

Phantasmagoria, Spectrality, and Illusion in *Oz the Great and Powerful*

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This article explores Sam Raimi's *Oz the Great and Powerful* (USA, 2013) with reference to the history of phantasmagoric shows.¹ Here the dynamic of Enlightenment rationalism and romantic faith in the supernatural is confronted by the opposition between the archetypal fairy-tale wizard and the figure of an illusionist who takes advantage of technology and science to make his spectators believe in the power of the supernatural. In Raimi's film Oscar (played by James Franco) is a prestidigitator who enters the imaginary world of Oz by accident and becomes involved in a struggle with the Wicked Witches Evanora (Rachel Weisz) and Theodora (Mia Kunis). Although Oscar, whose stage name is 'Oz', does not possess any magical powers, he succeeds in confronting the two evil sisters. Based on pre-cinema inventions and discoveries, his "*greatest trick ever*" is in fact a modern incarnation of phantasmagoria shows whose origin dates back to the 18th Century.

¹ This article has been developed from Justyna Hanna Budzik, *Filmowe cuda i sztuczki magiczne Szkice z Archeologii kina [Film Miracles and Magic Tricks: Sketches from the Archaeology of Cinema]*, Katowice: University of Silesia Press, 2015, pp. 51–75.

The words Oscar utters to Glinda (Michelle Wellman), "*I might not be the wizard you expected, but I might be the wizard that you need*", denote his virtuosity in prestidigitation as a skill required to defeat the Wicked Witches. The tension between rational knowledge and irrational belief in the miraculous, observed in the phantasmagoria shows of Robertson, is a key element of the pivotal scene in Raimi's film, involving the most wonderful trick ever performed in the Emerald City. I offer a detailed examination of this scene, placing it in the context of the debate on phantasmagoria in media history, involving, among others, Tom Gunning, Terry Castle and Dan North. The topic of the magical and the miraculous in film, as presented and discussed in Edgar Morin's writings on the double and the spectre, are also considered and will serve as the starting point for a broader reflection upon a popular fairy-tale film as a self-referential image of cinema archaeology.

The film derives from Lyman Frank Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, published in 1900, a landmark book for children and an important contribution to the fantasy genre, and might be seen as a prequel to Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (USA, 1939). At the end of Baum's tale about the adventures of Dorothy Gale, the dog Toto, Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion in the fairyland of Oz, the characters make an earth-shattering discovery: the powerful wizard ruling the Emerald City, who evokes both fear and respect for his wisdom and his power to fulfil good wishes, turns out to be a charlatan. The wizard appeared as a different figure to each of the literary characters: for Dorothy he is a giant head, for the Scarecrow a beautiful lady, for the Tin Woodman a beast, and for the Lion a magical ball of fire. Yet, after accomplishing their mission to destroy the Wicked Witch of the West the characters accidentally discover the magician's hideout in the throne room, where he presents himself as a voice, and they see "*standing in just in the spot the screen had hidden, a little old man, with a bald head and a wrinkled face, who seemed to be as much surprised as they were.*"² It turns out that Oz is, in fact, an illusionist, a circus performer who once came by chance to the Land of Oz in a hot air balloon.

Raimi's film tells the story of how Oscar, a showy hack conjurer from Kansas, arrives in the fairyland of Oz where, after numerous adventures, he becomes the Wizard residing in the Emerald City palace. The director borrows the idea of the balloon flight from the novel and somewhat develops the protagonist's history before his arrival in the Land of Oz. The film character of Oz embodies the most important features of stage magicians from the late 19th Century. The protagonist also uses language drawn from that of the first theoreticians of cinema, who saw moving images as representation of dreams, ghosts, and supernatural reality. The thread concerning Oz and his "*greatest trick*" is an interesting and perverse approach to the problem of projection art at the intersection of discussions on magic and illusion to be found in the writings of, among others, Georges Méliès and Edgar Morin.

² L.F. Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Chicago: George M. Hill, 1900, p. 133.

Apparatuses producing optical illusions are not only gadgets of the era in Raimi's film, they are also examples of media which activate various cultural strategies—from the entertainment value inherent in the discovery of technologies capable of deluding and deceiving the eye, to the fear of phantoms hidden in the viewer's inner world.

