The End of Mind Reading[*]

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ABSTRACT

Advances in neuroscience have formally debunked Cartesian mind/body dualism, ending, in the process, the possibility of mind reading as it has long been depicted in popular culture (Moulton, 2008, pp. 182-192). Gone, now, are the tantalizing possibilities of mental radio waves, psychic vibrations, and disembodied minds, frequently brandished by the mediums, mind readers, and mesmerists of decades past. It is my contention that contemporary mentalists are reacting – both intentionally and unintentionally – not only to these anti-dualist realities, but also to the *post-truth condition.* This in turn, is giving rise to a new meta paradigm of *wink-eye* mentalism in which – in contrast to classical mentalism – *the lies are less interesting than the lying.* In this paper, I explore the relationship between mentalism and two theories advanced by Performance Studies: *dark play* and *make-belief.* I further examine the curious relationships between mentalists, professional wrestlers, rock stars, politicians, and method actors; paying specific attention to what is known in the sports entertainment industry as *kayfabe*.

KEYWORDS

mentalism, metamentalism, wink-eye mentalism, post-truth mentalism, kayfabe, dark play, make-belief, trickster, anti-character, anti-magic

THE END OF MIND READING

Advances in contemporary neuroscience have formally debunked Cartesian mind/body dualism, ending, in the process, the possibility of mind reading as it has long been imagined by the public and depicted in popular culture (Moulton, 2008, pp. 182-192). Gone, now, are the tantalizing possibilities of mental radio waves, psychic vibrations, and disembodied minds, frequently brandished by the mediums, mind readers, and mesmerists of decades past. Yet, far from sending a shockwave through the ranks of mentalists, this post-Cartesian turn – which changes the very nature of what it means to "read a mind" – has been largely swept under the rug.

Many mentalists, such as Banachek and Derren Brown, have turned their attention toward premises which appear – at least on the surface – to be more psychological than psychic, implying the use of Neuro Linguistic Programming, subliminal influence, and advanced body reading techniques. Others, such as Uri Geller and Richard Osterlind, have simply soldiered on, staying true to the – by now – retro premises of classical mentalism, such as clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and telepathy. Others still, have adopted an unlikely combination of psychological and psychic premises. For instance, I recently witnessed a stage show in which the Irish mentalist Keith Barry correctly called out, while blindfolded, the serial number on a 20 Euro note which was sealed in an envelope. Barry claimed to accomplish this demonstration via the "vibrations" of the bill. This absurd claim is all the more fascinating since Barry publicly claims to accomplish his demonstrations through the use of Neuro Linguistic Programming (Harrington, 2015). How can one make sense of this?

It is my contention that contemporary mentalists are reacting – both intentionally and unintentionally – not only to the anti-dualist realities confirmed by neuroscience, but also to what is quickly becoming known as the *post-truth condition*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' Unlike the total subjectivity of postmodernism, or the total objectivity sought by modernism, at the heart of the post-truth paradigm, there seems to lie an interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, and the precise boundaries of that interplay is frequently blurred.

Linguist Nick Enfield describes this era of post-truth discourse, writing that 'in our new normal, experts are dismissed, alternative facts are (sometimes flagrantly) offered, and public figures can offer opinions on pretty much

anything. And thanks to social media, pretty much anyone can be a public figure' (Enfield, 2017). Enfield goes on to observe that 'in much public discourse, identity outranks arguments, and we are seeing either a lack of interest in evidence, or worse, an erosion of trust in the fundamental norms around people's accountability for the things we say' (2017). The post-truth paradigm is best captured, perhaps, by the creation of the word *truthiness*, by satirist Steven Colbert, who observes that that United States is a nation 'divided between those who think with their head and those who know with their heart' (Andersen, 2017).

Post-truth is a post-postmodern paradigm, fueled by an explosion of social media, fake news, and reality TV and – in contrast to the deconstruction of postmodernism – is *constructed upon* surface, image, multiple realities, and alternative facts. This, in turn, has radically altered the playing field for mentalists, who have always played with notions of truth, lies, and surface.
These post-Cartesian and post-truth provocations, I argue, are rapidly establishing a new meta paradigm of mentalism in which – in contrast to classical mentalism – *the lies are less interesting than the lying*. I use mentalist Philemon Vanderbeck's term *wink-eye* to describe this new paradigm of mentalism, and the term will be defined in the course of this paper. But what are the properties of this new paradigm, and where will it lead? To answer these questions, I will explore the relationship between mentalism and two particular theories advanced by the field of Performance Studies: *dark play* and *make-belief*. I will further examine the curious relationships between mentalists, professional wrestlers, rock stars, politicians, and method actors; paying specific attention to what is known in the sports entertainment industry as *kayfabe*.

I will begin, however, with a brief examination of the historical evolution of mentalism, looking, in particular, at the entangled relationship between mentalism and magic. I define mentalism as *a performance in which an individual purports to genuinely demonstrate extraordinary mental or intuitive abilities*. Mentalists – who might also be accurately described as pseudo-scientific anti-magicians – differ significantly from magicians, or conjurers, because they perform their demonstrations, neither as tricks, nor magic, but as genuine phenomena of the mind and body. I have elaborated upon, and defended, the more controversial aspects of this definition in my paper, *(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism*, published in the *Journal of Performance Magic* (Dean, 2016, pp. 1-3).

THE END OF AN ERA: SUPERSTITION

I suggest that the spiritualist terms *shut-eye* and *open-eye* point to the most useful distinguishing characteristics of the two types of performative magic; the so-called real and the so-called fake. While the precise origin of these terms are uncertain, the earliest usages suggest a connection to the darkness of the séance room. And while the precise meanings of these terms have not been fully agreed upon, it may be said, in general, that those who practice shut-eye magic superstitiously believe that their powers – often invoked through ritual – are genuine, while those who perform open-eye magic knowingly imitate magic through trickery and deception.

Following the Enlightenment, open-eye practitioners of magic gradually moved toward an *overt* use of *covert* deception. Still, even into the 1900s, conjurers were hesitant to openly claim trickery on stage. For example, Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin – widely regarded as the father of modern conjuring, and one of the great stars of the post-Enlightenment paradigm of magic – did not always present his illusions as mere tricks. In 1868, in *Secrets of Prestidigitation and Magic*, Robert-Houdin writes, '…what would my son's pretended power of divination have been without the *mise en scène* of the "second sight?" What special marvel would have been found in the "aerial suspension" without the pretended application of ether?' (Robert-Houdin, 1860, p.81). Robert-Houdin also successfully wielded his "real" magic against superstitious Marabout warriors in Alegeria, helping France to suppress an uprising, in the process.

Robert-Houdin's most enduring statement, '*Un prestidigitateur n'est point un jongleur; c'est un acteur jouant un role de magicien...*' (Robert-Houdin, 1868, p. 54) is widely quoted, mis-quoted, translated, and mis-translated, but I argue that it can be faithfully translated as follows: 'A conjurer is not a sleight-of-hand artist, but an actor playing the role of a mago.' Despite the exhortation of Robert-Houdin, within a century, magicians would be completely divorced from "real" magic.

