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Matthew Solomon: Disappearing Tricks. Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century

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Matthew Solomon: Disappearing Tricks. Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century

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Matthew Solomon's *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* traces the intersection of magic and cinema between 1895 and 1929. This was a time of immense change for the two industries. Each emerged as a respectable middle-class form of entertainment during the period: magicians put on evening dress, and filmmakers ceased shooting cockfights. With particular reference to Tom Gunning, Richard Abel, and Kenneth Silverman, Solomon illuminates a complex network of trick and screen in the French and American industries. 'Prestidigitation' was only one among many preexisting trades that pursued cinema in its earliest days (we might also count cartooning or science), but its practitioners were ubiquitous and their presence of great importance. Georges Méliès, of course, emerged from the field. Entwining stage magic with cinema, he eventually made film his sole métier, for it permitted "one to venture much farther into the realm of the marvelous than [did] magic." (S.36)

Based on the history of spirit photography undertaken by Gunning or the links between telegraphy and spiritualism established by Jeffrey Sconce, we might suppose that cinema and spiritualism share a common mystic pedigree. Solomon argues otherwise. "From the beginning," he suggests, "moving pictures were bound up with the magician's specific tradition of skepticism." (S.27) Expanding on the work of Simon During's *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge 2002), Solomon points to the many occasions in which magicians were brought in to test and debunk spiritualist claims. Sometimes, they repurposed the spiritualist's ruse as a magician's trick: Harry Houdini took the "cabinet escape," in which a performer disappears from inside a sealed armoire, out of the "pseudo-séance setting" from whence it emerged, in effect secularizing a "mystical" rite. (S.86)

Chronophotography, too, was thought to reveal spiritualist deception, and Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic devices were operated for this purpose after his death in 1904. But the insights of chronophotography were also applied to magic tricks: in 1893, Georges Demený shot fifteen photographs of the "egg trick," a maneuver that took one-and-a-half seconds to complete when performed by magicians of Méliès' Théâtre Robert-Houdin. (S.22) This use of the camera to decipher magic was comparatively rare. According to Solomon, cinema largely abetted magic or produced new, hybrid tricks out of old stage favorites. Revelation was undertaken only reluctantly.

The issue of divulging versus concealing magical methods is central to Solomon's history. An oppositional binary is ventured between the magicians who hoped to maintain the secrets of their tricks and the film producers who

wished to reveal them to the public. The producers' drive to disclosure is similar to what Neil Harris has termed, with reference to P. T. Barnum, the "operational aesthetic": the public's delight both in being fooled and in the mechanics of the ruse that fooled them. Many of the films that Solomon considers fall into this category and seem dependent on the audience's awareness of the trick's technique. Compellingly, Solomon positions Gunning's "aesthetic of astonishment" as the magician's response to the producers: if the audience understands the operation of the trick, they will no longer be astonished. This is echoed by Méliès, who believed that when the audience understands the procedure of a trick, they find it "not so clever". (S.57)

Apart from Méliès, Houdini is the historically important magician-director (or *tricqueur*), yet film historians have largely neglected his few available films. Solomon fills this lacuna. A major feature of *Disappearing Tricks* is Solomon's archival work in unearthing other extant Houdini films and their attendant paratexts. Many of these findings were first included in a *Magic and Cinema* series that Solomon programmed in 2006 for the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, and a selection of these may now be found on Kino's 2008 DVD box set, *Houdini: The Movie Star*.

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