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**HUDDERSFIELD**  
University of Huddersfield Press

**Original Citation**

Dean, Edward (2016) (Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism. *Journal of Performance Magic*, 4 (1). ISSN 2051-6037

This version is available at: <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/29937/>

DOI: [10.5920/jpm.2016.02](https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2016.02)

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# **(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper argues that despite contemporary discoveries disproving Cartesian mind-body dualism – which falsely presupposed a separation between mind and body – contemporary performances of mentalism are still vastly impacted by this belief. I further argue that the long-supposed divide between mind and body has led many contemporary mentalists to underexplore and underemphasize bodies in performance, particularly their own. In the exploration of this topic, I examine notions of psychophysical acting and post-Cartesian character – in relation to the personas cultivated and projected by mentalists – proposing the terms metamentalism, inverse method acting, quasi-character, and anti-character to better capture the forms of role play and persona variously taken on and projected by mentalists. I next examine the archetype of the trickster as it relates to mentalists, including associations with shamans and buffoons. I conclude with an examination of the material properties of mentalism.

## **KEYWORDS**

Mentalism, Metamentalism, Inverse Method Acting, Quasi-Character, Anti-Character, Post-Cartesian, Psychophysical, Bodymind, Postmodern, Trickster.

## TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

This research was undertaken as part of my practice-based doctoral research at University College Cork in which I explore – as both a performer and a scholar – the issues surrounding the presentation of mentalism in a post-Cartesian context. The aim of this research is to contribute to the current academic discourse surrounding mentalism and the body in performance, in order to inform my own practice of mentalism as well as to provide original perspectives which may help inform the practice of others.

Personally, I do not differentiate between mind and body, as the mind and body are both part of an absolutely inseparable bodymind. However – noting the fact that all mental activity is also physical, and all physical activity is also mental – in writing about the post-Cartesian mentalist, I will use the term “mind” to indicate activity which is perceived to be predominantly mental, and the term “body” to indicate activity which is perceived to be predominantly physical.

I choose to define mentalism as: *a physical performance in which an actor purports to demonstrate genuine extraordinary mental or intuitive abilities*. This definition emphasizes the non-Cartesian reality that the mentalist inherently plays a role, and that the abilities demonstrated, on the whole, are not genuine. This definition thoroughly disambiguates mentalism from contemporary magic and illusion, in the sense that contemporary magicians and illusionists do not purport to demonstrate genuine extraordinary capabilities – even when performing magic tricks which replicate precognition or telepathy. By calling attention to the purported mental nature of these abilities, this definition largely (but not entirely) disambiguates mentalism from bizarre magic, ‘which favours theatrical character, storytelling, overt allegory, symbolism, and themes of the supernatural, fantastic, and weird’ (Taylor/Nolan, 2015, p. 128). This definition also disambiguates mentalism from extraordinary math, memory, and sensory demonstrations, which are not purported, but actually genuine.

This definition does not, however, differentiate between mind reading, modern mediumship, psychic entertainment, fortune telling (reading), hypnotism (suggestion), or pseudo-hypnotism. Indeed, I hold all of these forms of performance to be branches of mentalism. Definitions of mentalism which successfully exclude these activities, inevitably conflate mentalism with mentally themed magic and illusion. For example, Dr Todd Landman, in *Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse, and Effect*, has ‘divided performance magic into three main groups: (1) magic, (2) mentalism, and (3) mystery entertainment’ (2013, pp. 47-68). These categories are problematic, however, as Dr Landman’s definition of mentalism includes ‘psychological illusionists and other

“straight ahead” mentalists,’ (2013, pp. 47-68) who disclaim supernatural or paranormal abilities, but it does not include traditional mind readers and psychic entertainers who claim, implicitly or explicitly, to genuinely possess these abilities (Landman, 2013, pp. 47-68).

Richard Osterlind, similarly, has defined mentalism as a ‘branch of magic which deals with mysteries apparently produced using powers of the mind’ (2011, p. 7). This definition, too, is unnecessarily limiting, since mentalism as a form of performance may be argued to be distinct from magic and mystery. It is also not precisely clear whether Osterlind means that the effects “appear” to be produced with mental powers but are known to be produced through trickery (mental magic) or if he means that the effects appear to be produced with “genuine” mental powers.

I have also chosen not to distinguish whether such performances are “entertaining” or not, as Bob Cassidy does when he defines mentalism as, ‘a performing art in which the mentalist entertainingly demonstrates mystifying “powers of the mind”’ (2013, p. 13). I feel that such criteria are too subjective to be categorically useful, since many people would consider visiting a psychic reader or watching a stage medium to be a form of light entertainment. Cassidy’s definition also ignores the fact that the mentalist does not actually demonstrate – but, rather, purports to demonstrate – such “powers”.