The opening credits, a masterpiece of animation, announce the major role which will be played by the machinery for producing illusions. In perfectly illusory spatial depth, reminiscent of Baroque *trompe l'oeil* paintings, curtains go up revealing stages where wings and painted backgrounds suggest the *enfilade* structure of an infinite number of theatres. Just before the credit to Franco appears on the screen, a trapdoor opens in the stage floor and the figure of an illusionist jumps out, a wand in his raised hand. With his back to the audience, he casts a shadow on the background landscape. Such a prefiguration of the main character evokes the effect of uncertainty and mystery (his face is invisible), and invokes the world of dark fantasy. The shadow is one of the forms of the double in Edgar Morin's reflection upon the magical nature of cinematic projection.³ Morin uses the notion of the double to describe an image which lacks its material base, a phantom which encompasses features of a mental picture—real and surreal at the same time. The shadow, connected with night and death, is the most magical form of the double.

These theatrical devices remind us that that the trick effect results from a skilful application of mechanics designed to deceive the senses, to surprise and to amaze. In addition, animated images in the opening credits make use of optical illusions such as spirals or spinning wheels painted in contrasting patterns to finally present the image of an eye, prior to the naming of the visual effects supervisor, Scott Stokdyk. The director's name, for its part, is placed in a crystal ball held by clawed hands, as if Raimi is being associated with fairy-tale wizards whose power is capable of creating fantastic visions. The audience is thus prepared for a spectacle of illusions. The film draws the viewer into the realm of optical devices, and the ways in which they enable us to see that which is impossible, in the form of images which can hardly be real but which nonetheless have the ability to outwit common sense. Such a strategy for arousing the viewer's interest in a spectacle created with the help of machines is reminiscent of the world fairs at the turn of the 20th Century where technological innovations were the main attraction.⁴ The opening credits also prefigure the film's narrative development, where illusion-creating machines play a pivotal role in the development of the story.

³ See Edgar Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, Warsaw: State Publishing Institute, 1975, pp. 39–55.

⁴ See Eduardo Victorio Morettin, 'Universal Exhibitions and the Cinema: History and Culture', *Revista Brasileira de História*, vol. 31 no. 61, 2011, pp. 232–33, http://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbh/v31n61/en_a12v31n61.pdf and Tom Gunning, 'The World as Object Lesson: Cinema Audiences, Visual Culture, and the St. Louis World's Fair', *Film History*, vol. 6 no. 4, 1994, pp. 422–444, <http://kmanthorne.commons.gc.cuny.edu/files/2011/01/gunningStLouis1904.pdf> (both accessed 29 May 2016).

Oscar belongs to the historical world of fairs, illusionist shows, and prestidigitator performances. He represents the epoch of the first years of cinematographic spectacles in which stage magicians relied on new image-producing machines to make their performance more attractive, the first of these being the 'theatrograph', constructed by R.W. Paul and purchased by the American illusionist Carl Hertz in March 1896.⁵ In the era of both media convergence and also the constant expansion of audio-visual theory, however, the figure of Oz may also be seen as the embodiment of discourses on the various relations between cinematic projection and magic, faith in doubles and shadows, fear of the miraculous and the unusual, as well as the pleasure of visual attraction based on surprising and astonishing images. Oscar is portrayed as a prestidigitator-artisan who masters the craft of the stage illusionist. He is equally fluent in the techniques of deceiving and seducing women. In the second sequence of the film, after the magician has been announced by a ringmaster at the fair, he is shown in conversation with his naïve assistant. The young woman, fascinated by the handsome and talented Oscar, lets him beguile her with his tricks. We struggle to like Oscar – described as great and powerful by his assistant – as, from the very beginning, he is shown to be at least ambiguous in terms of ethics and morality.

