

Conceptualising magic in 1950s Germany

Shifting notions between stage shows, scientific culture, and home manuals

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In an effort to explore the gap between pre-war occultism and the New Age movement, this article examines the public areas of stage magic, folklore magic, and handbook magic between 1947 and 1960. It firstly investigates possible connections between stage performance and the implicit character of religious beliefs and combines these observations with the notion of magic in the field of parapsychology. Then the latter approach is put into the context of mental health discourse, scientific culture, and the metaphysics of nature. The field of handbook magic, finally, relates to public debates about rationality and superstition as an attempt to popularise and legitimise knowledge and techniques of twentieth-century 'high magic'.

Introduction

In cultural and religious history, study of the post-war period of the German-speaking countries tends to be a neglected field. It is the founding narratives of Western Germany, such as the 'zero hour' or the 'religious springtime' of the churches, which have structured the collective memory until today. Beyond theology and church history, historical research has documented various currents of occultism and spiritualism, including the *völkisch* variants, and a broad field of activities and orientations that thrived between 1900 and 1940 (see e.g. Treitel 2004; Wolffram 2009; Gossman 2009). After World War II though, a large gap seems to extend until the late 1960s, when the New Age movement crossed the Atlantic and contemporary spirituality began to emerge in Western Germany. There are a few studies, however, that suggest to some extent the continuation and transformation of pre-war discourses, practices, and networks. Bernd Wedemeyer-Kolwe (2009) and René Gründer (2012) address Karl Spiesberger and his publications on rune magic and exercises (Spiesberger 1955b, 1958), which were instrumental for the survival of originally ariosophic body techniques, for example, in some neo-pagan groups. The institutionalisation of parapsychology in post-war

Germany and Europe was the topic of a ground-breaking conference in 2014 (Lux and Palatschek 2016). While generally cautious about the idea of translating esotericist discourse traditions into the contemporary field of new religions, Christoph Bochinger's seminal study of New Age and modern religion is the first and only one to pay attention to the intense activities of Barth publishers that centred from 1948 onwards on mysticism, Eastern religions, and religious experience (cf. Bochinger 1995: 143–58 authors and trends, 629–36 list of titles).

A comprehensive survey of the relevant literature, whether it be labelled occultist, esotericist, or otherwise – the first of these terms fell out of use during the decade, the second term occurred within very few publications and was invested with various meanings – is still missing. However, it is safe to state that the writing output has been much more extensive and diverse than the instances mentioned above suggest. The following study will focus on a small, but important segment of the source material that identified itself as 'magic'. This field is in turn grouped into three distinguishable and interacting subfields that will be called stage magic, folklore magic, and handbook magic. My approach will relate the literary production with other sources on magic performance or practice. I will further enquire into the role of a public discourse on superstition, linked with both competition and transfer modalities between the subfields of magic and adjacent fields such as parapsychology or radiesthetics.

A positive view of modernisation dominated the public discourse, though it did not necessarily, nor entirely, favour the exclusion or abandonment of magic. While nation-wide media (e.g. the *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau*) promoted civic education and revealed the stage skills of professional illusionists, legitimate magic entertainment could extend well beyond the repertoire of rope tricks and cabinets. In March 1960, a local broadcast station, Radio Bremen, put the mental faculties of stage magician Alfred Mihiel, better known as Jac Olten, to the test. A review in the Swiss journal of parapsychology, *Neue Wissenschaft*, retakes different notions of the term 'magic' as they were presented in the radio programme. Introduced as a French count, Olten supposedly had as teachers 'African magicians and an Indian guru'. When asked to guess the question prepared for him by the radio crew – who wanted to learn more about the future prospects of a monorail traffic project – he employed 'magic operations' of geomancy – 'an ancient method of oracle and divination' – and came up with a satisfying response. Hans Bender, Germany's first and only professor of parapsychology, explained the result

to the listeners in the framework of telepathy and suggested the possibility that Olten's geomantic procedure 'was "magically" directed by telepathic information' (Ringger 1960: 41; on Bender, see Lux 2013).

In this radio presentation, three uses of the term 'magic' can be identified:

1. magical knowledge as residues of belief systems that survived in remote areas;
2. divinatory practice as an ancient *modus operandi* of magic transmitted via esoteric tradition;
3. magic as a kind of spiritual economy dependent on natural, invisible forces that cause the human mind to process extrasensory input.