It is worth noting that these distinctions may not be readily apparent to spectators at a performance. For example, champion tennis player Dominika Cibulkova recently demonstrated on *BBC News* an apparent ability to identify different brands of tennis balls using only her sense of smell. (Wimbledon 2016, BBC). If her claimed ability is genuine – and there is no reason to assume that it is not – she is not really practicing the art of mentalism. If she cheated – by peeking down the blindfold, listening to the different ways in which the cans were opened, or by feeling the writing on the tennis balls with her fingers – then she was practicing the art of mentalism. If she claimed that she was performing a magic trick with tennis balls, then her demonstration would become precisely that to spectators, even if her sense of smell was genuinely the method.

Thus, methodology and presentation enable the classification of a performance as either magic, mentalism, bizarre magic, or as a genuine demonstration. Spectators, however, are rarely privy to the methodologies employed and, thus, are not in the position to determine the difference – even in spite of explicit disclaimers. For example, Dr Landman relates an anecdote in which he overheard an audience member at a Derren Brown performance – despite numerous disclaimers – say, ‘I don’t care what he said, he is the real deal, he is psychic!’ (2013, pp. 47-68).

The definition of mentalism, therefore, is inherently slippery. A performance of mentalism may be *received* as a genuine psychic or sensory demonstration. A genuine demonstration of sensory or mathematical ability may be *received* as mentalism. But it is precisely within this liminal space that mentalism flourishes; between science and magic, between the real and the clearly illusory.

## INTRODUCTION

Performances of mentalism are ostensibly about the mind. In actuality, however, these performances (as do all performances), depend upon an interconnectedness of minds and bodies (bodyminds), of both participants and performers. Despite this, the body of the mentalist often appears largely superfluous in contemporary mainstream performances of mentalism, when compared to the dynamic and frenetic physical activities of early spiritualists and thought readers. Perhaps this gap can be attributed to centuries of misguided Cartesian notions of an immaterial mind, or perhaps it is related to a desire by modern mentalists to distance their performances from the physically and vocally unabashed performances of their spiritualist predecessors. Regardless, the end of Cartesian dualism – brought about by contemporary neuroscientific discoveries – brings about not only the end of mind reading as the world once imagined it, but also a new era of opportunity for discovery and play in performances of mentalism.

A number of mentalists still performing today, such as Uri Geller, Max Maven, Derren Brown, Jim Callahan, and Richard Osterlind, have leveraged their bodies and movement to good effect. Geller is highly physicalized and energized as he uses his body to allegedly impact the physical world in his purported demonstrations of psychokinesis. Maven presents an extremely theatricalized and physically restrained body, creating impact with as little as the raising of an eyebrow. Brown is highly physicalized, as well, and often purports to read or influence minds through physical means, such as micro-expressions and kinesics. Brown has also effectively engaged in very physical and corporeal activities such as Russian roulette, perilous blindfolded walks, pulse stopping, and the apparent need to be slapped prior to particular demonstrations. Jim Callahan has used an extremely physical approach to trance mediumship and spirit channelling as a premise for his alleged demonstrations of clairvoyance. In contrast, Richard Osterlind has consciously chosen not to use any theatricalized movement in order to be perceived as an absolutely ordinary person with extraordinary abilities. In any case, such attention to the body in performances of contemporary mentalism seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

The performance of mentalism is almost exclusively spoken about in terms of mind and mental activity. Consequently, in most contemporary performances of mentalism, the body seems to have been relegated to a supporting role, at most. The majority of contemporary mentalists – both amateur and professional – do not appear to have put much thought into the use and presentation of the body in space beyond the context of naturalism. Standing casually, and talking casually, are by far the dominant physical activities of most contemporary mainstream performances. Few mentalists appear to train their bodies or cultivate physical and spatial awareness, as actors, or athletes, routinely do.

Accordingly, few have written specifically about the use of the body in such performances. Ken Weber, in *Maximum Entertainment* (2003), and Bob Cassidy, in *The Artful Mentalism of Bob Cassidy* (2013), have called attention to the role of the body in the performance of mentalism through the use of gesture and basic stagecraft. In most texts, however, if physical movement is addressed at all, it is virtually always in the context of how to use the body to execute artifice or sleight-of-hand, or how to use movement to effectively mask those movements and direct attention away from the artifice. These types of movement – while requiring a particular sensitivity to issues of timing, precision, naturalness, tension, and relaxation – are ultimately designed to conceal rather than to reveal. This in turn has, perhaps, encouraged mentalists to look upon the body from a relatively narrow frame of reference in terms of the use of the body in space, and with regards to the use of unnatural or expressive movement.