In 1995, magician, mentalist, and spirt performer Eugene Burger wrote of the disenchantment of contemporary magic, describing the century of 'tremendously powerful conditioning' (Burger, 1995, p. 2) which:

> tells us that a magician or conjuror is a person who presents his tricks (and the word "trick" is also part of this conditioning) while speaking entirely ridiculous sorts of sometimes-humorous "lines" or "patter." We have been conditioned to treat our conjuring as if it

needed a background of so-called jokes, as if conjuring were itself trivial, insignificant, silly, not important, all of it (1995, p. 2).

Burger cites influential mind reader Max Maven's astute and biting insight that contemporary magicians 'are afraid of magic' (1995, p. 1). Burger further suggests that these same magicians are also 'embarrassed by the whole idea of magic and so they transform conjuring into something silly and cute' (1995, p. 3). In reference to what might be called *the end of enchantment*, Burger writes: 'As modern men and women, our sense of mystery has been, at best, wounded and, at worst, lost completely. We have "problems" but not much sense of mystery in our lives. As mystery has been lost, conjuring has degenerated: the props have lost their symbolic value and power, and so they have become the end in themselves' (1995, p. 6).

In a critique which suggests that Robert-Houdin's exhortation has not been heeded, Burger writes that '…mystery has been replaced with skill and technique. In the earliest conjuring performances, magicians would have probably thought that they had failed if people had complimented them on their skill and technique' (1995, p. 6). Contemporary magicians have gradually evolved into *overt* employers of *covert* artifice, with no claim, whatsoever, to real magic. Burger reminds us that the 'early conjurors seem to have believed that skill and technique were to be invisible, so that the mystery was the center of focus.' (1995, p. 6).

THE END OF ANOTHER ERA: PSEUDO-SCIENTIFIC ANTI-MAGIC
The pseudo-magic of today's open-eye prestidigitator has almost entirely eclipsed the "real" magic of the shut-eye. Numerous performers, nevertheless, have continued to lay claim to real magic, cleverly bolstering that claim through the adoption of anti-magical or pseudo-scientific guises, such as mesmerism, animal magnetism, mediumship, thought reading, sightless vision, and other demonstrations of psi ability. In these new guises, such performers have continued to purportedly wield "real" power.

These performers might be generally described as open-eye, but there are exceptions. Many psychics, fortune tellers, and even mediums, entirely eschew artifice and deception, relying solely on their beliefs, intuitions, and oracles. Still others, such as the influential mind reader Bob Cassidy, claim to believe in the psi phenomena, yet obviously never depend on those abilities on stage. This is not an unusual attitude amongst mediums either, who have often been noted for a proclivity toward 'help[ing] the spirits' by 'resort[ing] to "manipulation" when the Power does not "arrive"' (*Spiritual Magazine*,

1862, p. 91). By the mid-1950s, performances of pseudo-scientific anti-magic – both shut eye and open eye – can generally be grouped together under the umbrella term, *mentalism*.

In 1928, Dr. Harlan Tarbell commenced the creation of *The Tarbell Course in Magic*, a correspondence course which contained many examples of 'mind reading,' 'psychic effects,' 'super-mentalism,' and 'spiritualistic magic' (Tarbell, 1928, Lesson 29). Such tricks were first described as 'anti-spiritualistic tricks' in 1901 (Stanyon, 1901) and later codified as mentalism in 1957 with the publication of the first of Tony Corinda's seminal *Thirteen Steps to Mentalism* (Corinda, 1957). In the 1947 edition of *The Tarbell Course in Magic*, conjurers are exhorted to understand the:

> ...psychological difference in the appeal, in the manner of presentation, between what we call two branches of the mystic art – 'magicians' and 'mentalists'. While both accomplish their effects by trickery, the mentalist rarely admits it. There is an important reason for this attitude of the mentalist. His mysteries of the mind are impressive only when cloaked in an atmosphere of genuine phenomena (Tarbell, 1947, p. 191).

Perhaps this distinction is what mentalist Theodore Anneman was referring to, in 1934, when he described mentalism as 'a grown up phase of magic and mystery' (Annemann, 1934). Or perhaps not. In *Principia Mentalia*, Bob Cassidy writes that 'careful reading of Theodore Annemann's *The Jinx*, the leading source of so-called "mental magic" in the 1930s and early 40s, reveals that most contributors practiced an almost ironic approach to mentalism, cloaking their presentations with the same patter stories and obvious props used by conjurors' (Cassidy, 2002, p. 5).

Cassidy goes on to discuss what he feels to be the distinct roots, as well as the true forbearers, of modern mentalism:

> …the fathers of mentalism weren't Robert-Houdin, Alexander Hermann or Harry Kellar. They were performers such as the Davenports, Washington Irving Bishop, Anna Eva Fay and Eric Hanussen. The exploits of such notorious and noted mediums as Henry Slade, Daniel Dunglas Home and Arthur Ford created the backdrop before which the art grew. Men such as the Comte Saint Germain, Cagliostro and Rasputin provided the legend. They were the godfathers of our art. (Which would, I suppose, make Madam Blavatsky the fairy godmother) (2002, p. 5).

While Max Maven considers mentalism to be a branch of conjuring, he wrote in 1976 that 'mentalism is the one area of magic that seems real to a lay audience. They not only suspend their disbelief... they believe...' (Goldstein, 1976, p. 2). Today, however, Cartesian, or dualist, mentalism is undergoing a delegitimization reminiscent of the delegitimization of superstitious magic a century ago. Indeed, the 'trivialization of mentalism' is a commonly discussed topic amongst mentalists who are concerned that an increasing number of conjurers and would-be-mentalists are overtly presenting mentalist premises as "tricks" (How to Stop…, 2015). Perhaps the two issues run hand-in-hand. As the premises of mentalism become less scientifically legitimate and, accordingly, more camp, those premises are in turn being increasingly adopted by mainstream performers and performed casually for mainstream audiences.

The pseudo-scientific anti-magic era of the open-eye Cartesian mentalist is drawing to a close, much as the superstitious era of the shut-eye magician did a century before. Still, there is no reason to believe that imaginary paranormal forces – or those who claim to wield them – will lose their power.

PLAY
According to Performance Studies theorist Richard Schechner, 'performance is amoral…this amorality comes from performance's subject, transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become – for worse or better – what they ordinarily are not' (Schechner, 1993, p. 1). This transformation brought about through pretending, or playing, is a very important aspect of mentalism, and the popular assertion that mentalism is a "grown-up" form of magic (Annemann, 1934) runs contrary to the fact that many children's games – such as, *Hangman*, *20 Questions*, *I Spy*, and *Which Hand* – are based on mind-reading premises. Yet, while performances of mentalism often employ premises of "play" and games, these performances are not *fair play*, because the games are frequently, and deviously, rigged in favour of the mentalist.

Nevertheless, despite the childish and childhood connotations of the word "play", it is a serious concept with the potential to create as well as destroy – such as when one decides to *play for keeps.* Cultural historian Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens* – a seminal analysis of culture and play – that 'play is the direct opposite of seriousness' (Huizinga, 1949, p. 5). He immediately explains, however, that '[a]s soon as we proceed from "play is non-seriousness" to "play is not serious", the contrast leaves us in the lurch - for some play can be very serious indeed' (Huizinga, 1949, p. 5). In a similar vein, Richard Schechner has argued that (emphasis added):

> …play and ritual are complementary, ethologically based behaviors which in humans continue undiminished throughout life; that play creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms; *multiple realities* that are *slippery, porous, and full of creative lying and deceit*; that play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing; that the perils of playing are often masked or disguised by saying that play is 'fun,' 'voluntary,' 'a leisure activity,' or 'ephemeral' – when in fact *the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies*; that play is performative, involving players, directors, spectators, and commentators in a quadrilogical exchange that, because each kind of participant often has his or her own passionately pursued goals, is frequently at cross-purposes (Schechner, 1993, pp. 26-27).