In 1960, these categories do not seem to be new at all, since it is easy to trace their elements back to learned discourses of the nineteenth century. Without attempting to unearth the itinerant journeys of the term across the globalising landscapes of Mesmerism, occultism, spiritualism, comparative science of religion, and anthropology during that time period (see, for an introduction, Otto and Stausberg 2014), it will suffice here to state that the boundaries between academic debate about magic and positive self-reference as 'magic' are more permeable than generally admitted. Although they failed to obtain academic recognition, erudite apologists in works such as John Campbell Colquhoun's, *An History of Magics, Witchcraft and Animal Magnetism* (1851, German edition 1853), and Éliphas Lévi's, *Histoire de la magie* (1860, German edition 1926), set parameters for future research. From different perspectives (cf. Otto 2015: 421n6), these writers have not merely adopted but also valourised 'magic' as a hidden tradition of both scientific and religious knowledge about natural and supernatural forces that flourished in the cradle of civilisation and subsequently has been for the most part forgotten or discarded. In his *Primitive Cultures* (1871), the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor, a vigorous critic of 'occult science', only needed to reverse the driving forces of history's arrow. Thus he replaced the decline of magic with an evolutionary progress of culture that gradually abolished 'primitive spiritualistic science which interpreted nature to the lower races' (Tylor, quoted in Larsen 2013: 476). However, both opposing positions describe 'magical history' and commonly select identifying feature areas from available source material. Magic could thus be recognised and scientifically explained – positively or negatively – in archaic survivals, esoteric traditions, and any manipulation of unseen forces.

Since these notions now seamlessly blended into a single public event, they have stepped out of the tower of academic distancing and comfortably settled within the culture of public discourse.¹ In their property as media events, they both respond to and shape popular understandings of the term magic. It is also significant that in the 1940s, Jac Olten worked in circus shows and was famous for his silk tricks (Höller 1999: 51; contrary to Höller, Olten/Mihiel was not a Jewish magician), while in 1960 he handled the radio medium as well as learned narratives about natural magic and the performance of clairvoyance. Later, in the sixties, he worked on a cruise liner. Olten's trajectory and his presentation as a magician reflect changing conditions of media and in public discourse, which in turn affect the plausibility patterns of magic agency between 1940 and 1960. To put it briefly: until the beginnings of the 1950s, popular notions of magic were oriented towards the experience of performances in stage entertainment, in healing, and in apotropaic rituals. From 1954 onwards, collections of magic handbooks appeared in esotericist publishing houses and attempted to popularise theosophic, hermetic, and occultist narratives and topics. In what follows it will be shown how this trend favoured an individual approach to spiritual experience. But firstly, a few brief case reports will help to elucidate the transition process while focusing on the discursive representation of magic performance, both as a cultural practice and in respect to religious and scientific interpretations.

Stage magic and religious beliefs

The years around 1950 were a final, post-war heyday for the magic theatre before it began losing ground to the spread of home television and other entertainment media. However, both the presentation and the reception of such feats as clairvoyance, mind reading, or invulnerability could convey notions that transcended the illusionist setting of the stage.

In June 1947, a Dutch trio – a prophet, his minister and assistant, and a healer who called themselves the 'Trinity' ('The invulnerable man' 1947: 103) – gave a guest performance at a Zurich theatre, the 'Corso'. The leading

1 Anna Lux (2013) discusses in detail how the transgression of the line between scientific discourse and public advertisement became a trademark of Bender's academic career.

performer had chosen the name Mirin Dajo – Esperanto for a ‘miraculous thing’ (on Arnold Henskes, alias Mirin Dajo, see Blum 2016: 79–82). He demonstrated the progressively fluid nature of his body in a series of rather hazardous experiments involving thin steel tubes as well as real knives and rapiers. As the police intervened and closed down the event to prevent further public offence, a support group enabled the continuation of the programme by restricting access to its members only. While the spectacle of Mirin Dajo’s self-proclaimed ‘undieability’ might have contributed to this development, it is important to note that the Dutch artists conveyed a message with eschatological connotations to their audience. The progressive transformation of Mirin Dajo’s body into the fluidal realm, his ‘local dematerialisation’ and ‘dissolution into the divine’ (Johnan 1949: 34), was regarded as an experimental breakthrough for the coming spiritual ascent of mankind and thus the establishment of world peace as soon as man would begin to realise his spiritual outreach. ‘Currents of spiritual powers will flow into us, they will change first ourselves, then those close to us, and they, linked to the whole world, will change all mankind’ (p. 43). In May 1948, Mirin Dajo entered his own garden ‘Gethsemane’ in Winterthur and died of internal bleeding following the consumption of ‘a 35 cm long dagger-type instrument tapered to a razor-sharp point’ (Egloff 1949: 16–17). The engineer Traugott Egloff – who stood in close contact with some former O.T.O. members in Zurich and copied a relevant handbook of magics, the writings of ‘Abramelin’ in the 1950s (cf. König 1995: 9–10) – prepared an obituary and considered the deceased to stand as ‘an exponent of belief in our poorly believing world’ (Egloff 1949: 20). Mirin Dajo’s performances in Switzerland were personally – and perhaps conceptually – linked with other developments that have been referred to as ‘popularisation [processes] in the discourse of scholarly magic in the twentieth century’ (Otto 2018: 89).

