

# **Luck, Love, and Psychic**

**By Edward James Dean**

**Everyone tells me you are a fake, but I believe in you.  
P.S.: if you really are a fake, don't tell me.  
I don't want to know.<sup>1</sup>**

*- Charles Schultz*

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<sup>1</sup> Schultz, Charles. *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*. Dir. Bill Melendez. 1966.

## The Psychic Placebo Effect

Although this chapter is concerned exclusively with the performance of mentalism, it is necessary to conduct this conversation hand-in-hand with a discussion of performances of purported psychic phenomena and identities which, for the most part, performances of mentalism pretend to be. Indeed, a simplified definition of mentalism could be: *the art of convincingly fabricating parapsychological phenomena*. A complicated situation, however, immediately arises since psychic phenomena is a fabrication to begin with. Mentalism, then, is not only a fabrication, but also a simulation of that fabrication. Perhaps, then, it is simplest just to say that psychic phenomena and mentalism have been the same thing all along. This is particularly so if one includes *shut-eyes* (performers who believe in the reality of their performances) *open-eyes* (performers who don't) and *wink-eyes* (performers who don't but maintain that they do *beyond all conventional boundaries*).

Observers of purportedly psychic demonstrations and identities are rarely in a position to perceive the *actual* nature and methodology of these fabrications and simulations. Thus, a convincing simulation of fabricated psychic phenomena is indistinguishable from – in fact, identical to – fabrications of psychic abilities which are perceived as “real” by actors or onlookers. Thus, one cannot talk about the performance of mentalism without also talking about the performance of purportedly genuine psychic phenomena, which mentalism simultaneously both is and, of course, is not.

In this chapter, I take a sceptical, but warranted, position that psychic abilities do not exist outside of the social/performative sense. My intention in this dissertation, therefore, is to explore the ways in which various psychic phenomena – despite not *actually* existing – are nevertheless frequently performed and apparently experienced, both on and off stage; and often perceived as real by both performers and observers. Thus, it is these performative actions – the *doings* of psychic stuff – which fabricate\* the very experiences and beliefs which they purport to be; or, to borrow from performance studies theorist Richard Schechner's description of performativity, ‘create the very social realities which they enact.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, despite the lack of credible scientific evidence for these phenomena, audiences for performances of mentalism continue to grow. Nevertheless, given the

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\* I use the term *fabricate* to mean ‘to invent in order to deceive’ rather than ‘to construct or manufacture.’

<sup>2</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2002. p. 35.

popularity of such performances, mentalists have – in the words of psychologist Peter Lamont – ‘been largely ignored by scholars.’<sup>3</sup> This is all the more surprising since, as Lamont further observes, such performers ‘are essential to understanding extraordinary beliefs.’<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that the term “performativity” is – as Henry Bial has observed – ‘layered with multiple meanings.’<sup>5</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have further noted that ‘while philosophy and theater now share “performative” as a common lexical item, the term has hardly come to mean “the same thing” for each.’<sup>6</sup> The root of these differences stems from primarily two different definitions. The first, refers to ‘a performance without the connotations of artifice or superficiality that accompany the word “theatrical.”’<sup>7</sup> The second, is rooted in J.L. Austin’s 1955 *How To Do Things With Words*, and refers to ‘an utterance that does not make a statement... but, in fact performs an action’<sup>8</sup> such as the statement, ‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’.<sup>9</sup> Henry Bial has described Judith Butler’s 1988 essay ‘Performative acts and gender constitution’ as a ‘remarkable synthesis of these two meanings.’<sup>10</sup> Schechner’s definition takes into consideration all of the above.

In ‘The End of Mind Reading,’ published in the *Journal of Performance Magic*,<sup>11</sup> I related psychic identities and behaviours to other forms of performance such as the make-belief of the politician, the kayfabe of the professional wrestler, the antics of the rock star, the process of the method actor, and the performances of meta-comedian Andy Kaufman. I further argue that psychic identities and behaviour may not only be viewed as performative, but that the mechanisms behind these kayfabe, meta, hyperreal, post-truth, or *wink-eye* performances are not unrelated to the well documented *placebo effect*. I argue that *the beliefs which we construct and maintain through play have the power to create real transformations*.