It is not a stretch to find the connections between play, as described by Schechner – with all its 'creative lying and deceit' – and mentalists, mediums, and psychics, who are inevitably as seedy as they are fascinating.

This liminal process between real and play, imbues those who play at transforming – often through rituals or rites of passage – with tremendous but ambivalent powers. These powers are reminiscent of those of the archetypal tricksters, who, according to George P. Hansen in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, 'are boundary crossers; they destabilize structures; they govern transitions. They also embody paradox, contradiction, and ambiguity.... Tricksters are marginal characters; they live at boundaries, with uncertain, ambiguous statuses' (Hansen, 2001, p. 46). Roman Gladiators, for example, who enacted ritual combat – which Schechner has described as 'real events fictionalized by virtue of their being acted out' (Schechner, 1988, p. 109) – were both celebrities and slaves. Professional wrestlers, who also enact ritual combat, are similarly celebrated as athletes and derided as fakes.

Mentalists are, in a sense, psychic gladiators, enacting a form of ritual shamanism which, like ritual combat, has primitive origins related to survival. Mentalists, too, are celebrated for their abilities as much as they are derided for their lies. Mentalist Derren Brown, for instance, has described the way in which mentalists and magicians face, '...the unavoidable problem that one is engaging in a childish, fraudulent activity' (Brown, 2010, p. 24). Magic, according to Brown, 'has both feet planted in cheap vaudeville and childish posturing; in dishonesty and therefore not in art. The magician cheats and this

truth runs cold through the craft's bloodless veins' (2010, pp. 80-81). I would suggest that this dilemma is intensified for mentalists who, unlike conjurers, make a claim toward truth and legitimacy. But while Brown's observation is astute and elegant, it is also incomplete.

TRUTH

The deceptions carried out by mentalists may very well run contrary to the subjective "truth" often sought by artists, but there is no reason to believe that art and dishonesty cannot co-exist. In fact, quite the reverse is true. In *The New Yorker*, for instance, Amanda Petrusich notes that 'many of our most prized artworks goof around with form, testing the permeable membrane between fact and fiction, between art and something else' (Petrusich, 2017). Conjurer and stand-up comedian, Jay Sankey, has also spoken about the role of deception in art (Sankey, 2015). Sankey observes:

> All art forms use some form of deception. You've got painters using a bit of shading to create the illusion of depth. You've got photographers using filters to bring mood to something. You've got theatrical plays – a whole bunch of people pretending... acting. And those art forms, they focus on the beauty, the truth, the meaning of what they're doing. The illusion or the deception is only a means, not the end in itself (2015).

And, indeed, all performances are real – *and* fake – on some level. But the precise boundaries between the real and unreal, between truth and fiction, can be difficult to parse. Particularly, when the unreal creates impacts which are all too real. For instance, while fans are largely aware that professional wrestling is "fake," it is not *entirely* fake. The laws of physics are not suspended in these "fake" wrestling matches; force still equals mass times acceleration, the athleticism is impressive, and injuries and deaths are all too common. Indeed, even after considerable research, I am still quite uncertain about the precise degree to which professional wrestling matches are, and were historically, "stage-managed" as well as about the pain and danger involved with many of the "moves". Erving Goffman, in his ground-breaking 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* addresses the "real-ness" of the notoriously "fake" professional wrestler. Goffman writes:

> When we watch a television wrestler gouge, foul, and snarl at his opponent we are quite ready to see that, in spite of the dust, he is, and knows he is, merely playing... We seem less ready to see,

however, that while such details as the number and character of the falls may be fixed beforehand, the details of the expressions and movements used do not come from a script but from command of an idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little calculation or forethought (Goffman, 1959. pp 80-81).

In 1984, investigative journalist John Stossel told the wrestler Dr. D that he thought wrestling was fake. Dr. D replied – as he twice knocked Stossel to the ground with open hand slaps – 'You think it's fake? What's that? Is that fake?' (Kaplan, 1985). As a counterpoint, footage of one aging wrestling fan went viral in 2006 when he sobbed at a Q&A event, 'It's still *real* to me, dammit!' (Wills, 2006).

Mentalism, similarly, is always partially fake and partially real. And like all other art forms, mentalism has the potential to reveal – whether by accident or design – truths about society and the human condition and enable audience members to question or challenge many aspects of established societal norms. Performances of mentalism, like other performances in the theatre, are shaped by surrounding contexts and in particular, the demands of the audience who pay for these performances or services. To this extent, the audience controls the content. And while performances of mentalism may not be entirely real, they may *feel* entirely real to some observers. These performances, then, have the potential to confirm what many may want to believe, or hold to be true: that we have a deeper capacity for connection and communication than we exploit in our daily lives; that there is a human soul or collective consciousness which transcends matter and death; or that time, space, and matter can bend around powerful human connections.

These performances may also be seen – by nature of being thoroughly deceptive in a thoroughly deceptive society – as a true reflection of the zeitgeist. In 2016, Oxford English Dictionaries named *post-truth* as the word of the year. By foregrounding questions of truth and deception, the lies of mentalists are in some ways, perfectly suited to a post-truth society, in which subjective truths are given more weight than objective facts. Contemporary mentalists – whether intentionally or not – have a particularly strong claim to the truth when it comes to reflecting the lies of a post-truth society.

DARK PLAY
Anthropologist Victor Turner has written that 'in liminality people "play" with familiar elements and defamiliarize them' (Turner, 1982, p. 27). Accordingly, the characteristics of post-truth might be effectively analyzed by

interrogating issues of play – dark play, in particular – which deal precisely with questions of liminal and in-between states, wherein the boundaries between real and not real are intentionally blurred. About dark play, Richard Schechner writes:

> Once play is underway, risk, danger, and insecurity are part of playing's thrill. Usually there is a safety net, or a chance to call 'time out,' or appeal to an umpire or other nonplaying authority who takes care of the rules. But in informal play, and in what I call 'dark play,' actions continue even though individual players may feel insecure, threatened, harassed, and abused (Schechner, 1993, p. 27).

According to Schechner, play is dark when 'we are playing and only one of the parties knows that we are playing' (Schechner, 2012). He further notes that dark play may 'be dangerous, psychologically, physically, and so on,' but inevitably involves 'deep disguise…identity shifting…a kind of free shifting of who you are and how you do things' (2012). Thus, mentalists of all sorts, from spirit mediums to pseudo-psychological masterminds, engage in dark play. The mentalist knows that the performances are rigged in some regard, but the audience, ideally, is not fully aware of the nature of the deception.