My goal in writing this paper is not to write a “how-to manual” with regards to using the body, but rather to argue a case for the importance of discovering and rediscovering the role of the physical body in mentalism. The general lack of exploration of the body in contemporary performances of mentalism is inherently problematic in the sense that the use of the physical body is the basis of all which follows in performance. Speaking about the performance of the body in theatre performance Collette Conroy writes, in *Theatre and the Body*, that bodies ‘need to be used and manipulated and foregrounded to make any kind of theatre at all’ (2010, p.74). This lack of exploration of the body becomes increasingly problematic when considering mentalism in a post-Cartesian context which does not allow for demonstrations of a disembodied mind.

## **THE ACTOR AND THE PSYCHOPHYSICAL BODYMIND**

On the one hand, the importance of bodies in the performance of mentalism is rather obvious, as Phelim McDermott illustrates when he asks, ‘When was the last time you went on stage without your body?’ (2007, p. 207). On the other hand, this idea is strikingly

counterintuitive, inasmuch as it challenges the dualism of mind and body advanced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the French philosopher René Descartes. Although modern neuroscience has thoroughly disproven Cartesian mind-body dualism, the idea remains widely embraced by western society and can be observed nearly everywhere, from pop culture to organized educational systems. The end of Cartesian dualism, further, has thoroughly complicated the performance of mentalism, which has long assumed and depended upon a mental plane independent of, and dominant over, the physical one.

Popular conceptions in western society – and, indeed, among mentalists – also largely conflate the many and varied approaches to acting with one specific approach, namely, psychological realism. Representing the general attitude of many mentalists toward issues such as character and subscript, influential mentalist Bob Cassidy writes, ‘...unless you have prepared, and thoroughly assimilated, the subscript of a “psychic” *persona*, astute audiences will sense your insincerity.... Ultimately, you must be able to walk out onstage and *become* the character you have created’ (2013, pp.80-81). It is limiting, I would argue, to equate acting with psychological realism and associated, but ultimately misguided, Cartesian notions that an actor is able to become his or her character. In 1996, Elinor Fuchs academically declared the ‘death of character,’ (1996) which depends upon a Cartesian ability to mix and match, as it were, bodies and minds. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes that the ‘physiological operations that we call mind are derived from the structural and functional ensemble rather than from the brain alone: mental phenomena can be fully understood only in the context of the organism’s interacting in an environment’ (1994, p. xxi). A character, therefore, may ultimately be reduced to the material sum of the actor’s appearance, surroundings, and use of movement, voice, and text, and thus, an actor is never *not* him or herself, but merely engaged in varied modes of performance. These modes of performance will be discussed in depth in the following section.

Even Konstantin Stanislavski – the acting teacher most popularly associated with psychological or “inside-out” approaches to acting – developed and advocated physical “outside-in” approaches as his career progressed. Stanislavski’s method of physical action, based on a psychophysical union, was likely influenced by the method of psychological gesture developed by his colleague Michael Chekhov. Phillip Zarrilli has written extensively on psychophysical acting techniques which embrace the fundamental inseparability of body and mind. Zarrilli, along with Eugenio Barba, has notably written on embodiment and the role of the situated whole body, or bodymind, in acting. The emergence and popularity of physical theatre as a specific genre, influenced by the teachings of Barba, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jerzy Grotowski, Jacques Copeau, Jacques Lecoq, and Anne Bogart, to name only a few, further reinforces this approach to acting. As I argue, despite the mental *premises* employed by the actor, a performance of

mentalism is fundamentally physical – more specifically, psychophysical – and ultimately situated in the actor’s bodymind.

These ideas – far removed from the dualistic hierarchy of mind over body posited by Descartes – align more closely with the phenomenological modes of perception put forward by the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who noted that ‘we perceive the world with our body’ (1945, p. 239) and asserted that the body is ‘our general medium for having a world’ (1945, p. 169). The philosophy of mind and body advanced by Merleau-Ponty also aligns with contemporary neuroscience which has established that, in the words of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, ‘there is no such thing as a disembodied mind. The mind is implanted in the brain, and the brain is implanted in the body’ (Brown, 2011). In a similar vein, Jacques Lecoq has observed that ‘the body knows things about which the mind is ignorant’ (2002, p. 8). As progressive and useful as Lecoq’s observation is, even this line of thinking reinforces a mind-body duality, which indeed, is hard to avoid. In *Theatre & The Mind*, Bruce McConachie writes:

Current practitioners and theorists of acting can be divided into two broad camps – those who emphasize the mental and psychological aspects of the art and those who explore the physical and kinaesthetic side of acting. Within the general dichotomy there are two extremes – theorists who continue to worship at the shrine of Method Acting and others who preach the necessity of Physical Theatre. Most near the psychological end of the continuum believe that the proper “internal” psychological exercises will draw the body along with the mind, while those near the other end believe that “external” physical work can bend the mind to the body. It would be nice to be able to say that the truth lies somewhere in between. But in fact both positions are misconceived; both depend upon a dualism that does not exist. Nonetheless, this dualism is difficult to escape or even consciously resist. (2013, pp. 29-30).

