Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*

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Abstract:
This essay argues that at its most sophisticated and playful, neo-Victorianism engages the reader/spectator in a conjuring game of duplicity and revelatory enlightenment, mimicking the strategies of Victorian magicians. Drawing on the history of late-Victorian magic, it contends that the combination of Victorian narratives of stage illusion with the more contemporary concept of Baudrillardian simulation and simulacra allows us to access the specific levels of metatextual misdirection provided by a number of recent films and fictions: Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), adapted from Christopher Priest's eponymous novel of 1995, Neil Burger's *The Illusionist* (2006), based on Steven Millhauser's short story 'Eisenheim the Illusionist' (1990), and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999). My argument resides in the interpretation of the trope of the trick and how it always returns us to a reflection on the nature of our engagement with and desire of the neo-Victorian (literary or filmic) text.

Keywords: conjuring trick; illusion; magic turn; magician; metatextual/metafilmic; misdirection; pledge; prestige; spiritualism; Victorian stage magic.

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Neo-Victorianism is sustained by illusion: the fabrication of a 'plausible' version of the Victorian past and a 'credible' representation of the places, characters, and experiences depicted in the text or film. As a sub-genre of postmodernism, neo-Victorianism, when at its most sophisticated, is self-referential, engaging the reader or audience in a game about its historical veracity and (intra/inter)textuality, and inviting reflections on its metafictional playfulness. If metafiction, as Patricia Waugh notes, "draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 1982: 2), neo-Victorian metafilm and metafiction, in Linda Hutcheon's terms "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1996: 105-123), stages its artefactual condition in order to challenge our desire for getting at the 'truth' about the Victorians, dramatising the essential constructedness of history and historiography. The position of the neo-Victorian author and film director can then be compared to that of a conjuror: like the audience of a stage magician, we know from

the start that it's all an act, but judge the quality of the performance by its ability to deceive and mystify us. As Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, a master of Victorian stage illusion, famously observed, a conjuror is "an actor playing the part of a magician" (cited in Mangan 2007: 99). Actor, conjuror, and neo-Victorian writer/director all strive for a compelling performance with the power to dazzle and captivate. Just as nineteenth-century magicians' invocation of spiritualist manifestations relied on the use of magic lanterns or angled mirrors, projecting on to the stage the reflections of hidden actors operating behind screens or below stairs (Mangan 2007: 123-125; Warner 2006: 147-150), so contemporary neo-Victorianism too plays with mirrors to lure us into suspending disbelief. In his cultural history of magic, *Performing Dark Arts* (2007), Michael Mangan draws analogies between the stage acts and "performative writing" of conjurors and the strategies of postmodernist fiction and film: all deploy a similar set of "gestures designed to misdirect the reader's attention, to say one thing while doing another", thus "performing that quintessential conjuror's routine of appearing to explain the trick while actually doing no such thing" (Mangan 2007: xix, 114).

Misdirection (the opening ploy of every trick, which consists in showing while hiding) is as central to the art of the neo-Victorian author and film director as to that of the conjuror. The stratagem of misdirection and the *mise-en-scène* of an illusion can be related to Jean Baudrillard's postmodernist concept of simulation and hyperreality. Baudrillard uses the example of the theme park, Disneyland – a more appropriately neo-Victorian paradigm would be Dickens World – to argue that in its very inauthenticity the simulacrum, once it has assumed reality function in our imagination, serves to mask the more general inauthenticity (hyperreality) of the world in which we live: "Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America that is Disneyland" (Baudrillard 2004: 12). This process of raising the doubly artificial to the status of 'reality' in order to hide the artefactuality of the original Baudrillard calls a "*simulation of the third order*" (Baudrillard 2004: 12, original emphasis). Neo-Victorian fiction and film adapt Baudrillard by engaging us in a game of hide and seek, in which the deceptions in which the characters ensnare each other conceal, even as they reveal, the textual and visual deceits practised on reader and spectator, creating third-order simulations which aim to trick and

then spectacularly undeceive us in our desire to capture the 'reality' of the Victorian worlds created.

This essay draws on Mangan's discussion of the "performative writing" of illusionists and Baudrillard's concept of "simulation and simulacra" in order to examine two neo-Victorian films and their textual originals – Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), adapted from Christopher Priest's eponymous novel of 1995, and Neil Burger's *The Illusionist* (2006), based on Steven Millhauser's story 'Eisenheim the Illusionist' (1990) – in comparison with Sarah Waters's novel *Affinity* (1999). These texts and films, I contend, present the neo-Victorian conjuring trick as a play in three acts: misdirection (the pledge of authenticity made towards the audience), the magic turn (the surprise, such as the disappearance of an object or a person), and the "prestige",[1] in stage magic the illusion itself, in neo-Victorianism the revelation of the trick.

1. "Are You Watching Closely?": *The Prestige*

Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* provides a striking metaphor for the imaginative and performative acts of contemporary neo-Victorianism.[2] Text and film revolve around the embittered professional and personal rivalry between, and mutual destruction of, two Victorian magicians, Robert (in the novel Rupert) Angier (played by Hugh Jackman) and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale). Their names are emblematic of their profession, Angier's evoking the world of dreams ('*anges*') conjured up by the magician, while Borden's hints at the crossing of 'borders', the boundary work involved in performing illusions. One of the underlying causes of their antagonism in book and film is their profoundly different approaches, reflecting competing camps in Victorian magic: the "skilled artists" who excelled at "sleight of hand" (but risked being dismissed as mere "jugglers") as opposed to what Robert-Houdin called "the 'false bottom' school of conjuring", who primarily relied on machinery (Mangan 2007: 104-105). Priest's Borden belittles Angier for his "flawed and limited understanding of magical technique": what Angier does not appear to grasp is that "[t]he wonder of magic lies not in the technical secret, but in the skill with which it is performed" (Priest 2004: 64). While Angier's *pièce de resistance* is indeed entirely a question of technology, ironically Borden's leading act is itself contingent on circumstances other than mere skill. In the film the enmity between the two characters originates from a tragic accident when Borden,