The preceding ideas are quite significant, in that they suggest that mentalism is not only play for the mentalist, but spectators, as well, whether they intend for this to be the case, or not. Some spectators may not believe the claims of the mentalist but may *play along* for enjoyment, or as an alternative to spoiling the game by pointing out that it isn't real. Other audience members may play unwittingly, taking at face value the claims of the mentalist. Regarding dark play, Schechner writes (emphasis added):

> Dark play may be conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark *when some or even all of the players don't know they are playing*. Dark play occurs when *contradictory realities coexist*, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out, as in the double cross…Or *dark play may be entirely private*, known to the player alone. Dark play can erupt suddenly, a bit of microplay, seizing the player(s) and then quickly subsiding – a wisecrack, a flash of frenzy, risk, or delirium. *Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed*, as in spying, con games, undercover actions, and double agentry. Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns,

and so on (whose agendas are public), *dark play's inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification*' (Schechner, 1993, p. 36).

The play of mentalists is often dark. In *Psychology of the Psychic,* a skeptical analysis of parapsychological research, David Marks and Richard Kammann confront the ethical implications of Uri Geller's dark play. They write:

> Some people have argued that it doesn't matter if Uri Geller is only a magician, because in that case he has played an excellent and entertaining joke on society. Perhaps. But it seems wrong to me to wink at deception used in support of a false, pseudoscientific theory… We expect a magician to deceive us, but we do not expect him to carry out the game when he goes off stage, thus misrepresenting himself as a person and the meaning of what he is doing. It is not clever magic to say that one's magic is not magic, it's just lying and cheating' (Marks, 2000, p. 294).

This may or may not be so. It might also be argued that it is not clever magic to say that one's magic is just silly tricks. In fact, the authors contradict themselves. Earlier in the book they write:

> If Geller simply billed himself as a magician, then his ability to bend spoons, start watches, and guess colors would be considered a dull routine offered for public entertainment. Geller's originality is to take a collection of simple effects, requiring almost no modern technology and gimmicks, and mold them into a total psychic image. He takes one giant step further by being a psychic both onstage and off, a step that many magicians consider beyond the ethics of their profession. Geller is the only magician performing today whose public image goes *up* by failures, because these help convince people that he is *not* a magician (Marks, 2000, p. 71).

The authors are seeming to say – perhaps without meaning to – that as a magician, Geller would have been 'dull,' but as a psychic he is brilliant. Mentalist Luke Jermay has praised Geller, describing him as 'the best magician on Earth because he's the only one that's managed to keep a secret' (Uri Geller Trilogy). Likewise, Eugene Burger has said that Geller may be 'one of the great magicians of our century' (Uri Geller Trilogy). Burger explains

that 'aside from government workers magicians are the worst secret keepers on the planet. Well good for Uri Geller, he hasn't told anything yet. I have great respect for him' (Uri Geller Trilogy). Mentalist Max Maven describes Geller as having 'significantly advanced the world of mentalism' (Uri Geller Trilogy). Maven continues, 'No matter what your opinion may be concerning Mr. Geller's career, there is no question as to the magnitude of his impact on the field' (Uri Geller Trilogy). In fact, Geller had a fascinating exchange with magician and illusionist David Copperfield on television in the early 1970s, in which they discussed the issues at hand:

> Copperfield: I am not out to expose you. I really think you're fantastic, and anything I say that you might feel is derogatory, is purely out of the admiration from one magician to – I'm sorry, I have to call you a magician.
> Host: He won't like that!
> Geller: No, I don't mind it if he calls me a magician, because I think of it in the old sense of the word. You know, in the past there were the real magicians. What is a magician? The word magician is –
> Copperfield: That's true (Uri Geller and David Copperfield, Early 1970s).

Geller, here, draws a distinction between magicians, and "real" magicians, which is quite similar to the distinction I draw between magicians and pseudo-scientific anti-magicians, such as mentalists. This distinction, as well, is in line with what Richard Schechner suggests when he refers to the modern 'debased sense' (Schechner, 1988, p. 63) of the word "magic".

For example, it seems to be relatively common knowledge among spectators that magicians perform mind-reading and prediction tricks. In fact, many of the first magic tricks that children learn are premised on either telepathy or precognition. Yet, most of these same spectators have, in all likelihood, never met a purportedly "real" mind-reader. Although the artifice employed by both may at times be the same, the two performance frameworks are entirely dissimilar. Contemporary magic and contemporary mentalism are entirely different forms of play. Thus, I argue, the distinctions between contemporary magic and contemporary mentalism have little to do with plots, premises, tricks, techniques, or effects, but with how these performances are framed and the perceived abilities and credibility of the performer.

MAKE-BELIEF AND LIMINALITY

The blurring of boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity suggests that when people engage in serious forms of play, they often enter states which go beyond what is described by terms such as pretend, make-believe, or suspension of disbelief. Richard Schechner, has written of what he calls, 'make-belief performances' (Schechner, 2002, p. 35) in which 'there is an intentional blurring of the boundary between what is fictionalized, constructed, made to order and what might be actually real' (Brady, 2012, p. 109). Schechner explains that, 'in actually performing the rituals… these actions, these performances, actually create the belief' (Schechner, 2012). Make-belief performances, according to Schechner, are ones in which "performers" enact 'the effects they want the receivers of their performances to accept "for real"' (Schechner, 2002, p. 35).

When people play, they play at what is not real, yet in doing so, they often place themselves in unusual, vulnerable, altered, or even dangerous states – and those states are absolutely real. To examine whether play is real or fake, is to largely miss the point. Play is both real and fake; fake and real. It is a liminal activity and facilitates transformation. Play allows people to explore areas without full commitment – but this is not to say that there is no risk. Play (and rituals) allow people to take part in something which may, or may not, exist. Performances of mentalism enable observers to exist between order and chaos; to choose to play.

The liminal positioning of mentalists with regard to claims can be observed in the statements of alleged psychic Uri Geller in a recent interview. The interviewer mentioned that Geller now seemed to be 'winking an eye' (Uri Geller Interview, 2016) at the magic community. Geller responds to the host:

> …when I was very, very young, I called myself a psychic. Then, I did a little twist and I called myself a paranormalist. Today, if you ask me, I call myself a mystifier. Because it's not there and it's not here. I'm sitting on the fence… If any person today, any interviewer, journalists, television, whatever, they ask me, "Now, Uri, tell us the truth. Are you real? Or are you not real? My answer will stay exactly the same as it was 48 years ago. I say, "You make up your own mind." I am more careful not to switch into that it's supernatural, and it's psychic, but, hey – there's only one person that really, really believes in Uri Geller, and that's Uri Geller (2016).

Geller's comments are immediately reminiscent of the performances of the Piddingtons on *BBC Radio* in 1950. The Australian husband and wife team

presented what appeared to be genuine demonstrations of telepathy, but took care to neither claim, nor disclaim, any specific abilities during their radio broadcasts. Instead, they continually reminded their listeners that, 'you are the judge' (Lamont, 2013, p. 221). The Piddingtons did not always sit on the fence, however. Off the air, Sydney Piddington was less ambiguous about the nature of their abilities, claiming for example, that his wife Lesley can 'read an average of seventy per cent of my thoughts when I am deliberately transmitting – and a disturbingly high percentage of my thoughts when I am not trying'(The Piddingtons, 1949, p. 84).

Indeed, while sitting on the fence is one approach, straddling the fence is another. Mentalist Derren Brown has written that he enjoys 'finding new ways to have [his] cake and eat it at times' (Aitkenhead, 2010). A blunt example of fence straddling can be seen in the case of *The Amazing Kreskin* who appears ahead of his time with regards to his use of post-truth tactics. Rather than avoid claims which go too far in one direction or another, he bluntly makes contradictory claims, firmly placing himself in both camps at once. Such tactics are both completely illogical, and disturbingly effective, as individual spectators – via selective validation and confirmation bias – are able to hear what they wish to hear.