In the larger public arena, the message from the ‘Corso’ stage contributed to another rhetorical framework that was built along the basic tenets of the New Thought movement – Paul Brunton’s *Wisdom of the Overself*, for example, was translated into German in 1949. The popular author defends ‘the essentially mental character of the world’ and guides his disciple-reader towards the realisation ‘that he is no longer imprisoned by the body, that an inexpressible spaciousness of being is now his’ (Brunton 1943: 23, 238). Mirin Dajo added to the spiritual liberation of the individual a social dimension that related world harmony with unconditional belief. Between the faiths of Yoga practitioners, anthroposophists, and Christians, which

intersect and diverge in this discursive field, the variety theatre provided an open space where these general notions could easily create a common ground.

Thoughts are forces – Ralph Waldo Trine’s famous catchphrase (Trine 1897: 24; first German edition in 1905) gained new currency in post-war Germany and provided a leitmotif for stage magic events, as in the opening act of Carl Sundra (alias Karl Nopper) and his magic show. Hans Bender reported an evening at Kurhaus Badenweiler, 4 October 1946, to the police administration of southern Baden who wanted to ascertain whether the *Gaukeleiparagraph* (§ 68 Bad PolStGB) law against paid fortune telling applied here too (Bender 1946, IGPP archives). In his introductory speech, the magician referred to parapsychology as well as to the history of religions, to the experience of yogis and fakirs and to self-education via suggestion. At times the audience was invited to participate in the show that included a demonstration of hypnotic catalepsy with a 16-year-old assistant – according to Bender ‘a degrading spectacle that encourages bad instincts’ – and an experiment in psychometry. ‘Sundra received ... objects from the audience and tried to establish situations that occurred in relation to these objects.’ Bender states that the magician demonstrated an advanced level of ‘telepathic tapping’ and recommends further scientific study (Bender 1946, IGPP archives).

Two and a half years later, the University of Heidelberg organised a test of Carl Sundra’s magic capacities under the auspices of Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, an art professor with esoteric interests. In this laboratory setting, Sundra did not achieve any remarkable results (Protokoll 1949, IGPP archives). Hartlaub eventually scored better all round and published a collection of essays that include topics like ‘Magism as a power in art production’, the ‘Problem with the term “superstition”’, and a general introduction to ‘the magic world-view’. Like the magician on stage, the academic appeals to the authority of science whose progress now has embarked into the realm of ‘the inexplicable’. To this end, he presents an extensive selection of disciplines that supposedly back his claim: physics, biology, parapsychology, Jungian psychology, folklore studies, archaeology, history of arts and religions, psychology of religion, ethnology, philosophy, and theology, both Catholic and Protestant (Hartlaub 1951: 33–8). In a later article for Bender’s journal, the *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, Hartlaub envisages the teleological scenario of a struggle between materialism and spirituality, culminating in the re-enchantment of metaphysics and



Fig. 1. Carl Sundra's extrasensory perception is examined by a journalist of the *Badische Neueste Nachrichten* in Karlsruhe. Photo: Horst Schlesiger by permission of Stadtarchiv Karlsruhe (8/BA Schlesiger A4/21/3/9A).

practice when magic will be reinstated through occultism and its successor, parapsychology:

While enlightenment in its latest form, that of atheist and Marxist propaganda, has arrived in the East and Southeast only recently, Western high civilisations begin already to stop and think things over. This 'revision of the enlightenment' ... applies particularly to those positions that seemed most radically 'done away' with: meta-religious and profane Magism, and its occultist succession. (Hartlaub 1960/1: 88)

For some in Sundra's theatre audiences, academic patterns of plausibility translated into forms of religious experience. A doctoral student of biology in Erlangen reports how the magician's tapping into the memory of objects evoked for her 'the unity of the whole living world'. The stage performance could trigger 'insights into transcendental processes' and thus orientate individual religious pathways (Koettnitz 1996: 146–7).² On the one hand, the presentation of magic inspired a conservative 'revision of the enlightenment' and a critique of modernity; on the other hand, it contributed to late twentieth-century developments of religious individualisation.

The above examples illustrate how the meaning of 'magic' is constantly questioned and redefined from within the field, involving three distinguishable and interacting groups:

1. stage producers who may include, but are not always identical with, the magician;
2. expert witnesses who evaluate authenticity and introduce their opinions into public discourse;
3. audiences who associate individual expectations with stage acts and emphasise meaningful experience.