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<sup>3</sup> Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem*. 2013. p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> Lamont, Peter. *Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem*. 2013. p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> Bial, Henry. ‘Performativity.’ *The performance studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> Parker, Andrew and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. ‘Introduction to Performativity and Performance.’ *The performance studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Henry Bial. 2004. p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> Bial, Henry. ‘Performativity.’ *The performance studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Henry Bial. p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> Bial, Henry. ‘Performativity.’ *The performance studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Henry Bial. p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things With Words*. 1962.

<sup>10</sup> Bial, Henry. ‘Performativity.’ *The performance studies Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Henry Bial. p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Dean, Edward James. ‘The End of Mind Reading,’ *The Journal of Performance Magic*. 5 (1). 2018.

My argument relies in part on recent research, such as an extensive meta-analysis conducted by Jeremy Howick, et al., (2017) who argued in the *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine* – on behalf of the effectiveness of ‘placebos without deception.’<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Nic Fleming (2017) in *The Guardian* called attention to the existence of ‘open-label placebos’ which remain effective even when those treatments are known to be placebos.<sup>13</sup> The effectiveness of open-label placebos demonstrates that real psychophysical transformations can be triggered even by beliefs which are known to be imaginary. Fleming’s article is aptly entitled, “‘I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic” – the rise of open-label placebos.’<sup>14</sup>

In a related vein, psychologists Yuxuan Lan, et al., (2018) express concern that even information which is known to be fictional ‘can potentially influence our beliefs...and attitudes.’<sup>15</sup> According to the authors: ‘A recent meta-analysis concluded that there was no significant difference between the persuasive effect of factual and fictional narratives, which shows that misinformation in the context of fiction can influence attitudes and beliefs.’<sup>16</sup> The authors draw what they describe as a ‘clear and somewhat unnerving’ conclusion that ‘even when people know that what they are seeing may not be real, it can have a profound impact on their beliefs.’<sup>17</sup>

Along these post-truth lines, it is worth recalling the 1972 *Philip Experiments* which stand out as a unique – if not intentional – examination of deep and dark play in allegedly psychic occurrences. In these experiments – conducted by the Toronto Society for Psychical Research – a group of eight subjects was assigned the task of creating an imaginary spirit with which they would later attempt to communicate. The purpose of the experiment was to determine whether it was possible ‘to

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<sup>12</sup> Howick, Jeremy, et al. ‘Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis.’ *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine*. 10(2). 2017. pp. 97-107.

<sup>13</sup> Howick, Jeremy, et al. ‘Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis.’ *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine*. 10(2). 2017. pp. 97-107.

<sup>14</sup> Fleming, Nic. “‘I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic” – the rise of open-label placebos.’ *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. ‘Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people’s beliefs in psychological principles.’ *PLoS ONE*. 13(11). 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. ‘Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people’s beliefs in psychological principles.’ *PLoS ONE*. 13(11). 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Lan Y, Mohr C, Hu X, Kuhn G. ‘Fake science: The impact of pseudo-psychological demonstrations on people’s beliefs in psychological principles.’ *PLoS ONE*. 13(11). 2018.

communicate not with a spirit entity, but with the *idea* of a spirit?’<sup>18</sup> In other words, could spirit contact be made by *human will* – or, expectation, desire, and imagination – alone?

Over a period of weeks, the group constructed an entirely fictional backstory of ‘Philip, the imaginary ghost’<sup>19</sup> which included many colourful elements such as an English aristocrat with a distinguished war record, a frigid wife, and an affair with a gypsy girl. The wife discovered the affair and accused the gypsy of witchcraft. The girl was promptly burned at the stake.\* Philip then committed suicide at the age of 30. For several weeks the group reported no extraordinary experiences. In the following weeks, however, the group experienced many instances of spirit rapping, table tipping, and other seemingly “ghostly” phenomena.

