

# Rethinking Emotion

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Interiority and Exteriority in Premodern, Modern,  
and Contemporary Thought

Edited by  
Rüdiger Campe and Julia Weber

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## Contact at a Distance

The Topology of Fascination

### Expectations

Thinking about fascination and “rethinking” the historical semantics of this notion, I must admit that I wonder whether it actually refers to an emotion at all, as its contemporary uses seem to suggest.<sup>1</sup> At least with regard to the future (which in this case takes the form of science fiction), it might be no coincidence that “fascinating” happens to be the favorite word of *Star Trek*’s mastermind Mr. Spock: not exactly the emotional type. He mainly uses it to comment on phenomena that affect his earthly colleagues emotionally, but leave the hyperrational half-Vulcan’s green blood cold. According to Spock’s own explanation, what the word *does* account for is a challenge to preconceived knowledge. Facing one of the many curiosities that intergalactic travel involves, he is asked: “Does your logic find this fascinating, Mr. Spock?” Mr. Spock answers: “‘Fascinating’ is a word I use for the unexpected. In this case, I should think ‘interesting’ would suffice.”<sup>2</sup>

Luckily, and somewhat unexpectedly, this rather laconic comment provides me with the opportunity to actually re-connect ‘fascination’ – at least in its future and Vulcan iteration – to the history of passions. As a reaction to the unexpected, it is this moment of epistemic crisis that fascination shares with the long-established concept of *admiratio*. As late as the eighteenth century, *admiratio* (which of course contains the Latin noun *mirum* for ‘miracle’ and ‘marvel’) referred not only to admiration (*Be-wunderung*), but also to amazement, surprise, and wonder (*Ver-wunderung*) – and thus to the whole range of emotional reactions to that which appeared to be “miraculous” (*das Wunderbare*).<sup>3</sup> When Descartes in his canonical *Passions de l’âme* (1649), for example, describes “admiration” as a reaction to something new, unexpected,

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<sup>1</sup> This essay originated in the context of my work on a book-length study on the genealogy, poetics, and media aesthetics of fascination, in which the argument that remains only sketched out here is further substantiated.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Spock in *Starship Enterprise – The Squire of Gothos*, season 1, episode 17 (original air date: 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Barck, Karlheinz. “Wunderbar.” *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*. Ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005. Vol. 6. 730–773; see also Daston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*. New York: Zone Books, 2001.

and/or extraordinary, his emphasis is on surprise: “Admiration is a sudden surprise of the soul which brings it to consider with attention the objects that seem to it unusual and extraordinary.”<sup>4</sup> In the moment of admiration – and it can only ever be an extended moment – the decision as to whether the object is “convenient” (*convenable*) or not is suspended in favor of this intensified, yet ‘neutral’ attention. Accordingly, *admiration* for Descartes not only seems to be the first of the *passions*: “Since all this may happen before we know whether or not the object is beneficial to us, I regard admiration as the first of all the passions.”<sup>5</sup> It is also the only one he locates in the brain, where the formerly non-conceptualized object of perception is said to leave a particular impression. And since this impression is considered to be a rarity, it is “strengthen[ed] and preserve[d]” by “the spirits” (*les esprits*) which interact with the sense organs, and kept in its special place.<sup>6</sup> A productive reaction to the unknown which, due to its location in the brain, affects neither heart nor blood: Cartesian *admiration* indeed seems like the kind of ‘cold’ intellectual passion to which even Vulcans may be prone.

Now, even among earthlings, historical or contemporary, the notion of *fascination* certainly connotes a moment of epistemic rupture or delay as well, which even resonates in its use as a mere stock phrase (as in ‘a fascinating talk,’ for example). But unlike surprise and wonder, in its long discursive history *fascination* is hardly ever credited with initiating the advancement of knowledge, not to mention with the dignity of being a catalyst of philosophy – and this is not the only difference from Cartesian *admiration*. If anything, *fascination* shares the paralyzing effects that Descartes ascribes to the “excess[es]” of admiration, the “astonishment” (*étonnement*), which turns the body into an immobile statue while all the spirits are busy keeping the impression of the astonishing object in its place and stop communicating with the other organs or even moving within the brain. As it happens, motionlessness is also a commonplace in descriptions of being fascinated. The close association of such stupor with stupidity is implicitly affirmed by Descartes when he relates the state of astonishment to a somewhat unreasonable use of perception due to the preoccupation of the spirits:

As a result the whole body remains as immobile as a statue, making it possible for only the side of the object originally presented to be perceived, and hence impossible for a

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<sup>4</sup> Descartes, René. “The Passions of the Soul.” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 325–404. A. 70 (translation modified throughout for terminological consistency).

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” a. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” a. 70.

more detailed knowledge of the object to be acquired. This is what we commonly call ‘being astonished.’ Astonishment is an excess of admiration, and it can never be other than bad.<sup>7</sup>

Again, this tendency to get stuck perceptually – in this case, visually – at the mere surface of the object, thereby turning it into an image, is a recurrent theme in scenarios of fascination (although, as we shall see, fascination of the subject may also be characterized as a snapshot-like state). It is due to this lack of epistemic productivity that, in Cartesian terms, fascination would be closer to astonishment than to admiration. Its rather complicated relationship with reason is already inscribed in the etymology of the term: the Latin verb *fascinare*, which goes back to Greek *baskanía*, means ‘to bewitch, to enchant, to dazzle,’ and thus locates the notion within the history of magic (or, depending upon your perspective, superstition). No wonder that in the longstanding tradition of trying to apprehend *fascinatio* as enchantment, its instantiations are often themselves considered to be *mirabilia*.

If in what follows, I want to take a closer look at the *topology of fascination*, I am particularly interested in this resistance to being fully integrated into the history of ‘reasonable ideas,’ including the rational re-thinking of emotions exemplified by Descartes’s treatise on the passions of the soul, which makes no explicit mention of the subject.<sup>8</sup> What’s more, although this topology does indeed rely on the opposition of interiority and exteriority to which this volume is dedicated, the emotions involved in historical accounts of fascination cannot be said to simply confirm the common historical diagnosis of a gradual interiorization of passions.<sup>9</sup> Even if fascination may indeed refer to something like a feeling in itself – and *in our* selves –, the notion still implies a strong reference to the *transmission* of emotions, and more specifically: to a process which connects the subject to an exterior agency that cannot be fully appropriated. As we shall see, the exteriorizing effects of this connection constitute a major part of the notion’s archaic heritage.

When I emphasize fascination’s ‘incomplete’ integration into the familiar historical narratives of emotional interiorization, it is not in order to romanticize the phenomenon as completely alien – or extraterrestrial – to Western rationality; there will be mention of many reasonable explanations which aim

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<sup>7</sup> Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” a. 73.

<sup>8</sup> For reasons that should become clearer in the course of my argument, fascination is not mentioned in classical accounts of passions and emotions.