The construction of the story follows a basic narrative pattern: the protagonist has a mission to fulfil, in Oscar's case, to free the Land of Oz from the rule of the Wicked Witch (in the course of the film it turns out that there are in fact two Wicked Witches). The inhabitants of the magic land believe in the truth of the prophecy which foretells that one day a powerful wizard will come, defeat the forces of evil, and restore harmony. The problem is that Oz is not a wizard: he does not possess supernatural powers – as he indeed mentions several times, for instance, while he is trying to convince Glinda: "*I might not actually be a wizard you are expecting*". The young stage illusionist is fully aware of the fact that he finds himself in a fantasy world where "*true*" magic occurs, whereas he himself can only produce illusions, manipulating the audience by persuading it to see something which does not exist. He is a master of tricks, and it takes more than a trick to defeat evil in the world of the fairy-tale. And yet eventually a perfectly planned spectacle of illusion will give the protagonist victory; his outstanding knowledge of optical and projection devices can indeed be used instead of magic. The effects of Oz's "*greatest trick*" will be the culmination of both the fantasy convention of fulfilling a mission without the help of magical powers, and the fairy-tale tradition of the protagonist's transformation, leading to the eventual triumph of good over evil.

Where the optical spectacle of magic and illusion is concerned, three sequences are crucial: the illusionist's show in Kansas at the beginning of the film, Oscar's conversation

⁵ See Dan North, 'Magic and Illusion in Early Cinema', *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 1 no. 2, 2001, p. 72. Oscar's activities refer to a practice popular with illusionists at the turn of the century – see Erik Barnouw, *The Magician and the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

with China Girl in the Land of Oz, and the showpiece with the false wizard. Two sequences are symmetrical with one another, both leading to a dramatic turn of events: after the unsuccessful show in Kansas, Oscar escapes in a hot air balloon, which carries him to the Land of Oz, where he gains the love of Glinda and the respect of his faithful audience, whereas following the spectacle in the Emerald City the Wicked Witches, Evanora and Theodora, flee. Each show reveals various possible ways of perceiving the performance of an illusion, and the reactions of the film audience may be understood as an exemplification of historical and anthropological studies on the reception of magic shows. The illusionist show performed by Oz is a typical example of a performance from the late 19th Century. The artist, using magical tricks such as that of the floating lady, is a master manipulator. However, a certain anachronism is present in the film portrait of the audience in Kansas. According to historians of the spectacle, the viewers of magical shows were aware of the illusory nature of the tricks being presented, and the pleasure of watching the show was derived from their assessment of the magician's technical skills. The essence of the show was to deceive the sense of sight; viewers valued the show precisely if they were unable to uncover the principles governing the operation of the trick. Of course, magicians hid and protected their technological arsenal from the public, but the deception upon which their shows was based was never questioned.⁶

Oscar's show, however, is different, and the audience in the film seems somewhat more naïve than the educated Victorian viewers described by North. The aggressive reaction of the viewers towards the fact that the strings used during the floating lady trick are visible could be explained by their disappointment with the low quality of the spectacle, yet further developments cause a surprising plot twist. After cutting the strings, Oscar's assistant is still floating above the stage, and the audience is once again intrigued. The greatest amazement, combined with fear, is seen on the face of a disabled girl who cannot restrain her emotions and shouts out, "*Make me walk!*" The girl is joined by her parents, poor people who are ready to give all that they have to the stage illusionist so that he may help cure their daughter. The other viewers support the girl's dramatic request and Oscar finds himself unable to confess that the magic spectacle is after all based on trickery. The protagonist is trying at all costs to retain the viewers' faith in the truthfulness of his show. This anachronism plays an important role in a dramaturgy relying on elements drawn from the fairy-tale and fantasy genres. Oscar's helpless explanations that he could make her walk again, but not at that very moment, are mirrored in his later conversation with China Girl (the disabled girl and the voice of China Girl are both played by the same actress). In the latter situation, Oz can admit that he does not perform miracles, and that he is therefore not the wizard awaited by the inhabitants of the enchanted world.

⁶ North, 'Magic and Illusion', p. 74.

The conversation with China Girl, however, inspires Oz to invent his greatest ever trick in order to free the Land of Oz from the rule of the Wicked Witches. The girl tells Oscar that the previous wizard – the witches' father – could fulfil wishes provided they were good. Oscar responds that real magicians do not exist in the place from which he comes. He ponders a moment, however, and begins to talk about one – Thomas Alva Edison – who “*could consider the future and make it real*”. Oscar describes Edison's most interesting invention, a device to register moving images, delighting the girl with the story. In the land of fairy-tale, somebody who can create the real from the impossible by means of glass and cable is also a wizard: the fragile, fantasy character convinces Oz that he must indeed be just such a one. The trust the little creature places in him, together with the illusionist's technical skills, result in a wonderful idea for the most astonishing spectacle of optical magic ever to be presented in the Emerald City.