The professional interplay of expectation and satisfaction between groups 1 and 3 shares basic features with a comparable 'exhibitionary complex' that has been addressed in regard to British and North American spiritualist

2 The author does not mention Carl Sundra's name, however, it was possible to identify the anonymous 'clairvoyant' by the unique pseudonym of his assistant 'Agyra Mara' (Koettnitz 1996: 144).

entertainments of the nineteenth century. As generally in stage magic, the culture of science enjoyed a prominent position in spiritualist séances and stage shows: the audience is attracted by a ‘phenomenon that escaped normality to enter the dimension of curiosity and wonder’; the producers ‘mingled scientific lectures with stage magic’; and both stage producers and audiences inserted their ‘religious and spiritual viewpoints within a positivistic and scientific framework’ (Natale 2016: 4). This preoccupation with scientific explanation, experiment, and evidence on the stage platform not only bolstered religious statements of all groups about the meaning and authenticity of the event; it also informed these belief claims on a conceptual basis.

In order to access the positionings and placements of scientific and religious claims within the interactional setting of magic performance, it is crucial to take the ‘substantial ambiguity’ of the show elements into account. ‘Claims of authenticity’ coexist ‘with a spectacular frame’ and ‘rational explanation’ accompanies ‘extraordinary experience’ (Natale 2016: 9–10). Astonishment and wonder were integral parts of awe-inspiring, persuasive aesthetics – including the sensual production of transcendence; the notion of a scientific lecture applied to the style, technique, and authority of the speaker rather than to positivist curricula; on the whole, the framework endorsed the content that it held within it. While or after being immersed and inside the created experience, the audience could engage with ‘different, potentially divergent interpretations of the event’ (p. 9). An expert observer like Bender fully realised that under such conditions the persuasiveness of a religious message would depend on its rhetorical openness, as he emphasises in his account of a test with Kurt Trampler, a busy spiritual healer of the 1950s (on Trampler, see Mildenerger 2005–7):

Dr Trampler starts his treatment with a lecture in front of the assembled patients, describing illness as a disturbance in the connection to the creative powers of the Divine from which depends the balance of life forces. ... The analysis of the patients’ belief revealed a dominance of transference processes and dispositions for faith that are ... far less directed at Trampler as a person than on the mission announced by him, which is extensive enough to take in the most different imaginations and expectations. It activates forces of faith that manifest on all levels, from the creation of true religious trust to the obscure magic anticipation of a miracle to the simple conviction that it is from here where help has to come. (Bender 1959: 143–4)

It would be misleading to adopt the distinction between ‘truly religious’, ‘obscure magic’, and ‘simple conviction’ that Bender obviously based on a contemporary – and today obsolete – typology of religion and magic. A detailed report of the spiritual healing experiment provides fascinating insights into the non-specific use of a dynamistic terminology derived from phenomenology of religion; for example, ‘charged with Mana’ (*manageladen*) for either positive or negative affection, or the ‘somehow numinous character’ of the ‘affective field’ created by the healer. In this context, the attribute ‘magic’ refers to the healer’s strong efficiency in relation to his emotional and affective force (Strauch 1958: 62). However, Bender’s categories still point to different modes of expressing belief in explicit or implicit ways. The capacity of evoking and directing emotion, of creating bodily, grounded evidence for belief via expectation and imagination is certainly a prominent feature of a healing performance. But, as we have seen, the same structural interaction processes apply to a number of other settings, including stage magic. Since parapsychology turned out to be an important voice in the second group – the expert evaluation of magic agency – the following section will discuss briefly its position in the religious field and preliminarily investigate related conceptions as well as the impending risk of superstition.

Science, imagination, and folklore magic

Bender’s description of telepathy as a mode of interaction with magically directed, that is, invisible forces could be considered a contemporary scientificisation of magic. This is partly due to the dynamistic explanation model of forces and powers that dominated the discourse in the phenomenology of religion (e.g. van der Leeuw 1986: 23–8). The invisible and supposedly primordial force of Mana has been portrayed as Mesmerist fluidum, or explained as electricity – and, as such, it provided a metaphor that borrowed its plausibility from physics (cf. Gladigow 1991). Furthermore, parapsychology established itself as the scientific discipline devoted to the study of telepathy, considered to be one of the two main types of extrasensory perception (the other, directed at objects, was clairvoyance). Since a viewpoint like that of Hartlaub would directly associate the ‘essence of the magical’ with the ‘results and problems of parapsychological research’ (Bender 1964: 2), magic itself became subject to the scientific tools of parapsychology; namely, to experiment, taxonomies and instrumentation (cf. Asprem 2011: 651–3).