Contemporary performances of mentalism further complicate the mind-body problem, inasmuch as these performances purport to be an expression of pure mental power – unconnected to the physical body. The height of physicality in many contemporary performances of mentalism occurs when the actor touches his/her temples with two fingers in order to indicate strenuous mental activity. Most contemporary performances of mentalism on stage, TV, or DVD – excluding the exceptions noted earlier – rarely go far beyond *pretences* of using the body/bodies.

Yet, performances of mentalism can be highly physicalized, and may involve activities such as firewalking, Russian roulette, spirit channelling, and blindfolded driving.



Historically, performances of mentalism were often extreme, both physically and vocally; from the semi-nude, ectoplasm producing séances of Mina “Margery” Crandon in which she spoke in a ‘rough and tumble voice’ (Cox, 2013) apparently belonging to her deceased brother Walter, to the frantic and apparently strenuous muscle reading demonstrations of Washington Irving Bishop. Despite the rich and diverse opportunities for physical expression, many contemporary mentalists do not use bodies in ways which fall beyond what Eugenio Barba described as the ‘daily mode’ of self-expression (1985).

## **ROLE PLAY, CHARACTER, AND PERSONA**

Questions of role play, character, and persona, may seem more psychological than physical, but this is not entirely the case. Traditional notions of “playing a character” depend upon a now disproven Cartesian essence of self, or essentially, a disembodied mind. By reintroducing the body of the actor into the question of character, new avenues of approach become available.

In *Secrets of Conjuring and Magic*, written in 1868, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, widely considered the father of modern conjuring, wrote, ‘A conjurer is not a juggler; he is an actor playing the part of a magician’ (1877, p. 43). With this statement, Robert-Houdin made the ground-breaking assertion that a sleight-of-hand practitioner is more artistically aligned with the role playing of an actor, than with the exposed manipulative skills of a juggler. By extension, Robert-Houdin asserts that, as a conjurer, one must hide one’s skills in order to deceive, rather than brandish those skills in order to impress. Robert-Houdin’s statement on the relationships between conjurer, role, and actor still generate heated debate today, and this quote is one of the most quoted, and misquoted, parts of performance theory in the annals of conjuring. Mentalists, likewise, are actors playing a role. But if a mentalist is an actor, then what are the further implications of the enduring statement of Robert-Houdin on the contemporary performance of mentalism? What is the nature of the relationship between mentalists and the roles they play?

Theatre director and conjurer Henning Nelms, in his 1969 book entitled *Magic and Showmanship*, offered advice which provides a counterpoint to that of Robert-Houdin. Nelms argues that it is limiting to play the role of a conjurer. He suggests, instead, that it is more effective to play an enhanced version of oneself. He further, without necessarily intending to, implies that premises of mentalism, which blur the boundaries of role and performance, are more effective than the roles and frames of traditional conjuring performances. Nelms writes, ‘You can make your task much simpler by limiting your claim to something more plausible than magic. [...] At the same time, you must be doubly careful not to overdo your characterization. If the audience becomes consciously

aware that you are not literally being yourself, all hope of conviction is lost. [...] Plausible roles offer better prospects...' (1969, pp. 50-51). The persona created and projected by a mentalist in performance, therefore, is not fully a character, but a quasi-character formed in part from the multiple selves of the actor. Richard Schechner has observed that in addition to playing a role, or behaving as somebody else, an actor may also behave 'as if I am "beside myself" or "not myself," as when in trance' (1985, p. 37). According to Schechner, 'this "someone else" may also be "me in another state of feeling/being," as if there were multiple "me's" in each person' (1985, p. 37). Darwin Ortiz makes a similar observation in *Strong Magic*. He writes:

The usual advice found in magic books on developing a persona consists of the platitude, "Be Yourself." Frankly, this advice is extremely simple-minded. It ignores the fact that each of us is really many different "selves." We show different faces to different people in our lives. [...] The challenge the performer faces is what aspects of himself to accent in his performances for best audience response... (1995, p. 235)