<sup>9</sup> For a very prominent version of this diagnosis, see Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners, and State Formation and Civilization*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994. 475–498.

at the disenchantment of fascination in this essay. But if, as I would like to show, fascination refers to a spatial relationship between subject and object that is characterized by the paradox of *contact at a distance*, we can expect the notion to keep challenging the distinction between interiority and exteriority. By the end of my genealogical sketch, it should therefore come as no surprise that in modern attempts to radically question the inside/outside dichotomy with regard to our conceptions of subjectivity as interiority, the topology of fascination established in pre-modern discourses on enchantment is reactivated – in favor, for example, of a “thought of the outside,” to use Michel Foucault’s description of the works of Maurice Blanchot.<sup>10</sup>

## Subject/object, *actio/passio*

Although my outline thus far seems to announce a rather a-historical approach, it is actually against the background of the notion’s changing semantics and epistemological contexts that the recurrent features of a topology of fascination take shape. Firstly, and as an initial hint to the central idea of an exterior agency, let me remind you that nowadays, the noun ‘fascination’ can refer both to the *act or activity* of casting a spell on somebody (as in: the fascination of a certain celebrity) and to the rather passive *state* of being fascinated (as in: my fascination with or for a certain celebrity, or a certain object). The latter is a rather modern, although by now much more common use of the word; this is the reason why nowadays, in order to effectuate an oscillation between a genitive of the subject and a genitive of the object, the person involved needs to bear some numinous, if dubious, qualities – as in, say: “Hitler’s fascination,” while “Joe Average’s fascination” clearly suggests that it is Joe Average who is spellbound. Symptomatically, the semantic shift from fascination as an *activity* to fascination as a *disposition* goes along with a process of *metaphorization* that occurs in the course of enlightenment. As a result, fascination loses most of its literally magic qualities of enchantment. According to the OED (which also delivers the final confirmation that we are indeed dealing with emotions), the word is now mainly used to describe “an irresistible feeling of attraction.”<sup>11</sup> Even in this miniature version, historical semantics seem to indicate a chiasm that connects the debasement of magic,

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault, Michel. “The Thought of the Outside.” Trans. Brian Massumi and Robert Hurley. *Essential Works of Foucault. Vol. 2: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Ed. James D. Faubion. London: New Press, 2000. 147–169.

<sup>11</sup> “Fascination.” *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. Angus Stevenson. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Vol. 1. 932.

on the one hand, to the establishment of fascination as an interior emotion, on the other.

And yet, although we seem to have long ago left the realm of magic in favor of a discourse on ‘feelings,’ the mention of an ‘irresistibility’ which deprives the fascinated subject of any self-determined interiority indicates that it is (still) under the remote control of something exterior. The feeling of being drawn somewhere in a manner which one cannot resist can hardly be considered to be completely ‘interiorized;’ it is rather something that works upon the subject, thereby turning it into an *object*. Even as a form of attraction (as it happens another term with occult connotations: just think of magnetism), fascination is not beyond fatality. Its more positive appeal in the discourse of *galanterie* could not deceive the sober judgment of Sigmund Freud, who used the term exclusively for an extreme form of love that borders on pathology. Due to the paralysis of the critical faculties, fascination as a state of amorous “bondage” (*verliebte Hörigkeit*) is comparable to being hypnotized.<sup>12</sup> This analogy echoes the use of the term as a synonym for *hypnosis* at the time, as



Fig. 1a



Fig. 1b

*Les yeux qui fascinent*. Episode from the silent film serial *Les Vampires*. Dir. Louis Feuillade. Gaumont, 1915/1916.

<sup>12</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Trans. James Strachey. London: International Psychoanalytic Press, 1959. 57.

illustrated by an episode entitled “Les yeux qui fascinent” of Louis Feuillade’s silent film serial *Les Vampires* (1915/1916), featuring a hypnotizer who brings the lady vampire Irm la Vep under his power (see figs. 1a and 1b which also provide an example of how to compensate for the crucial lack of visibility in visual representations of occult forces). Moreover, Freud’s remarks resonate with the notion’s much longer tradition in discourses of witchcraft as “ligation”: a powerful binding, albeit by invisible bonds.

Attraction, irresistibility, bondage, immobility: so far it seems that if I am fascinated, I do not have much of a choice, but I am rather in the situation of being chosen by somebody or *something*. This state exceeds the kind of passivity that is inscribed in the concept of *passion* as its condition and implies a more fundamental powerlessness. With regard to the distribution of power, the relationship established by fascination is characterized by an irreducible oneness: to be fascinated is to be subjected to the agency of an impalpable power. Not only is this asymmetry of power a common denominator in the discursive history of fascination; it is also inscribed in the notion’s genealogy as a clear role distribution of *actio* and *passio* among the subjects and objects involved.

## Cause and affect: contact as contagion

In pre-modern discourse, roughly speaking, fascination and its Latin antecedent *fascinatio* refer to a particular kind of action: namely, to certain phenomena of *actio in distans*, and most prominently to ‘bewitchment’ via eye-contact, as assumed in the widespread belief in the “evil eye.” Although enchanting words, sounds, and touch also sometimes feature as means of transmission, the primary case of debate here is the power of the look: “fascination is ever by the eye,” as Francis Bacon put it in 1627 in his *Natural History* – with explicit mention that “the opinion [...] is ancient.”<sup>13</sup> The asymmetry of the supposed power relation is more than evident in the idea of the evil eye, which basically implies that a human being or an animal can be harmed and made sick by another by means of a mere malevolent look. Yet these fatal consequences only emphasize the underlying problem of *causation*: if mere affects can have psychological and even physical effects on somebody else, we are apparently confronted with some sort of *transmission without contact*. Curiously enough, up to the late seventeenth century hardly any contribution to

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<sup>13</sup> Bacon, Francis. *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England. Vol. 4: Sylva Sylvarum: Or, A Natural History in Ten Centuries*. Ed. Basil Montagu. London: Pickering, 1826. “Century X,” 944.

the topic in Western philosophical or scholarly discourse ever denies the possibility of such visual enchantment – the main question remains *how* exactly it is possible. The list of thinkers who dealt with the question is quite impressive. It includes several of the patrists, scholastics such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, who picked up ideas from Islamic thought on the issue through the works of Avicenna, natural philosophers, and Renaissance *magi* such as Ficino, Agrippa von Nettesheim, and Della Porta – and last but not least the many authors of demonological tracts that participate in the ideological underpinning of the persecution of witchcraft in the late middle ages, including the authors of the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* (*Hammer of Witches*) and other well-known authorities such as Martín Del Rio or Jean Bodin. Moreover, the conditions of *fascinatio* as an “occult disease” were discussed by medical authorities such as Jean François Fernel or Daniel Sennert up until the seventeenth century.

As one might expect, there are not many among these philosophers or scholars who easily subscribe to the idea of magic, at least if we take ‘magic’ to be an antonym to ‘in accordance with the order of nature.’ In fact, as a mysterious instance of action at a distance or transmission without contact, fascination became the object of numerous attempts at reasonable explanation, and more specifically: at a reconciliation with the Aristotelian principle of causality according to which causation presupposes contact, since everything that moves has to be moved by something (*Physics*, book VII). Indeed, the main historical approach to demystifying fascination has been to explain it as the effect of a literal eye-*contact*, and moreover: of *contagion*. Although the constitution of the supposed “streams,” “beams,” “emanations,” or “effluvia” varies according to the states of optical, psychological, and medical knowledge, the common epistemic function of these means of transmission is to turn fascination via eye-contact or face-to-face interaction into an extraordinary, but *natural* process.

The *locus classicus* to which many of the later authors refer is Plutarch, whose contribution also points to the crucial role of emotions and of the *look* as a *medium of affects*. His *Table-Talks* include a discussion about “those who are said to cast an evil eye,” a rumor which is not refuted but rationalized by means of a theory of eye-contact as contagion. According to Plutarch’s main speaker, looking implies the emission of a “stream of emanations” from the eye, which is transmitted to the eye of the person being looked at, through which it enters their body and soul.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, this physiological pro-

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14 Plutarch. *Plutarch’s Moralia in Sixteen Volumes*. Trans. Paul A. Clement and Herbert B. Hoffleit. Bilingual edition. London, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969. Vol. 8. “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681.

cess of transmission is prompted by and infused with emotions. As a result of this saturation, looking is said to imply an irreducible susceptibility to the appeal of the object of vision: “He [man] is possessed and governed by either pleasure or displeasure exactly in proportion to what he sees.”<sup>15</sup> When asked about the “casting of spells” and “how precisely [...] harm [can] spread to others by a mere glance of the eye,”<sup>16</sup> Plutarch’s speaker predictably turns to envy, since this is the passion that, according to the ancients, causes the evil eye, and whose intrinsic connection to sight is already inscribed in its Latin name *invidia*. See how Plutarch’s speaker, who has just asserted the psychosomatic effects of the mind on one’s own body, describes the look of envy – and thereby the *transitive effects* of an affect:

Envy, which naturally roots itself more deeply in the mind than any other passion, contaminates the body too with evil. [...] When those possessed by envy to this degree let their glance fall upon a person, their eyes, which are closed to the mind and draw from it the evil influence of the passion, then assail that person as if with poisoned arrows; hence, I conclude, it is not paradoxical or incredible that they should have an effect on the persons who encounter their gaze.<sup>17</sup>

Contamination, possession, assailment: note that it is only with the supplement “as if with poisoned arrows” that Plutarch turns to metaphor here. The fact that he considers emotionally charged eye-contact to be a *literal* contagion is emphasized when he compares it with eye-diseases, which “are more contagious to those exposed and more instantaneously so than other diseases, so penetrating and swift is the power of the eye to admit or communicate disease.”<sup>18</sup> The aforementioned “arrow” is not only a symbol for plague, but of course also resembles the one with which Eros likes to initiate love. As passions allegedly initiated by sight, Plutarch treats love and envy as structurally analogous. In fact, his model of contagion and actual “injury” is primarily established by the example of the *loving gaze* before it is applied to the look of the envious.<sup>19</sup> An equally literal use of what became the topos of love as

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**15** Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681. This fusion of seeing and affect can also be considered a visual equivalent to the assumption that sense perception in general goes along with pleasure or pain. For a more detailed account of this connection in Aristotelian (including scholastic) theories of emotions and of its reformulation in Kant’s work, see Catherine Newmark’s contribution to this volume.

**16** Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681.

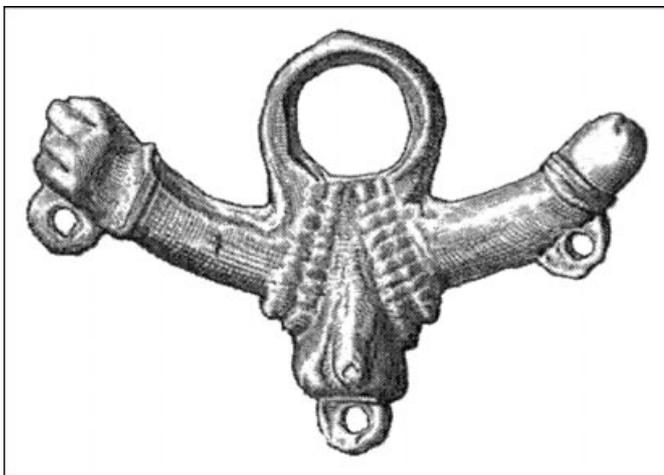
**17** Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681.

**18** Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681.

**19** Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 682. – Plutarch’s physiology of the loving gaze is clearly indebted to Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where it is related to the recognition of heavenly, ideal beauty as retrieved in the look of its earthly equivalent; there is no mention, however, of the evil eye in Plato’s dialogue.

infection and exchange of body fluids can be observed in the philosophical poem *De rerum natura* by Plutarch's slightly older colleague Lucretius.

Thanks to his sober-minded, quasi-medical approach, Plutarch's orator even manages to rescue the use of *amulets* against the evil eye from its bad reputation as mere superstition. Instead, they are said to simply attract the look onto themselves and thereby protect against eye-contact. What Plutarch does not mention, though, is the design of a certain amulet which was particularly popular in Roman antiquity (and possibly beyond) for protecting children, cows, and Imperial chariots from envious looks: the so called *fascinum*, a piece of metal in the shape of a penis.<sup>20</sup> Although the phallic *fascinum* is somewhat out of fashion by now, in contemporary Italy, where the belief in the evil eye is still prevalent in everyday culture, the phallic form reappears in the numerous practices to avert the *mal'occhio* or the *jettatura*, as it is called in Southern Italy. Evil eye charms commonly feature horns (or *corni*) or the *mano cornuta*, one of the two most customary gestures used in defence when a *jettatore* tries to cast a spell on you. The other gesture, the *mano fica* (fig hand), also clearly bears obscene connotations, especially if combined with the phallic element. Nevertheless, the combination of phallus and fig hand is said to be “the most common form” of ancient protection against the evil eye



**Fig. 2:** Fascinum with mano fica.

Source: Jahn, Otto. “Über den Aberglauben des bösen Blicks bei den Alten.” *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich-Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-Historische Klasse* 7 (1855): 28–110, here 81.

<sup>20</sup> For a somewhat scandalized account of this custom, see “Fascinum.” *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexikon*. Ed. Johann Heinrich Zedler. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1961 [reprint: Halle-Leipzig, 1735]. Vol. 9. 289.

by the nineteenth century classicist Otto Jahn, who permitted himself to add an illustration of such an object in the service of science (fig. 2).<sup>21</sup>

The apotropaic custom of the amulet obviously involves a particular kind of affect management. Not only does it involve a shift of perspective from the fascinator to the fear of and care for the possible victim of the evil eye – in fact, the whole notion of the evil eye hints at both the potential violence of the look and the fundamental vulnerability implied in being looked at. Moreover, with regard to the topology of fascination, it is crucial to emphasize that the logic of the amulet relies on the idea of *counter-fascination*: it is not by coincidence that “fascinum” refers to both the act of visual enchantment *and* to the means of protection against it.<sup>22</sup> (The same applies nowadays to the word *charm*.) So, fascination here explicitly turns out to be the quality of an *object*. Moreover, its efficacy extends into a dynamics of reflection, by means of which the space between subject and object becomes a field of bouncing forces. Accordingly, the function of the amulet can also be fulfilled by a mirror, as demonstrated by Perseus, the mythical antagonist of the proto-witch Medusa. Faced with the risk of being petrified by Medusa’s looks and turning himself into a picture – that is to say: a statue –, Perseus used his reflective shield to avoid eye-contact. Thanks to this act of counter-magic, Perseus is not only able to cut off the Gorgon’s head; from then on, he uses it himself as a *fascinum*.<sup>23</sup> This is but one instance which indicates that the asymmetrical power relation at the core of fascination may switch, but may not be sublated. If the one-sided agency may be countered by reflection, this does not imply any emphatic form of reciprocity.

Since Plutarch’s orator is tackling the topic as a preventable disease rather than as a matter of belief, such mythical and irrational undercurrents as appear in the psychologies of the amulet are of no concern for him, and do not have to be: It is not surprising that the guests at the table seem to be convinced by his reasonable explication for the supposed enchantment by the evil eye and its effective counter-charms, since the general idea of eyesight as an extramissive process, and of the active eye sending out particles of some kind, is not unusual in ancient thinking. In Plutarch’s explanation, as well as in similar attempts to ‘naturalize’ the bodily effects of eye-contact as contagion, fascination proves to be a concept in which *vision* converges with *emo-*

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<sup>21</sup> Jahn, “Über den Aberglauben,” 80 (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> “Faszination.” *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*. Ed. Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer and Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1987 [reprint: Berlin, Leipzig, 1927]. Vol. 2. 1263–1266.

<sup>23</sup> With regard to Medusa, this has been pointed out in Siebers, Tobin. *The Mirror of Medusa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. 3.

*tion*: with a telling neglect of distinction, Plutarch refers to the consistency of the “stream of influence” from lovers’ eyes “whether it be light or a current of particles.”<sup>24</sup> The eye is considered not only an organ of seeing, but also viewed as an opening of the body where vision is superimposed onto a psychophysical transmission.