In the 1980 edition of *The Psychology of the Psychic*, Marks and Kammann, look closely at Kreskin's claims. They write, 'Throughout Kreskin's entire book, *The Amazing World of Kreskin*, and throughout everything he says or writes, Kreskin retains his secret behind a barrage of double talk and verbal flip-flops. In fact, he contradicts himself so freely that finding the truth from him is like finding your way out of a hall of mirrors' (Marks, 1980, p. 43). The authors cite Kreskin's stage program which contains, for example, the following contradictory statements:

> Kreskin is the enemy of all professed psychics, mind-readers, mediums and charlatans, who attempt to guide people's lives. Kreskin has been successful in applying his special abilities to help dentists, doctors, expectant mothers, golfers and the police (1980, p. 43).

They also cite the following contradictory statements from Kreskin's autobiography.

> Perhaps some of what I do fits into the category of the "psychic," so-called, under certain conditions…. I do pick up information

through a kind of telepathy…. In using ESP as a form of communication, I receive information in images…

I am not a psychic (1980, p. 43).

This same attitude can further be observed even in the title of Kreskin's book, *HOW TO BE (a fake) KRESKIN.* The book, itself, contains numerous methods for recreating, through trickery, several hypnotic effects which have been created legitimately by Kreskin, as well as multiple methods for purported mind reading demonstrations which have been accomplished by Kreskin on national television, apparently using the exact methods contained within the book, despite the author's claims to the contrary.

Geller, as well, has taken this have-it-both-ways-at-once approach. In a 2007 interview with a German magic magazine, Geller said, 'I'll no longer say that I have supernatural powers. I am an entertainer. I want to do a good show. My entire character has changed' (*Magische Welt*, 2007). When skeptics, such as James Randi, pointed out that Geller had reversed his position, he responded with another interview in which he said, '…so what I did say? That I changed my character, to the best of my recollection, and I no longer say that I do supernatural things. It doesn't mean that I don't have powers. It means that I don't say "it's supernatural", I say "I'm a mystifier!" That's what I said. And the skeptics turned it around and said, "Uri Geller said he's a magician!" I never said that' (2007).

This two-sided approach to truth and fiction is not entirely unique to performances of mentalism. A clear precedent exists, for instance, in the genre described by historian James Cook as 'artful deceptions' (Cook, 2001). Among the most prominent examples of artful deceptions are many of the less than entirely genuine exhibitions of the great showman P.T. Barnum. In *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, Cook writes that 'artful deception was never a hard and fast choice between complete detection and total bewilderment, honest promotion and shifty misrepresentation, innocent amusement and social transgression' (2001, p. 16). Rather, according to Cook, such deceptions:

First…routinely involved a calculated intermixing of the genuine and the fake, enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and momentary suspension of disbelief. Merely offering one or another of these things was not simply bad form; it also usually lowered the door receipts. Second, as Barnum often noted in his own self-defense, no producers of such entertainment who wanted to stay in business for long simply fooled their viewers

without also drawing attention to the act of fooling – or at least the possibility thereof. There is little question that most contemporary consumers of artful deception entered the exhibition hall looking for fraud. And third, none of the tricksters in Barnum's milieu simply peddled deception as an end in itself…. the deception always involved at least a modicum of narrative – an entertaining story that delivered the trick (2001, p. 16).

Cook further observes that it was 'precisely the blurring of these aesthetic and moral categories that defined [Barnum's] brand of cultural fraud and generated much of its remarkable power to excite curiosity' (2001, p. 16). Performances of mentalism are closely related to artful deceptions such as Barnum's exhibition of the alleged *Feegee mermaid* and Johan Malelzel's exhibition of *the Turk,* a purported automaton which expertly played chess. Exhibits such as these, in the words of Cook contained a 'sort of built-in perceptual fuzziness' (2001, p. 16) and were viewed 'as both representation and substance, counterfeit and currency' (2001, p. 15). The widespread popularity of exhibits such as these, according to Cook, 'grew directly out of [their] capacity to be both things at once, an ambiguity that was never fully solved (2001, p. 16).'

Performances of mentalism – like other artful deceptions – exist in a state of play and are therefore liminal. Anthropologist Victor Turner noted the liminality of play, describing it as being ultimately undefinable. Play, according to Turner 'does not fit in anywhere in particular; it is a transient and is recalcitrant to localization, to placement, to fixation – a joker in the neuro-anthropological act' (Turner, 1983, p. 233). The image of the joker in the pack is suggestive of the archetype of the trickster discussed previously, and it is worth noting that P.T. Barnum is, according to Cook, 'one of the most (in)famous trickster figures in Western cultural history' (Cook, 2001, p. 6).

KAYFABE
Following the enlightenment, the magician's role in society was trivialized from sacred and mysterious, to virtually parodic, comical, or even farcical. It is my contention that the role of the mentalist is now – in light of contemporary cognitive science – undergoing a further trivialization. This is not to say that such performances are no longer viable, however, since spectators need not necessarily "believe" in ghosts to be frightened by them; nor must spectators believe in a disembodied mind to be swept up in the romantic and humanist ideals offered by psi phenomena.

Philosopher Roland Barthes makes a similar observation about amateur wrestling (which, ironically, would later become known as professional wrestling) in his 1957 essay 'The World of Wrestling.' Describing the passion of wrestlers in the ring, Barthes writes that 'it is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself' (Barthes, 1972, p. 18). Barthes notes that 'people wax indignant because wrestling is a stage-managed sport' (1972, p. 15), which he notes ought really 'mitigate its ignominy' (1972, p. 15). Yet, he immediately goes on to say that 'the public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees' (1972, p. 15).

Just as mentalism points less to a real world than an ideal one, wrestling according to Barthes, portrays 'an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a universal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction' (1972, p. 25). The professional wrestling industry has not achieved this 'view of a universal Nature' as Barthes calls it, without taking extreme efforts.

The professional wrestling industry has long used the term *kayfabe*[*] to describe the rigid and often absurd defence – both on and off stage – of not only the genuineness of the matches, but also of the nature of the feuds and rivalries between "heels" and "babyfaces". Wrestler Nick Rogers recently discussed kayfabe in the *New York Times*, describing it as an 'unspoken contract between wrestlers and spectators' (Rogers, 2017). Rogers describes the nature of this unspoken contract: 'We'll present you something clearly fake under the insistence that it's real, and you will experience genuine emotion. Neither party acknowledges the bargain, or else the magic is ruined' (2017). Rogers further writes that the 'artifice is not only understood but appreciated: The performer cares enough about the viewer's emotions to want to influence them. Kayfabe isn't about factual verifiability; it's about emotional fidelity' (2017).

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[*] The origin of the term is uncertain, but it is thought to possibly be derived, etymologically, from a backward pig-Latinization of "be fake"

I find it interesting that Rogers describes kayfabe as an unspoken contract between performer and spectator. The very nature of kayfabe has clouded its own evolution, but it would seem to have clearly evolved as an internal secret agreement *within the industry* with the pragmatic purpose of concealing the artificial nature of the form which did, indeed, remain a dirty little secret for many years.