by tying the wrong kind of knot, caused the death by drowning in a water-filled cabinet of Angier's assistant and wife.[3] Angier later attempts to sabotage Borden's most celebrated act, "The Transported Man", which consists of the magician entering a cabinet at one end of the stage while instantly re-emerging from another one at the opposite end, catching the ball he had started to bounce across the stage. With the help of the ingenious Eastern-European scientist Nikola Tesla (a real-life inventor, here played by David Bowie), Angier acquires a quasi-Frankensteinian electrical apparatus which enables him to outperform Borden's magic trick. Angier's star act is called "In a Flash" and involves his disappearance in the midst of electric explosions, only to make a spectacular reappearance seconds later on one of the balconies. One day, however, his performance goes tragically wrong when he drops through a stage trap door into a tank filled with water and drowns. Borden, who at the start of the performance had made his way into the basement in order to discover the secret of Angier's trick, arrives to see his rival trapped in the tank. Found at the scene and convicted of having plotted Angier's murder, Borden is sentenced to death.

There is, of course, more than one trick and turn to the story of the two magicians, and one of these is to present the audience with parts of the explanation of Angier's secret at the very beginning. The film starts with Harry Cutter, Angier's designer of illusions (played by Michael Caine), describing the three constitutive parts of every magic trick to a young girl, whom we later identify as Borden's daughter:

> [The voiceover (indicated in italics) addresses the spectator while Cutter performs a magic dis/reappearance trick with a budgie to a young girl; in the background Angier is shown staging "In a Flash".] *Are you watching closely?* – [Cutter] Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the pledge. It's where the magician shows you something ordinary, a deck of cards, a bird, or a man. [Cutter produces a cage with a bird in it; Angier's assistant asks for volunteers from the audience, who – with Borden, in disguise, among them – proceed to examine Angier's magical apparatus.] He shows you this object, perhaps he asks you to inspect it, to see that it is indeed real, normal. But of course it probably isn't. [While the volunteers return to

> their seats, Borden moves backstage.] The second act is called the turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. [Cutter makes the budgie and cage disappear while, apparently hit by electrical currents, Angier vanishes from the stage.] Now you are looking for the secret, but you won't find it because you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled. [Borden arrives in the basement, moves past a blind man sitting in front of a water tank, and witnesses Angier dropping into the tank.] But you wouldn't clap yet. [The girl grows confused, while the audience in the background is becoming restless, as there is no sign of Angier.] Because making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it back. [Cutter presents the missing bird to the girl, who starts clapping.] That's why every magic trick has a third act: the hardest part, the part we call the prestige. [A bewildered Borden watches Angier's struggle for survival in the tank.] (Nolan 2006: 00:42-03:12)[4]

"Are you watching closely?" Repeated twice, this question evidently issues a challenge: from the outset we are invited to question our perception of events. In his 'Special Features', Nolan refers to the affinities between magician and film director,[5] stressing that he wants viewers to pick up on the metafilmic dimension:

> *The Prestige* is very much about film-making […] It's also intended to suggest […] how the film itself is spooling its narrative out to the audience. We want people really to be aware of the effect the film is having on them as it's unfolding before their eyes. (Nolan 2006, 0:17-0:42)

Nolan plays with our blindness in the face of the insights we are given early on about how Borden and Angier's tricks might work. Cutter insists that Borden's act must rely on a double, but Angier's persistent disbelief clouds our judgement. While in the film a child is instantly and painfully aware of the cruelty that lies beneath the bird dis/reappearance trick (the bird on display is crushed by the collapsing cage; the 'recovery' produces a second

bird that had been hidden in the folds of the cloth), we remain impervious to its allegorical nature as an indication of Angier's later stunt. Another important early clue is the revelation of the secret of a prominent magician, Chung Ling Soo (another historical figure), who relies for his trick on a permanent deception which, in order to sustain his act, must be maintained in his private life; and yet we do not make any inferences about Borden's changeable behaviour, which so troubles his wife.[6]

The Prestige perfects the strategy of revealing while concealing the clues. The very first camera shot offers an oblique illustration of Angier's trick; but it is only at the film's close that we can make sense of what was disclosed to us at the beginning. The film opens on a vista of black top hats scattered on the ground in an outside space (Tesla's laboratory grounds, we learn later). If we take the hat as a metonymy for the magician, this would hint at the magic trick being premised on the multiplicity, or at least duality, of magicians involved in any one performance (a duality recreated not only in the doubling of characters but also in the joint screenplay composition of the film director brothers Christopher and Jonathan Nolan, and further reflected in the close proximity of the release dates of *The Prestige* and Neil Burger's 'sibling' film about nineteenth-century magic and deadly rivalry).[7] In the closing scenes of *The Prestige* we discover that Borden's "Transported Man" relied on twin brotherhood. There are two Bordens, and not even the women in their lives knew about their double identity. (Indeed, in Priest's novel their sense of self/selves is fundamentally linked to their unitary duality, "Alfred" being the composite name for the identical twins "Al"bert and "Fred"erick; when one of them dies, the other admits to "no longer know[ing] myself" [Priest 2004: 116, 204].) One of the brothers is hanged for murder, the other survives to kill Angier, whose own double had revealed himself to the Borden awaiting execution. Angier, too, has always had a dual identity: "The Great Danton" in public life, he is Lord Colderdale in his private capacity. The secret of his survival resides in his apparatus, which is not, as his Victorian (and contemporary) audience might suspect, a tele-transportation device, but a duplication machine. Just like the top hats we see yet whose meaning we do not take in at the beginning, Angier has been creating a copy of himself every time he performed his trick. The copy would continue the act by making a glamorous re-appearance on a balcony, while the original would fall through the trap door into the water tank and drown. When Angier set Borden up for his 'murder', he did not allow for

Borden's own duality. After Borden's execution his brother exacts revenge by shooting Angier and setting fire to his theatre. In his dying moments Angier discloses his secret:

> [Angier] It took courage to climb into that machine every night not knowing if I'd be the man in the box or in the prestige. Do you want to see what it cost me? You didn't see where you are, did you – look … [pointing at a long row of water tanks, now all enveloped by flames]
> [Borden] I don't care. You went half-way round the world, you spent a fortune. You did terrible things, really terrible things, Robert, and all for nothing, nothing.
> [Angier, talking haltingly, in pain] You never understood why we did this. The audience knows the truth. The world is miserable, solid all the way through. But if you could fool them, even for a second, if you could make them wonder, then you got to see something very special. You really don't know. It was … It was the look on their faces. [Falls back, dying.]
> [Cutter performs his trick to Borden's daughter.] Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called the pledge. The magician shows you something ordinary. The second act is called the turn. The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it into something extraordinary. But you wouldn't clap yet, because making something disappear isn't enough. You have to bring it back. [The surviving Borden enters to catch the ball his daughter is bouncing and takes her home. Flashback to earlier scene: after Angier's death Borden is shown walking along the burning glass tanks.] Now you're looking for the secret. [Flashback to opening shot: vista of the top hats.] But you won't find it because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to work it out. You want to be fooled. (Nolan 2006: 1:56:17-1:59:50, pauses in the original)

We want to be fooled because the 'truth' may be more than we have bargained for. In the concluding shot the camera moves over a multitude of

glass cabinets before zooming in on one, which contains the – or rather a – dead body of Angier. The one transparent glass case stands for all the others; each holds the human remains of Angier's performances. Every performance produced another replica that had to be disposed of. Each tank is a coffin, the basement of Angier's theatre a graveyard of suicides. The original Robert Angier died at the rehearsal of his new act prior to its first public performance. The first glass cabinet houses the 'original', all others the copies. The glass case with the copy inside is an apt metaphor for film, for it too deals in 'dead' images. It is also a metaphor for neo-Victorian fiction and film, which plays with our desire to rediscover and possess the 'original' and 'authentic' by offering us a hall of mirrors full of copy. As in Baudrillard's third-order simulation, the copy becomes the real thing: in Angier's performance as much as in neo-Victorianism.

2. The Conjuror in the Closet: *Affinity*

It is the performance not of magic but of spiritualism in which the third-order simulation is embedded and through which it is deconstructed in the final pages of Sarah Waters's *Affinity*. Spiritualism and stage magic are of course closely aligned; they perform the same tricks in different environments: the private home for spiritualist sittings, the public domain of a theatre for displays of magic. Priest's Angier starts off his magician's career as a spiritualist preying on the vulnerability of the newly bereaved; in 'Eisenheim the Illusionist' and Burger's film version the hero's stage invocation of spectral apparitions blurs the boundaries between the performance of magic and the spiritualist séance. In *Affinity* a character's reference to spiritualists as "a lot of clever conjurors" is confirmed early on by the spiritualist medium herself, when she explains one of her illusions to the woman already well on her way to becoming ensnared by her sleight of hand: after conjuring up the word "Truth" on the flesh of her arm, she illustrates how she achieved the effect by marking out the letters with a knitting needle and then sprinkling salt on the wound, thus making the letters stand out in crimson (Waters 2000: 98, 168). The 'truth' of the spiritualist act is, indeed, fakery. Spiritualism in *Affinity* acts as a simulation which operates a treble deception: on the characters tricked by the lesbian couple, by masking, and thereby enabling, homosexual acts; on the protagonist, by furnishing her with an exonerating language for the exploration of her transgressive desires, and, through the concept of

spiritual-qua-erotic 'affinity', securing her complicity in the prison escape plot; and on the contemporary reader who, familiar with Terry Castle's concept of the "apparitional lesbian" (Castle 1993), will see through the spiritualist masquerade and yet is likely to be seduced into suspending disbelief in the desire for a happy supernatural ending to the lesbian love story.

If *The Prestige* hints at the necrophilic undercurrents in our imaginary revisitations of the Victorian, *Affinity* tenders a less sinister image of the neo-Victorian textual and sexual body. Set in 1870s London, it tells the story of the Victorian hysteric-as-repressed-lesbian, Margaret Prior, through journal entries that map her growing obsession with the spiritualist Selina Dawes, incarcerated in Millbank Penitentiary for having caused her benefactress Mrs Brink's death after assaulting a teenage girl during a private séance. Selina's voice and diary extracts, set two years earlier, are offered as a complementary account contextualising her prison sentence and, as the novel progresses, increasingly serve as a counter-narrative to Margaret's vision. Here, too, the text is framed by a corpse: the lifeless body of Mrs Brink, who suffered a heart attack as a result of the shock of disillusionment, anticipates Margaret's projected suicide at the close of the novel. The corpse is emblematic not, as in *The Prestige*, of the neo-Victorian venture of resurrecting the past, but of the destruction wreaked by illicit desire on the upper-middle-class Victorian spinster. The spectacular petrification of defrauded desire at the moment of enlightenment has its counterpoint in the hidden consummation of desire, behind the scenes, by the trickster couple Selina and her maid Ruth. As in stage magic, which *Affinity* mimics in its enactment of pledge/misdirection, turn/disappearance, and prestige/shock revelation, the iconographic display of and fetishistic gaze directed at Selina's body serve to distract the reader's attention and provides a screen for the shadow game operated by Ruth. The instability of the figure of the 'magician' constitutes a conjuring trick in itself, for the ostensible mistress of illusions, the spiritualist, turns out to be the assistant merely: not the strategist who pulls the strings but, rather, as the line from Selina's diary which concludes the novel indicates, one of her puppets: "'Remember,' Ruth is saying, 'whose girl you are'" (Waters 2000: 352).