Many different conclusions – from ideomotor response\* to ‘playful’ spirits<sup>20</sup> – were drawn from these experiments, which, it must be noted, were not scientifically controlled and ‘offer proof of nothing.’<sup>21</sup> However, as John Robert Colombo writes in *Ghost Stories of Ontario*, ‘This episode in parapsychological history offers promise of a better understanding of the dynamics of group interaction, of the psychological consequences of belief, if not of contact with the “spirit world.”’<sup>22</sup> My own hypothesis on these experiments is not among the commonly offered explanations. I suggest that rather than playful spirits, one or more members of the group playfully decided to *liven things up a bit* for the researchers and the rest of the group. If this is the case, it is hard to fault the decision. A failure to do so, would have resulted in a boring and forgettable – rather than exciting and infamous – series of experiments.

Jeffrey Kripal, a Professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University has also previously explored connections between paranormal experiences and the placebo effect. Playfully claiming that ‘myth happens,’<sup>23</sup> Kripal explains that parapsychological experiences or events are ‘subjective and objective at the same time’<sup>24</sup> and ‘mediated not just by the five senses, but by the

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<sup>18</sup> Colombo, John Robert. ‘The Philip Phenomenon.’ *Ghost Stories of Ontario*. 1995. P. 122.

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Philip Experiment – did a 1972 scientific experiment conjure a spirit or create a real ghost?’ *AlteredDimensions.net*. 8 April 2014.

\* A forgivable historical inaccuracy – In England witches were hanged.

\* Ideomotor response may be defined as: *the psychological phenomenon of subtle and involuntary physical movement triggered by thinking about that movement*.

<sup>20</sup> Nason, Rachel. ‘The Philip Experiment.’ *Vimeo.com*. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Colombo, John Robert. ‘The Philip Phenomenon.’ *Ghost Stories of Ontario*. 1995. P. 123.

<sup>22</sup> Colombo, John Robert. ‘The Philip Phenomenon.’ *Ghost Stories of Ontario*. 1995. P. 123.

<sup>23</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

sixth sense – the super sense – of the human imagination in very extraordinary circumstances.’<sup>25</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionaries Online* defines the sixth sense as: ‘a supposed intuitive faculty giving awareness not explicable in terms of normal perception,’<sup>26</sup> and historically, of course, the sixth sense was thought to be the psychic sense, which operated independently of the five classical senses. It is revealing that Kripal describes the sixth sense as the imagination, not so subtly suggesting that purported psychic phenomena and purported psychic identities were, all along, driven by the imagination.

Kripal relates these experiences to storytelling and notes that ‘once we adopt such a narrative approach to paranormal experiences a lot of things suddenly make a lot of sense.’<sup>27</sup> He argues that such an approach provides an explanation for the fact that apparent parapsychological experiences are common in the real world, but non-existent in laboratories. Along the lines of performativity, Kripal explains that ‘we are all born into cultures and languages and belief systems that may or may not serve us, and yet they define what we can think, what we can imagine, who we can become. We are in fact all written. We are all being played in some way.’ He suggests, therefore, that a parapsychological experience is ‘not just a story, but it’s a story waking up to its own authorship; to its own author, i.e., us.’<sup>28</sup> According to Kripal, ‘if we can start to think of these experiences with the tools of literature and art, my hope is that these sorts of events can be treated with more curiosity, with more generosity, and they can become what I think they actually already are: Real world invitations to become our own authors of the impossible.’<sup>29</sup>

I feel that Kripal’s message is both elegantly stated and extremely useful. However, the question remains: is it possible to become ‘authors of the impossible’<sup>30</sup> without entering into pathological self-delusion? Kripal’s discussion of the placebo effect offers some insight along these lines. He writes:

The placebo is essentially a fraud. It is a lie. And it works. It works really well. Somehow it tricks the mind into extraordinary capacities to deal with the human

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<sup>25</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

<sup>26</sup> *Oxford English Dictionaries Online*.