In 1989, World Wrestling Federation (WWF) CEO Vince MacMahon, tired of regulation, oversight, and taxation from State Athletic Commissions, announced that 'professional wrestling should be defined as "an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest"' (Hoy-Browne, 2014). And with that, the form of 'sports entertainment' was born (2014).

MacMahon's decision to lift the veil was widely derided within the professional wrestling community (2014) but it did not destroy the industry. On the contrary, the deregulation allowed for previously unprecedented promotions, events, and financial success (2014). And thus, the unspoken agreement between fans and wrestlers was an evolution of kayfabe; from, what I would describe as a *closed kayfabe* to an *open kayfabe*. In fact, it is the open nature of modern kayfabe which makes contemporary professional wrestling such a fascinating form of performance.

Nick Rogers eloquently summarizes this open kayfabe: 'to a wrestling audience, the fake and the real coexist peacefully. If you ask a fan whether a match or backstage brawl was scripted, the question will seem irrelevant. You may as well ask a roller-coaster enthusiast whether he knows he's not really on a runaway mine car' (Rogers, 2017). According to Rogers, while, 'their athleticism is impressive, skilled wrestlers captivate because they do what sociologists call "emotional labor" — the professional management of other people's feelings' (2017).

Andrew Weymes' 2013 documentary, *Kayfabe Lives: It's Still Real to Me, Dammit!*, concludes that in professional wrestling, 'The person is the character. The character is the person. That is kayfabe at its core. What separates a wrestler from an actor is that no matter what, there is no break in scene' (Weymes, 2013). The kayfabe of wrestlers is often poignant, and sometimes winking, as they must seriously defend – both in the ring and out – outrageous, and sometimes ludicrous, premises in the face of overwhelming public skepticism. Despite the unique nature of kayfabe, it is not without a

noteworthy historical precedent. P.T. Barnum wrote in 1855 that 'the public appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived (Barnum, 1855, p. 171).

DARK METHOD ACTING

It is not only professional wrestling that employs a form of kayfabe – mentalists, politicians, and rock stars, do this, too. Although, it seems that only in professional wrestling does a clear term exist to describe it. David Lee Roth, the front man for the rock band, *Van Halen*, for instance, has been noted for such antics. About this, Mick Brown, in *The Guardian*, writes:

> …the stipulation in their performance contract that the promoter remove all brown Smarties in the bowl in their dressing-room… Roth's two black-belt midget bodyguards – such things, [Roth] suggests, are imperative for 'overall ambience'.
> [Roth] says: 'I was always disappointed when I was a little kid when I found out that other people were faking me out – they didn't really dress like that, or look like that or behave like that off stage. And I believe in leaving the door open and letting everybody have a look. A fantasy is no fun unless everybody shares it' (Brown, 2012).

"Method" actors, as well, often employ such processes, blurring the line between truth and fiction offstage. While the aim and intent of so-called method actors is entirely different to that of wink-eye mentalists, many similarities may be observed in the ways in which these performances *spill over* off the stage and screen. In many ways, I consider the wink-eye mentalist to be a method actor playing a single role – on stage and off – sometimes for decades. Accordingly, it is worth looking more closely at the roles method actors play offstage and offscreen.

The processes of the method actor, in some instances, undoubtedly allow actors to better portray their roles on stage or camera. It seems apparent that, however, that at other times, the process is – as Angelica Jade Bastién writes in *The Atlantic* – used as much as 'a marketing tool as it is an actual technique – one used to lend an air of legitimacy, verisimilitude, and importance to a performance no matter its quality' (Bastién, 2016).

 Indeed, over-the-top processes, such as maintaining character even while off stage may, at times, be counter-productive or even dangerous. Bastién describes some of Jared Leto's behaviour on the set of *Suicide Squad,* including

gifting cast members with 'used condoms, a dead pig, a live rat' and watching 'footage of brutal crimes online' (2016). Leto purportedly used this process in order to get into his role of the Joker.

Bastién further notes that 'the underpinning of this strategy is the belief that to create great art one must suffer' (2016). Examples of this suffering can readily be found: Christian Bale's weight loss for *The Mechanic,* or Robert DeNiro's weight gain (through a hedonistic/masochistic gluttony) for *Raging Bull,* or Charlize Theron's de-beautifying weight gain and eyebrow shaving for *Monster,* or Shia LaBeouf's self-inflicted tooth pulling for *Fury,* or Daniel Day Lewis maintaining character for the duration of his filming periods, or Leonardo DiCaprio's endurance of extreme conditions for *The Revenant.* It is worth noting that despite the reputation of method acting as a psychological approach, these psychological aspects cannot be separated from extreme changes in *physical behaviour*, which become a part of the actor's daily life.

Sidestepping the debates of what "method acting" may or may not be, it seems to concern itself, in general, with a quest – however extreme – for sincerity or authenticity. About this authenticity, actor James Franco writes in an editorial in *The New York Times* that '[Marlon] Brando's performances revolutionized American acting precisely because he didn't seem to be "performing," in the sense that he wasn't putting something *on* as much as he was *being* (Franco, 2014).

In an article in *The New Yorker*, entitled, *Is Method Acting Destroying Actors?* (Brody, 2014) Richard Brody laments the death of Phillip Seymour Hoffman and describes a very different process employed by some pre-method actors such as Cary Grant, Robert Mitchum, or John Wayne. These actors, Brody writes, 'seem not to become the roles they play but to turn the characters into versions of themselves. Their roles aren't put-ons, but they do put them on: they don their roles like costumes while continuing, manifestly and even brazenly, to be – themselves' (2014). Brody points out that pre-method actors also lived 'strange or even riotous lives' but notes that 'the reason was altogether different: it's precisely because of the way their private lives flowed into their onscreen personae' (2014). Brody writes:

> the private extravagances and excesses, the "experience" that in [that] day came with a whiff of immorality, made the actor's life seem bigger, grander, wilder, more exciting than that of the viewer—and that expanded emotional spectrum was more than a source of the actor's imaginative sympathy for a wide range of

characters; it was the very life force with which the actor invested the character. The allure of the classic actor is, essentially, sex. The classic stars' exotic, sybaritic life is part of their charm. Mitchum was, in effect, wilder than his characters; he endowed them with his own fury for life. The actor herself inflated roles to her own bigger-than-life dimensions. Now, in the post-Method* age, actors seem expected to inflate or stretch or shrink or compress themselves to fit the character (2014).

Perhaps one explanation for the seductive appeal of method acting – for both actors and spectators – is that method actors who suffer for their art are performing emotional labour for their spectators. Connecting the emotional labour of the professional wrestler to contemporary post-truth politics, Nick Rogers writes in *The New York Times* that just as 'Hulkamaniacs* demand [emotional labour] from their favourite performer… a whole lot of voters desire it from their leaders' (Rogers, 2017). Referring to the emotional labour performed by politicians, Rogers writes that the 'factual fabrication is necessary to elicit an emotional clarity' (2017) and further writes that 'kayfabe isn't merely a suspension of disbelief, it is philosophy about truth itself. It rests on the assumption that feelings are inherently more trustworthy than facts (2017).'

