

Appendices: Origin and Meaning of *Shut-Eye* and *Open-Eye*

The terms *shut-eye* and *open-eye* – although common, and important, in contemporary discussions regarding mentalism – are of uncertain origin. The term was undoubtedly popularized by Orson Welles during a 1970 television interview with David Frost in which Welles described the shut-eye phenomena as an ‘occupational disease,’ and defined the term as coming from the ‘argot of those crooks,’ and describing the ‘fellow who begins to believe himself.’¹ Welles’ comment, however, may be taken with a grain of salt since he claimed to start becoming a shut-eye on his first and only day of ‘fortune telling.’² But where did Welles learn this term?

One likely explanation is that Welles, being an amateur conjurer, may have learned the term from fellow conjurer and anti-spiritualist Harry Houdini. Houdini’s use of the term during a 1926 Senate investigation on ‘fortune telling’ stands as the earliest *public* use of the term which I have been able to locate. Houdini defines both the terms *shut-eye* and *open-eye* in the following testimony before Representative Frank Reid of Illinois.

Mr. HOUDINI: Any medium could fool Mr. Funk, because he is what is known in the vernacular as a “shut-eye.”

Mr. REID: A what?

Mr. HOUDINI: A “shut-eye.”

Mr. REID: What is that?

Mr. HOUDINI: A “shut-eye” is one who believes everything any medium tells him or her. An “open-eye” is one who is a trickster and knows it. A good many people believe in it, and I respect them. I take off my hat to the “shut-eyes,” but those who are open-eyed and know they are tricksters are the ones that I am attacking.³

Note the difference in usages. Houdini claims to ‘respect’ *shut-eyes*, and uses the terms to describe those who believe in spiritualism and do not employ trickery. No mention is made of *becoming* a shut-eye, and the term seems aimed more at spectators – rather than performers – of purported spiritualist phenomena. But, where did Houdini learn the term? It remains unclear, although it is

¹ Frost, David. ‘An Interview with Orson Welles.’ *Youtube.com* 5 Dec 1970.

² Frost, David. ‘An Interview with Orson Welles.’ *Youtube.com* 5 Dec 1970.

³ ‘Fortune Telling Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Judiciary of the Committee on the District of Columbia House of Representatives.’ Sixty-Ninth Congress, First Session on H. R. 8989. 1926.

curious that Houdini did not use the term in his 1924 book *A Magician Among the Spirits*, which was devoted to exposing fraudulent (open-eye) spiritualists.⁴

Mentalist Bill Montana has cryptically suggested that the original connotation of the term *shut-eye* was, in fact, very different to the meaning assigned by Houdini and Welles. According to Montana, in studying ‘the early mentalism literature’ a ‘ladder of accomplishments’ may be observed, through which mentalists might progress.⁵ Montana argues that the progression moves from conjurer, to mentalist, to open-eye, to shut-eye, and further – and again, cryptically – suggests that there is another rung higher than shut-eye.⁶ Montana, however, divulges neither what that rung might be, nor his arcane source, of which he claims that only six copies exist.⁷ Obviously, Montana’s assertions must also be taken with a grain (shaker?) of salt. But whatever his intentions and credibility may be, he argues – and it certainly is plausible – that the terms were perversely adopted by skeptics in the 1950s, and *shut-eye* took on connotations of fraud, rather than purity.⁸

The term does, in fact, resurface in a 1945 article in *The Chicago Tribune*, regarding the investigation of Rose Mackenburg. The author writes, including the bracketed text, ‘This helps put the “Shut-eye” [trade name for the devout believer] in a properly gullible mood for the hocus pocus that follows.’⁹ Interestingly, in this usage – as in the usage by Houdini – the term *shut-eye* again refers to devout and ‘gullible’ sitters, not mediums.

The earliest source I have located found for the term *shut-eye*, comes from the 1874 book by N. B. Wolfe, *Startling Facts in Modern Spiritualism*. Wolfe writes, ‘It is not necessary, I hope, to extend the list of trance-speakers, to show my reprobation of the “shut-eye” habit. I want to look my educator in the eye; then I can tell whether he is honest and in earnest. It is the organ of a language that is always truthful.’¹⁰

⁴ Houdini, Harry. *A Magician Among the Spirits*. 1924.

⁵ Montana, Bill. ‘Origin and definition of Shut-Eye and Open-Eye.’ Penny for your Thoughts. *Themagiccafe.com*. 21 Mar 2017.

⁶ Montana, Bill. ‘Origin and definition of Shut-Eye and Open-Eye.’ Penny for your Thoughts. *Themagiccafe.com*. 21 Mar 2017.