## Mediating spirits

With respect to the relation of interiority and exteriority in this process, it stands out that Plutarch describes envy as something that is “root[ed] [...] in the mind” and first ‘contaminates’ the subject’s own body, out of which the “evil influence” then exits through the eyes (“which are close to the mind”), to infect the envied object.<sup>25</sup> Thanks to this so to speak two-step approach to a very specific kind of exteriorization of emotion, Plutarch implicitly offers a solution to another tricky problem raised in Aristotle’s *De anima*: whether and how the soul can affect corporeal matter. This question can be broken into two parts: how does my soul affect my own body? And: can it affect other bodies, and how? At this point, discourses on fascination overlap with those on the power, and more precisely with those on the scope of *imagination*, the conventional view being that strong imaginations (as well as strong emotions) do influence one’s *own* body, but can only reach over to other bodies by means of quasi-material mediation – for example, contagion.

In pre-modern debates about fascination as a particular transmission of emotions, what I called Plutarch’s two-step approach *grosso modo* proves to be valid as long as the prevailing medical and psychological models, based on the theory of humors, allow for the assumption of some kind of mediating *spiritus* or *pneuma*, that is, “[s]omething midway between the material and the spiritual,” to cite a particularly laconic expert in that matter.<sup>26</sup> Due to this particular consistency, they function as an instrument for the immaterial soul to interact with corporeal substance – thereby allowing for a mode of interaction which neither Aristotelian nor Platonic thought could conceive of as immediate. We already came across the notion of spirits in Descartes’s description of admiration, where they appeared in their typical function as mediators, although there they operate *within* the body. In pre-modern debates on *fascina-*

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<sup>24</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681.

<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681.

<sup>26</sup> Parke, Herbert William, and Donald Ernest Wormell. *The Delphic Oracle*. i, 23; as quoted by the editor in Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Table-Talk,” V. 7, 681 (note on page 421).

*tio* as a malicious power of the look, the *spiritus* are often also held responsible for the *transitive effects* of affects on other bodies. Thanks to their versatility as a mediating substance and to the assumption that the eyes are their privileged exit, the two-step model of emotional eye-contact as contagion outlived the rejection of the extramission theory of vision. This paradigm shift officially happened as early as 1021, when Ibn al-Haytham (also known as Alhazen or ‘the father of modern optics’) demonstrated in his *Book of Optics* that vision is based on rays of light that come from the object and are received by the eye. Nevertheless, extramission theories do not disappear until the seventeenth century in discourses on fascination, and even the most cutting-edge approaches to optics (for instance, the influential “species” theory which is based on the idea that spiritual images of the object are continuously multiplied on the way to the observer) allowed for a conceptualization of vision as contact in the Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup>

In any case, within the framework of humoral medicine as stipulated by Galen, which was prevalent up to the seventeenth century, the contagion model of emotional transmission by means of the gaze can always rely on the idea of *spirits*, since they are alleged to carry the infectious substance. Let me illustrate this by quoting – out of numerous other examples – Thomas Aquinas, who not by coincidence discusses the evil eye as part of the question “whether man by the power of his soul can change corporeal matter?” (an assumption he predictably denies, at least in the case of humans). It is no coincidence that he explicitly distances himself from Avicenna in this regard, since the Persian polymath is one of the rare figures in the *Problemggeschichte* of fascination whose explanation of the evil eye does not claim to be compatible with the Aristotelian principle of causality, but relies on “strong imagination” alone.<sup>28</sup> Yet in the general view, which is shared by Christian scholastics as much as by Neoplatonic thinkers, the *vis imaginativa* – as a faculty of the soul that deals with sensual images which, within the ventricle model, is usually located in proximity to the eyes – itself relies on the mediation of spirits. This fine, but crucial distinction is palpable in Thomas Aquinas’s correction

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<sup>27</sup> A particularly telling example for this argument is to be found in Roger Bacon’s approach to fascination, which shortcuts the transmission of *species* with the emanation of spirits, with the latter being dependent on a person’s complexion. Cf. Bacon, Roger. *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*. Trans. Robert Belle Burke. 2 vols. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928. Vol. 1. 413.

<sup>28</sup> Avicenna’s position is discussed by Hasse, Dag Nikolaus. *Avicenna’s ‘De anima’ in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul, 1160–1300*. London: Warburg Institute, 2000. 114.

of Avicenna's view on *fascinatio*. While reading Thomas's argument, bear in mind that he does not doubt the phenomenon as such:

But it has been shown above (Q. CX., A. 2) that corporeal matter does not obey spiritual substances at will, but the Creator alone. Therefore it is better to say, that by a strong imagination the (corporeal) spirits of the body united to that soul are changed, which change in the spirits takes place especially in the eyes, to which the more subtle spirits can reach. And the eyes infect the air *which is in contact with them to a certain distance* [my emphasis]: in the same way as a new and clear mirror contracts a tarnish from the look of a *menstruata*, as Aristotle says (*De Somn. et Vigil. [De insomniis ii]*).<sup>29</sup>

This “menstruata” is also a recurrent figure in pre-modern discourses on *fascinatio*, which of course strengthens the connection between femininity and – since we are speaking of the evil eye – witchcraft, which is spelled out as follows:

Hence then when a soul is vehemently moved to wickedness, as occurs mostly in little old women, according to the above explanation, the countenance becomes venomous and hurtful, especially to children, who have a tender and most impressionable body. It is also possible that by God's permission, or from some hidden deed, the spiteful demons co-operate in this, as the witches may have some compact with them.<sup>30</sup>

“[T]he countenance becomes venomous and hurtful.” With this, we are back to Plutarch's poisoned arrows and the wounds caused by emotionally charged eye-contact. The implications of this statement by a canonical author for subsequent demonologies can hardly be underestimated; besides many other references to this paragraph, it is quoted in the *Malleus maleficarum* which, due to its enormous circulation, is held responsible for numerous witchcraft trials.<sup>31</sup> With regard to the topology of fascination as contact at a distance and its historical persistence, it is worth mentioning that even in theological arguments that claim a necessary interaction of demons in this otherwise inexplicable process, this predication is linked to a meticulous provision of evidence on the nature of eye-contact. This apparent contradiction is due to Satan's inability to perform real ‘miracles’ (a privilege of God): since his power is restricted to the realm of nature, his tricks may be extraordinary at best, but

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<sup>29</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. *The ‘Summa theologica’ of St. Thomas Aquinas. Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Vol. 1.5: QQ. CIII–CXIX.* London: Oates & Washbourne, 1922. Ia, q. 117, a. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, Ia, q. 117, a. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Kramer, Heinrich, and James Sprenger. *The ‘Malleus maleficarum.’* Trans. Montague Summers. New York: Dover, 2007. 17. (Recent scholarship claims Kramer, aka “Institoris,” to be the author of the *Hammer of Witches*.)

never exceed the limits of ‘natural’ magic. As a result, one discovers in medieval and early modern discourses on *fascinatio* striking similarities between the explanations of, for example, Christian theologians on the one hand and, on the other, natural philosophers or Neoplatonic Renaissance *magi* who often became suspect of heresy themselves – not to mention skeptics like Reginald Scot who discredits the witchcraft belief as “Papist” frenzy, yet accepts fascination as a possible, since natural phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> By 1600, the contagion model was so widespread that the Jesuit and polymath Martín Del Rio, in his *Disquisitiones magicae* (*Investigations into Magic*), lamented the misuse of “fascination” as a mere metaphor for “contagion,” which suggests a purely physical act. He vehemently claimed that the use of the word should be restricted to its *literal* meaning – namely: “if someone attacks or damages somebody else by looking at him, without being bodily connected to him, and without acting against him.”<sup>33</sup> As expected, Del Rio refers to the interference of the devil when he tries to qualify literal fascination as ‘real’ magic (and not ‘just’ contagion). However, the possible operators in the service of God’s antagonist have to be of a truly exceptional kind, since they are neither identified as humoral *spiritus*, nor are any other media strategies revealed to the reader – for once, the mere mention of demonic interaction has to suffice for the paradox of action at a distance to appear resolved.