The 'real' illusionist, Ruth, comes doubly disguised, as Selina's male spirit guide and cross-class 'master', Peter Quick (anachronistically purloined from Henry James's Peter Quint), and as the lowly servant Vigers

employed by Margaret's mother; the tweeny not afraid of ghosts because she impersonates them. In Selina's opening journal entry, Quick is the central agent of the plot: it is he who frightened and then manhandled the hysterical Madeleine Silvester, with his "white legs" (and gender) exposed by his "open gown", causing Mrs Brink's collapse, and it is his desires and actions which led to Selina's conviction (Waters 2000: 2). As in the introductory pledge of a magic trick, the text offers us all the clues to the mystery, but it is only with hindsight that we recognise and understand them. When Quick leaves the scene, Ruth enters it; her careful (and threatening) attention to Mrs Brink during the doctor's examination ensures her silence: "Mrs Brink looked then as if she longed to speak but could not" (Waters 2000: 3).[8] The love affair between Ruth and Selina is hinted at between the lines of Ruth's refusal to "lock up my own mistress, who has done nothing" (Waters 2000: 1). Later it is Margaret's lawyer brother Stephen who muses about the "beau in muslin" for whose sake Dawes must have gone to prison, while Vigers, the very lover in question, is offering biscuits to the guests (Waters 2000: 101).

This scene is emblematic, for Ruth's (the conjuror's) silent presence is key to the 'disappearance trick', which follows the textual 'pledge' (Selina's opening journal entry, which exhibits the prime movers while obscuring the precise nature of their interaction). In her quest for Selina's story Margaret repeatedly comes across representations of Peter Quick, and records the sense of odd familiarity she experiences when looking at the dark eyes and muscular arm of this supposed spirit reproduced on paper or in sculptural form, but never once does she recognise her own maid, who daily helps her dress, prepares her baths, and uses her free access to her mistress's room to drive the trickster plot forward. Because the first-person perspective encourages our identification with the central character, we are seduced into sharing Margaret's misperception of events, even though the textual insertions of Selina's journal narrative allow us privileged insight into Ruth's and Quick's interconnecting manipulations. Ruth's sudden appearance in her bedroom, when Selina first takes up residence in Mrs Brink's house is associated with the spectral identity she will soon co-opt for her Peter Quick persona: "she had come quietly […] like a real lady's maid, like a ghost" (Waters 2000: 119). That ghosts might take the earthly shape of maids is insinuated in Selina's warning words to Margaret: "They [spirits …] see everything. Even the pages of your secret book." (Waters

2000: 111) The birth of Peter Quick, the removal of the medium's cabinet to the alcove that has a door in it, the establishment of séances with Mrs Brink's friends, the introduction of private sessions with pretty women who take Quick's fancy – none of these ideas originate from Selina. Ruth's increasing mastery is accompanied by Quick's sadistic interventions: the rope cutting into Selina's flesh during sittings, the collar marking him out as her owner, the mantra of obedience impressed on her ("your prayer must always be *May I be used* […] my medium must do as she is bid" [Waters 2000: 261, original emphasis]). All reverse social hierarchies of class as much as they transgress gender codes. Ruth's management of Mrs Brink and her implicitly threatening behaviour, when Selina is first installed in the house,[9] suggest that she master-minded past encounters with mediums for her own libidinal purposes and that Selina's satisfactory performance will be judged by her compliance with Ruth's desires. In contradistinction to Margaret, the reader is thus able to gain detailed knowledge of Ruth's control of Selina, and yet is no closer than Margaret to making a connection between Ruth/Quick and Vigers, the servant Margaret can so frequently "hear […] stir[ing] above" her at night (Waters 2000: 116).

It is only after the final magic turn (Selina's disappearance from Millbank) and with the emergence of the 'magician' figure into full view that the reader is at last able to 'see' and identify Ruth as Vigers, Margaret's maid, currently on her way to Italy with Selina in order to start a new life with Margaret's name and inheritance. The crucial insight for readers here is Margaret's, and our own, class blindness: "What was she, to me? I could not even recall the details of her face, her look, her manners. I could not say, cannot say now, what shade her hair is, what colour her eye, how her lip curves" (Waters 2000: 340). The 'monstrous' consequences of acquiescing with the idea that those deemed socially 'inferior' should remain invisible to us strike home with a vengeance. At the start of her diary Margaret had set out to write history from a new angle, a perspective programmatically different from the one her historian father would have taken (see Kohlke 2004: 156): "no, of course he would not start the story there, with a lady and her servant, and petticoats and loose hair." (Waters 2000: 7) By not "bother[ing] with the detail of the skirts", her father – the male historian and story-teller – would have missed out on a vital insight into the personally intimidating and disciplining nature of the penitentiary's architecture (Waters 2000: 8). Margaret gains her first view of Millbank when, on

entering the prison grounds, she bends down to disentangle her gown from jutting stones: "it is in lifting my eyes from my sweeping hem that I first see the pentagons of Millbank – and the nearness of them, and the suddenness of that gaze, makes them seem terrible. I look at them, and feel my heart beat hard, and I am afraid" (Waters 2000: 8). This experience predisposes her to empathise with the inmates and their predicament rather than to assume the position of 'upright' superiority expected by the prison governor Mr Shillitoe and the matron Miss Ridley. As she realises at the end of her journey, however, this woman-centred and supposedly bottom-up perspective still excluded the key agent, the servant, thus causing her own demise.

Ironically, while from her first visit to Millbank Margaret is aware of to the panoptical gaze – a gaze which she realises is also, increasingly, turned on her, both at home and in the prison[10] – she never considers the potential dangers of the maid's gaze. Despite a childhood incident, when a servant responded to her stare with a painful pinch, and in the face of the Millbank prisoners' intent observation of her and warnings about their cunning manoeuvres,[11] it is only after her maid has made away with her lover, her money, and her identity that she comes to recognise the controlling, blinding power of the subaltern's gaze: "Every time I stood in Selina's cell, feeling my flesh yearn towards hers, there might as well have been Vigers at the gate, looking on, stealing Selina's gaze from me to her" (Waters 2000: 341-342). The all-embracing illusion to which Margaret has fallen victim has the effect of turning not only her life, but even her death into a simulacrum. Thus her farewell letter to her one-time lover and sister-in-law Helen, posted with the thought of her imminent, and scandalous, life in Italy with Selina, now assumes the appearance of a suicide note:

> I wish you will only regret my going from you, not cry out against the manner of it. I wish you will remember me with kindness, not with pain. Your pain will not help me, where I am going. But your kindness will help my mother, and my brother, as it helped them once before [when she attempted suicide …] I cannot live, and not be at her side! (Waters 2000: 316)

Just as the "interrogation posed by simulation", in Baudrillard's terms, precipitates "the knowledge that truth, reference, objective cause have ceased to exist" (Baudrillard 2004: 3), so Margaret's comprehension of the momentous imposture enacted on her retrospectively dispossesses all of her thoughts and actions, her sense of identity, her prospective suicide even, of authenticity and 'truth'.

