an Umbrella* (1903) to the Roman god in *Jupiter's Thunderbolts* (1903)—but his function would remain the same: to perform feats of wonder upon a female subject.

Though we are all accustomed to crediting Méliès with the birth of film magic, the implications of that genre for the *image of women* have not been examined. In addition to being the "father" of film fantasy, Méliès may also have to stand as the inadvertent patriarch of a particular cinematic vision of women.

In all fairness to Méliès, however, his personal role in authoring such a vision is highly qualified. For, as we know, many of the screen creations associated with Méliès are, in truth, derived from the antecedent tradition of theatrical magic. Méliès, himself, was a stage magician; prior to making films he had purchased the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in 1888. Thus it is to the legacy of theatrical magic that we must turn to find the roots of this cinematic image of woman—a vision which Méliès and others eventually "grafted" onto the screen.

When one begins to examine the history of stage magic, one finds that the situation of male magician and female subject—so common to the trick film genre—is simply a convention borrowed from theatrical magic. In the course of an entire book on the history of stage magic (*The Magic Catalogue* by William Doerflinger) only two examples of female magicians were ever cited.[3] One involved a woman named Adelaid Herrman, who originally served as magician's assistant to her husband Alexander, and then assumed his role when he died. The other reference was to Dorothy Dietrich and Celeste Evans, a team of magicians

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Top: *Méliès's* THE VANISHING LADY (1896): *the cinema's first "substitution trick."* Top left: PIERROT'S PROBLEM *(Biograph 1902).* Bottom left: *Méliès's* TEN LADIES IN AN UMBRELLA. [*All photos in this article courtesy The Museum of Modern Art and The Library of Congress. Most of the films discussed here will soon be available, on a single reel, from the Circulation Department, MOMA.*]

specializing in "dove illusions." Clearly, this text does not constitute a definitive study of stage magic, and one would assume that other female magicians have, indeed, existed and performed. But the paucity of references to women magicians at least makes clear the exceptional nature of that status, and the tenacity with which the model of male magician and female subject is maintained.

It is precisely the dominance and immutability of that paradigm that makes one begin to suspect that sexual role-playing is *itself* at issue in the rhetoric of magic, and that perhaps in performing his tricks upon the female subject, the male magician is not simply accomplishing acts of prestidigitation, but is also articulating a discourse on attitudes toward women.

In approaching the phenomenon of theatrical and cinematic magic in this fashion I am making certain assumptions. Like Roland Barthes in his studies of boxing and striptease in *Mythologies,* I will assume that the conventions of magic are not simply arbitrary, incomprehensible actions, but rather elements in a coherent social "sign system" that can be read for its cultural meaning.[4] The notion, however, that the significance of magic involves a submerged discourse on sexual politics, is a speculation—a working hypothesis that must be tested through an examination of magical practice.

To begin that investigation, let us return to the basic archetype of male magician working wonders upon the female subject, and commence to read it for its implications. Perhaps the act most typical of trick films is that of simply *conjuring* a woman. In Edison's *Mystic Swing* (1900) a series of women are made to appear on a moving trapeze; in Biograph's *Pierrot's Problem* (1902) a clown-magician produces two girls from behind his voluminous pantaloons. In *Ten Ladies in an Umbrella,* Méliès makes women appear and disappear with the help of an unlikely prop; in *The Ballet Master's Dream* (1903) a sleeper conjures women as part of an oneiric fantasy.

Accustomed as we are to this particular magical trope, it is easy to accept it as a mere "given" of the rhetoric of magic, and therefore to neglect to pursue its implications. But if we regard it as meaningful and begin to consider its significance, various issues come into focus.

On the most obvious level, the act of the male magician conjuring women is simply a demonstration of his *power over the female sex.* Woman has no existence independent of the male magi-

cian; he can make her appear when he wants her and disappear when (to paraphrase de Beauvoir), he wishes no longer "to contend" with her. Woman is thus a *function* of male will.

In the rhetoric of magic the conjured woman is also a *decorative object*—to be placed here and there like a throw pillow or a piece of sculpture. Thus, in countless trick films (like *Jupiter's Thunderbolts*) women appear in tableaux "arrangements"—like dried flowers or fruit.

On another level, the act of conjuring and "vanishing" ladies tends to *dematerialize* and *decorporealize* the female sex—to relegate woman to the level of "spirit." Thus, to paraphrase de Beauvoir again, magical practice literalizes the notion of woman as "Other," as unfathomable "mystery."