<sup>27</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

body. And paranormal events are a lot like this. Their visual quality, their mythical quality, somehow tricks the mind into extraordinary capacities...<sup>31</sup>

When Kripal speaks of paranormal experiences in this way, comparing them to placebos, and using terms such as *fraud* and *lie*, it goes right to the question of intellectual integrity. The article on open-label placebos in *The Guardian*, previously referenced, calls attention to the ‘reputation problem’<sup>32</sup> of placebos. The article states that ‘It is widely believed they are only effective when those taking them are deceived into thinking they are taking real drugs. As such, prescribing dummy or fake treatments is unethical.’<sup>33</sup> However the article goes on to describe a 260-patient review over five studies, which found ‘that “open-label” placebos – those that patients know contain no active medication – can improve symptoms in a range of conditions.’<sup>34</sup> According to the article, ‘this growing body of evidence raises a number of important questions. How do open-label placebos work? Which conditions do they work for? And should doctors prescribe them?’<sup>35</sup> The mechanism behind the success of open-label placebos is not yet understood, although the article suggests a combination of theories including Pavlov’s *conditioning effect*, ‘conscious expectation of improvements,’ and ‘embodied cognition’ as potential contributing factors.<sup>36</sup> All the same, the success of open-label placebos shines light precisely on the way that psychic belief and intellectual integrity may coexist.

Parapsychologist George Hansen, in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, has written extensively on the ‘deep connection between liminality and deception,’ noting that ‘shamans were often seen as tricksters’<sup>37</sup> and have ‘been observed in trickery.’<sup>38</sup> Such shamanic/trickster activities may, nevertheless, have played a critical role in evolution and survival, acting as psychological placebos, or what director Franc Chamberlain has described in the *Journal of Performance Magic*

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<sup>31</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey J. ‘Authors of the Impossible.’ TEDxHouston. *Youtube.com*. 16 Jan 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Fleming, Nic. “‘I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic’ – the rise of open-label placebos.’ *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Fleming, Nic. “‘I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic’ – the rise of open-label placebos.’ *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Howick, Jeremy, et al. ‘Effects of placebos without deception compared with no treatment: A systematic review and meta-analysis.’ *Journal of Evidence Based Medicine*. 10(2). 2017. pp. 97-107.

<sup>35</sup> Fleming, Nic. “‘I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic’ – the rise of open-label placebos.’ *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Fleming, Nic. “‘I knew they were sugar pills but I felt fantastic’ – the rise of open-label placebos.’ *TheGuardian.com*. 22 May 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal*. 2001. p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal*. 2001. p. 31.



as ‘a set of potentially transformational practices or perhaps healing fictions.’<sup>39</sup> Chamberlain argues that ‘It would be an error...to assert that magic is either full of supernatural power or it is a shell of empty tricks and that wonder and enchantment (even dark enchantments) cannot co-exist with the knowledge that our senses are being deceived.’<sup>40</sup>

Hansen, in discussing shamanic trickery, has observed that ‘placebo healing is one of the benign uses of trickery,’<sup>41</sup> and neuropsychologist and philosopher Nicholas Humphrey has written extensively on the importance of such issues in contemporary philosophical debates, asserting that ‘so-called “faith-healing” is no longer regarded by most doctors, theologians or parapsychologists as being strictly paranormal.’<sup>42</sup> According to Humphrey, ‘it is now widely recognized by the medical community that the course of many kinds of illness, of the body as well as of the mind, can be influenced by the patient’s hopes and expectations and thus by the suggestions given him by an authority figure whom he trusts.’<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Kripal has observed that ‘the well documented medical placebo, after all, is a fake that has real effects.’<sup>44</sup>

Further elaborating on the psychological and physiological impacts of these suggestions, Humphrey neatly describes the paradox embedded within these *psychic placebos*, arguing that ‘to say that these cures have a normal explanation...is not to deny that they may often rely on the idea of a paranormal explanation. In fact, it is often quite clear that they do rely on it.’<sup>45</sup> He continues:

It is for most people, including the healer, extremely hard to imagine how the voice or the touch of another person could possibly bring about a cure unless this other person were to have paranormal powers. It follows that the more the patient believes in these powers, the more he will be inclined to take the suggestions seriously – and the better they will work. Equally, the more the healer himself believes in his powers, the more he can make his suggestions sound convincing – and again the better they will work. The consequence is that a kind of virtuous circle can be established. Success in bringing about a cure feeds back to the healer, boosting both his image in the eyes of the world and his image of himself.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Chamberlain, Franc. ‘Editorial for JPM Issue 5.’ *Journal of Performance Magic*. 5 (1). 2018. p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Chamberlain, Franc. ‘Editorial for JPM Issue 5.’ *Journal of Performance Magic*. 5 (1). 2018. p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Hansen, George P. *The Trickster and the Paranormal*. 2001. p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. Copernicus. 1996. p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. Copernicus. 1996. p. 111.

<sup>44</sup> Kripal, Jeffrey. *Authors of the Impossible*. 2010. p. 52.

<sup>45</sup> Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. Copernicus. 1996. p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> Humphrey, Nicholas. *Leaps of Faith*. Copernicus. 1996. p. 111.

Taken as a whole, the implications of the ideas discussed above may throw light upon numerous critical contemporary issues such as the election of Trump, the Brexit election, fake news, alternative facts, and manipulation of electorates and social media, not to mention health and fitness fads, skin care products, reiki, faith healing, neurolinguistic programming self-help gurus, and the homeopathic industry. When something is not what it seems – or purports – to be, that thing is often described as “fake.” Yet, nevertheless, fake things are not powerless to trigger real transformations.

### **Luck, Love, and Psychic**

What do we talk about, when we talk about psychic? \* Richard Schechner has written that ‘we need to stop looking so hard at play, or play genres, and investigate *playing*, the ongoing, underlying process of off-balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming – the permeating, eruptive/disruptive energy and mood below, behind, and to the sides of focused attention.’<sup>47</sup> Much effort has been spent attempting to quantify, or *prove*, psychic phenomena, but it is equally important to investigate the motivations and impacts – for better and for worse – of the purported performance of, and corresponding belief in, these phenomena.

Attempts to measure psychic phenomena seem to always miss the target. Perhaps, the very act of measuring has pointed researchers in the wrong direction. Searching for evidence of psychic phenomena is like searching for evidence of luck or love. It is unlikely to be found. But this is not to say that luck or love are not real, or at least, that the effects of these ideas cannot be measurably real. Psychic phenomena, like luck and love, are liminal. Such phenomena are resistant to quantification. Admittedly, it is the hindsight provided by a century of scientific inquiry that makes this understanding possible. Psychics and mediums in contemporary western societies, I would argue, help to fulfil a basic and ancient human need for storytelling and meaning making – whether they intend this or not.

In *The Luck Factor*, psychologist Richard Wiseman discusses superstition, luck, and ritual, concluding that ‘superstition doesn’t work because it is based on outdated and incorrect thinking

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\* This is a repurposing of the title of Raymond Carver’s 1981 short story, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*.

<sup>47</sup> Schechner, Richard. *The Future of Ritual*. 1993. p. 43

[and] comes from a time when people thought that luck was a strange force that could only be controlled by magical rituals and bizarre behaviours.’<sup>48</sup> Rather, according to Wiseman, so-called lucky people tend to create their own luck by being outgoing, positive, flexible, attentive, and hard-working.<sup>49</sup> Wiseman points out that his research ‘is not simply about debunking superstitious thinking and behaviour. Instead, it is about encouraging people to move away from a magical way of thinking and toward a more rational view of luck.’<sup>50</sup> Wiseman hopes to use ‘science and scepticism to increase the level of luck, happiness, and success in people’s lives.’<sup>51</sup> Yet, despite his call for an end of magical thinking, Wiseman’s research highlights the fact magical thinking can achieve real results.