3. Death and Resurrection in *The Illusionist*

It is again the simulacrum, and the invocation of a quasi-spectral image of the real, which sustains the conjuring trick in Neil Burger's *The Illusionist*. In his commentary on the film Burger notes that to him Chief Inspector Uhl's point that "Perhaps there's truth in this illusion" represents the 'key line' of the film: "You have to embrace illusion to get to the truth" ('Special Features', Burger 2006: 1:31:32-1:31:49). Just as neo-Victorian writers research the period in order to fabricate fiction from 'factual' contexts, so in order to create convincing stage illusions the film crew was advised by three magicians (David Blaine, James Freedman, and Ricky Jay), the effects created were, as far as possible, authentic, and the actors playing the young (Aaron Johnson) and adult (Edward Norton) Eisenheim were asked to perform 'real' conjuring tricks ('Special Features', Burger 2006: 7:01-7:10, 16:54-17:07).

If *Affinity* and *The Prestige* play on the illusion of 'truth' and in the process invoke spectral and deadly desires in their protagonists, Burger and his metafilmic hero Eisenheim stage an elaborate game with the illusion of spectrality and death itself. The ease with which death can be simulated and turned into a spectacle is demonstrated to us in Eisenheim's performance of a mirror trick (Burger 2006: 21:30-25:32). That our interpretation of the scene and, by inference, the film to a crucial extent relies on our perceptiveness in relation to our position *vis-à-vis* the magician (director) is intimated in the *mise-en-scène*, which involves a large mirror being moved into place on the stage. While Eisenheim is only visible partially, and only from the back, the audience is reflected in frontal view in the moving mirror: the scene to be set in motion will evidently revolve around the spectators (ourselves) as much as around Eisenheim and what he does on stage. His instruction to his volunteer – "Gaze directly into my eyes. Look nowhere else"– issues an invitation to the viewer to become as hypnotized and absorbed by the deception as she does (Burger 2006: 23:20-23:25).

In the act that ensues, a member of the audience is clothed in a hooded red robe (a variation on the black-hooded harbinger of death), positioned in front of a mirror facing the audience, and told to wave to her image; the hooded reflection first complies but soon develops a life of its own and is joined by a second phantom, which proceeds to stab the first; as the 'reflection' lies prostrated on the mirrored floor, a ghostly ectoplasm – a feat adapted from David Brewster's early-nineteenth-century 'Dr Pepper's Ghost'[12] – rises from the figure and hovers over the mirror, until it is dematerialised by the conjuror.[13] This episode constitutes a direct parallel to *The Prestige*'s opening gambit; we are shown the trick before we can understand its full significance. The act begins as a recognition scene: in his involuntary volunteer, the Crown Prince's fiancée, Eisenheim identifies Sophie Duchess von Teschen. As adolescents Eisenheim, a carpenter's son, and Sophie, an aristocrat's daughter, were deeply in love, but were forced apart by her parents. An apprentice magician, Eisenheim then failed in his magic endeavour to make them disappear together; now, after years of training, the outcome is to be dramatically different. This is implied in a *double entendre* when, after the performance, Eisenheim responds to the Crown Prince's dismissal of magic with the remark, "Perhaps I'll make you disappear" (Burger 2006: 27:33-27: 36). The message is directed at Sophie who now, at last, recognises him; it is also directed at us, issuing a cryptic hint at Eisenheim's emerging plans.

With its female volunteer, Eisenheim's act presents a version of the 'Death and the Maiden' trope, which appeared on film for the first time in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, the period in which *The Illusionist* is set. Georges Méliès's *Escamotage d'une Dame chez Robert-Houdin / The Vanishing Lady at the Robert-Houdin Theatre* (1896) shows the recording of a performance in the Parisian Théâtre Robert-Houdin, in which a woman seated on a chair is covered with a cloth; when the cloth is lifted she is no longer there; when it is lifted a second time, the spectator is confronted by a skeleton (Mangan 2007: 116-117). Méliès trained as a magician before turning to film as a new, and superior, vehicle for the production of illusions (Mangan 2007: 126). Burger's film about a conjuror's mirror game with disappearance and reappearance, death and resurrection, thus represents a self-referential engagement with the birth of film as the medium which 'killed' and 'resurrected' stage illusionism in the late-Victorian era. In his 'Special Features' commentary, Burger notes that

he took pains to use the "old visual vocabulary" and "autochrome" quality of silent film, and he refers to his work as comparable to that of a "magician setting up a misdirection" (Burger 2006: 1:24:52-1:24:59).

The misdirection enacted by *The Illusionist* is twofold. In the case of the phantom death it consists in giving us a first taste of the grand illusion Eisenheim will operate on Inspector Uhl (and us) when the same woman, Sophie Duchess von Teschen (Jessica Biel), who in the initial performance of the act was selected to play the part of volunteer by her then-lover, Crown Prince Leopold, will later be set up to be 'killed' by Leopold and 'resurrected' as a spectral avenger by Eisenheim. The misdirection here involves presenting us with an allegory of what is to follow, but of course we cannot identify it as such at this early stage. The second misdirection concerns the flashback technique with which the story is narrated. The film begins with Uhl's (Paul Giamatti's) arrest of Eisenheim on stage, as he is in the process of materialising an apparition to the extreme excitement of the audience. Uhl then reports back to the Crown Prince (Rufus Sewell), who expresses irritation about Uhl's failure to "put an end to it"; Uhl assures him that there are only a "very few" "loose ends of the case" (Burger 2006: 5:37, 5:13, 5:09-5:10). The Crown Prince's exasperation with Eisenheim, *agent provocateur* in his personal capacity as in his challenge to rationalism, prompts Uhl's recapitulation of the conjuror's life and career. From this point the film follows a chronological sequence of events, and only at its very end returns to flashback in its final illumination, Uhl's realisation that it was all a trick and his speculation about how it was done. The device of re-narration by somebody other than the central protagonist casts the veracity of the account in doubt: Uhl cannot know the details of Eisenheim's early life, even less the particulars of his adolescent romance with Sophie. Since everything, including the resolution, is presented through Uhl's eyes, it must ultimately, as Burger affirms in his 'Special Features', remain "all conjecture": "what he chooses to believe, what the audience chooses to believe – may-be it's true, may-be it isn't" (Burger 2006: 1:29:18-1:39:25).