## From spirit(s) to spirit: curiosities

The epistemic advantages of conceiving of contagion as a “missing link” in actions at a distance are obvious, since it provides a plausible chain of cause and effect, based on the mediation of spirits and forces (even if occult).<sup>34</sup> As

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<sup>32</sup> Scot, Reginald. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft. With an Introduction by the Rev. Montague Summers*. New York: Dover, 1989. 281.

<sup>33</sup> Del Rio, Martín. *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex: quibus continentur accurata curiosarum artium, & variarum superstitionum confutatio, utilis theologis, jurisconsultis, medicis, philologis*. Lugduni, 1602. 169 (my translation). I have not been able to retrieve this quote in Alonso Tostado’s rather extensive work, which prompted the use of the bishop’s name as a synonym for prolific productivity (to which Miguel de Cervantes refers in his *Don Quijote* (1605/1615), book II, chapter 3). – Extracts of the section “De fascinatione” can be found in the abbreviated English version of Martín Del Rio’s *Investigations into Magic*. Ed. and trans. P. G. Maxwell-Stuart. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. 122–125.

<sup>34</sup> The notion of the “missing link” is crucial in the anthropologist Edward E. Evans-Pritchard’s conceptualization of magic as an alternative theory of causation, which he derived from witchcraft practices of the African Zande. Cf. Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976. 69.

contagion, the notion of contact at a distance loses its paradoxical quality – after all, it is a form of mediation that stabilizes the dichotomy of inside and outside rather than challenging it. One might expect that with the scientific disqualification of the notion of spirits, vapors, and other effluvia still so dear to thinkers of the seventeenth century, the reduction of fascination to contagion would cease. But it looks as though the idea of contagion is here to stay, as it has survived even the modern re-conceptualizations and replacements of the supposed spirits involved – albeit (somewhat ironically, with regard to Del Rio’s attempts to stick to the literal) as metaphor. These changes correspond to certain tendencies toward a conflation of the immaterial soul with the spirits on whose mediating functions it relies, a process of ‘spiritualization’ that may go along with a further dematerialization of both entities involved.<sup>35</sup> From the perspective of these rather complicated developments, it is not always obvious whether the polysemantics of the English “spirit” as well as the German *Geist* – words that can refer to pneumatic substances, to demons or ghosts, or to the mind – are the reason for or the result of certain conceptual confusions.

Concerning this matter, Francis Bacon’s attempt to systematize the possible media involved in action at a distance in general and in the power of imagination and affects in particular is an exemplary case. In addition, his investigations into the subject matter are revealing with regard to the attitude of a skeptic who seems likely to change his mind and give in to the belief in phenomena located in the realm of magic and the miraculous, if only there were a way of proving their agreement with the laws of nature. While this perspective is characteristic for all of his comments on the topic, one may observe certain shifts in Bacon’s approach, which partly reflect the competing views at the time. In his late essay *Of Envy* (1625), Bacon takes up the familiar ancient view and describes fascination as a visual enchantment triggered by love and envy. Both of these “affectations” are said to

have vehement wishes; They frame themselves readily into Imaginations, and Suggestions; And they come easily into the Eye; especially upon the presence of the Objects; which are the Points, that conduce to Fascination, if any such Thing there be.<sup>36</sup>

Bacon had already dealt with “these Curiosities, (though not unworthy, to be thought on, in fit place)”: twenty years earlier, he had considered the section

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<sup>35</sup> Sonntag, Michael. “‘Gefährte der Seele, Träger des Lebens.’ Die medizinischen Spiritus im 16. Jahrhundert.” *Die Seele. Ihre Geschichte im Abendland*. Ed. Gerd Jüttemann et al. Weinheim: Psychologie-Verlag-Union, 1991. 165–179.

<sup>36</sup> Bacon, Francis. “Of Envy.” *The Oxford Francis Bacon. Vol. 15: The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*. Ed. Michael Kiernan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 27–31, here 27.

on “the substance, or nature of the soule or mind” in his *Advancement of Learning* (published in 1605) such a fit place, and while it was consistent with his skeptical attitude, the text featured the “Imaginations” as the main factor in this process. In *The Advancement of Learning*, fascination is defined exclusively as “the power and act of Imagination, intensive upon other bodies, than the bodie of the Imaginant” – no mention of evil or loving eyes.<sup>37</sup> When Bacon gets back to this topic *in extenso* in his posthumously published *Sylva Sylvarum* (thereby revealing his lifelong curiosity about it), the term “fascination” again refers to visual transmission, which by now features as but one major instance of the power of imagination.

Of course it is the extension to *other* bodies which provokes the objections of a thinker known for his claims concerning scientific standards, but at this point he obviously feels the need to enter a discussion on phenomena “which as they have ben [*sic*] handled, have rather vapoured foorth fables, than kindled truth.”<sup>38</sup> His examinations are formulated in a conditional mode – ‘if one was to believe in the power of imagination upon other bodies ...’ – although it seems that not only the reader, but also the author himself is at risk of forgetting this condition. In any case, if Bacon was to believe in fascination, it had to be explained as the result of mediation; in contrast, “the Schoole of *Paracelsus*, and the Disciples of pretended Naturall Magicke” are dismissed as “intemperate, as they have exalted the power of imagination, to be much one with the power of *Miracle-working* faith”<sup>39</sup> (which is definitely an exaltation itself with regard to most representatives of natural magic, and even Paracelsus, who inherits Avicenna’s role as a counter-figure in this debate, does actually bother with questions of mediation). “[O]thers that drawe neerer to Probabilitie,” Bacon acknowledges,

calling to their view the secret passages of things, and specially of the Contagion that passeth from bodie to bodie, do conceive it should likewise be agreeable to Nature, that

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<sup>37</sup> Bacon, Francis. *The Oxford Francis Bacon. Vol. 4: The Advancement of Learning*. Ed. Michael Kiernan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 105.

<sup>38</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 104 (besides fascination, Bacon mentions divination as a topic of the same kind). See also the conclusion of the paragraph on fascination: “Deficiencies in these knowledges, I wil [*sic*] report none, other than the generall deficiencie, that is not knowne, how much of them is veritie, and how much vanitie.” (Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 105.)

<sup>39</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 105 (emphasis in the original). In *Sylva Sylvarum*, where much of this paragraph is reused, this rejection is expressed more strongly: “for Paracelsus, and some darksome authors of magic, do ascribe to imagination exalted, the power of miracle-working faith. With these vast and bottomless follies men have been in part entertained.” (Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” Introduction.)

there should be some transmissions and operations *from spirit to spirit, without the mediation of the senses*, whence the conceits have grown, (now almost made civile) of the Maistring Spirite, & the force of confidence, and the like.<sup>40</sup>

So while contagion may be an explanation worthy of consideration, the immediate communication between spirits remains a matter of mere belief. As to the latter idea, Bacon's formulation only makes sense if "spirit" does not refer to the *spiritus* as mediating substance, but to "the soule or mind" with whose nature the paragraph is dealing. This inclination in the meaning of "spirit" toward 'mind' also resonates in the notions of the 'mastering spirit' and the 'force of confidence,' which usually refer to Avicenna's eccentric position in this discourse. Of course, all of the related ideas are explicitly doubted. And still, when Bacon goes on to denounce the assumed fortification of the imagination by means of "*Ceremoniall Magicke*" – that is, by the (as we might call it: suggestive) use of "*Ceremonies, Characters, and Charmes*" which he also recognizes in the Catholic Church's imagery – his criticism is less based on its impossibility than on moral grounds: as a short-cut to higher powers, such practice strikes him as being too easy.<sup>41</sup>

So far, Bacon's approach to fascination and imagination may not seem to be quite as systematic as promised. But it is in a section on the power of imagination in *Sylva Sylvarum* that he dedicates himself to the "labour of Hercules, in purging the stable of Augeas," in order to separate "any thing that is clean and pure natural" from superstition and magic.<sup>42</sup> This endeavor is based on the premise that "[a]ll operations by transmission of spirits and imagination, have this; *that they work at distance, and not at touch;*"<sup>43</sup> what follows is a list of eight different explanations for such transmission, ranging from the "most corporeal" emissions at work in infection to "energies merely" and other "immaterial virtues," including the ones supposedly at work between things which have at some point been in contact. Symptomatically, "spirits" figures both as a generic term for and an item in this list, where it reappears in a crucial role with regard to the transitive power of imagination:

The fifth is, the emission of spirits; and this is the principal in our intention to handle now in this place; namely, the operation of the spirits of the mind of man upon other spirits: and this is of a double nature, the operations of the affections, if they be vehement, and the operation of the imagination, if it be strong. But these two are so coupled,

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<sup>40</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 105 (my emphasis).