⁷ Montana, Bill. ‘Ethical Question.’ Penny for your Thoughts. *Themagiccafe.com*. 1 Dec 2016.

⁸ Montana, Bill. ‘Ethical Question.’ Penny for your Thoughts. *Themagiccafe.com*. 1 Dec 2016.

⁹ Williamson, E.W. “Spirit Fakers of City Fatten on War's Grief,” *The Chicago Tribune*. 5 Aug 1945. pp. 1, 9.

¹⁰ Wolfe, N. B. *Startling Facts in Modern Spiritualism*. 1875. p. 77.

Wolfe appears to use the term *shut-eye* as a description of mediums who conduct seances – with their eyes closed – as if in trance. He seems to imply that shut-eyes avoid eye contact in order to conceal their guilt. Thus, the first known usage of the term appears to mean the opposite of the definition offered by Houdini and Welles and Montana, who all equate the shut-eye with genuine belief.

Later 19th century sources also refer variously to open eyes and closed eyes. For instance, in the anonymously written 1882 book *Confessions of a Medium*, there is a reference which is consistent with Wolfe's usage. The author writes, 'Nothing is impossible. Just shut your eyes and chatter away; say you are controlled by some great personage – Martin Luther, Judas Iscariot, John Wesley, anybody.'¹¹

Earlier in the book, two references to open eyes suggest how the term *open-eye* might have come to be associated with fraud. The first reference suggests that by opening one's eyes – or by turning on the lights, as it were – one will learn the tricks of the trade. The author writes:

'Now this may appear a difficult matter to you, until I have shown you the way,' said Thomson. 'Of course it could not be done in the light; darkness is the key to the whole mystery.'

'But how on earth did you free your hands?'

'Take hold again, and this time keep your eyes open.'¹²

The second reference provides another possible connotation. The author writes, "That just shows you what a medium can do if he keeps his eyes and ears open," said he. "Olaf is an all-absorbing name with this family, and very few people know anything about it. It is a sort of cupboard skeleton..."¹³ This reference suggests that a mentalist with *eyes and ears open* would use surreptitiously gained information in the séance room.

A century after the term first saw print, Orson Welles popularized the term on television. Six years after the usage by Welles, the terms appeared in print once again, this time, in *Psychic Mafia*, an exposé written by former medium M. Lamar Keene. Keene uses the terms – for the most part – as they were used in other pre-Welles references. He writes:

¹¹ *Confessions of a Medium*. Anonymous. 1882. p. 175.

¹² *Confessions of a Medium*. Anonymous. 1882. p. 93.

¹³ *Confessions of a Medium*. Anonymous. 1882. p. 149.

In the spook business, as we were soon to discover, mediums are divided into two classes: the “shut-eyes” and the “opens.” The shut-eyes were the simple believers, often sweet little old ladies (although not all old ladies in spiritualism are sweet) who genuinely felt that they were psychic and able to pick up “vibrations.” They were kept around by the others because their transparent sincerity was good for public relations. But the shut-eyes were not let in on the tricks of the trade.

The open mediums, by contrast, were those who knew they were frauds and admitted it – at least in the secret circles of the fraternity. When Raoul and I started out, we would have had to be classed somewhere in between the shut-eyes and the open mediums. We were in fact what is called in the business “open to ourselves.” This meant we knew that some mediums were total frauds – though we didn’t know how many – but the fraud, we felt, was for a good cause and didn’t do anybody any harm. If it strengthened faith, could it be that bad?¹⁴

Again, the term *shut-eye* is used to describe ‘simple believers’ and the term *open mediums* refers to those who ‘knew they were frauds.’¹⁵

It is undoubtedly ironic, that Welles – who popularized the term – also appears to have reinvented the term in the process. Nevertheless, the terms have taken on special significance post Welles, and I would argue that Welles’ usage – however and why ever it happened – unearthed a very important dimension of beliefs pertaining to those who repeatedly perform purportedly psychic phenomena. Orson Welles – who wrote and directed the real/pseudo documentary *F for Fake* about a talented art forger and a fake auto-biographer¹⁶ – was acutely aware of the complex and shifting nature of the line between real and fake.

¹⁴ Keene, M. Lamar and Allen Spraggett. *Psychic Mafia*. 1976. p. 16.

¹⁵ Keene, M. Lamar and Allen Spraggett. *Psychic Mafia*. 1976. p. 16.

¹⁶ *F for Fake*. Dir. Orson Welles. Janus Film. 1975.

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