A compelling argument for the institutionalisation of parapsychology in post-war Germany was the emphasis on *Psychohygiene*, the German rendering of the term ‘mental health’, which assigned societal functions to the research at the margins of psychology. The related discourse displayed strong affinities to, if not a continuation of, earlier arguments that ‘presented [parapsychology] as a possible saviour of Western civilisation amidst the impending dangers of a loss of religion and the degeneration of society’ (Asprem 2011: 647). Bender saw the principal challenge of his research in maintaining the boundaries of ‘a beneficial enlightenment’ against immoral and criminal superstition attacks on one side and Lenin’s materialistic theory of causality on the other.³ Experiencing the ‘essence of true mediumism’ protects, according to Bender, against ‘dubious procedures of counselling’ and the removal of ‘phantasms’ allows for a transference of the ‘fascinations of magic ... into a “room of discretion”’ (Bender 1959: 8). It is thus not only that magic settles within Rudolf Otto’s famous categories of numinous experience; moreover, in alignment with the ethical mission of mental health, true magic would help to get rid of superstition. To consider parapsychology as a religion of its own is certainly going too far. However, the legitimisation of the discipline was derived at least partly from the fact that it claimed to take over an ethical model position from religion and thus entered the religious field as a competitive player. The curious point in Bender’s strategy, though, is placing the element of magic at the centre of his argument.

However, it is possible that shared religious world views provided a bridge between the different milieus that came out of pre-war ‘occulture’. The following considerations about these implicit notions of religion will begin with a ‘particularly persuasive aspect of scientific activity’ created by technological instruments that translate ‘the confusing mishmash of nature to simple, ordered signs’ (Asprem 2011: 653). Technology has been interpreted not only by scientists in the laboratory, but sometimes even more efficiently by ordinary folk. In the 1920s, deradiation or shielding devices started to appear that manifestly sported references to the material culture of technology. A study from the late 1950s lists 51 different models that were available on German and Austrian markets (Schäfer 1959: 196–7). These objects

3 In context, this anti-communist flavour of Bender’s argument aimed to discredit Degesa, the German Society for Protection against Superstition that counted among its various members Theodor W. Adorno (cf. Schneider 2016: 293–4), see also below.

were popular items invested with protective value for persons and livestock and used as a safeguard against potentially dangerous terrestrial radiation. Some were designed with a chemical approach in mind, like the 'Guardian Angel' box that contained 12 bottles of formic acid labelled with 'Poison', 'Ray-death', and 'Leadzinn',⁴ all connected with each other through 40 copper coils (p. 198, fig. 43). The 'Ether Regulator' invented by Franz Wetzel, who also named it 'Terrella' after a similar looking apparatus designed by Karl



Fig. 2. Wetzel's Ether Regulator (Terrella). Schäfer 1959: fig. 38.

Reichenbach, father of the Od force, favoured obviously general assumptions about the mode of operation of invisible forces (see Fig. 2).

Wetzel was president of *Verband für Ruten- und Pendelkunde*, the Austrian and German Association for Rod and Pendulum Sciences, the leading organisation of dowisers and radiesthetists, from 1948 until he passed away in 1956. Parapsychology and radiesthetics were both disciplines devoted to measuring and classifying invisible forces and they had strong conceptual and personal ties with each other. Wetzel's obituary in *Neue Wissenschaft* highlights his religious curriculum vita that led him from scientific doubts about Catholicism in his youth to a vision of Christ in World War I and finally to the notion of 'Transphysis', viz., 'deep layers ... in the cosmos and man that no longer stand under the categories of space and time' (Frei 1956: 188). Wetzel himself describes how his involvement with a nuclear research project in Austria led to a confrontation with black magic (Wetzel 1956). Transphysis provided, according to Wetzel, a conceptual solution to the question of whether man is 'a psychocentric being, like the tradition of all religions requires', or if Stalin's dogma of materialism, which also happened to be the 'state religion of the Third Reich' would prevail (Wetzel 1955: 4–5).

4 The latter term is my individual attempt to render the German creation 'Bleitin' into English.

Since parapsychology experimentally substantiated the existence of forces beyond physical causality, the whole cosmos could be considered to be a form of transphysis, a contact zone between metaphysis and physis, ‘floating in and pervaded with the realm of God’ (p. 17). In the ‘sea of ether’ (p. 14), the ‘natural objects around us arise out of their spiritual urimages, and, directed by mental forces of formation, enter ... visibility’ (p. 3). Adopting a religious rhetoric, this tableau participated in a larger discourse of nature-philosophy that related to Edmund Husserl’s student Hedwig Conrad-Martius and her teleology of nature (p. 12; cf. Conrad-Martius 1944).

It seems no risky speculation to guess that in Wetzel’s view, his ether regulator did not represent an actual physical resource. Mental forces had to be applied if one wanted to confine the negative effects of harmful radiation. Wetzel combined the ‘influential epistemological tradition of urimage/image-representation as access to truth’ (Grieser 2015: 461) with the iconic repertoire of mid-twentieth-century technology. Technological objects serve as a focus of the imagination and thus structure access to the invisible layers of transphysis. It is tempting to shift this notion a little bit: ‘resolute imagination is the beginning of all magical work’ (Douval 1956: 70), says the magician Henri Eduard Douval, echoing Paracelsus.