This is not entirely surprising given the ways in which play and ritual enable people to change themselves and to change their perceived world – to recreate themselves and to create a world of meaning. In the case of Wiseman’s subjects, he found that people who self-identify as lucky can actively transform themselves – or, at least, perceive themselves as being transformed – into habitually lucky people. Wiseman found that those who believe themselves to be lucky, among other things (emphasis added), ‘[listen] to *their intuition, create self-fulfilling prophecies* via positive expectations, and adopt a resilient attitude that *transforms bad luck into good*.’<sup>52</sup> Note the use of magical language in Wiseman’s so-called rational explanation of luck.

The massive success of self-help books promoting the apparent magical powers of positive thinking – from Mentalist Al Koran’s 1965 bestseller, *How to Bring out the Magic in your Mind* to the 2006 mega-bestseller *The Secret*, written by Rhonda Byrne – suggests that these magical ideas, while clearly not scientific, resonate with people in a powerful way. It would further seem to suggest that these ideas even resonate powerfully enough to enable a significant number of people to create tangible changes in their lives.

For this reason, I believe that Wiseman’s call for scepticism misses the target to some degree. So, of course, do the endorsements of Koran and Byrne for the magical *law of attraction*; not to mention the centuries of diverse superstitious practices such as ‘sympathetic,’ ‘homeopathic,’ and

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<sup>48</sup> Wiseman, Richard. ‘The Luck Factor.’ *Sceptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Wiseman, Richard. ‘The Luck Factor.’ *Sceptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Wiseman, Richard. ‘The Luck Factor.’ *Sceptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Wiseman, Richard. ‘The Luck Factor.’ *Sceptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.

<sup>52</sup> Wiseman, Richard. ‘The Luck Factor.’ *Sceptical Inquirer*. May/Jun 2003.

‘contagious’ magic detailed by James Frazer in his seminal anthropological text, *The Golden Bough*.<sup>53</sup> The conflict between scepticism and magical thinking, is in many ways, a false dichotomy dependent upon oversimplified binaries of real and false or wrong and right. It is my contention that purported psychic ability – along with luck and love – is a form of play which is frequently ritualized through ceremonies, behaviours, objects, and paraphernalia. Further, these forms of highly transformative ritualized play have, for centuries, enabled people – sometimes wilfully and sometimes unwittingly – to escape or change their circumstances, if only psychologically. Uri Geller, for instance, has remarked, ‘...by visualizing and fantasizing spoon bending, which I kind of brought into the world, I saw it as a tool to climb out of poverty.’<sup>54</sup>

Deep play can also be associated with both superstition and the paranormal when, for example, people make life decisions or gamble their savings based on advice drawn from horoscopes, fortune tellers, hotline psychics, tarot cards, dowsing rods, or other such oracles. Yet, deep play can also provide hope and be a vital source – if not always entirely harmless – of meaning making and storytelling. Richard Schechner, speaking on deep play, explains that ‘sometimes in human relations – in love relations especially – we find ourselves very, very, involved in deep play.’<sup>55</sup> On love and deep play, Diane Ackerman, in her book *Deep Play* writes:

When lovers isolate themselves from others, desperate to be alone together, indeed when they decide to become ‘a couple,’ they escape to the sacred kingdom of their love affair, a private world with its own customs, dialect, values, and rules. Love is a voluntary mysticism. They become a cult of two.... The lover is like a shaman who rises into steep ecstasy and thus is able to see into the heart and soul of the beloved. If one lover breaks up with the other, their secret world is shattered, its reality is disavowed, and in a sense the leaving partner becomes what children like to refer to as ‘a spoilsport,’ someone who ruins the game by rejecting its reality, essence, and appeal. Disavow the illusion and the game is over.<sup>56</sup>

I argue that contemporary performances of mentalism are not consumed by spectators according to the binary of *either* real or fake. Rather, contemporary performances of mentalism offer spectators a range of options from which to choose. Spectators may also, for instance, invest in the performance *as if* it is real, or disbelieve the performance but believe that *the performer believes*

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<sup>53</sup> Frazer, James G. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Abridged Ed. 1923. Chapter III

<sup>54</sup> ‘Uri Geller Interview.’ *YouTube*. Sep 30, 2016. Web. 21 Jun 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Schechner, Richard. ‘performance studies: An Introduction - Play ("Deep Play/Dark Play")’ *YouTube*. 17 Dec 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Ackerman, Diane. *Deep Play*. 1999. p. 20.

it to be real. The most appropriate areas of inquiry with regards to contemporary performances of mentalism, I would therefore argue, are not belief, disbelief, or even the willing suspension of disbelief – but rather, make-belief, performativity, ritual, and play.