Often, however, in these trick films, woman's immaterial status takes on a particular inflection. Rather than function simply as a spirit, she is cast specifically as a *figment of the male imagination.* This notion is most apparent in the trick films involving the magician as dreamer. In Méliés's *The Clockmaker's Dream* (1904), for example, the main character falls asleep and has an oneiric fantasy of a bevy of women who emerge from a grandfather clock. Similarly, in *The Ballet Master's Dream* (Méliès/1903) a man dreams about a series of dancing women. In these films the narrative openly situates the women within the male imagination, and casts them as sexual fantasies. In other films their status as sexual fantasy is less literal and explicit, yet why else would Méliés bother to conjure so many ladies from an umbrella?

Thus far, however, our inquiry has only scratched the surface and has viewed the act of conjuring women as a flexing of the male sense of power over the passive, ethereal female sex. But from another viewpoint, the male's need to exert his power can be seen as belying the *opposite* impulse: rather than evince his sense of strength in relation to women, might it not bespeak his perception of relative weakness? In other words, the gentleman doth protest too much. If our male magician is so sure of his own power over woman, why must he so relentlessly subject us to repeated demonstrations of his capability?

It is in response to that question that I must advance another speculation. Might it be that in addition to demonstrating the male sense of power over the female, the practice of magic also evinces certain deep-seated male anxieties concerning the *female's power over him*? According to this reading the male magician is not so much attempting to demonstrate his potency over the female, as he is to *defuse or exorcise her potency over him.* What aspects of magical practice might corroborate such a reading? And, furthermore, what psychological and cultural evidence is there to support such a notion of male "anxieties" regarding women?

As a starting point for the investigation of these questions, it is useful to examine the reverse situation of the magic "paradigm"—that is, the model of a female magician performing tricks upon the male. As mentioned earlier, in the history of theatrical magic such female magicians are rare, and their occurrence is no more common in the archives of cinematic magic. Several films of this kind do exist, however, and their portrayal of the female magician is most telling.[5]

There is, for example, a marvelous film of 1905 made by Edison entitled *A Pipe Dream,* which opens with a medium close-up of a woman smoking a cigarette, seated against a black background. She begins rather playfully to blow smoke into her outstretched hand, and, out of nowhere, a tiny man appears, on bended knees, upon her palm. The little homunculus seems to be pleading with the woman, as though asking for her hand in marriage. She laughs at him cruelly, and begins to close her palm; her homunculus disappears. Perplexed, she tries again to conjure her little man, but cannot repeat the trick.

What is interesting about this film is its characterization of the female "magician"—one fraught with anxiety and ambivalence toward woman. Unlike the camera set-up for most magic films, that of *A Pipe Dream* renders the scale of the woman huge, particularly in comparison to her diminutive little man. She is a literalization of the overpowering female, the Amazon, or the awesome, domineering Mother, as seen by a child-man. Thus, she is a figure of considerable terror. Psychologists might have something to say about her as well, particularly about how her

depiction evinces certain classic male fears concerning women. In her article, "The Dread of Woman" (1932), for example, Karen Horney speaks of the psychic importance of the male child's anxieties regarding his mother, and Horney's language seems custom-made for the film. She discusses the young boy's perception that his genital is "much too small for his mother's" and how he "reacts with the dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided." Such, of course, is the fate of our homunculus.

The film has other implications as well. The fact that the woman smokes a cigarette marks her, according to Victorian mores, as dangerously loose and "masculine," and thus invests her magician-status with a degree of perversity. Furthermore, it is significant that when she tries to repeat her trick, she fails, as though her magical powers were accidental, or beyond her control.

Another film of the period, *The Red Spectre* (Pathé/1907) is interesting to examine in this regard as well. The narrative of this film involves a competition between a male magician (dressed as a devil, in skeleton costume) and a female conjurer (dressed in courtly attire). Ultimately, the woman magician reduces the male to a folded costume, and appropriates his black cape. Again, a certain anxiety regarding the figure of the female magician is apparent, particularly her perceived ability to get the better of the male.

In point of fact, throughout the history of myth and religious practice, when women have been "granted" magical powers by men, those powers have most often been regarded as evil or dangerous. We rarely find an image of a harmless female magician, playfully conjuring people and objects. Rather, she is cast as a figure of great perversity. According to Greek legend, for example, the magical Circe turned the companions of Ulysses into pigs and wild beasts; and in Venezuelan mythology, the love-goddess, Maria Leonza, turned men into stone.[6] Similarly, the legendary Sirens were bird-women who played magical music on their lyres and lured sailors to a watery grave. Even in contemporary mythos, the tainted figure of the prostitute is said to turn "tricks" upon her "johns." Thus, in all of these cases, women who practice magic seem to do so at the expense of men.