Rogers analyses this political kayfabe using language which resembles Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality. According to Baudrillard, hyperreality is that which is 'more real than real' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 3) and produces 'a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world' (Lane, 2000, p. 30). Such concepts are inevitably intertwined with ideas of simulation, nostalgia, and desire. Mentalism, for example, appears to be a representation of an idea; a copy of something which appears to have never actually existed. According to Umberto Eco, hyperreality can be observed in 'the American imagination [which] demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred' (Eco, 1986, p.8). Regarding the post-truth consequences of this hyperreality, Amanda Petrusich writes in *The New Yorker* that 'our hunger for the authentic or the unmediated has mostly begotten us a cavalcade of deeply unreliable things, such as Donald Trump, laminate flooring, fake-fake news, artisanal moonshine, and reality television' (Petrusich, 2017). I argue that these descriptions of kayfabe – as well as those of hyperreality – walk

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* Brody seems to use this term to indicate coming chronologically after the popularization of method acting; the opposite of the pre-method age.
* This is a reference to the loyal fans of legendary professional wrestler Hulk Hogan.

hand in hand with contemporary notions of post-truth. I further argue that professional wrestling, method acting, rock stars, and politicians all rely heavily on forms of kayfabe. But where, precisely, do mentalists fit in?

It is my contention that mentalism currently sits on a precipice similar to the one occupied by professional wrestling decades ago. But where the kayfabe of professional wrestling was forced to evolve in response to taxation and regulation, and where the kayfabe of politics is now being forced to evolve in response to shocking election results such as Brexit and Donald Trump, the kayfabe of mentalism is now pressed to evolve in response to the anti-dualist, post-Cartesian paradigm.

The example set by professional wrestling suggests that the deceptions of mentalists – even if acknowledged – will be ignored or excused by spectators who depend upon the emotional labour carried out by purported mediums, psychics, and mind readers. This also highlights the limitations of the performer-centric model of most contemporary performances of stage mentalism, in which the mentalist (and I don't mean to be glib) demonstrates *his* power over the audience; (especially over the attractive females in the audience). If mentalism is to adopt an open kayfabe – and some mentalists such as Eugene Burger and Jim Callahan do this very effectively – it is necessary to adopt an audience-centric approach where the emotional needs of the audience are attended to.

METAMENTALISM: THE RISE OF THE WINK-EYE
The discussion of kayfabe surfaces questions of character. Performance Studies theorist Richard Schechner asks: 'When a performer does not "play a character" what is s/he doing?' (Schechner, 1988, p. 50). The characters depicted by mentalists during a performance are typically what I describe as *quasi-characters* – in that they are intended to be seen as merely the daily or extra-daily self of the actor. In this regard, the characters of mentalists bear a resemblance to the personas projected by stand-up comics whom, Schechner notes, 'play aspects of themselves… [while] the audience teeters between knowing it is being put on and glimpsing brief, but deep, looks into the "real person"' (1988, p. 50). The personas projected by mentalists are also what I would describe as *anti-characters* – in the sense that the character exists primarily to deny its own existence.

It is further possible, I argue, for the persona of a mentalist to function as a *meta-character*, aware of, and acknowledging, its own status as an artificial construct. In metaperformance, according to Richard Schechner, 'the story of

"how this performance is being made" replace[s] the story the performance more ordinarily would tell. This self-referencing reflexive mode of performing is an example of what Gregory Bateson called 'metacommunication' (1988, p. 121). But it is not only mentalists that have been moving in a meta direction.

I would argue that acting in general, and film acting in particular, is entering into a self-referential *post-method* era in which some actors – which I would describe as *meta-actors* – appear to be playing, while offstage, the role of method actors imminently capable of playing a role. Jared Leto's offstage approach to the Joker serves as one example. If this is so, then what are the ramifications of this extra layer of portrayal for – what I describe as *metamentalists* – who are essentially actors playing the role of method actors lost in the role of a shut-eye? In particular, how might this additional layer of acting be employed when one is – as regularly occurs on reality TV, documentaries, and social media – *off stage-but-on-camera*?

Richard Schechner has described 'reality shows' as a form of dark play in which, 'the viewer knows one thing and the participants know something else' (Schechner, 2012). With regards to the shifting frames of performance and modes of communication, I would be remiss if I did not reference the Brechtian de-familiarisation effect (*verfremdungseffekt*). Susan Colleary notes that 'Brechtian concepts of de-familiarisation have been linked to the performance of stand-up comedy' (Colleary, 2015, p. 57). She writes:

> The American comic Jerry Seinfeld has stated that the gift of the comic is a sense of detachment, which feels Brechtian and allows the comic to view everyday situations from an ironic distance.... On one level, what Seinfeld is describing may well be considered as running parallel to de-familiarisation processes.... And not only because stand-up comedians speak directly to the audience, thereby acknowledging the performance context, but because of stand-up comedy's ability to make that which seems familiar, strange or dislocated (2015, p. 110).

The de-familarisation effect in the performance of mentalism seems to me to be even more pronounced than in the performance of stand-up comedy, since much observational comedy suggests a *sameness* shared between actor and audience, while much mentalism suggests an *Otherness* which foregrounds unfamiliar – but uncannily familiar – experiences. Clearly, the political intentions which lie behind Brecht's approach to theatre fall beyond the scope of this paper, which remains to examine the levels and approaches to role

playing in the contemporary performance of mentalism. In this regard, the de-familiarisation effect of Brecht may prove a useful point of consideration.

In a meta paradigm, mentalists might effectively mask their projected persona through the use of an alienation effect, which – rather than attempting to conceal the artifice of the performance – calls attention precisely to the artificiality and theatricality of the event. In so doing, metamentalists may avoid counterproductive suspensions of disbelief, *while still concealing the artificial nature of their persona.* This may be accomplished, counterintuitively, by openly acknowledging the artificial nature of the performance as a form of psychological misdirection which enhances credibility while disguising the artificial nature of the persona. An example of this can be found in the BBC Radio broadcasts of the Piddingtons in which Sydney Piddington occasionally refers to 'the script' (The Piddingtons, 1949-1950).

Additionally, metamentalists have the powerful advantage of being able to perform their demonstrations ironically to part of their audience, while performing sincerely to another. Ian D Montfort, for example – the mediumistic alter ego of comedian Tom Binns – is described as 'a psychic medium loved by believers and sceptics alike' (Archived: Tom Binns, 2013). His promotional materials point out that 'Whether you think he's a spoof or real you'll be in no doubt that the demonstrations of Ian's gifts are hilarious and mind-blowing' (2013).

Paranormalist Jim Callahan provides a subtler example. On the TV program *Phenomenon* – hosted by purported psychic Uri Geller and magician Criss Angel – Callahan performed a mediumistic demonstration, allegedly with the assistance of deceased author Raymond Hill. I would be tempted to describe this premise as charmingly retro, had I not witnessed *The Psychic Ether*, the 2016 stage performance of purported medium Derek Acorah, at which a significant portion of the audience apparently took Acorah's hard to believe claims of direct spirit communication at face value. Nevertheless, the premise is a powerful one and Geller described Callahan's performance as 'believable,' 'convincing,' and 'a very interesting act' (Jim Callahan's Act…, 2007).