### **Acting Out the Imaginary**

After a century of psychical and parapsychological research has failed to find robust, replicable, or credible evidence of what it has searched for,<sup>\*</sup> it is time I argue, to expand the discourse to one which questions, not only the nature of purported psychic phenomena and beliefs but looks *beyond psychic* to questions of the performance and performativity of psychic phenomena and identities in shared social spaces. This expanded discourse would look at psychic behaviour – not as a result of flawed mental processes or misguided science – but as a vital by-product of the human need for storytelling, transformation, and play. This discourse might further investigate ways in which these time-honoured rituals and forms of deep and dark play might be engaged with safely, effectively, and with awareness and intention.

Although the shelves of bookstores are full of books about love, not one of those volumes would attempt to find proof of love in a laboratory. Love is a concept, an idea, a ritual, a game, a paradigm, a way of seeing ourselves and each other. So, too, are psychic phenomena. Psychic phenomena point to deep connections, rapport, soul-mates, higher planes of existence, and a purpose for our lives. As Peter Lamont has noted, people have, through psychic beliefs, ‘constructed and maintained [their] beliefs about the world in which [they] live, not only about what is possible in the material world, but also about what matters in the social world.’<sup>57</sup> When psychic phenomena are discussed in the psychological context, as they are in Richard Wiseman’s *Paranormality* or Michael Shermer’s *Why People Believe Weird Things*, these beliefs are often framed as pareidolia<sup>\*</sup> run amok or as ‘nonsensical’<sup>58</sup> and sometimes ‘dangerous’<sup>59</sup> flaws in our thinking.

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<sup>\*</sup> This expression is widely derided in the field of parapsychology owing to the comparatively small amount of resources and funding devoted to this area. However, I see no reason to amend this statement.

<sup>57</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performed Imaginaries*. 2014. p. 259.

<sup>\*</sup> Pareidolia may be defined as: *a psychological phenomenon in which patterns are perceived where none exist*.

<sup>58</sup> Shermer, Michael. ‘Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time.’ 2002. Back Cover.

<sup>59</sup> Shermer, Michael. ‘Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time.’ 2002. Back Cover.

The alternative view – *that people rationally choose to believe in psychic phenomena* for the benefits that such beliefs provide – has only rarely been proposed. On one of the few occasions on which I have seen this concept proposed, the authors immediately passed it over in favour of a more conventional approach. In, *Psychology of the Psychic*, Marks and Kammann describe what may be referred to as the *motivational hypothesis*:

One likely explanation is motivational. We seem to have a profound yearning for a magic formula that will free us from our ponderous and fragile human bodies, from realities that will not obey our wishes, from loneliness or unhappiness, and from death itself. This idea is especially compatible with the broader occult spectrum including astrology (which relieves us from responsibility for our actions and moods), spiritualism, reincarnation, and faith healing. In this sense, the occult serves as a sort of underground religion...<sup>60</sup>

But the authors immediately claim to ‘move on to firmer ground’ pursuing the more conventional ‘cognitive hypothesis that psychic belief follows from natural fallacies of human thought.’<sup>61</sup> The authors continue, ‘Our starting point is the common experience of stumbling onto a mysterious event that defies explanation and seems supernatural.’<sup>62</sup> In other words, Marks and Kammann suggest that psychic beliefs are more likely to grow from the cognitive misattribution of coincidences and anomalous events, rather than from the desire or motivation to hold such beliefs for a particular purpose. On the contrary, I hold the *motivational hypothesis* to be the more compelling – albeit incomplete – explanation.