A PIPE DREAM *(Edison 1905).*

In terms of the history of the Christian religion, the most compelling female "magician" is, significantly, the witch—clearly a figure of great terror. Though male witches, or *incubi,* were thought to exist, the notion of witchcraft was strongly identified with the female of the species, or *succubi.* That perverse magical powers were associated with womanhood in particular is apparent in the *Malleus Maleficarum,* a handbook on witchcraft written by two Dominican monks in 1484. According to that influential text: "Perfidy is more found in women than in men . . . since they are feebler in body and in mind, it is not surprising they should come under the spell of witchcraft."[7] Furthermore, woman "is more carnal than man as is clear from her many carnal abominations." Thus all witchcraft is seen to stem from "the carnal lust which in women is insatiable."[8]

What these few examples demonstrate is the flip side of the male magician/female subject paradigm. In the cases where women magicians exist, they are figures of awe and dread. This makes clear the fact that woman is not always perceived as *powerless*—a passive prop. Rather woman's power is often acknowledged, but it is viewed as perilous and perverse. Perhaps, the male magician is not only performing tricks upon the female; he is preventing *her* from performing more dangerous tricks upon *him.*

Thus the rhetoric of magic may bespeak a *fear* of the female, rather than the exuberant display of male superiority that marks its surface. The male magician's obsessive need to "dematerialize"

women by making them vanish, may in fact, betray his fear of female "carnality," as much as it displays his own sense of power.

But what precisely are the nature of these male fears, and what cultural/psychological evidence is there to support their existence? First of all, several texts have been written on the subject: *The Fear of Women* by psychoanalyst Wolfgang Lederer, and *The Dangerous Sex* by H.R. Hays.[9] Furthermore, various psychologists have produced essays on the topic, like Gregory Zilboorg's "Masculine and Feminine . . ." Karen Horney's "The Dread of Woman," and Freida Fromm-Reichmann and Virginia Gunst's "On The Denial of Women's Sexual Pleasure."[10] Freud himself spoke of male anxieties toward women in *Totem and Taboo.*[11]

In most interpretations, this fear of woman centers on the female genital. According to Freud, in his essay "Medusa's Head," the female genital posits the threat of male castration and is thus viewed with terror.[12] In other remarks in *Totem and Taboo* Freud questions whether the male fear of woman might not stem from a fear of being "weakened" by her, as he is in the sexual act.[13] In much of the writing on the subject mythology has served as cultural evidence. Myths, for example, provide the suggestion that men may also fear women's procreative powers because they perceive them as entailing the reverse power of *death.* Freida Fromm-Reichmann and Virginia Gunst cite the following Persian myth of creation as proof of such an anxiety:

> In that myth a woman creates the world, and she creates it by the act of natural creativity which is hers and which cannot be duplicated by men. She gives birth to a great number of sons. The sons, greatly puzzled by this act which they cannot duplicate become frightened. They think: "Who can tell us, that *if she can give life, she cannot also take life.*" And so, because of their fear of this *mysterious ability of woman,* and of its *reversible* possibility, they kill her (Italics mine).[14]

Thus, once more woman's sexuality is linked to mutilation or death: if woman can conceive life, can she not also take it away? If the womb is a bearer of life, might it not also be a tomb?

This irrational fear of female "magic" is apparent in many of the trick films. In *The Red Spectre* it seems significant that the woman magician manages to kill the *male* devil, reducing him to a disembodied skeleton. In several other films, women are associated with death and skeletal symbolism. In Méliès's *The Vanishing Lady,* for example, when the woman disappears she is replaced by a skeleton, an occurrence which also happens in Edison's *The Mystic Swing.* Perhaps this fear of women explains why so many magic films involve tricks in which women are turned into men, thereby annihilating their disturbing sexual status. In *A Delusion* (Biograph/1902) a female model turns into a man each time the photographer looks into the camera lens. In *The Artist's Dilemma* (Edison/1901) a woman turns into a clown.

Given this basic fear of imagined female powers, it is not surprising to find the iconography of theatrical and cinematic magic plagued by a rampant *hostility* toward the female subject. In fact, it is this very aggression that makes the theory of male fear more plausible. If the male magician only wished to "play" with the female subject, why has he devised for her such a chamber of horrors?

For instance, in many trick films women are symbolically dismembered. In Biograph's *A Mystic Reincarnation* (1902) a male magician conjures female body parts, then turns them into a woman. In *Extraordinary Illusions* (1903) Méliès takes out mannequin limbs from a "magical box" and through stop-motion photography transforms them into a flesh and blood woman.