Angel, on the other hand, was unimpressed, despite the fact that Callahan went so far as to say to the audience, 'Thank you for letting me entertain you' (2007). A physical altercation took place between Angel, who called Callahan's performance 'comical,' and Callahan, who called Angel 'an ideological bigot' (2007). In an interview following the performance – which I can only describe as another fine *performance* – Callahan excitedly claimed:

I'm tired of skeptics thinking they can push on people's ideological beliefs – that they can attack religion. And I'm the guy who pushes back… It feels like your [stomach] is being taken and jammed up through your heart into your brain, and to have a guy that fakes, and uses camera tricks, and uses stooges, trying to crucify me on live television… he has the chains, he has all the clothes, he's a middle-aged man dressing as a goth boy. I don't like having what I believe to be real, questioned. (2007).

For better and for worse, Callahan is a mentalist among magicians. His website boldly states: 'JOB OPENINGS FOR THE DEAD (Sign up now before it's too late!)' (Callahan, 2018, Job Openings). According to his website, Callahan 'is seeking individuals who desire employment after death' (Callahan, 2018, Home Page). The website further notes that such people 'will be compensated for [their] participation and time' at the rate of 25 dollars per show' (Callahan, 2018, Employment after Death). Presumably this payment is made to a designee nominated by the deceased, prior to their death.

As committed as Callahan is, both on and offstage, he does not always hide the fact that he is winking an eye. Callahan speaks rather frankly about his claims in a number of interviews on podcasts for magicians. For example, on *Magic Newswire,* Callahan explains: 'I can't do anything that another performer does. Everything I do has to be an original methodology, so that I don't have somebody showing up at my show saying "oh I saw this on so-and-so's video or that was a really cool version of…" because it would totally destroy the image and the show I've put together' (MNW #175:, 2009).

Another similar example can be seen in the mischievous spirit performer Eugene Burger, who describes his persona as 'naughty Santa' (Burger, 2014). Burger also stresses the importance of maintaining claims even off stage. In a statement reminiscent of psychic entertainer Tony Andruzzi's observation that 'at the conclusion of a performance you're still performing' (Burger, 1986, p. 185). Burger writes, '*After* you've done [an] effect people will very often stop you and ask whether it *was* a trick. Your response to this question is also an expression of your character and, therefore, your response is part – a very real part – of your *show*' (1986, p. 76).

Yet, Burger is also unusually flexible in this regard. He refers to his ability to perform séances in a range of 'modes and moods' (Burger, 2014). According to Burger, 'I can be serious, I can be tongue-in-cheek, I can just be comic. I can

go any range I want. And I can just pick the range for the audience I'm working for' (2014). In his seminal book, *Spirit Theatre,* Burger reminds his readers that their roles, characters, and even "selves" can be 'comic…slightly tongue in cheek…serious…very serious… Or, at different times, all of the above' (2014). He adds, 'God knows you can play laugh séances, and sometimes I do, but if you want to do something more serious, then it *really has to be* **serious**' (Burger, 1986, p. 163). Burger is an embodied example of Richard Schechner's paradoxical observation that 'to perform acts that are otherwise forbidden-punished, taboo, unthought of – is a way of "making fun"' (Schechner, 1988, p. 208).

While many premises of mentalism have not significantly changed over the past century, the context in which these dualist claims are presented has shifted radically. This, in turn, has cast an almost farcical shadow over a number of the mentalist's claims, such as psychokinesis, precognition, mediumship, and psychometry. Even the super-psychological premise – which would seem on the surface to be less absurd than claims of psychic abilities – is regularly taken to absurd or parapsychological extremes. Contemporary mentalist, Colin Cloud, for example – widely referred to as 'a real-life Sherlock Holmes' (Garnar, 2015) – has implied publicly that he is able to identify specific car models driven by spectators via the observation of car keys through the pockets of skinny jeans (2015).

It is as if these performers are pandering to one portion of the audience while winking an eye at another. Indeed, I am indebted to bizarrist and ghost hunter Philemon Vanderbeck for the use of the term, *wink-eye.* Many actors and open-eye mentalists have played the role of shut-eye psychics or mediums, but a wink-eye performer introduces an additional layer of artifice by subtly acknowledging the playful nature of their role play. I define a wink-eye mentalist as *an actor playing the role of a method actor lost in the role of a shut-eye*. I argue that the wink-eye paradigm is fundamentally a meta form of mentalism.

In *Postmodernism and Performance*, Philip Auslander points out that in the 1960s, some metacomedians such as Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman 'took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject' (Auslander, 2004, p. 107). Among the most radical of the metacomedians, writes Auslander, was Andy Kaufman. Auslander describes how, in the course of a single performance, Kaufman adopted the persona of a foreigner who did not fully understand his jokes or the format of stand-up comedy, impressively impersonated Elvis, and then seemingly played '"himself," a nasty and aggressive figure' (2004, p. 108). Auslander continues,

'This persona, while seemingly closer to the "real" Kaufman, was yet another construct, no more real than The Foreign Man or Andy as Elvis. In place of a consistent comic persona, Kaufman created a hall of mirrors in which no persona ever turned out to be a dependable representation' (2004, p. 108).

According to Mark Fortier in *theory/theatre:*

> Two of Kaufman's longest running performances were as the offensive night club performer Tony Clifton and as a... male chauvinist wrestler.... In each case, Kaufman presented his performance as reality – going to great lengths to make it appear that Tony Clifton was a real person, for instance.... One assumes it was all an act and that Andy Kaufman didn't hold in private the views he presented in public. And yet, in a strangely postmodern play on appearance and reality, it doesn't make much difference.... What is most striking is Kaufman's enthusiasm – his embracing of the game – he leaps in the way a mudwrestler leaps into the mud. To ask why seems pointless (Fortier, 2002, p. 160).

Spectators knew that Andy Kaufman was really Tony Clifton, just as they knew that he was not *really* the Women's Wrestling Champion of the World. The fun, for spectators – and presumably for Kaufman – came from the extremes to which Kaufman went to defend such absurd premises. Does the post-Cartesian mentalist face a similar problem? Are contemporary mentalists engaging in – either with or without intending to – a form of metamentalism which both ridicules and embraces the impossibility of being a post-Cartesian mentalist?

On this note, it is worth examining a number of recent uncanny marketing campaigns featuring mentalists. Paranormalist Uri Geller has provided lessons in mental spoon bending (Uri Geller reveals…, 2015) as part of a *Kellogg's* personalized spoon promotion in which he claims that the first three steps to mentally bending spoons are: 'Open up your mind. Do not be skeptical. Be positive' (2015). Similarly, mentalist and hypnotist Keith Barry has been featured in (ironic?) hypnotic radio ads for the kebab chain, *Abrakebabra,* in which he (ironically?) attempts to hypnotize listeners into craving a kebab. These claims and promotions venture so near absurdity – with an almost self-referential irony – that it can be difficult to describe them without invoking the term meta.

The ironic foregrounding of the surface, evident in many contemporary performances of mentalism, such as Jim Callahan's presumably playfully

ironic advertisements for the dead, would appear to aim at some end other than critique and deconstruction. Richard Schechner has described such performative actions as 'extreme but recognized by everyone, including the performers, as a "playing with" rather than a "real doing of."' Schechner notes that this "playing with" is not weak or false, it causes changes to both performers and spectators' (Schechner, 1988, pp. 169-170). These extreme performative actions open possibilities of dark play and make-belief performances, in which the boundaries of the performance are blurred, and the rules of the game become impossible to decipher. In contemporary performances of mentalism, the line between ironic and sincere is becoming increasingly blurred. It is as if one eye is open while the other is closed.

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