At this point, it is important for the purpose of this study that ‘imagination’ is not merely considered a part of magic procedure. As such, it would suggest a substantial integration of Douval’s reference to Paracelsus into the esoteric tradition of ‘vis imaginativa’ that Antoine Faivre (2000) selected to represent Western magic symbolism, or of Sundra’s presentation of psychometry into the theosophical variation of imagination as clairvoyance stressed by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2017). There is no doubt that specialised knowledge and techniques of both these currents inform the notions of the German protagonists. However, as an analytical term, imagination refers to much more dynamic moments of religious and magic practice in which various aesthetic configurations at an individual level situationally intersect and organise meaningful experience. The imaginative act continuously accompanies sensory perception. It proceeds with an actualisation of available symbolic resources that involves all the senses, not only the visual ones, and associates selected sensational forms with relevant emotions, attitudes, and arguments (cf. Grieser 2015: 462–3). While some German magicians of the 1950s stood more firmly in the esoteric strand, they also had recourse to contemporary cultural techniques and methods that influenced their notions about the meanings and effects of imagination, as will be discussed below.

When deradiation devices and Od forces were meaningless in regard to negative influences, many people resorted to witchcraft for a plausible explanation of a run of bad luck.⁵ In 1953, around 70 so-called ‘witch trials’ were held in the courts, a number that inspired – among other reasons – the foundation of the Degesa, the German Society for Protection against Superstition (Schneider 2016: 281–2). In the course of the criminal investigation, a 1950 edition of a grimoire and ‘magic-sympathetic house treasure’ (cf. Peuckert 1957: 177) from the early nineteenth century, the *Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses*, was brought to the attention of the public media. The success story of the book goes back to Johann Scheible’s famous ‘collection of old “miraculous and curious” German literature, *Das Kloster*’, from 1845 to 1849 (Davies 2009: 123). In the 1920s and 1930s, ‘at least five publishers were producing editions’ (p. 248) and the book played a role in a number of court cases. Beginning in 1950, Planet publishers in Brunswick released several editions of no less than 9,000 prints. The book sold well and in 1955, only 200 copies were left in stock (Oberstaatsanwalt Braunschweig 1955, Nds STA WF).

Initiated and supported within the network of the Degesa, a highly mediatised lawsuit against Planet publishers united ‘the rather unlikely coalition of those inspired by anti-clericalism, professional medical hegemony, and Catholic authority’ (Davies 2009: 259). In 1956, the defence lawyers proposed three expert witnesses who should ‘assess the question whether – “the Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses” is a manual of superstitious healing or if it represents real occult writing and folk literature’ (Oberstaatsanwalt Braunschweig 1956, Nds STA WF). They assured the support of Will-Erich Peuckert, a professor of folklore studies in Göttingen, to testify in favour of the latter position. With Hans Geisler, they came up with the chief editor of *Okkulte Stimme*, a journal that belonged to the Löwen printing house, the parent house of Planet publishers, until both Geisler and the journal moved to Freiburg in October 1958. Later, the journal evolved under the title *Esotera* into a leading voice of the New Age scene in Germany. The third candidate, the bookseller Richard Schikowski in Berlin, was just building

5 Herbert Schäfer (1959: 27–125) gives a tendentious overview. For further references, see Davies (2009: 252–61, 345–7). A classic anthropological fieldwork by Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980) offers rich material from France that points to comparable, if not similar rural contexts.

up his position as an insider authority of magic knowledge. Schikowski's publishing activities focused on literature concerning 'high magic' in the interpretation of the *Fraternitas Saturni*, an important German offspring of the O.T.O. (cf. Hakl 2006). The proximity of a group that 'has never sought the spotlight of publicity' (p. 382) to this public affair allows for some interesting insights concerning pragmatic choices in conceptualising and publicising magic. In a handbook published by Schikowski, Hans Arnold, aka H. Atkinson-Scarcter or Ray Atkinson, considered the *Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses* a 'hot potato' and denounced the 'truly American publicity fuss' that could not 'earn much sympathy for the book' (Atkinson-Scarcter 1960: 25). However, although it was Lenin who repeatedly brought up the dictum 'learn from the enemy', Hans Arnold and others studied the American way and experimented with new marketing strategies.