In other films (like *Apparitions Fugitives* (1904), *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas* and *The Red Spectre*) women are levitated, an action which likens them to corpses in advanced states of *rigor mortis.* In such a posture they also impersonate the model Victorian wife—whose sexuality was entirely dormant. According to H. R. Hays, women of the era engaged in intercourse "in a sort of coma, apparently pretending that nothing was happening [since] the slightest sign of life on [their] part would have been a humiliating admission of depravity."[15]

In the canon of theatrical magic tricks, of grandiose "stage illusions," we find a catalogue of magical misogony. Thus we have such tricks as "Rod Through Body" in which a sword is placed through a woman's torso, "Dagger Chest" in which a series of knives are placed into a box around a woman's head, "Shooting a Woman

Out of a Canon," "Sawing a Woman in Half," "Shooting Through a Woman," and finally "The Electric Chair."[16] Such tricks cannot simply be viewed as jovial and naive demonstrations of imagined male powers, as a harmless flexing of the masculine ego. Rather they must be regarded as symbolic acts of considerable violence.

But certainly not *all* of magical practice involves a thinly disguised hostility toward women. What about such trifles as pulling rabbits from hats, or flowers from cones? Though it is true that such tricks do not suggest male aggression toward women, they can, nonetheless, be seen as constituting a submerged discourse on male-female relations. For when one begins to examine those sleights-of-hand so characteristic of magic tradition, one is struck by how so many of them center on the theme of *creation:* men pulling rabbits out of hats, making flowers grow from canes, bringing mechanical automata "to life." All of these acts seem like symbolic representations of *birth*, and their occurrence at the hand of the *male* magician seems to bespeak an envy of what is, essentially, the *female procreative function*. Significantly, most of these magical births take place with the aid of a highly phallic object—a "mystic" cone, or a cane, or perhaps an "enchanted candle."

Since my proposed reading of these tricks presumes a notion of male envy of the female procreative function, it would be well to examine that subject before proceeding any further. In the canons of psychoanalytic literature, we are, of course, more familiar with a theory of the *reverse* situation, of the female's alleged envy of the male. According to Freud in his formulation of "penis envy," during a young girl's "phallic phase" (3-7 years), she sees a naked man and realizes that she "lacks" a penis. As Freud would have it the psychological consequences of the young girl's perception are devastating and far-reaching: "She develops, like a scar, a sense of inferiority . . . she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect . . . Even after penis-envy has abandoned its true object, it continues to exist . . . in the character trait of jealousy."[17] Thus in traditional psychoanalytic theory it is the female who is seen as biologically deficient and envious of the male.

Early on in the history of psychology, voices were raised in protest against Freud's construal of sexual relations. And many of those who countered his claims did so by advancing an opposing notion of the male envy of the female for her procreative, life-giving powers. Thus, writing in 1926, Karen Horney states:

> . . . from the biological point of view woman has in motherhood, or in the capacity for motherhood, a quite physiological superiority. This is most clearly reflected in the unconscious of the male psyche in the boy's intense envy of motherhood . . . When one begins . . . to analyze men . . . one receives a most surprising impression of the intensity of this envy of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood, as well as of the breasts, and of the act of suckling.[18]

Similarly psychoanalysts Fromm-Reichman and Gunst state:

> Men are not only unconsciously afraid of women as childbearers but many men are also envious of this ability of women . . . We know it from our clinical practice . . . We hear so much about penis envy but it is not fashionable in a patriarchal culture to talk about birth envy, although many of us know it exists.[19]

In discussing the issue of male envy, many psychoanalysts have felt the need to venture into the field of anthropology. Thus in 1944 psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg wrote an essay, "Masculine and Feminine," in which he posited male envy as a determining force in the creation of primitive culture:

> . . . the male who first overcame the woman by means of rape was hostile and murderous toward the female . . . But despite all his economic and sadistic and phallic superiority, man could not fail to discover that woman . . . still possessed a unique power over mankind. She could produce

LES APPARITIONS FUGITIVES *(1904): Levitation.* ▶

> children . . . Thus man, who hated the woman-mother, must have envied her too . . .[20]

Zilboorg's assertions are clearly hypothetical, but many practicing anthropologists have documented concrete evidence of the male envy of the female. Margaret Mead, for example, in a chapter on "Womb-Envying Patterns" in *Male and Female* demonstrates how male initiation rituals of South Sea island societies evince anxieties that are suppressed in Western society:

> In our Occidental view of life, woman, fashioned from man's rib, can at most strive unsuccessfully to imitate man's superior powers and higher vocations. The basic theme of the initiatory cult, however, is that women, by virtue of their ability to make children, hold the secrets of life. Men's role is uncertain, undefined and perhaps unnecessary. By a great effort man has hit upon a method of compensating himself for his basic inferiority. Equipped with various mysterious noise-making instruments . . . they can get the male children away from the women, brand them as incomplete and themselves turn boys into men. Women, it is true, make human beings, but only men can make men.[21]

Thus, Mead casts male initiatory rites as elaborate, compensatory "magic tricks."