While gaining experience as a stage illusionist, he learned how to manipulate optical devices, and he intends to use this skill to create a new show. He references the praxinoscope as an inspiration for his own device. The praxinoscope, designed by Emile Renaud in 1876, was a modification of the zoetrope.⁷ Renaud closed the apertures in the external drum and placed little mirrors in the internal drum which reflected the pictures located along the outer circumference. The observer focused his attention on the mirrors which became the screen for an animated sequence. The inventor subsequently developed several new versions of the device in an attempt to separate the optical illusion from the apparatus. Because of this separation, the device was gradually removed from the field of vision of the audience.

The machine which Oscar commissions from Master Tinker resembles one of the later versions of the praxinoscope, the *Théâtre Optique*, introduced in 1892.⁸ In this version the praxinoscope was supplemented by a magic lantern projector. The system of double projection cast a static background and animated pictures on the screen, with the apparatus hidden from the spectators who visited the Musée Grévin in Paris to watch the shows in a darkened room. Almost a century earlier they had visited the *Pavillon de l'Echiquier*, where Etienne-Gaspard Robert, better known under his stage name 'Robertson', had organised phantasmagoria shows since 1798. (The protagonist of Raimi's film and Robertson have one

⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Suspension of Perception. Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, new ed., 2001, p. 259.

⁸ Crary, *Suspension of Perception*; Nicolas Dulac and André Gaudreault, 'Circularity and Repetition at the Heart of the Attraction: Optical Toys and the Emergence of New Cultural Series', in Wanda Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, pp. 237–240.

more thing in common, namely, travelling in a hot air balloon; Robertson was best known for being an outstanding aeronaut who set a height record for flying a hot air balloon.)⁹

Phantasms of light, moving in space, approaching and talking to the audience, generated fear and disbelief – similar to the feelings experienced by the Wicked Witches and the inhabitants of the Emerald City in the course of the spectacle organised by Oscar. The skills which transform the protagonist into the hero needed by Glinda and her people are mainly connected with his mastery of staging phantasmagoria shows. The operation of the praxinoscope was based on the animation of still images presenting successive phases of movement. The primary function of the device – the illusion of smooth motion based on single static images – does not change during the subsequent modifications of the invention which, despite rendering the projection event similar to the conditions of phantasmagoria shows, do not produce the effect of the uncanny and the magical experienced by the spectators of the shows in the late 18th Century.

The functions fulfilled by phantasmagoria shows have been extensively described, from a Cultural Studies perspective, by Terry Castle, Tom Gunning and Tomasz Majewski.¹⁰ In my analysis of *Oz the Great and Powerful*, I will present different meanings of the term 'phantasmagoria': the showing of images projected by means of a hidden magic lantern; the effect of phantom images shows in relation to the spectators' psyche (Castle); the notions of illusion and deception associated with Benjamin and Adorno; a product which hides the way of its production (Marx); an uncanny, supernatural phenomenon. According to Majewski, the phantasmagoria became "*a cultural replacement of black magic*" in the modern era. It is visible in an etymology rooted in the Greek words *phantasma*, *phantazo*, *agoreno*, *agora*, and means "*the public calling of the ghosts*".¹¹

The world of the cinematic Land of Oz lies beyond civilisation as we know it, yet the illusionist's activity refers to a ground-breaking moment in Western culture which "*is enriched by phantasmagoria, with a post-Enlightenment transformation of scientific and technical inventions into entertainment devices*". Majewski remarks that "*they are among the first observable cases of the saturation of scientific achievements with irrational content*".¹² Oscar, like Robertson, does not conceal his fascination with technology and modern inventions. At the moment when he presents his plan of action to Glinda he points to a stage magic textbook as a primary source of reference for his idea. "*Illusion, misdirects,*

⁹ See Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 15 no. 1, Autumn 1988, p. 31.