<sup>41</sup> Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 105 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>42</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, "Century X," Introduction.

<sup>43</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, "Century X," 903 (my emphasis).

as we shall handle them together: for when an envious or amorous aspect doth infect the spirits of another, there is joined both affection and imagination.<sup>44</sup>

Firstly, Bacon's claim of dealing with an operation between spirits – in the plural – brings the phenomenon at stake back to the familiar ground of an epistemologically plausible mediation (formerly called contagion). Secondly, and less familiarly, the “double nature” of this operation refers to a ‘coupling’ of imagination that is easily recognizable as fascination<sup>45</sup> – a reunion which implies a prior separation – of which there was no mention in his former comments. In order to understand this move, one has to know that by the time he writes on the power of imagination in *Sylva Sylvarum*, his focus has actually shifted toward the equally mysterious phenomenon of *telepathy*: by now, imagination is understood to be “the representation of an individual thought.”<sup>46</sup> As it turns out, he uses the longstanding tradition of explaining the transmission of affects by means of spirits in order to demystify the transmission of thoughts – a line of argument that definitely benefits from this alleged joint venture.

Accordingly, Bacon's attempts to credit the quasi-mechanical (*avant la lettre*, if one thinks of the mechanist thinking advanced by Hobbes, Descartes, and others later in the seventeenth century), touch-like efficiency of these united forces is remarkable. This mechanistic appeal is amplified by the repeated emphasis on the ‘vehemency’ of the affections and the ‘strength’ of the imagination, by mention of the limited distances at which they can operate, and by the bodily and mental ‘weaknesses’ presupposed on the part of the targeted person or object:

If there be any power in imagination, it is less credible that it should be so incorporeal, and immateriate a virtue, as to work at great distances, or through all mediums, or upon all bodies: but that the distance must be competent, the medium not adverse, and the body apt and proportionate.<sup>47</sup>

If no such mediating connection can be conceived of, as in the magic belief that imagination works upon a thing which was previously in contact with a person before (think of a witches' manipulation of somebody's hair), Bacon –

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<sup>44</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 908.

<sup>45</sup> Later in this same text, fascination is described as the mainly, yet not exclusively visual transmission of *affects*, namely love and envy: “if there be any such infection from spirit to spirit, there is no doubt but that it worketh by presence, and not by the eye alone; yet most forcibly by the eye.” (Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 944.)

<sup>46</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 945.

<sup>47</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 950.

like many of his contemporaries – still resorts to the “working of evil spirits,” also known as demons.<sup>48</sup> But at least this can be said to be an explanation that does not come easily. Instead, and despite his own alleged distrust of the transitive power of imagination, early on in his examinations of the topic in *Sylva Sylvarum*, he admonishes the reader not to “withdraw credit from the operations by transmission of spirits, and force of imagination, because the effects fail sometimes” and to take into account that even “contagion from body to body, as the plague, and the like” is not always successful with a strong body – and how much more resistance is to be overcome by “impressions from mind to mind, or from spirit to spirit.”<sup>49</sup> The reader is not exactly discouraged by comments like this from believing in imagination’s power to act at a distance. Moreover, “mind” and “spirit” again tend to be equated.

The overall effect produced by Bacon’s zigzagging line of argument and his shifting use of the notions of “spirits,” “spirit,” and “mind” is that, against all odds, immediate communication from mind to mind actually seems by no means inconceivable. This impression is supported by the fact that most of his examples refer to the “binding of thoughts” (as in the classical conjurer’s trick of guessing a chosen card, which Bacon claims to have witnessed himself).<sup>50</sup> What is more, despite Bacon’s insistence, the specific nature of transmission appears secondary; his suggestion that there are indeed many ways to make it happen conveys a general epistemic plausibility to the phenomena at stake. In his discussion of a wide range of supposed operations that “work at distance, and not at touch,” he enters rather deeply into the field of adversary thought. As an – albeit unwilling – result, his elaborations combine to make all kinds of ‘spiritual’ communication acceptable, including the kind that operates without the mediation of the senses – “(now almost made civile).”

## “Communication of the will”

It should be mentioned that Bacon makes a serious effort to support his ultimate resistance to the idea of the transitive power of imagination by insisting on a lack of experimental proof: since all of the test scenarios presuppose a belief in such a power, he – as an official non-believer – has to leave their execution to others. And in accordance with the media conditions mentioned above, the person who claims to be equipped with this capacity is well advised

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<sup>48</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 950.

<sup>49</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 901.

<sup>50</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 956.

to try it within a setting that provides for the limited distances and ‘weak’ (including: light) objects, preferably “things living.”<sup>51</sup> To that effect, it is interesting to see an unequivocal practitioner of transitive ‘spiritual’ power struggle with the same media issues as Bacon while trying to explain its agency. Franz Anton Mesmer, as his writings demonstrate, apparently considered it vital that, in order for his theory of *animal magnetism* to be accepted by medical authorities, the putative influences of the mind on other people’s bodies be something “agreeable to Nature,” as Bacon would have it. Drawing from the Paracelsian notion of a cosmic “influx,” but also from Newton’s ether theory and his later theory of forces of gravity, Mesmer’s healing practices are based on the idea of a “universally spread fluidum” (*fluide universellement répandu*).<sup>52</sup> His spectacular therapeutic sessions, including collective healing circles, relied on the idea that this subtle fluidum can be set in motion “through unmediated or mediated *contact* with a magnetized body.” As he points out, the magnetic effect can be evoked by “mere will,” since “all kinds of conductors and media, and even looks,” are sufficient to provide a connection:

The actual communication [*Die wirkliche Mittheilung*] operates through unmediated or mediated *contact* with a magnetized body, that is, with a body inflamed by this invisible fire; so that through the mere direction of the hand and by means of all kinds of conductors and media, and even looks, the mere will may be sufficient to this end.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 957. In another place, he states: “the rule, as I conceive, is, that it [imagination] hath most force upon things that have the lightest and easiest motions. And therefore above all, on the spirits of men.” (Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, “Century X,” 957.) – I can only briefly mention here that in certain operations based on the power of imagination, these conditions may even imply the insertion of an additional human “medium,” a person who is weak and credulous enough not to divert the transmission (which, as to be expected, not only qualifies boys and children over adults, but also women over men).

<sup>52</sup> Mesmer, Anton Franz. *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* [1779]. The document’s twenty-seven propositions are reprinted in Tatar, Maria. *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. 273–276. In a German compilation of Mesmer’s French texts, the term is translated as “All-Ströme” or “All-Flut;” cf. Mesmer, Friedrich [sic] Anton. *Mesmerismus. Oder System der Wechselwirkungen, Theorie und Anwendung des thierischen Magnetismus als die allgemeine Heilkunde zur Erhaltung des Menschen*. Ed. Dr. Karl Christian Wolfart. Berlin: Nikolaische Buchhandlung, 1814. 176. Some, but not all of Mesmer’s writings in English translation can be found in: *Mesmerism: Being the First Translation of Mesmer’s Historic ‘Mémoire sur la découverte du Magnétisme Animal’ to Appear in English*. London: Macdonald, 1948. For an updated translation, see *Mesmerism: A Translation of the Original Medical and Scientific Writings of F. A. Mesmer, M. D.* Ed. and trans. George Bloch. Los Altos: William Kaufmann, 1980.