Another researcher in the field of male envy is Bruno Bettelheim who, in his book *Symbolic Wounds*, describes the primitive ritual of *couvade*, by which the husband of a parturient woman enacts a rite in which he mimics, and even appropriates, the child-bearing act:

> The [pregnant] woman works as usual up until a few hours before birth; she goes to the forest with some women, and there the birth takes place. In a few hours she is up and at work . . . as soon as the child is born the father takes to his hammock and abstains from work, from all food but weak gruel . . . and is nursed and cared for by all the women of the place. This goes on for days, sometimes weeks.[22]

What these various quotes from psychologists and anthropologists demonstrate is that there exists a body of literature in which male envy of the female's procreative function is established and considered a crucial aspect of sexual dynamics. Given that most cultures are patriarchal, however, it is clear that such feelings are not openly acknowledged, and indeed are concealed and suppressed. How is man to maintain and justify political power over woman if the truth of his awe and envy of the female sex comes out? In the "primitive" societies described by Mead and Bettelheim, this envy is released in the form of established cultural rituals. In modern Western society, however, such sanctioned avenues of expression do not exist, and envy wears more oblique disguises.

It is my contention that the rhetoric of magic is one of those disguises, one of those cultural artifacts in which the male envy of the female procreative powers is manifest. Yet what is there about magical practice that supports such a reading?

I have already mentioned the general emphasis in conjuring tricks on the notion of creation or birth, be it rabbits from a hat, women from umbrellas, or automata that move. But there are many standard magic tricks which evince a more overt symbolism. Within the canon of theatrical magic there are, for example, a whole series of tricks which involve the central prop of an *egg*. *Dunninger's Complete Encyclopedia of Magic* lists such tricks as "Eggs Extraordinary," in which a designated card is found within an egg, "Miraculous Eggs" in which a ring is produced from an egg, and "The Coin in Egg."[23] *The Magic Catalogue* notes tricks with even more tendentious implications. A trick entitled "Human Hen," for example, is described as follows:

> Egg after egg . . . are produced from magician's (or friend's) mouth. They are placed into a clear bowl, or tray in plain view of everyone. You can make as many eggs as you wish appear. Mouth is seen as empty after each egg is removed. Eggs are real and can be cracked open to prove so.[24]

Shades of Professor Unrath and The Blue Angel.

Other tricks, not specifically involving eggs, have similar birth implications. One entitled, "Baby Trousseau Production" entails a male magician and a male subject:

> Performer shakes hands with person who helped him, notices a ravel on their [sic] collar. When he pulls it, it is really a tape, and as he continues to pull, audience sees that it is a long string of fluttering dolls clothes in all colors. This causes a big laugh which gets bigger when a baby nursing bottle seemingly full of milk and complete with nipples, shows up on the end of the tape line.[25]

In a similar vein, one reads in the history of stage magic of a turn-of-the-century Mongolian conjurer, Chin Ling Foo, who "was noted for his production of large bowls of water or small children from an apparently empty cloth."[26]

While these tricks tend to mimic the procreative act, the canon of "escape tricks" evince a male anxiety about the birth process itself. In *Houdini on Magic*, for example, the trick of "The

Spanish Maiden" is described in terms that foreground those fears:

> [The Spanish Maiden] is shaped like a human body and the front is painted to resemble a maiden. The device hinges open at the side and both sections of the interior are lined with iron spikes. When you enter the device, you take a position between the spikes. The front is then closed, so that the spikes completely trap you within. Padlocks are attached to staples on the outside of the Maiden to prevent you from opening the device. Nevertheless, soon after the cabinet is placed over the Spanish Maiden, you make your escape.[27]

The history of trick films evince similar associations of magic and birth. The Star Film Catalogue lists such Mélies films as *Prolific Magical Egg* and *Marvelous Egg Producing with Surprising Developments*, both of 1902. And in *The Brahmin and the Butterfly* (1900) the character of a male magician conjures a caterpillar from an "egg shaped cocoon," which then turns into a beautiful princess.

