

## Sights of Enchantment: Magic – Vision – Metaphor (New York, 13 Feb 09)

Brigitte Weingart

Sights of Enchantment: Magic – Vision – Metaphor

Workshop at Columbia University, New York  
Friday, February 13, 2009, 2-8 pm  
Deutsches Haus at Columbia University  
420 West 116th Street (at Amsterdam Ave.)  
New York, NY 10027

Even in our allegedly secular times, visual experience is often described with reference to “magic”. Notions like enchantment, fascination and glamour come from the lexicon of magic, and it is often unclear if they are used metaphorically or meant more literally. Their long-standing presence in the discourse of aesthetic experience and in discussions of the power of eye contact are symptomatic of the continued (if sometimes subliminal) efficiency of magical concepts of vision and imagery, a diagnosis that prompts the question: what does “magic” mean (here)?

Bringing together literary, historical, anthropological and media perspectives, the workshop aims to provoke an interdisciplinary discussion of magical concepts of vision and their rhetorical functions. Given that the realm of this discussion has been described as “the underside of vision” (by Lawrence Di Stasi, in his book on the evil eye entitled *Mal Occhio*), one of the subjects might be how the concept of magic took the form of an implicit psychology – long before psychoanalysis delivered its influential interpretation of the relations between visual experience, emotions, and the unconscious.

The workshop places this topic in a historical perspective. Later rhetorical adaptations (e.g. in Romantic literature) can only be appropriately described with regard to “literally” magic ideas of vision and imagery (prevalent, for example, in discourses on the evil eye, on image magic and in early modern demonologies). The shift from magic and religion to aesthetics that marks the 18th century as the period of Enlightenment led to a transformation of the idea of visual enchantment, but not to its dismissal. In fact the arts of illusion that were practised under the name of “natural magic” around 1800 can be considered a site where Enlightenment and magic converged. These “smoke

and mirrors” sometimes even became a model for the literary poetics of enchantment, and of course the history of film is inseparable from the history of optical magic.

Magic – both as practice and discourse – is involved in the exertion and reflection of power, and we might therefore consider how metaphors of enchanted gazes and images function as verbal attempts to contend with, and even banish, this power. The workshop will contribute to creating a genealogy of what has recently been discussed as the “power of images.” The idea that visual artefacts “take possession” of their spectators (and, much to the regret of advocates of verbal discourse, more so than words) is a standard trope of both popular and academic discourses on media effects. The interdisciplinary exchange on the history and function of magical concepts of vision might provide an opportunity to engage with contemporary debates on inexplicable visual forces in a historically informed way.

#### Program

2 pm Welcome

Mark Anderson (German Literature, Columbia University)

2.15 pm

Eye Contact, Enchantment and Contagion: fascinatio/fascination,  
1600/1800

Brigitte Weingart (German Literature and Film, Universität Bonn/Columbia University)

Response: Elisabeth Strowick (German Literature, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore)

3.30 pm

The Visions of St Anthony and the Art of Discernment  
Stuart Clark (Early Modern History, Princeton University)

Response: Anselm Haverkamp (English Literature, New York University)

4.45 pm Coffee Break

5.15 pm

Mystery, Magic and the Late English Enlightenment  
Simon During (English Literature, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore)

Response: Dorothea von Mücke (German Literature, Columbia University)

6.30 pm

The Magic Hour When the Sun Goes Down  
Michael Taussig (Anthropology, Columbia University)

Response: Thomas Levin (German, Media and Theory, Princeton University)

7. 45 pm Wine & Cheese Reception

Organized with the support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Germany, and the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, Columbia University

<https://calendar.columbia.edu/sundial/webapi/get.php?vt=detail&br=default&id=30151>

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Reference:

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