In this way, personas cultivated by mentalists are similar to the personas constructed and projected by stand-up comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld, who seems to be playing some version of himself. Mentalist Marc Salem, for example, enters the stage as if he is not playing a fictitious role. He promotes his personal academic credentials and, although Marc Salem is not his given name, he has not altered his name in order to reflect a stage persona which is other than himself. Jiří Veltruský, has argued that, 'all that is on stage is a sign' (1964, p. 84). On stage, everything is a performance and necessarily a representation of something else. On stage, Marc Salem is not, and cannot be, himself. Richard Schechner has written that while an actor playing Ophelia is 'not Ophelia' she is also 'not not Ophelia' (2006, pp. 72-73). This is an apt description, as well, of the projected persona of the mentalist who is at once, both not a psychic, and not not a psychic, given the liminality of belief in which the audience may be situated. Thus, in contemporary mentalism, the distinction between the actor and the projected persona, is an inherently elusive one.

Bert O. States has written of the three modes 'in which [the actor] may speak to the audience: [...] the collaborative, the self-expressive, and the representational' (2002, p. 24). States describes the collaborative form as breaking down 'the distance between actor and audience [...] to give the spectator something more than a passive role in the theatre exchange' (2002, p. 29). In this sense mentalism must operate, at least in part, on the collaborative level. Mentalist Bob Cassidy writes that, 'mentalism may be the most interactive of the performing arts' (2013, p.12). This collaborative nature, however, does not determine whether the collaboration takes place with actors in a self-expressive or a

representational mode. Characters portrayed by mentalists are usually not representational, inasmuch as such characters are understood to be characters, and thus, are entangled with the willing suspension of disbelief, which mentalists must endeavour to avoid; although I will examine one such exception in the following section. Generally speaking, however, if the character portrayed is clearly other than the actor, then the abilities of the character will most likely be subsumed into the dramatic production as special effects, rather than credited to the personal ability of the actor. It is, therefore, the self-expressive mode which primarily concerns the personas projected by mentalists.

In the self-expressive mode, according to States, the audience perceives the self of the actor – apart from the character being portrayed. States refers to opera, dance, and mime (stand-up comedy, conjuring, and mentalism could be safely added to the list) as the ‘major self-expressive forms of theatre’ (2002, p. 25). He humorously observes that the opera soprano ‘is not expected to “disappear” into her role as a dying tubercular because it is impossible to sing properly and die properly at the same time’ (2002, p. 25). States notes that in these forms it is the ‘display of the artist’s ability’ (2002, p. 26) which is primarily on display. Thus, the self-expressive mode amounts to the ‘audience’s awareness of the actor,’ (2002, p. 26) in the act of playing a role.

In contrast to Cassidy’s advice to ‘become the character you have created,’ (2013, pp.80-81), Richard Osterlind writes, ‘Becoming a mentalist means combining the principles of the art with your own individuality. You do not need to become a character to become successful. In truth, that will probably doom you to failure. Why would you possibly want to change what is already unique?’ (2011, p. 85). Yet, despite the different approaches, both Cassidy and Osterlind are advocating for the actor to face the audience in the self-expressive mode, while fully committed to the role. Personas projected by mentalists are most effective when presented in the self-expressive, not representational, mode. However, I would argue that – within this self-expressive mode – the actor should move beyond daily modes of behaviour into what Eugenio Barba has termed the ‘extra-daily,’ (1985) engaging in what he has described as ‘the dilated body’ (1985).

While the mentalist’s persona is a quasi-character, it is also an anti-character, insofar as the mentalist projects a persona which actively denies being a persona, and gives a performance which actively purports to be, at least in part, a genuine demonstration. The persona of the mentalist must extend beyond, and obscure, the traditional boundaries of the performance. In an interview conducted by Eugene Burger in *Spirit Theatre*, Tony Andruzzi speaks of the importance of remaining in character, ‘twenty-four hours a day!’ (1986, p. 85) adding, ‘At the end of a performance, you’re still performing. You’re still making believers’ (1986, p. 85). While Andruzzi is a bizarrist, I hold his advice to be equally relevant for mentalists. Burger enquires about going out to lunch with friends,

and Andruzzi replies, 'Even then. They must know that you are a little weird' (1986, p. 85). Mentalists must, to some extent – either intentionally or inadvertently – conflate their onstage and offstage personas. In many ways, this process may be viewed as an inverted method acting process, by which an actor places him or herself in the daily routines of a given character – not to inform the onstage persona – but rather, *to deny the existence of the onstage persona*. This, in turn, opens questions of metaperformance.