Many other films, though devoid of overt egg symbolism, nonetheless display a submerged iconography of birth. In *Pierrot's Problem*, for example, the magician-clown seems to give birth to two young women from out of his baggy pantaloons. (Though he eventually "combines" them into one huge "Great Mother" of a woman.) Similarly, it is telling that so many magic films (like *The Red Spectre* and *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas*) employ as their settings caves and grottoes. For according to historians of myth, like Mircea Eliade, these locales have commonly been associated with the world's womb in primitive Earth-Mother cults.[28] Finally, it is interesting to note that many magician's props seem to embody womb symbolism. One thinks of the classic "magic box," so nicely labeled as such in Mélies's *Extraordinary Illusions*. One notices as well the countless films (like *The Red Spectre* and *L'Enchanteur Alcofrisbas*) in which women are conjured from urns, as though to literalize the notion of womb as "magic vessel."

Thus in many magic films, the prestidigitation performed by the male magician seems to have relevance to the issue of birth. It is as though through magical practice the male can symbolically imitate, or even appropriate, an aspect of female procreative powers.

It is interesting to note in this respect the existence of a magic film that runs *counter* to this example, a film in which the role of female as procreator is not suppressed. In an extraordinary Pathé trick film of ca. 1906, entitled *Transformation*, a *female* magician conjures live male and female babies out of a series of flowers and vegetables, and ends the film with the children bouncing blissfully on her knee.[29] Thus the subtext of female procreation which seems masked in most examples of magical practice, is, in this film, somehow liberated, or brought to the surface.

In summary, then, the rhetoric of magic—in its theatrical and cinematic varieties—constitutes a complex *drama of male-female relations*. In the guise of the magician figure, the male enacts a series of symbolic rituals in which he expresses numerous often-contradictory attitudes toward woman: his desire to exert power over her, to employ her as decorative object, to cast her as a sexual fantasy, to exorcize her imagined powers of death, and to appropriate her real powers of procreation.

At various points in this essay I have mentioned how the genre of the trick film owes its heritage to the legacy of theatrical magic. Yet the question arises as to *why* the conventions of stage magic were so easily translated onto the screen. Is there something *specific* to the cinematic medium that makes it appropriate for the conventions of magic, and if so, what implications might this have on the issue of women and film?

Clearly, the very nature of the cinematic medium links it with magic, for the photographic process has always held for people a magical aura. Though grounded in physical realities, photography still strikes us as producing an image "conjured" (albeit "developed" in a wash of Kodak chemicals.)

Historically, *motion* picture photography had even stronger ties to magic. One of the early predecessors of the film projector was, of course, the magic lantern, a device which projected painted, often animated slides. Clearly cinema, with its use of photography and its perfection of the illusion of movement, created even a more "magical" image of life. As Parker Tyler has written:

> Camera trickery is really camera magic, for illusion can be freely created by the movie camera with more mathematical

> accuracy and shock value than by sleight-of-hand or stage illusion. The very homogeneity of cinema illusion—the images of the actors themselves are illusive, their corporeal bodies absent—creates a throwback in the mood of the spectator to the vestiges . . . of ancient beliefs . . .[30]

It is interesting that among the trick films of the era are some whose iconography provides a commentary on the perceived magical qualities of the film medium. In *A Spiritualist Photographer* (Mélìes/1903), for example, a male magician appears on stage with a huge empty picture frame. He fits blank paper into the frame and stands a woman before it. As a torch burns beneath her, she magically dissolves onto the photographic paper. The magician rolls up the print and the flesh and blood woman reappears.

This same play with conjuring the image of women appears in *The Red Spectre.* As part of the devil-magician's competition with his female counterpart, he produces not live women but the *image* of women on a movie-type screen. Having done this, he lies beneath the ersatz screen and peers lasciviously at his nubile creations.

Several things can be concluded from the activities portrayed in these two films. First, they establish that the photographic act is seen as a kind of conjuring; producing a cinematic image is viewed as a "magic trick" equivalent to those one might perform on stage. Secondly, they demonstrate how readily the magic of the film image was associated with the image of the *female.* As theatrical magicians had obsessively made live women appear on stage, so the film magicians might conjure their images on screen.

Still another film of this era seems to literalize the notion of the cinematic apparatus as a magical device for producing women. In Mélìes's *The Magic Lantern* (1903) we find the characters of Pierrot and Harlequin in a children's play room. Early on in the film they assemble a huge magic lantern and project its light upon the wall. After a while, however, they become curious about what is inside the lantern's cavity. They open it up and, as though from a mechanical birth chamber, a stream of women swarm out.

