

„*Magic Machines*“

*Lecture held at Burmester & Feigl's Hermetischer Garten*

*Autumn 2014, Sophiensaele Berlin*

(Throughout the lecture Florian uses a magic wand and hits repeatedly a black cube (22cmx22cmx22cm) placed next to him on a musical stand. This is in the following text indicated by „hits the box“.)

\* \* \* \* \*

Towards the end of the 19th century magicians made magic vanish from the world. They showed that even the most unbelievable can be done, explained and understood by mankind. They made their art available to industrialisation and imperialism, they agitated the individual in development and fulfilment of consumer cultures. They had their share in bringing the phantasies of final, technical explanation of the world by mankind and their machines to new climaxes. They helped realise the complete domination of all political, economic and social processes by capitalism.

*hit the box*

Robert Houdin, son of a clockmakers family, inventor of the mechanic orange tree fooled on behalf of the French colonial power warriors and sorceres of northern Africa by entering the stage with a metal box and announcing the following competition: „Come up and proof that your powers are equal to mine. Move this box as I just did!“ The strongest warriors came up and tried, the mightiest sorceres tried. But none was able to move the box. What they didn't see was Robert Houdin turning a switch that put an electro-magnetic apparatus in motion which made it impossible to move the box.

*hit the box*

Two generations later Georges Méliès bought Robert Houdins old theatre in Paris. Only few know that Méliès the pioneer of filmmaking started his career as a magician. As all magicians he was very interested in the potentials of new technological inventions. In his case photography and early film. He realised soon that the moving images of early film and above all the possibilities of manipulation during the process of producing them were immense. It opened a door to fabricate illusions in a so far unseen way - and most of it happens during the process of production completely out of any possible perception of an audience. Along this way he developed most of the basic techniques of stop-motion film making . . .

*hit the box*

I said that starting with Houdin magicians made magic vanish from the world. I have to correct this: They mad magic travel magically into media. Transformations happen in the dark room where chemical processes allow to capture light and make the past available again and again.

*hit the box*

The medium. Ghost apparitions in live shows were common spectacles produced with optical contraptions. The belief that this really happened in front of the very eyes of an audience was supported by the fashionable practice of séances and the scientific proof of ghost photography. Some examples of ectoplasm photography are exhibited in the entrance area. Key to these practices was the medium. A gifted being able to facilitate the contact with the dead.

*hit the box*

Photography. The *camera obscura* earliest photographic apparatus is another black box. Muybridge's work using sequential photographs to produce moving images – anatomic studies of movement sequences – finds an echo in the pseudo-scientific lectures of Houdini about the perfect control of his body. As in many of his acts Houdini held these lectures half-naked – live anatomy classes with the living object. Houdini is interesting for us for another reason as well. His obsession to reveal the tricks of spiritist circles was in part driven by the deep wish to find the one real medium that could give him a moment with his deceased mother. The moment on her side when she died. The moment he missed.

*hit the box*

An important box in this context is produced by Erwin Schrödinger. The cat which he puts into the box where before a small but highly poisonous and several times deadly portion of the element radium was placed is at the same time alive and dead - as long as the box stays closed. This suggests Schrödinger's mind experiment. Of course a magical machine *par excellence*. The chained magician, lowered into the water tank is dead and alive at the same time. Briefly before the decisive moment, on the edge between life and death, a curtain gets lowered - the analogy with Schrödinger's cat is perfect in this moment. Most of the times the magician stays on the side of the living. The paradox of being dead and alive at the same time is overcome by changing the dimension when the magician contracts time and space in ways impossible to be explained by common sense: The magician appears far from the tank - of course alive.

*hit the box*

Dead becomes living again. The broken watch is whole again. When the destroyed object becomes whole again we are travelling in time. Back to *status quo ante*, back to the moment when the clock was whole.

*hit the box*

Machine and medium. Box and human being. Besides the basic difference between alive and dead and the concept of the irreversibility of the arrow of time, magical machines attack other basic propositions of us human beings: Magic offers alternatives to early childhood experiences. It questions the experience of object persistence. The magician is able to vanish the coin that a moment before was here in front of our very eyes, or make it appear in another space, or duplicate it magically. Sigmund Freud: He offered an exit from the determination by god and Kaiser. He made the human being itself a magic machine to be explained and to be understood. Doing so he opened as well ways to manipulate this medium - human beings - according to the varying political or consumer-capitalist interests. Interestingly similar to the approach of Robert Houdin as we described earlier.

*hit the box*

I make a jump in time: As part of the process of world domination by the all encompassing spirit of capitalism the last hideaways of deviant knowledge got enlightened by the light of rationalism: the human DNA got de-coded, communism was finished up, the Large Hadron Collider was set in motion to reveal the last truth about what this world is made of.

You see? All magical machines according to the start that Houdin made.

*hit the box*

Two more things: (1) I want to introduce one somewhat different magical machine and (2) follow a hint regarding the somewhat maybe still limited abilities of even the very successful machines:

Alan Moore, comic artist, writer and magician argues that art and magic have a basic principle in common: "something emerges from nothing". Moore follows that thought up and describes an approach which is based on the magic of speech. He says magic is nothing more than speaking something out which then produces effects in reality. Following this idea he compares it to his writing practice. He writes something which produces a reality. Something emerges out of nothing. He follows this analogy when he says that the difference between weak and powerful magic is easy to detect because only powerful magic produces a lasting effect in reality. The same can be said about literature he states: good literature produces a consistent narration with openings, opportunities to connect and revelations while bad literature does not go much further than being words on paper.

Language - a magic machine.

*hit the box*

Jacques Derrida the French philosopher points out in an interview that the general view that the ongoing development of better and more elaborate machines allows to explain the world more and more precisely. However, one should not forget that along with all the new inventions and technologies new ghosts come into the world. In the interview Derrida's phone is ringing in this moment. He answers the call, says hello, listens, takes some notes - a clearly administrative act. Then he turns back to his interview partner, points to the phone and says: „Ghosts, you see, everywhere ghosts.“

*hit the box*

\* \* \* \* \*