¹⁰ See Castle, 'Phantasmagoria'; Tom Gunning, 'Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and Its Specters', 2004, <http://www.mediaarthistory.org/refresh/Programmatic%20key%20texts/pdfs/Gunning.pdf>, accessed 29 May 2016; Tomasz Majewski, 'Fantasmagoria i episteme nowoczesności', in Majewski, *Dialektyczne feerie. Szkoła frankfurcka i kultura popularna*, Łódź: Oficyna, 2011.

¹¹ Majewski, *Dialektyczne feerie*, p. 27.

¹² Majewski, *Dialektyczne feerie*, p. 35.

sleight of hand" – Oz enumerates knowledge included in the book which will help him win the battle. He designs a machine which, by means of a system of magic lantern, lenses, mirrors, sound amplifiers and a device producing smoke, will enable the projection of a giant speaking phantasm. "*A conman, a trickster*" – this is how the protagonist identifies himself as an expert manipulator of the techniques of illusion.

It is worth noting that Robertson also emphasized his technical competencies, introducing himself in the press and in advertisements as "*mechanic, painter and optician*" in an attempt to establish the rational nature of his artistry.¹³ Oscar also reveals his economic and social motivation – a desire to be promoted and famous. He is a skilful craftsman and a talented performer, perfectly suited to his profession. Moreover, he realizes the great possibilities of illusionist art. And here he again uses "*a powerful spectatorial effect*"¹⁴ produced by phantasmagoria understood as the combination of an optical illusion and the psychological experience of a phantasm. Oz's phantasmagoria, however, functions rather differently from those to be found in European culture at the turn of the 19th Century, and the way the show was incorporated into the fabric of the film complicates its structure and makes spectators reflect on the nature of cinematic projection itself.

An essential element of Robertson's shows was that he divided them into two parts: an exhibition of optical devices, which was available to the spectators before the actual show, and a spectacle of phantasms in a darkened room with a curtain. So, before the audience could enjoy the immersive activity of sensually experiencing luminous phantasms, they had already visited the exposition devoted to technological possibilities for producing illusions, reflecting a post-Enlightenment aspiration to embed phantasmagoria in a scientific model for exploring the world. Despite this, illusionists were greatly concerned with the magical aura of their shows: they started by convincing spectators that the belief in ghosts was a mere superstition and then produced ghosts which were so realistic that the spectators began to believe in them all over again.¹⁵ Similarly, Oz does not exhibit a purely scientific attitude: the way he describes Edison's achievements reveals an (unconscious?) inclination of the protagonist (and people in general) to think about optical and electrical inventions in terms of magical phenomena. Perhaps it is unveiled because of his contact with the fantasy world and with the people of Oz, who find magic an obvious component of the world.

The educational function of the spectacle emphasised by the cultural scholars is not imparted to all the characters in Raimi's film. Phantasmagoria as presented in the Emerald City is not addressed to a homogeneous audience, which can be divided into two groups: on

¹³ Majewski, *Dialektyczne feerie*, p. 27.

¹⁴ Gunning, 'Illusions', p. 10.

¹⁵ See Castle, 'Phantasmagoria', p. 30.

the one hand Oscar's allies, aware of the hidden mechanics, and on the other the Wicked Witches and almost all inhabitants of the royal city, unaware of the machinery. From the perspective of the fictitious intrigue, the witches are the most important recipients of the show which, by means of the technical capabilities of the optical devices involved, confronts them with their greatest fear, that of a power stronger than the one which they possess. And yet even the spectators who understand the principle of illusion allow themselves to be seduced by the terrifying 'ghost' of Oz, proving his magical power.

And so, how does Oscar plan and conduct his phantasmagoria show? The deception of the spectator's senses and attention – so important in the case of every good illusionist show – provides the basis for the project. Before the actual spectacle begins, Oz stages his false escape: he fills the basket of the balloon with gold and valuables from the treasury and then releases the balloon. This action proves the protagonist's critical self-awareness: in the first days of his stay at the castle he showed himself to be greedy, striving for wealth, as well as showing himself to be an unreliable and unfaithful person. Such a construction of character is typical of the fantasy genre, where characters are not clearly good or evil, as in the case of human types in fairy-tales.¹⁶ Oscar arrived in the Land of Oz in a hot air balloon, and so the means of his escape from the battle field seems logical to the other characters. Yet the departure of the balloon – very quickly destroyed by the spells of the Wicked Witches – is only a prelude to the real show.