<sup>53</sup> Mesmer, *Mesmerismus*, 112 (my translation, emphasis in the original). Notably, this process of transference is often termed “fascination” among English and French followers of mesmer-

A coeval illustration of this process – taken from a sympathizer’s tract on *Physic and Occult Sciences* – shows the necessity of grounding such ‘communication’ in the realm of ‘actuality’ (“actual communication”) by making it visible (fig. 3). Not only does this visualization suggest that Mesmer’s conception of contact at a distance inherits the idea of imagination and eye-contact as contagion, it also hints at a possible transformation concerning the mediating substances involved in this process: in their diagrammatic regularity, the dotted lines that connect the mesmerist to his patient obviously represent a flow of *forces* rather than particles. They can therefore be regarded as the graphic synthesis of the diverse references and analogies that Mesmer used in order



**Fig. 3:** A scene of Mesmerist transmission.

Source: Sibly, Ebenezer. *A Key to Physic and the Occult Sciences*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London, 1814 [1794]. Facing 200.

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ism. See, for example, the mesmerist tract by Newman, John B. *Fascination, or the Philosophy of Charming*. New York: Fowlers & Wells, 1847.

to capture the nature of the transmission at stake (including light, gravity, and the newly understood electric and magnetic forces) – all of which oscillate between the material and the immaterial.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast to longstanding academic tendencies to oppose Mesmer's approach to 'enlightened' science, his attempts to present the transmission at stake as 'nearly immaterial' without giving up the idea of a material contact do indeed accord with a general epistemic insecurity regarding such forces at the time.<sup>55</sup> This demonstrates that the Cartesian split of substances did not abolish the assumption of some kind of 'spiritual' mediation in order to account for the internal processing of exterior input. The impact of the further radicalized opposition of matter versus mind is evident, however, in Mesmer's notion of an 'inner sense' (*innerer Sinn*), which is said to communicate the input of the outer senses to the nervous system – a form of mediation (or *Mittheilung*) which again proceeds by means of a *fluidum*. While this integrative function accords with the traditional idea of the *sensus communis*, Mesmer's inner sense is also in charge of the perception of forces that evade the outer senses. This is why this sensory organ can be held responsible for the transmission of thoughts and affects by mere will, a form of communication that is assumed to work best when the outer senses are paralyzed (for example, while asleep, or somnambulant). As this suggests, the accordance of two wills "*in rapport*" must be understood as the communication between two interiorized agencies.<sup>56</sup> And when Mesmer (although somewhat inconsequentially) qualifies the effect of the will as something that "*immediately*" (*unmittelbar*) connects with the other's inner sense,<sup>57</sup> it becomes even clearer that the move toward the immaterialization of the forces of mental transmission goes along with the interiorization of the minds involved.

The voluntary influence on another's mind discussed by Bacon and Mesmer nowadays recalls the notion of "suggestion," a term which is apparently only established in the early seventeenth century (so Bacon's use of it with regard to the transmission of "vehement wishes" – as quoted above – was rather avant-garde). In the modern concept of suggestion, as established in mass-psychology and psychoanalysis around 1900 by Gustave Le Bon, Freud,

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<sup>54</sup> Barkhoff, Jürgen. *Magnetische Fiktionen, Literarisierung des Mesmerismus in der Romantik*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995. 41.

<sup>55</sup> Feldt, Heinrich. "Vorstellungen von physikalischer und psychischer Energie zur Zeit Mesmers." *Franz Anton Mesmer und die Geschichte des Mesmerismus*. Ed. Heinz Schott. Stuttgart: Steiner-Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985. 31–43; Koschorke, Albrecht. *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr. Mediologie des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Munich: Fink, 1999. 101–112.

<sup>56</sup> Mesmer, *Mesmerismus*, 203 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>57</sup> Mesmer, *Mesmerismus*, 202 (emphasis in the original).

and others, what Bacon referred to as the “mastering spirit” and the “force of confidence” and what Mesmer discussed as “communication of the will” (*Mittheilung des Willens*) is officially ‘despiritualized,’ if you take spirits to mean some kind of material quality, however subtle. As a key concept in accounting for the transmission of emotions among the masses, as well as for the manipulative power of *hypnosis* (which Le Bon regards as the former’s structural basis of such transmissions), such modern accounts of suggestion heavily rely on the vocabulary of (mental) “contagion,” and “epidemic” or “psychic infection.”<sup>58</sup> This of course once more provokes the question as to whether the lexical field of infection is here being used ‘merely’ metaphorically, particularly since Freud himself noted a certain fuzziness in this regard.<sup>59</sup> Be this as it may, the use of scientifically obsolete concepts as *metaphor* has to be considered as a rhetorical equivalent to the attempts at demystification on which it draws. The ‘magical’ ability of metaphors to suggest causal relations, however, would be the topic of another essay.

## Outlooks

Confronted with these many attempts to domesticate the topology of fascination as contact at a distance and bring it home to the grounds of reason where contact guarantees causality (which can even be extended to the use of metaphorical speech), one might wonder what happened to the much-trumpeted epistemic rupture, the challenge to the inside/outside dichotomy announced at the beginning of these remarks. If even the supposed magicians or somewhat occult figures like Mesmer diminish the scandalon of action at a distance, the putative magic once again appears to be a “bastard sister of science,” to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist James George Frazer.<sup>60</sup> And yet, as I can only adumbrate within the bounds of this essay, the topology of fascination has indeed inspired the conception of different modes of subjectivity, and moreover: of aesthetic experience – modes which also account for the permea-

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<sup>58</sup> Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001. 17 et passim.

<sup>59</sup> Freud, *Group Psychology*, 27. For a more in-depth discussion of suggestion as infection in Le Bon and Freud, see my essay “‘Rumoritis’: Zur Modellierung von Massenkommunikation als Epidemie.” *Die Kommunikation der Gerüchte*. Ed. Jürgen Brokoff et al. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008. 278–299.

<sup>60</sup> Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Religion and Magic*. Mineola: Dover Books, 2002 [abridged edition, 1922]. 50.

bility between interiority and exteriority, subject and object as implied in the idea of contact at a distance without being phobic about it. A more comprehensive examination would have to account for – for example – the Romantic re-mystification of the ‘enlightened eye,’ which counters the prevailing identification of looking with knowing, as seen in the scenarios of ‘re-enchantment’ evoked by Ludwig Tieck or E. T. A. Hoffmann. And one would certainly have to think about twentieth century French thinkers of fascination, such as Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes, who take its dynamics of exteriorization and the agency of objects and images as a starting point for redesigning subjectivity as the fundamental disposition of being looked at and addressed by things.