Thus the legacy of magic in film is twofold. On the superficial level, there is cinema's historical inheritance of the conventions of stage magic, as manifest quite literally in the trick films of Edison, Pathé, Mélìes and others.[31] On a deeper level, however, is the primitive association of the film image itself with a conjured magical illusion.

Given the "sexual politics" of magic, what might the implications be, for the portrayal of women in film, of the association of cinema and magic? Clearly, this is a complex question that cannot be summarily answered; but several preliminary speculations present themselves. There would seem to be, within the history of cinema, a group of male film-makers who strongly identify the directorial role with that of a magician. Often, they are directors who display a great ambivalence toward women in their films.* Orson Welles, for example, in *F for Fake* (1973), flamboyantly adopts the stance of a master conjurer; but in his earlier film, *Lady from Shanghai* (1949), he casts Rita Hayworth as a perversely magical ensnarer of men. Jean Cocteau, in *The Testament of Orpheus* (1959) flaunts his own and cinema's trickery, but in his earlier *Orpheus* (1949) reveals woman (in the figure of Eurydice) to be the true source of magic in life and in art. Busby Berkeley, of course, is an obvious pledge for this fraternity, conjuring women from safely off-screen with all the male bravado that Mélìes displayed so guilelessly on stage.

There is also the case of a director like Ingmar Bergmar who, though admitting the lure of the cinema's magic, seems more qualified in his enthusiasm for the conjurer's posture. In his film *The Magician* (1958) he creates the character of Albert Vogler, a rather morose and somber magician who stands in contrast to the wry and mischievous figures cut by Mélìes or Welles.[32] Significantly, within the narrative of *The Magician* the issue of the relation of women to magic is foregrounded. An old woman in Vogler's magic troupe seems to have more powers than he does and, in fact, brews all the potent medicines that he sells. Yet, typically, she is regarded as a witch, and never performs on stage. Various male members of the magic troupe utilize their association with magic to control women. Tubul sells the cook, Sofia, a "love potion," and Simson woos the naive Sara by telling her how "magic attracts women." Most interesting of all, is the fact that for half the film Vogler's wife and magician's assistant, Manda,

*An exception is Jacques Rivette who, in *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, openly invests the two female main characters with magical powers.

is disguised (at his request) as the male, Aman—a name that is an anagram for "Manda," but also for the English words "a man." Finally, another character in the film, Mrs. Egerman, believes that Vogler has the power to bring back her deceased child. Throughout the film the magician's powers are cast in terms that suggest the cinema. Thus Vogler's act involves magic lanterns and shadows projected on screens; and he has the power to summon huge disembodied faces, which seem like nothing so much as film close-ups.

Bergman, himself, admits that his own fascination with cinema began with the childhood gift of a magic lantern, complete with a set of colored glass fairy-tale slides. But it was the acquisition a few years later of a film projector that had a profound effect upon the young director; and Bergman's recollection of that childhood experience makes clear his almost unconscious association of the powers of women, magic and the cinema. Thus he speaks of his own first encounter with a "vanishing lady:"

> When I was ten years old I received my first, rattling film projector, with its chimney and lamp. I found it both mystifying and fascinating. The first film I had was nine feet long and brown in color. It showed a girl lying asleep in a meadow, who woke up and stretched out her arms, then disappeared to the right. That was all there was to it. The film was a great success and was projected every night until it broke and could not be mended any more.
>
> This little rickety machine was my first conjuring set. And even today, I remind myself with childish excitement that I am really a conjurer . . .[33]

A Mystic Reincarnation
(Biograph 1902)