Magical handbooks, education, and experience

Until recently, the bookshop of Richard Schikowski had maintained a high profile across the whole of Germany's esoteric scene (cf. Scharna *et al.* 1985). This fame is partly based upon a book series that the publishing house launched in 1954, entitled 'The Magical Handbooks'. The collection features, on the one hand, re-editions of classical textbooks – for example, William Maxwell's *De Medicina Magnetica* (1631/9),⁶ a manual of natural magic that, perhaps because of the title, had been already noticed in Scottish Mesmerism during the 1840s (Lang 1843: 1–2) and was prepared for publication by Ernst Issberner-Haldane, a *völkisch* Yoga teacher, after the German Scheible edition of 1855 (Maxwell 1954). Considering the importance of Abramelin's book of practical magic for Aleister Crowley's pursuit of the 'Holy Guardian Angel' (cf. König 1995: 19–45; Davies 2009: 180–2; Pasi 2012: 70–3), the decision to re-translate the English version consulted by Crowley – which itself was created from a French version of the German original⁷ – is not so far-fetched as the parapsychologist Gebhard Frei complains in his review of the magical handbooks (Frei 1959, on Becken 1957). Hans Arnold prefaced a significantly abridged version of

6 There is little known about the author except that he probably sat in Robert Fludd's parlour in London between 1631 and 1637 (cf. Kassell 2007: 100–2).

7 The earliest print available is again a Scheible edition of 1853 that relates to a now-lost edition of Peter Hammer publishers, Cologne 1725.

Helena P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* and stressed the importance of her life and teachings for occultism and parapsychology (Arnold 1958).

On the other hand, the handbook series offered genuine writings of authors close to the *Fraternitas Saturni* who cover topics like Tarot, astrology, magic spells, clairvoyance and Tattva visualisation, and 'oriental' magic. From the periodical of the brotherhood, *Blätter für angewandte okkulte Lebenskunst* (1950–63), it is evident that the independent acquisition of knowledge about these questions was required from its members, who numbered about a hundred initiates at the time. However, the publications of Schikowski were far more widely distributed and the same authors, such as Hans Arnold, Ernst Issberner-Haldane, Willy Schrödter, Karl Spiesberger (Fig. 3), and Joachim Winckelmann, contributed to journals like *Neue Wissenschaft* and *Okkulte Stimme*. Both Schrödter and Winckelmann compiled dictionaries that represented the history of magic in convenient and accessible registers; Winckelmann had published instalments of an 'Occult ABC' as appendices to *Okkulte Stimme* before he united the issues into a Schikowski handbook (Winckelmann 1956). *Neue Wissenschaft* mirrored this trend with a 'Parapsychological Dictionary', commencing in January 1952.

In order to appreciate the contribution of this publication strategy to the discursive field of popular magic, two points need to be considered. Firstly, when magic circles realised that a public debate about superstition tended to blame occultism and folklore magic for Germany following a path 'into a racist totalitarian state' (Davies 2009: 252), they adopted the response of parapsychology that emphasised *Psychohygiene* or mental health. This approach translated into a new importance of 'high magic' as a key to individual ethics, to be obtained through inner knowledge and insight. As a general rule, the commitment to the *Fraternitas Saturni* meant converging with the 'laws of harmony' that are 'anchored in the cosmos' and perceived as 'reflections on earth' and 'revelations in nature' (Gregorius 1950: 1,2). The initiates thus take part in 'a spiritual brotherhood ... that consciously works for the evolution of mankind. Thoughts are forces!' (1,7), as Gregor A. Gregorius, aka Eugen Grosche, the founder of the brotherhood, reminds them. The achievement of this goal required a collaboration with academia, namely the fields of comparative religion (cf. 2,9) and parapsychology. However, the brotherhood understood this liaison primarily as an educational project directed at the common and ignorant folk. 'The circles behind us always deprecated the idea of giving ancient wisdom [directly, TH] into the hands of the people where it always causes only harm. Therefore we demand on every occasion



Fig. 3. Karl Spiesberger (Fra Eratus) illuminates a light bulb using his 'Od-magnetic force' (Spiesberger 1955a: 11).

the establishment of professorships in parapsychology and related occult areas' (2,8).

This educational impetus called for a well-monitored popularisation of academic knowledge about magic. The print number of the *Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses* had demonstrated the market potential that lies behind a sales strategy that allows for the appeal of pulp literature. What if the product did not serve superstition, but rather guided the reader towards the magical imagination? For this task, no one was better qualified than Hans Arnold. He wrote his first book for Eden publishers in Berlin, *Der Blonde Assassine* (The Blond Assassin) in 1937, later contributed to a series of '50 Pfennig' crime

thrillers, and, after the war, moved to biographical portraits of astonishing figures from history such as Cleopatra, Madame Pompadour, and Rasputin. In 1958 for the same publisher he submitted two paperbacks; one entitled *Magie, Liebestränke, Hypnose* (Magic, Love Potions, Hypnosis), the other *Hexenwahn und Hexenprozesse* (Witch Mania and Witch Trials). The latter came with a print run of 20,000 copies that more than doubled the previous model title of Planet publishers. Arnold signed both his books with his artist pseudonym Ray Atkinson. He enticed the customer with a cover and illustrations that promised a good dose of sex-and-crime pulp history (see Fig. 4). However, the first two chapters of 'Witch Mania and Witch Trials' proceed with a basic narrative type that sets up the history of magic with Babylonian astrology, gnosis, and Neoplatonism (cf. Atkinson 1958: 6–18). The author later refers to the *Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses* and remarks: 'Still today, rural people often apply sympathetic remedies and actually achieve certain successes. They content themselves with the results and do not think about the fact the success was caused by autosuggestion, the force of their own imagination' (p. 182). It is obvious from product placement, layout, and content that these books represent an educational attempt to reach out to the target group of folklore magic.