When the audience in front of the castle seem to be sure of Oz's escape, and Theodora and Evanora are preparing to kill Glinda, torches are suddenly lit by invisible hands around the square and a fire breaks out accompanied by a pillar of smoke. Upon the 'screen' of smoke appears a projection of Oz's head, significantly enlarged. The protagonist screams with rage and his face is twisted in a grimace of fury. Music emphasizes the horror of the situation and the inhabitants of the Emerald City flee in fear of the phantasm. Fear can also be seen on the faces of the evil sisters, only Glinda gently smiles because she has apparently begun to understand the idea of the perfect illusion announced by Oz. Evanora's reaction to the projection demonstrates her allegiance to a fantasy world where miracles and magic are part of an everyday reality. She treats the tricks of Oscar as an insult to her and her sister, as they are convinced of their superiority where magic is concerned. Oscar plays with their self-confidence by 'disappearing' for a moment after Theodora's intervention, skilfully building tension in this battle of trickeries. He also compliments the Wicked Witches' faith in magic power, and boasts of a new status: *"Thanks to you, I've shed my mortal shell and taken my true ethereal form. I'm now more powerful than ever. I'm invincible. Do you still doubt me?"*

¹⁶ See Barbara Tylicka and Grzegorz Leszczyński, eds., *Słownik literatury dziecięcej i młodzieżowej*, Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2002, pp. 31–33.

The tricks used by Robertson and Philisthal resulted in the “*dematerialisation of the so-called projection plane, making it impossible for the viewers to adequately situate images in the surrounding space*”¹⁷, so that the viewer’s immersion in the world of images became possible. Pouring water on the grate in a fireplace, they created a cloud of smoke or water vapour, using the projection from an additional magic lantern to evoke “*the impression that the phantasm had a tangible body*”¹⁸. In addition, the subject of the phantasmagoria shows referred to necromancy, calling up the ghosts of the dead, which intensified the weird and baleful atmosphere. Combined with a skilful application of technology the illusion became perfect. Similar tricks help Oz achieve the effect of a semi-transparent phantasm of some volume which seems almost tangible when projected on to the cloud of smoke.

The people of Oz and the evil sisters behave like the audience, who are unaware of the machinery producing the illusion. Majewski defines “*unenlightened spectators*” as “*those who believe in the ontological reality of phantasms, in their existence independent of the projection activity of the optical apparatus and the viewer*”.¹⁹ A similar problem is described by Edgar Morin in reference to cinema. He argues that the film projection replaced the faith in phantasms typical of magical thinking: “*Those who do not know the secret believe that they deal with magic tricks. Because it is true that a shadow, each shadow, immediately refers to fantasy and surreality*”.²⁰ For the inhabitants of the Land of Oz the immaterial appearance of a person testifies to tremendous magical powers. They share the type of magical thinking which for Morin identifies an image, a double, with a thing, and which is based on sympathetic magic, on a belief that a thing is in a mysterious way present in its image.²¹ According to Morin this type of magic also includes illusionist art. At this point, however, he relies, in my opinion, on an over-simplified model of the adequacy of effects such as transformation, and the appearance and disappearance of things.²²

The phantasmagoria performed by Oscar is perceived as a phantasm (Morin’s double, the *Doppelgänger* produced by the process of multiplication) by the Wicked Witches and the people of Oz: “*The double is actually the most basic image of a human being, it is even older than the human self-awareness, an image recognized in a reflection or a shadow, appearing in dreams and hallucinations*”.²³ The huge phantasm of Oscar’s face combines the objective

¹⁷ Tylicka and Leszczyński, *Słownik literatury*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Tylicka and Leszczyński, *Słownik literatury*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Tylicka and Leszczyński, *Słownik literatury*, p. 24.

²⁰ Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, p. 74.

²¹ Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, pp. 39–40.

²² Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, p. 78. I do not agree with Morin’s opinion that illusionists were sustaining primordial magical thinking. I find more convincing the view described in the introduction – that illusionists represent the type of thinking typical of fantasy poetics: stemming from a scientific and rational world-view which is inspired by technological aspects of illusion and which testifies to the need for *mythos*.

²³ Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, p. 42.

nature of photography with the subjective projection of desires, dreams and fears which separates itself from the spectator's mind and imagination, and makes itself present in an independently existing image. But the phantasmagoric image has a completely different effect on spectators who share modern understandings of magical thinking stemming from the Enlightenment rationalization of all supernatural phenomena.²⁴ They include both Oz's allies, who are aware of the technical side of the illusion, and contemporary viewers of Raimi's film.

In the sequence under discussion, shots of the square in front of the palace alternate with shots of technical backroom space where Oz and his friends operate. The protagonist sits inside the drum of a machine resembling a praxinoscope combined with a variable aperture lens, a sound system, and numerous mirrors. The hybrid device constructed by Oz is a laboratory of the research and achievements of Della Porta, Kircher, Renaud, Horner, Philisthal and Robertson. Oscar's technical skills come from a romantic motivation not unlike Della Porta's attempts to show and explain the impossible.²⁵ The surprise effect aimed at the audience and based on the improbability of the images to be shown is planned down to the tiniest detail and calculated to the second. The backroom shots are not deprived of humour, either: the re-start of the projection is delayed because of a loose cable, and Oz, Master Tinker and Finley have a very good time operating the apparatus. The viewer of *Oz the Great and Powerful* learns about the functioning of the invention which was earlier described by Oscar when he was ordering the machine from Tinker. When he announces that they are going to build a machine which "*allows you to project an image onto space*", Tinker and Finley are rather sceptical and the Master claims that that it is "*impossible*". Oz answers: "*Nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it*". Thus, once again the protagonist declares his belonging to an epoch characterised by the "*episteme of modernity*" as Majewski's sees it, where the most miraculous and improbable illusion results from scientific research and the brilliance of the human mind.

As I have suggested, however, the scientific ethos of phantasmagoria and later magic spectacles was never clear and obvious. Magical thinking also changed. During the Enlightenment, it was already based on the anthropocentric imagination granting the greatest power to the human being. In this approach science was born out of medieval 'magic', while "*what we tend to perceive – in retrospect – as magical and irrational was given a function that in modern times is fulfilled by science*".²⁶ A certain contradiction between the rational world-view which denies the existence of any kind of miracle, and the faith in an evil

²⁴ See Dobrosława Grzybkowska-Lewicka, 'Trzy typy cudowności w literaturze fantasy a problem wyobrażenia, in Tomasz Ratajczak and Bogdan Trocha, eds., *Fantastyczność i cudowność. Fantasy w badaniach naukowych*, Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego, 2009, pp. 127–8.

²⁵ See Siegfried Zielinski, *Archeologia mediów*, Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010, pp. 78-9.

²⁶ Grzybkowska-Lewicka, 'Trzy typy cudowności w literaturze fantasy', p. 128.

magic understood as "*the state of the desire of power*"²⁷, can be found in the figure of Oscar. The protagonist agrees to fight the Wicked Witches in exchange for the royal throne and untold wealth. He is, after all, accustomed to control over minds of the female audience and to the submission of women who are enchanted by his abilities.

And although Oz's phantasmagoria is prepared in front of the cinema audience and none of the elements of constructing the illusion is a secret to the protagonist's friends either, the effect of astonishment – resulting from the beguilement of the spectators' senses – becomes the most important aim of the spectacle.²⁸ In his extremely interesting analysis of phantasmagoria as a phenomenon which significantly influenced aesthetic discourse at the turn of the 20th Century, Gunning indicates another important context – the notion of the uncanny, deriving from Freud's notion of the *Unheimlich*. According to the father of psychoanalysis the uncanny refers to non-abandoned primordial beliefs which are reactivated by means of optical illusion in the audience for the spectacle.²⁹ The feeling of the uncanny relates to a dimension of phantasmagoria based on primitive faith in phantasms of the dead. In terms of the didactic framework of the shows, which reminds us of the scientific and rational explanation of the illusion, phantasmagoria reveals an extremely important tension between scientific knowledge and the spectator's belief (or otherwise) in the ontological reality of phantasms.