That appearances are deceptive is brought home to us in the latter part of the film, when the plot returns to the two opening scenes, Uhl's arrest of Eisenheim and his subsequent meeting with the Crown Prince, which now assume a significantly different outlook (representing the 'magic turn' of the film). Not only did Uhl fail to make an arrest because Eisenheim

concluded his final performance with his own spectacular dematerialisation on stage at the very moment of capture, but Uhl's subsequent arrival at the hunting lodge is motivated by sentiments rather dissimilar to those of a subordinate acknowledging defeat: he has come to charge the Crown Prince with the murder of the Duchess. When Leopold realises that he is about to be seized by emissaries of his father, Emperor Franz Josef I, whom he was plotting to overthrow, he shoots himself. It is only after his death that Uhl discovers that he was, after all, innocent, having been framed by Eisenheim for a simulated murder which served to provide an escape route for the lovers. Since Sophie had been entrusted with the Crown Prince's treason plan and their engagement was a prerequisite for securing the support of the Hungarian part of the Empire, he would never have consented to her departure, least of all in the company of his declared rival, who had publicly taunted him as a usurper during a performance at his lodge, when Leopold was powerless to lift his sword (dubbed "Excalibur" by the magician), the emblem of his legitimacy as a ruler, until enabled to do so by Eisenheim.

Here, then, is the third misdirection, followed by the 'prestige', the illuminating disclosure of what 'really' (might have) happened: like Uhl and Eisenheim's theatre audience, who inferred the identity of Sophie's murderer from her phantom appearances on stage, we were fooled into believing that she was killed by the ruthless Crown Prince, rumoured to have disposed of a previous lover in just such a manner. Uhl reconstructs what he believes to be the sequence of events: Sophie deliberately sought out Leopold in his hunting lodge to provoke his anger, using an inattentive moment to drug him in order to make his subsequent pursuit of her to the stables appear to have taken place in a drunken rage, rode away in an apparent swoon, and deposited herself in a river shortly before Eisenheim and his recovery party 'found' her chilled ('dead') body. The doctor who showed Uhl the corpse but interfered with its examination was a fellow professional. The gem stone supposedly retrieved from Sophie's clothes, which Uhl, together with another stone discovered in the stable of the hunting lodge, identified as missing jewels from Leopold's sword, are from the very weapon which Eisenheim had previously handled while performing the 'Excalibur' trick. Now Uhl recalls a conversation at the train station that he overheard between Eisenheim and the man who later impersonated the 'doctor': "When it's done, you will travel ahead with her, and I will follow" (Berger 2006: 49:41:46, 1:37:35-1:37:39). Eisenheim's necromantic

performances after Sophie's death served the single purpose of establishing the credibility of his apparitions as 'real' entities with superior insight over life and death, thus preparing the way for his invocation of the Duchess.

Only after the missing description of the 'Orange Tree' mystery (a trick that had always baffled him) is passed on to him by a street boy and his pocket is picked by a man resembling Eisenheim, whom he sees departing with Sophie's locket dangling from his hand, does Uhl gain insight into the conjuror's final and most superlative act. Just as, at the outset, Eisenheim had furnished him, the amateur magician, with the explanation for a minor trick when he questioned him about the 'Orange Tree', so now he leaves Uhl with the 'Orange Tree' in order to protect his grandest illusion. The film concludes, as it began, with an image of butterflies: the iconic representation not only of Eisenheim's relationship with Sophie (whose wooden butterfly-motif locket in knowing hands transforms into a heart-shaped pendant) but also of the 'Orange Tree', which stands for Eisenheim's death and resurrection stunt.

The 'Orange Tree' is composed of two acts: a member of the audience is asked for a handkerchief, which is placed for safe-keeping in a box (while secretly being purloined); seeds planted in a bucket filled with soil grow into a tree bearing real fruit, which is distributed to the audience; one of the remaining oranges opens to reveal mechanical butterflies carrying the handkerchief towards the audience (Burger 2006: 13:20-16:15; Millhauser 1998: 218).[14] Just as the tree serves to hide the handkerchief's disappearance by focusing the audience's attention elsewhere, while the butterflies dramatise the return, and thus a realisation of the prior loss, of the object, so Eisenheim's necromancy was a means of distracting Uhl's and Leopold's energies away from pursuing too closely the mystery of Sophie's death, thereby enabling her safe passage to a secret location; the subsequent invocation of her 'spirit' was calculated both to bolster the illusion of her death and to intensify speculation about the identity of her 'murderer', taking advantage of the Crown Prince's increasing unpopularity to inculpate him. Leopold, who from the start is determined to uncover the secrets of Eisenheim's illusions, becomes their foremost victim.

The overthrow of this representative of empire hints at the impending collapse of the established order in the new century. It is no accident that it is the son of a carpenter and the son of a butcher (Uhl) who, conjointly, bring about the fall of the heir to the throne. In *The Prestige*, too,

the working-class magician (Borden) ultimately prevails over his titled and wealthy rival. In both films class issues are implicitly aligned with race: the Chinese magician Chung Ling Soo is an important role model for Borden, while Eisenheim comes to his maturity in East Asia and later employs Chinese assistants when he embarks on his most baffling performances. In their exploration of the collision, at the close of the nineteenth century, of spirituality and rationality, art and science, illusion and reality, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist* thus co-opt metaphors of class and race in order to establish conjuring as a category of crisis.