The second point relates to the importance of applied experience that dominates in the teaching methods of various textbooks, not exclusively in the Schikowski series. Between 1954 and 1956, Henri Eduard Douval, for example, introduced twelve volumes of practical magic. He claimed to provide a systematic learning programme for the apprentice that consists of a few hundred body exercises related to, for example, the use of drugs, Od body training, meditation, the training of the senses, or solar plexus resonance. Neither the religious leanings and ritual preferences of individual readers nor the different perspectives of theosophy, parapsychology, or mentalism actually mattered here. The development of magical skills required first and foremost a set of body techniques that may appear embedded within different narratives. As a consequence, the self-teaching curricula of Douval or the magical handbooks of the *Fraternitas Saturni* were successfully passed with the embodiment of knowledge:

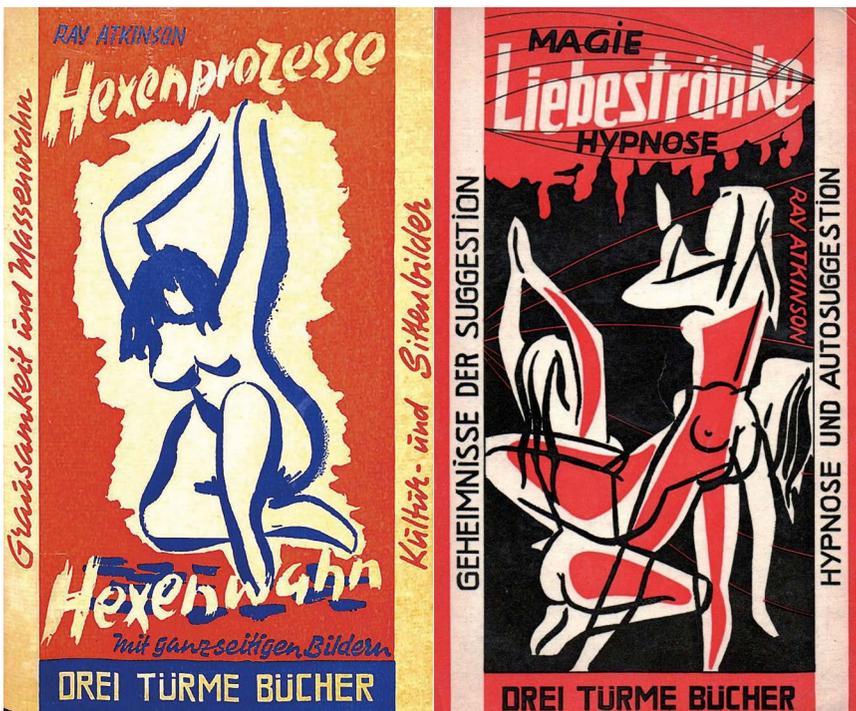


Fig. 4. The book covers of Hans Arnold's 'pulp' histories of witchcraft and magic (Eden Verlag, 1958).

... it is not absolutely true that magical forces can be acquired always or merely through initiation into antique mysteries or their modern branches. Many of these rites are certainly very useful for the achievement of magical power or for spiritual inspiration. However, the very disciplines prescribed for the adept at his initiation into the mysteries have been and still are the principal cause of bodily change in which the success of initiation consists. (Fra Peregrius 1959: 63)

Conclusion

In post-war Germany, the fields of stage magic and folklore magic came under two different kinds of public pressure. First, a structural transformation of the profession reduced the importance of the stage; second, a campaign of disenchantment against superstition meant to dispel the demons of the past and criminalise ritual practices in popular culture. These processes were commented upon and evaluated by parapsychologists who introduced their own category of magic in order to discriminate between 'false' superstition and 'true' effects of non-physical causes. The scientific assessment drew on dynamistic models of forces that were plausible starting points in the phenomenology of religion and on a philosophical model of 'transphysis' that naturalised manifestations of metaphysical realities in the physical world. The individual imagination organised the access to such 'numinous fields' of magic which could heal, protect, or harmonise the subject in relation to invisible forces. This methodical approach proved to be compatible with the paradigms of 'high magic', whose practitioners, in response to the public debate, set up ways of popularising their knowledge without the mediation of the stage. Since any evidence of invisible forces required an experience of transcendental qualities, the embodiment of knowledge through exercise and imagination took up a prominent space in their teachings.

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