Andy Kaufman, for example, was a comedian who regularly appeared, 'as himself' (Fortier, 2002, p. 190) on late night TV 'staging conflicts that were then treated as real in newspaper reports' (Fortier, 2002, p. 190). According to Mark Fortier in *theory/theatre*, 'In each case, Kaufman presented his performance as reality.... 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...' (2002, pp. 190-191) In *Postmodernism and Performance*, Philip Auslander points out that in the 1960s:

The very notion of comedy itself had become problematic under postmodernism. Comedy by definition requires stable referents, norms against which behaviours may be deemed humorous. In the absence of such norms it is impossible to define comedy. Some comics responded by becoming metacomedians whose performances took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject. (2004, p. 107)

Does the post-Cartesian mentalist face a similar postmodern problem? Are modern mentalists engaging in, either with or without intending to, a form of metamentalism which acknowledges and plays with the impossibility of mind reading and spiritualism? I will examine these questions in the following section.

The processes by which mentalists engage with role playing in order to create and project a persona are seemingly unique to the field of mentalism. Yet, the performance of mentalism has rarely been addressed in the academic context. Conversely, contemporary academic post-Cartesian approaches which dispute the entity of character, remain largely unexplored in the field of mentalism. Postmodern responses to Cartesian mind-body dualism, in particular Elinor Fuchs' theory on the death of character, present a need and an opportunity, for mentalists to re-evaluate the role of the physical body in the performance of mentalism – a form of performance that has increasingly emphasized the mind at the expense of the body.

## **THE TRICKSTER AND THE MENTALIST**

According to Richard Schechner, 'all performances exist in creative tension between ritual and play' (2012). Performances of mentalism not only exist within this tension, but also seek to blur the very nature of that tension. In this regard, mentalists share much with the archetype of the trickster. While much has been written and on tricksters and magic, a strong connection can also be made between tricksters and mentalism, particularly given the ways in which mentalists deny and disguise the nature of their "tricks". According to George P. Hansen in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, prominent characteristics of tricksters include 'deception, disruption, reduced sexual inhibitions, and magical (psi, supernatural) practices' (2001, p. 46), and he also observes that, 'the concept of marginality is significant' (2001, p. 46). Beyond these common characteristics, Hansen notes that 'there is considerable diversity among [tricksters]. At one end are primitive buffoons, at the other, gods' (2001, p. 35). Thus, tricksters may take myriad forms from shaman to buffoon. On a related note, Susanne Colleary has written, in reference to stand-up comedy, that 'evocations of the trickster, the buffoon and the shaman, all inhabit the spirit of comic identity in stand-up' (2015, p. 64). Given the similarities between the projected self-expressive personas of mentalists and stand-up comics – particularly in the post-Cartesian and postmodern contexts – I believe it is useful to examine the performance of mentalism through the lens of the trickster, paying particular attention to the extremes of shaman and buffoon. In this regard, a case study of the internationally acclaimed comedian Tom Binns, who sometimes performs satirical spirit mediumship and mind reading as Ian D. Montfort, *the Psychic from Sunderland*, may prove worthwhile.

Cleverly billing himself as a 'spirit comedian' (Arthur, 2010) and with posters which boast 'not for entertainment purposes only – actually psychic', (Arthur, 2010) his internationally successful shows are a complete send up of spirit mediums. Ian D. Montfort is a trickster in which shades of both buffoon and shaman can be observed. He is a poor charlatan and his efforts to manipulate the audience into taking him seriously inevitably fail. Take for instance, one of Montfort's typical spirit messages: 'I've got a message here, very much in spirit, and it's for a lady here tonight. This is for a lady who has either just lost weight, is thinking about losing weight, or has been talking to someone about losing weight. Does this make sense?' (Binns, 2014). Like all buffoons, Montfort has his little victories and his moments of anarchic genius. In the same performance, moments later, he correctly identifies the name of a lady's first boyfriend, as well as the name of her childhood pet. 'You're not laughing now,' (Binns, 2014) Montfort points out to the audience. Like all buffoons, Montfort's triumphs seem to come in spite of his idiocy rather than through any real merit of his own, but Montfort's successes establish him as something more than a buffoon. Binns, along with his alter ego Montfort, steps onto the stage in order to deceive the audience; to entertain, of course, but also to deceive. And

unlike the buffoon – who may also set out to deceive – the trickster succeeds. According to George P. Hansen, ‘Tricksters 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’ (2001, p. 46). Compelling performances of mentalism occupy a similarly liminal position in society.