4. From Magic to Cinematography: 'Eisenheim the Illusionist'

That conjuring is a portent of change, heralding the approach of a new world order, is made explicit in the opening sentence of Millhauser's story, from which Burger adapted his film:

> In the last years of the nineteenth century, when the Empire of the Hapsburgs was nearing the end of its long dissolution, the art of magic flourished as never before […] Among the remarkable conjurors of that time, none achieved the heights of illusion attained by Eisenheim, whose enigmatic final performance was viewed by some as a triumph of the magician's art, by others as a fateful sign. (Millhauser 1998: 215)

Here there is no love plot, and the factual Crown Prince, Rudolf, is mentioned only in passing, with reference to Eisenheim's first spectral apparition, Greta, rumoured to be both the ghost of Rudolf's mistress Mary Vetsera, who found a violent death with her lover at his hunting lodge in Mayerling, and that of his mother Elizabeth (see Millhauser 1998: 230, Hamann 1984: 437-495). Millhauser's text is not about professional-qua-sexual rivalry, much less about the quasi-Shakespearean faking of a death to bring about a lovers' reunion, but exclusively about the art of illusionism. Burger's film, reflecting as it does on its own status as an artefact, echoes the original text's self-referential quest, which probes the writer's art in creating and sustaining feats of the imagination. The story concludes Millhauser's collection of uncanny and metafictional tales *The Barnum Museum*, named after Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-91), the nineteenth-

century American showman, circus owner, collector and exhibitor of curiosa, freaks, and automata: a version of the Victorian conjuror (Gregory 1982).

The text consistently calls itself into question, drawing attention to the constructedness and illusory quality of all narrative by adopting the discourse of hear-say and highlighting the variety of possible readings. Just like Eisenheim's performance itself, accounts of it are invariably instable; concurrence of opinion relates only to the perceived mastery of his act and its emblematic nature: "All agreed that it was a sign of the times" (Millhauser 1998: 237). Even his fellow magicians are unnerved by Eisenheim's move beyond the limits of comprehension and imitation. The sentiments of Uhl, chief of police and recreational magician, sums up the feeling of unrest prompted in the profession:

> certain distinctions must be strictly maintained. 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 1998: 235)

As if to reinstate the disrupted boundaries, the narrative voice (which Burger adapted for Uhl) strains to provide explanations for Eisenheim's tricks, always to find its rationalism confounded by the conjuror's unfathomable artistry. The development of his craftsmanship is orchestrated in the text by three central acts, which represent the three different stages of his magic career: from apprenticeship (pledge), through mastery (turn), to climactic dissolution (the prestige).

The first of these 'acts' recounts Eisenheim's initation into the dark arts through a foundation myth: the boy was set on his course by an accidental encounter with a travelling magician found sitting under a tree, who performed a series of tricks, which he then crowned with his own disappearance, and that of the tree. This offers an ironic reflection on the biographical conjuring tricks of factual magicians; thus in his memoirs

Robert-Houdin invented the figure of Torrini, an older Italian magician who saved the young man's life and adopted him as his surrogate son, thus launching him on his stellar career (Mangan 2007: 113-114). Méliès is said to have been inspired at the age of ten to take up magic after attending a performance by Robert-Houdin; and Harry Houdini named himself after this spiritual father, whom in his later writings, in an embittered Oedipal contest, he sought to expose as a charlatan (Mangan 2007: 117, 145). While many of Eisenheim's stage illusions are indebted to Robert-Houdin, he is also modelled on Houdini, whose ethnic (Jewish-Hungarian) background he reflects; Burger's Eisenheim additionally draws on the Houdini family mythology, in particular the legend of his father's duel with and triumph over a prince (Silverman 1996: 3, Brandon 1995: 8).

In a second stage, after Eisenheim's genius has been established with the account of numerous dazzling feats, his position as the unrivalled master of magic is confirmed in the monumental clash with other magicians.[15] Rivalry, the leitmotif of *The Prestige*, is here a phase in the magician's evolution. If the 'first act' in Eisenheim's self-constitution consisted in being given professional birth by a father figure, this second act is about the defeat of the father, again mirroring the self-representations of historical magicians. Provoked by the presumption of a rival, Bendetti, Eisenheim appears to sabotage his performance through mental suggestion, possibly remote hypnotism; Bendetti mysteriously disappears in the middle of an act after entering a trick cabinet. The arrival of a new, and more powerful, rival, Ernst Passauer, is greeted with heightened excitement, and mounting audiences watch with bated breath the war of the titans, conducted through competitive performances scheduled for complementary sets of weekdays. When Passauer begins to emerge as the superior talent, Eisenheim stages his victory by concluding Passauer's final performance with the disappearance of his props, followed by the spectacular unveiling of the conjuror – who turns out to be none other than Eisenheim himself. This virtuoso triumph of self-referentiality coincides with the close of the century, ringing in the death throes of the Habsburg Empire.

The final act reveals not only the conjuror's act, but his very person as an illusion. After retiring from the stage for the whole of 1900, during which he studies photography and cinematography, Eisenheim returns to launch a new career at the intersection between stage magic and spiritualist séance. His decision to distance himself from traditional, nineteenth-century