I would assert that – on the whole – the constant and enthusiastic embrace of psychic phenomena throughout history is not fuelled by cognitive biases, schizotypy, psychosis, or personality disorders – nor by the objective existence of these phenomena – but, rather, by the unique ability of humans to play, and in the process, to escape their realities or to transform themselves and their world into a better or more meaningful one. The cognitive hypothesis, therefore, is not necessarily the firmer ground. Richard Schechner has observed that ‘people make what isn’t there, combine elements from fantasy, actualize situations that occur only as art or performance. These actualizations in the service of social organization, thought, ritual, or rebellious anti-structure contain, transmit, and (dare I say it?) create the very circumstances they purport to depict.’<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *The Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. p. 156.

<sup>61</sup> Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *The Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. p. 156.

<sup>62</sup> Marks, David and Richard Kammann. *The Psychology of the Psychic*. 1980. p. 156.

<sup>63</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. 1988. pp. 229-230.

Ackerman elucidates the reality that the transformative power of rituals comes not so much from belief in the illusions, but from a decision to play at these illusions. ‘The word *illusion*,’ she writes, ‘literally means “in play.” When the game of love is no longer in play, we say “the magic is gone,” some of our best illusions have been shattered, and we return to the all-too-ordinary world.’<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, the theories of performance studies, specifically theories of ritual and play – and in particular, practice-based research, such as my own interdisciplinary research in performance studies and applied psychology – may ultimately provide the firmest ground of all from which to study the motivations, benefits, consequences, and performativity of psychic belief.

In 1897, Virginia O’Hanlon wrote to *The New York Sun*, asking if there was there a Santa Claus. The eloquent response, penned anonymously by Francis P. Church, read in part:

...Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight.

...You may tear apart the baby’s rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.<sup>65</sup>

This essay from *The New York Sun* perfectly captures the psychological benefits of *performing* belief in the imaginary. Having spent four years giving purported demonstrations of psychic phenomena, on stage and off, in laboratories and in lecture halls – not to mention portraying Santa Claus himself, in performances which I have come to view as a form of mainstream shamanism for children – I have come to believe that luck, love and psychic phenomena are three ideas of a similar nature.

Psychic phenomena, however, are embraced fervently by some and dismissed aggressively by others. Love and luck are not treated so extremely. Rather, they are widely accepted as amorphous metaphors, both for better and for worse. I contend that it would be a step forward for society if psychic phenomena were to be understood in this light. One can understand that love is merely an

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<sup>64</sup> Ackerman, Diane. *Deep Play*. 1999. p. 21.

<sup>65</sup> Church, Francis P. ‘Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus.’ *The New York Sun*. 21 Sep 1897.

idea, and still engage in love with complete passion and total commitment. One may understand that luck is merely a superstition, and still throw the salt over the left shoulder for good luck.

Similarly, one may acknowledge that psychic is a game we play to challenge the completeness of science and the accuracy of its borders in a healthy way. Or to reaffirm our belief in our interpersonal connections. Or to rise above – or step outside of – the limitations of our social roles. Or to simply, in the words of psychologist Jordan Peterson, ‘overcome the terrible limitations of existence.’<sup>66</sup> This, in turn, recalls Nietzsche’s assertion, ‘If we have our own why in life, we shall get along with almost any how.’<sup>67</sup> One may understand all of this, and still engage with the psychic premise with a playful conviction.

It is my contention that psychic phenomena is *play*, often deep and dark. Although, serious people have sought to find it in serious places, psychic phenomena has always been playful, and the scientists themselves were unwitting players in the game. Psychic phenomena is a ritual, performative, transformative and liminal. It is an imaginary force that has bent, shaped, formed, and twisted this world, and those who inhabit it. It is an imaginary force to be reckoned with.

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<sup>66</sup> Peterson, Jordan. ‘Potential.’ TEDx. *Youtube.com*. 27 Jan 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Twilight Of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. 1889. Maxims and Arrows. #12.



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