Given its historical background, one of the most significant of such alternative approaches to the topology of fascination seems to be its appropriation in some of the writings of Maurice Blanchot. It is no easy undertaking to comment on the poetological impact he attributes to the subject, most emphatically in his programmatic text *The Essential Solitude* (*La solitude essentielle*), with which we finally leave the mode of explication in favor of a performative invocation of the phenomenon in question. “What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense,” Blanchot writes – a statement that might also apply to the reader confronted with the poetics of fascination staged in this text.<sup>61</sup> As its title suggests, the essay deals with the condition of writing as a state of radical interiority, by which the writer excludes himself from the outside world. Yet what distinguishes this essential solitude from mere productive reclusion that protects from distraction is an openness to something exterior – and this is where fascination comes in. In order to distance this mode of experience from more mundane versions of loneliness, Blanchot introduces several dichotomies; most notably he distinguishes the interminable ‘work’ (*œuvre*) from the final ‘book’ which can never be more than a substitute, since the work’s infinity exceeds any attempt at reappropriation. Exerting an “open violence” on the writer, the work banishes him from its realm, so that he necessarily ends up being “out of work” (*désœuvré*).<sup>62</sup> Adding to the spatial tropes employed by Blanchot in this scenario, the writer’s situation is located in a particular space of time, the entering of which implies a surrender to a “time of time’s absence” (*le temps de l’absence de temps* – a contraction of opposites which Blanchot does not want to be misunderstood as being ruled by any dialectics).<sup>63</sup> When fascination is said to “reign” (*règne*) in this space-time-

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61 Blanchot, Maurice. “The Essential Solitude.” Maurice Blanchot. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. 21–34, here 32.

62 Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” 23. / Blanchot, Maurice. “La solitude essentielle.” Maurice Blanchot. *L’espace littéraire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955. 11–32, here 17.

63 Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” 30. / Blanchot, “La solitude essentielle,” 26.

continuum,<sup>64</sup> its dominion implies the by now familiar association of a heteronomous power to which the fascinated writer is subjected. If, nevertheless, the connection of Blanchot's statements to the historical topography of fascination as outlined above so far may seem tenuous, take a look at the answer to the question "Why fascination?":

Seeing presupposes distance, decisiveness which separates, the power to stay out of contact and in contact avoid confusion. [...] But what happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when the manner of seeing is a kind of touch, when seeing is *contact* at a distance? [...] What happens is not an active contact, not the initiative and action which there still is in real touching. Rather, the gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep. What is given us by this contact at a distance is the image, and fascination is the passion for the image [*la passion de l'image*].<sup>65</sup>

As this paragraph demonstrates, Blanchot uses in their most basic, literal sense the contradictory elements that the discourse of fascination as contagion tried to reconcile (seeing as 'contact at a distance'). But he no longer aims at any reconciliation or explanation – on the contrary, he prolongs the unfolding of non-dialectical opposites that represent the essential solitude of the writer as a process of incessant withdrawal and dispossession, and establishes fascination as a status that allows for a kind of dwelling within a quasi-spatial arrangement of paradoxes – at least rhetorically (although language is the only space inhabited by the writer, according to Blanchot's emphatic view on this form of existence). Anyhow, this situation lacks any existential comfort, as emphasized when fascination is related to the image and said to be *la passion de l'image* – an expression which is only partly grasped if translated as "passion for the image" because it also seems to imply a state of being affected by the image to the point of suffering. Although Blanchot tends to charge the image with a power of a different order (for example, when he opposes the communicative functionality of words to their becoming images), it does not qualify as a simple 'exit' from the realm of language.<sup>66</sup> If, in his solitude, the writer is on his own with his 'fascinating' imagination, this experience is once more described in terms of unattainability:

Fascination is solitude's gaze. It is the gaze of the incessant and interminable. In it blindness is vision still, vision which is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impos-

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<sup>64</sup> Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," 31. / Blanchot, "La solitude essentielle," 28.

<sup>65</sup> Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," 32. / Blanchot, "La solitude essentielle," 29.

<sup>66</sup> For all that, Blanchot at one point resorts to a psycho-phenomenological approach to fascination by referring to the child's fascination by his mother, who "concentrates in herself all the powers of enchantment." (Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," 32.)

sibility of not seeing, the impossibility which becomes visible and persevere – always and always – in a vision that never comes to an end: a dead gaze, a gaze become the ghost of an eternal vision.<sup>67</sup>

This ‘dead gaze’ not only reconnects – even if admittedly vaguely – Blanchot’s rather idiosyncratic approach to fascination to the older attempts to handle the affects effected by a threatening look by attributing it to a death-bringing, ‘evil’ eye. Moreover, the impossibility which haunts the writer being looked at in this scenario points to the irreducible difference between the visible and the verbal, thereby assigning fascination a central function in Blanchot’s poetological project: If writing means “to let fascination rule language” (*Écrire, c’est disposer le langage sous fascination*), it is directed at the recognition of images which tend toward both figuration and, dissolving back into formlessness, disfiguration.<sup>68</sup> As it happens, this volatility recalls the usage of fascination in less ‘essential’ circumstances, namely as the emphasis upon an inability to do justice to the subject matter which Ernst Robert Curtius considered to be the root of what he named “inexpressibility topoi” (*Unsagbarkeitstopoi*) – an inability of which Blanchot’s essay gives a rather wordy account, thereby adding to the aforementioned nesting of opposites.<sup>69</sup>

As should be clear by now, today’s understanding of fascination as “an irresistible feeling of attraction” – or, in the more sober case of Mr. Spock, a reaction to the “unexpected” – is not as remote from its pre-modern conceptions as one might have initially suspected. Blanchot’s version is but an extreme example of the general tendency in modern accounts of contact at a distance to completely suspend questions of causality in favor of an intensified attention to the *state* of being ‘contacted’ – and of course, at this point we are dealing not so much with evil eyes but rather with the inexplicable, ‘wondrous,’ and above all powerful appeal of a person or an object. Still, the older discourse resonates here insofar as this connection implies a vulnerability to outside influences that goes along with the fundamental passivity of the fascinated subject-becoming-object. Such a state does not necessarily have to be experienced as an oppressive loss of self-determination, but can take the form of a readiness to be invaded and/or borne away by exterior forces. Nevertheless, it is shaped by the inescapable asymmetry of the underlying power relation. If this exposure to something ‘out there’ which is beyond my control

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<sup>67</sup> Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” 32.

<sup>68</sup> Blanchot, “The Essential Solitude,” 33. / Blanchot, “La solitude essentielle,” 31.

<sup>69</sup> Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. 159. / Curtius, Ernst Robert. *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*. 11<sup>th</sup> ed. Tübingen-Basel: Franke, 1993. 168.

but actually remote-controls me is what the topology of fascination is all about, Paul Valéry is to be credited for stripping it down in a highly evocative fashion. In a collection of aphorisms that he published in 1930 under the title *Suite*, he elucidates how to conceive of fascination as follows:

As to fascination, the created stupor, – like the long sojourn in a landscape illuminated by the moon, and this calm that envelopes you in bonds, – the infinite wait, – the whole being becoming a passive sense, an eye which does not see more than one thing, an ear which follows, precedes, obeys, – obeys in anticipating – and the whole being becoming uninhabited/uninhabited by itself, deserted like this lunar space, ready to receive a foreign will.<sup>70</sup>

In fact, the vanishing point of this paratactical arrangement that imitates the extended momentariness of the phenomenon in question – the foreign will – finally situates this experience in the context of hypnosis. Yet the description of the deserted self as a space as empty as the nocturnal landscape that surrounds it, which suggests a permeability of the interior with the exterior that borders on mimesis, indicates that it is accessible to a more general structure of experience – if we accept that “[a]s long as there is something like experience, it is not entirely mine.”<sup>71</sup> Its scope certainly extends to aesthetic experience as *aisthesis*, as inextricably bound to sensory perception. As we have seen, discourses on fascination claim that such input is always infused with ‘vehement affects,’ ‘strong imaginations,’ and the like, thereby effecting its stubborn resistance to post-processing by and integration into reason. Whether approaches to fascination attempt to abolish the magic of contact at a distance in favor of comprehensible causal explanations, or simply embrace its inexplicability, its inherent challenge to notions of interiority is emphasized by this constant rethinking, which evinces the insistence of a symptom.

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<sup>70</sup> Valéry, Paul. *Suite*. Colmar, Paris: Hartmann, 1930. 71 (my translation).

<sup>71</sup> Ronell, Avital. “Preface.” Avital Ronell. *Finitude’s Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. ix–xiv, here ix.

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