magic is indicated by the paucity of his equipment: a single chair, a small, glass-topped table, which disposes of the trick compartments of the conventional magician's apparatus. The childhood and adolescent state of his spectres, materialised possibly with a hidden projector (as is demonstrated to Uhl in *The Illusionist* in a scene in which Burger himself makes a spectral appearance), is indicative of the infancy of the cinematographic art Eisenheim has embraced. The enthusiastic, even hysterical following enjoyed by his apparitions Greta and Frankel (a parodic adaptation of Hänsel and Gretel lost in the dark woods) and Rosa and Elin epitomises the affective appeal of the new technology's power to spirit up forms and project them on to the audience, 'Greta' anticipating the later emotive response to Garbo in the 1920s and 30s. Eisenheim's identity here becomes blurred as he moves from the performative acts of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century magicians, Robert-Houdin and Houdini, to those of modernist revolutionaries like the Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein, whose name he echoes. (Eisenstein was born at the cusp of two centuries – the turning point in Eisenheim's career – into a Russian-German Jewish family [Bergan 1999: 19-22].) Eisenheim's final performance, which stages the disappearance through dematerialisation of the magician himself, symbolises the way in which stage magic was being superseded by film, as exemplified by erstwhile magicians like Méliès, who retired from conjuring to take up the new art form (Mangan 2007: 116-8, 138). At the same time this final illusion returns us to the beginning, the old magician who spirited himself away after performing his tricks and initiating the new generation into the craft. As in the case of the original foundation story a new mythology is inaugurated, and Eisenheim's audience is left wondering whether Uhl (like the tree in the initiation act, or the orange tree in the handkerchief trick) "was himself an illusion, a carefully staged part of the final performance", a variation on the second act's rival magician (Millhauser 1998: 237); indeed Uhl's name echoes J.B. Priestley's uncanny Goole in *An Inspector Calls* (1946). The arguments that arise over "whether it was all done with lenses or mirrors" or, conversely, with recourse to supernatural powers (Millhauser 1998: 237), proffers an ironic metaphor for the magic feats of neo-Victorianism in its most 'perfect' form: the illusion of reality.

5. Conclusion: The Double Vision of Metatextual Magic

The creation of a compelling impression of 'reality' and the subsequent deconstruction of this impression as an illusion are the central axes around which the texts and films discussed in this chapter revolve, and which are key to the strategies of metafictional and metafilmic neo-Victorianism: historiographic metanarratives that aim to engage us in a game with their artefactuality. If, as the film theorist Richard Allen argues, the sophisticated film spectator "actively participates in the experience of illusion that the cinema affords", then the appeal of metatextual neo-Victorianism lies precisely in its challenge to reader and spectator to derive pleasure from its pyrotechnic performance, while simultaneously remaining attentive to and, able to savour, the complex operations of its deceptions (Allen 1995: 3). 'Eisenheim the Illusionist', *The Illusionist*, and *Affinity* summon spiritualism as a metaphor for the neo-Victorian project of 'spiriting up' the Victorian, drawing attention to its strategies of dissimulation and manipulation, which capitalise on the desire for the uncanny in order to conceal the human agencies at work behind the scenes. The extent to which we overlook or develop an awareness of these agencies is dependent on the degree of our compliance with or resistance to the textual or filmic play with point of view. *The Prestige* proffers an explicit invitation to reflect on its constructedness by invoking our knowledge of and interest in Victorian science and yet succeeds in deceiving us, just as Victorian conjurors did their audience in the very act of displaying all the props. In its compositional structure – an opening offering misleading clues, followed by a surprise/turn in the narrative, which culminates in a climactic revelation – metanarrative neo-Victorianism employs the same performative techniques as Victorian stage magic. In allowing us insight into how the illusion is produced, if only we "watch closely" enough, neo-Victorianism departs from stage magic, challenging us from the outset to embrace a double vision, which satisfies our desire for what Baudrillard calls "a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin" (Baudrillard 2004: 10), even as it is engaged in deconstructing it.

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Notes

1. The earliest use of 'prestige' meaning "deceits, impostures, delusions, cousening tricks" dates back to 1656; from 1832 the term could be used to refer to "[m]achines by which phantasmagoria and oracular prestiges were played off" (OED 2009 online).
2. The title of this section derives from Nolan 2006: 0:54-0:56.
3. In the novel Borden, intent on exposing Angier's spiritualist imposture, inadvertently causes Angier's wife's miscarriage. Borden is the primary aggressor throughout.
4. For Priest's description of the three stages of magic performance see Priest 2004: 64, 32-34.
5. See Nolan 2006: 14:03-14.22.
6. A further context to the magicians' rivalry and the game with 'original' and 'copy' is the American-Chinese Chung Ling Soo's imposture of a Chinese magician, Ching Ling Foo, whose stunts he appropriated, just as Angier does Borden's. Priest's novel features the 'original', Ching Ling Foo (Priest 2004: 36); Burger's choice of the 'copy' for his adaptation is an inter/intra-textual joke on the doubling of the magician figure. For further details on the two magicians see Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly 2007: 223-225.
7. For *The Prestige*'s doubling strategies see Newman 2006: 16, 19. *The Illusionist* was premiered on 27 April 2006 (Newport Beach International Festival), *The Prestige* on 17 October 2006 (Rome Film Festival and Hollywood); see the Internet Movie Database information, both viewed 25 March 2008, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443543/ and http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0482571/. For the brothers' collaborative approach see Shewman 2006.
8. This silence is essential in protecting Ruth from prosecution, since Selina will be sentenced for her "spirit guide's" actions, enabling Ruth to plot her escape. The fatal flaw of Andrew Davies's 2008 ITV adaptation is Madeleine

Silvester's act of unmasking Quick: revealed as a woman, not a spirit, Vigers would have been convicted with Selina.

9. All previous mediums, Ruth tells Selina, turned out to be "crooks" and had to be dismissed; the coded warning is not missed by Selina (Waters 2000: 155).
10. For a discussion of the novel's panopticism see Llewellyn 2004: 204-210, Armitt and Gamble 2006: 142-149; and Macpherson 2007: 48-53.
11. They have been known to blind matrons by sticking knitting needles through the eye-hole (Waters 2000: 23).
12. The scientist David Brewster explained in 1832 how hovering spectral forms ('Dr Pepper's Ghost') could be produced with angling sheets of glass placed both below and above stage; see Warner 2006: 152-153, and Mangan 2007: 125.
13. For the equivalent description in Millhauser's story, see Millhauser 1998: 219-220. Here there is only one phantom, which stabs itself.
14. For a description of Robert-Houdin's 'Marvellous Orange Tree', see Mangan 2007: 104.
15. Professional competition was indeed a regular occurrence among Victorian and early-twentieth-century illusionists, and Houdini in particular made a career of inviting challenges, on one occasion summoning the suffragettes to a duel for the best performance of escapology (Mangan 2007: 154-157).

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