In a postmodern turn of events reminiscent of Andy Kaufman, Binns reports that despite the outlandish nature of his performance, many people accept his mediumship as genuine. According to Binns:

After the third or fourth show there was a guy about my age in absolute tears because he believed I was really contacting the dead. His girlfriend asked me to go and explain to him it was just an act. I've had audiences who were petrified to talk to Elvis through me because they genuinely believed I was talking to him. There are quite a few people who just think I'm a spirit medium who's added a comedy spin to it. What I find interesting is where some people will draw the line; they'll accept that I'm talking to dead people, but not to famous people. (Arthur, 2010)

Binns is relatively unique in the field of mentalism, in that he may shift freely between self-expressive (Tom Binns) and representational (Ian D. Montfort) modes of performance. On a related note, mentalist Max Maven has suggested that some audience members will see his own performances as credible, virtually regardless of circumstances. In *The Art of the Con*, R. Paul Wilson discusses Maven's theory: ‘After thousands of shows, [Maven] made the observation that even if [he] were wearing a bright red nose, someone would eventually approach him after the show and ask for a personal “reading”’ (2014, p. 91). This provocatively suggests that the performance of mentalism may disrupt the semiotics of the body. For example, signifiers of “not to be trusted” may be ignored in circumstances where extraordinary “mental” powers are said to be exercised. This is fully in line with notions of the trickster who, according to Hansen, ‘lives in the liminal area betwixt and between the signifier and the signified’ (2001, p. 382).

This deep seated, and at times irrational, belief in the purported abilities of mentalists suggests that mentalists may also share something with the shaman, who according to Mircea Eliade, ‘is also a magician and medicine man; he is believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians, whether primitive or modern. But beyond this, he is a psychopomp, and he may also be priest, mystic and poet’ (1964, p. 4). The shaman communicates with an unearthly realm, most often by way

of altered states of consciousness. This process has clear links to darker forms of mentalism, such as automatic writing and spirit channelling. Like the buffoon, the shaman has been frequently linked to the trickster. Carl Jung wrote that 'there is something of the trickster in the character of the shaman' (Hansen, 2001, p. 87). Joseph Campbell has described the trickster as 'a super-shaman' (Hansen, 2001, p. 87). Mac Linscott Ricketts situates the shaman and the trickster as opposites – suggesting that the trickster is a parody of the shaman. He writes that although the trickster and the shaman 'represent opposing worldviews, the two are found side by side in nearly every tribe' (Hansen, 2001, p. 88). The shaman takes the audience to the edge, but seemingly crosses the edge alone, coming back apparently changed.

Whether through training, traveling, or trauma – the liminal abilities of the mentalist often purportedly develop in correlation with the liminality of the performer. This liminality may be observed, for example, in the personas of Max Maven and *the Amazing Crisswell*. Max Maven regularly performs in 'Dracula-reminiscent makeup' (Weber, 2003, p. 66) and claims, according to Donna Zuckerbrot's documentary, *Max Maven – A Fabulous Monster*, to have been born on 'the day with most darkness' (2006). Alleged psychic and public personality, Jeron Crisswell King, better known as *the Amazing Crisswell* was 'a flamboyant figure, best remembered for his spit-curlled hair, his stentorian speaking style, and his sequined tuxedo' (*Who Was Crisswell?*). Crisswell was also 'the possessor of a coffin, in which he claimed to sleep' (*Who Was Crisswell?*)

Ultimately, the mentalist cannot truly be a shaman, for the shaman occupies a holy position in society, and the mentalist's place is marginal. Nor can the mentalist fully be a buffoon; for the buffoon's deceptions fail, while the mentalist's must succeed. The mentalist is, however, a trickster, who subverts order and invites chaos for the sake of a little fun and/or profit. Mentalists, like tricksters, occupy a liminal position in society and seek to situate their audiences in a liminal space, as well. The trickster is playful – but far from just doing tricks for fun – the trickster plays with fire. There is always a risk that the trickster, or his spectators, may be metaphorically burned. For example, mentalists have stabbed themselves, and spectators, playing a version of Russian roulette with spikes and cups, known as "smash and stab". Spectators at performances of mentalism may also be adversely affected psychologically or financially, paying hundreds of dollars, for example, to learn "photo reading" such as Derren Brown purported to demonstrate, (Swiss, 2005) or as a result of receiving damaging answers in a "question and answer" act, or bad advice from a psychic reader. The trickster plays at the edge, but does not cross, as the shaman seems to. However, the trickster may play at being a shaman.

Like the shapeshifting trickster, the mentalist may engage the audience by shifting freely from self-expressive to representational modes. Even within these modes, actors may engage in stylized movements and what Bert O. States described as, an '*unnatural* attitude

of the body' (2002, p. 24) as suggested by the red nose theory of Max Maven. Questions, not only of "mental powers," but of character, self, identity, movement, name, costume, and setting, may all be brought to the foreground in a *mise en abyme* which locates the audience squarely in the shifting sands of a liminal metamentalism. In such a maze of mirrors, it is only the body, perhaps, which remains constant and fixed.