NOTES

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2. Paul Hammond, *Marvellous Méliès* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1974), p. 30.
3. William Doerflinger, *The Magic Catalogue* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 21, 41.
4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).
5. Thus far I have based my research largely on the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection as well as on those trick films available through commercial distribution. Further research would have to be done into archival holdings and trick film descriptions to ascertain precisely how uncommon female magicians were in this genre. Eileen Bowser and Bob Summers of The Museum of Modern Art have informed me that, based on the screenings at the FIAF Brighton Conference, female magician figures were most common in Pathé films. This has been born out by my examination of *The Red Spectre* and *Transformation*, discussed later in this article.
6. Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), p. 57.
7. H. R. Hays, *The Dangerous Sex* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 141.
8. Hays, p. 141.
9. Cited in footnotes 6 and 7.
10. Gregory Zilboorg, "Masculine and Feminine: Some Biological and Cultural Aspects," in *Psychoanalysis and Women*, ed. Jean Baker (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 96–131; Karen Horney, "The Dread of Woman" in her *Feminine Psychology*, ed. Harold Kelman (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 133–146; Freida Fromm-Reichmann and Virginia Gunst, "On the Denial of Women's Sexual Pleasure" in Baker, pp. 86–93.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo, Gesammelte Werk IX*, p. 180 as discussed in Lederer, pp. 2–7.
12. Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" in his *Sexuality and Love*, ed. Philip Reiff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 212–213.
13. Discussed in Lederer, p. 3.
14. Fromm-Reichmann and Gunst, p. 88.
15. Hays, p. 215.
16. These tricks are listed in Doerflinger as well as in *Dunninger's Complete Encyclopedia of Magic* (New York: Spring Books).
17. Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," in Rieff, p. 188.
18. Karen Horney, "The Flight From Womanhood," in Kelman, pp. 60-61.
19. Reichmann and Gunst, p. 91.
20. Zilboorg, p. 124.
21. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New York: William Morrow, 1949), pp. 102-103.
22. Bruno Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), pp. 109–110.
23. Dunninger, pp. 139, 262, 278.

24. Doerflinger, p. 123.
25. Doerflinger, p. 113.
26. Doerflinger, p. 26.
27. Walter B. Gibson and Morris N. Young, eds., *Houdini on Magic* (New York: Dover, 1953), p. 118.
28. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1960), p. 117.
29. Again, as mentioned in footnote 5, it is significant that this film is attributed (by Reel Images, its distributor) to Pathé.
30. Parker Tyler, "Preface" to *Magic and Myth of the Movies* in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford, 1974), p. 586.
31. For the most complete discussion of the influence of magicians on movies see: Eric Barnouw, "The Magician and the Movies," *American Film*, Part I (April 1978), Part II (May 1978).
32. My comments on *The Magician* are, unfortunately, based on the published screenplay, since I was unable to view the film at the time of writing this piece. See Ingmar Bergman, *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Lars Malmstrom and David Kushner (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).
33. Ingmar Bergman, "Introduction" to *Four Screenplays*, pp. xiv-xv. Most of the films that I have discussed in this article will soon be available on a single reel through Film Circulation, The Museum of Modern Art.

Reviews

THE MEETINGS OF ANNA

Director: Chantal Akerman. Script: Akerman. Director of photography: Jean Penzer. Editing: Francine Sandberg. New Yorker Films.

Chantal Akerman's *The Meetings of Anna* (1978) is a brilliant, innovative film that challenges our expectations with a simple clarity that is perceptually strong and emotionally compelling. As in her earlier work *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), its radical style forces us to become aware of filmic conventions that we normally accept as realistic but which actually distort our conception of experience.

The plot is minimal. A young Belgian filmmaker named Anna (Aurore Clement) travels to a German city to appear at the screening of her latest film, then returns home to Paris. Though this may sound like a potentially glamorous situation, Akerman's unconventional treatment goes against our expectations. We never see the glamorous scene of the celebrity appearing before her fans; instead, Akerman focuses on what is usually omitted in movies—the detailed physical actions of a character in isolation. Most of the time, we see Anna alone—walking through a train station, riding in a train, staring out a window, or lying in her bed in a hotel room. She is between films and between meetings with other lonely individuals.

The structure of the film is framed by these long stretches of isolation, interrupted by five specific meetings: a one-night stand with a German grade-school teacher, who is looking for a wife; a brief visit in a train station with the mother of her former fiancé, who still wants Anna as a daughter-in-law; a chance encounter on a train with a stranger seeking romantic adventure; a one-night stop-over in Brussels with her mother, whom she hasn't seen in three years; and a reunion in Paris with her lover, whose anticipation of future disappointments destroys their enjoyment of the present. These five encounters raise expectations both in the characters and in the audience. Whom will she meet next—a stranger, friend, lover, or relative? What will the person want from Anna? What role will each be expected to play? What will result from the exchange?

By watching these encounters, we learn that Anna is a person who tries to minimize her expectations so that she won't be disillusioned, but she nevertheless is trapped into wanting more than she gets. Anna knows her commitment to her art means that she must give up other more conventional choices. Despite twice breaking an engagement and having two abortions, she still hopes to have children. It's as if Anna knows that the relationship between mother and child holds more potential for her both as an artist and as a woman. In fact, her meeting with her mother is the only encounter in the film that is emotionally satisfying. In her various meetings we perceive that there are marked differences in expectations between the sexes and the generations. In contrast to Anna who pursues work and independence, the men that she meets yearn for

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