## **MATERIALISM IN MENTALISM**

Although contemporary performances of mentalism often purport to depend upon an immaterial mind, the execution of the performance itself is – and, it would seem, must be – strictly material. Neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio has argued that body and mind exist in a state of near fusion (2010, p. 200). When Cartesian notions of mind and character recede to the background, what is it that comes into the foreground? It can be nothing, really, other than body, voice, and object. But what specifically, and materially, occurs which enables spectators to experience a performance of mentalism? What occurs in the confrontation between spectators, and the manipulation of body, voice, and object, which allows for this creation?

To my knowledge, all techniques of the mentalist are rooted in the physical, the material, and the sensory. To this end, I am interested in exposing the occlusion of the body in the contemporary performance of mentalism. Most classical techniques of mentalism are clearly physical, despite the fact that they are concealed from the audience. Many techniques exist for the covert writing, reading, forcing, switching, and conveying of information. Many such techniques are included in conjuring books for children, and needless to say, such techniques are purely material. Classical techniques even include processes to ascertain written shapes, letters, and numbers simply by listening carefully as they are written or drawn; an amazing, but strictly material, technique.

Many other techniques of the mentalist are psychological in nature, rooted in psychological processes such as logic puzzles, statistical probabilities, or suggestion. These techniques are largely mental, but not immaterial. They are dependent upon one body encoding meaning into sounds, in the form of language, and other bodies hearing, decoding, and responding. Furthermore, the psychological processes involved do not, and cannot, occur apart from the material properties of the body and the brain. A small number of techniques depend on the use of highly physicalized processes such as paralinguistics, including tone, pitch, volume, and rhythm; or on the use of kinesics, including body language, eye movements, pupil dilation, and micro-expressions. Such physical techniques, however, rarely attain a high degree of accuracy. One technique traditionally used by thought readers, but rarely seen today, depends upon the use of



muscle reading or, so-called, contact mind reading. This overtly physical technique has been described by mentalist Banachek as ‘psychophysiological thought reading’ (2011) and was first presented by thought reader, J. Randall Brown in 1873. Brown used contact mind reading techniques to identify objects, words, numbers, and locations which were merely thought of. It was from these early performances that thought reading emerged as a field distinct from spiritualism. These techniques rely on the ideomotor effect, which in turn depends upon unconscious or involuntary motor response. Fascinatingly, contact mind reading is perhaps the technique which comes closest to qualifying as genuine mind reading – via the body, of course. The ideomotor effect also provides a material explanation for pendulums, dowsing rods, Ouija boards, and much of the table turning which took place in Victorian parlour rooms.

Still – and despite the often highly physicalized performances of witches, spiritualists, and thought readers – many contemporary mentalists appear to have given very little thought to the use of their own bodies on the stage, in terms of presentation. The lack of writing on the subject reinforces this. Many mentalists seem interested in the body only to the extent that sometimes bodies (especially fingers) are needed in order to execute physical artifice, such as sleight of hand. It is paradoxical that while contemporary mentalism is – or at least purports to be – quite interested in the bodies of participants, the body of the mentalist often seems largely incidental to the process.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between mentalists and their bodies has always been a complicated one, particularly with regards to Cartesian mind-body dualism. On one extreme, as I have written about elsewhere, purported mental abilities have been aligned with the othering, feminising, and animalising of the body. On the other extreme, the body has been regarded as virtually incidental to what purports to be a purely mental process. I argue, based on my experiences as a scholar and performer, that over the past century, the physicality of mentalists has significantly decreased, even as the *pretences* of physicality have increased. In an effort to be “realistic” or “believable” contemporary performers of mentalism, only rarely, I believe, progress beyond what theatre director Eugenio Barba has called ‘the daily mode’ (1985) of self-expression. Many modern and contemporary performances of mentalism involve little more than casually standing and speaking.

My goal in writing this paper was not to write a “how-to manual” with regards to using the body, but rather to argue a case for the importance of discovering and rediscovering the role of the physical body in mentalism. The end of Cartesian dualism, brought about by contemporary neuroscientific discoveries, has not only ended mind reading as the

world once imagined it, but also ushered in an exciting new era of opportunity for discovery and play in the performance of mentalism. Quasi-characters, anti-characters, inverse method acting, metamentalism and other postmodern and post-Cartesian approaches may be used, which acknowledge performances *as* performances, while exploring the potential of a fused bodymind in the contemporary performance of mentalism.

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