According to Gunning, "*Freud reveals how the uncanny effect of the Phantasmagoria derives from a dialectic – not only between what we sense and what we know – but between what we think we know and what we fear we might actually believe.*"³⁰ The perfection of illusion does not consist of presenting the spectator with a phantasm of something or somebody whose existence they believe in. However, the trick leads him to start believing in the reality of the projection. Seen in this way, phantasmagoria becomes a modern experience which grants the activity of the senses a status equal to that of cognition. Majewski aptly suggests that this extension of the role of human sensuality is also reflected in granting "*figurative meaning to the notion of Phantasmagoria*" used as a metaphor of a cognitive act which objectivizes and materializes individual phantasms hidden in the spectator's subconsciousness and imagination.³¹

As is clear from the research by Gunning, Castle, and Majewski, the screen of phantasmagoria used to be metaphorically understood also as a mirror placed in front of the audience for the spectacle. Erkki Huhtamo, one of the theorists and practitioners of the

²⁷ Grzybkowska-Lewicka, 'Trzy typy cudowności w literaturze fantasy', p. 128.

²⁸ See Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator', in Linda Williams ed., *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp. 114–133.

²⁹ Gunning, 'Illusions', p. 7.

³⁰ Gunning, 'Illusions', p. 7.

³¹ Majewski, *Dialektyczne feerie*, p. 36.

archaeological approach, notices that understandings of the word 'screen' as a projection surface dates back to 1810 thanks to its popularization by phantasmagoria shows.³² Before this date images were projected on a semi-transparent material which Robertson defines as a "mirror".³³ It provides Majewski with the basis for a daring interpretation of a common phantasmagoria image of Medusa "as a metaphorical depiction of the imaging procedure"³⁴, reminiscent of the metamorphosis machine constructed by Athanasius Kircher.³⁵ Thus, in relation to the Freudian category of the *Unheimlich*, phantasmagoria not only shows phantasmatic images to the viewers, it also visualises their fears by returning their own gaze as a mirror does. Hence the horror, the fascinating unreality and improbability, of the images. Moreover, some researchers are prone to accept that the mirror effect of phantasmagoria stems from collective hallucinations, presenting collective visions typical of the modern epoch. For Gunning, the charm of such shows derives from the fusion of realism and fantasy, and from the conflict between art and representation, so typical of modernism and postmodernism.³⁶

If the phantasmagoria screen has the features of a mirror which reflects the spectator's gaze, and the deeply hidden fears and desires that lie within, it also works in the manner of the wicked sprite's mirror in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen'. It mercilessly exposes the corruption and egoism of Evanora who has long been evil; her appearance may be beautiful and elegant, but she is perfectly deceptive. For many years, the inhabitants of the royal city have not realized that they are ruled by someone who is quite different than they think. Evanora always presents Glinda as the wicked one, but she turns out to be a perfect cheat herself; and perhaps she is so afraid of Oscar's phantasm because she sees the reflection of her character in it. Theodora, on the other hand, sees the reflection of her bitterness and hatred while looking at the phantasmagoric mirror, and no longer sees her good features. When Oz tells her "I know your wickedness is not your doing" and calls on her to transform again, her response is a powerful "Never!", and she flies away on her broom. Oscar lowers his head in sadness. He is aware that the woman's metamorphosis relates to his betrayal. And despite his good will to rectify it, his image is the wicked sprite's mirror for

³²See Erkki Huhtamo, 'Elements of Screenology – Media Archaeological Explorations', Lecture delivered to wro 01, 9th Media Art Biennale, Wrocław, May 2001, http://wro01.wrocenter.pl/erkki/html/erkki_pl.html, accessed 25 July 2014; See also Majewski, 'Fantasmagoria', p. 23.

³³ Majewski, 'Fantasmagoria', p. 34. Earlier, as Huhtamo explains, the word 'screen' meant a kind of curtain, a folding screen and it is significant especially in the context of the scene quoted from Baum's novel: when the characters from the book gather in the throne room asking Oz to fulfill their wishes: he is hidden behind a folding screen.

³⁴ Majewski, 'Fantasmagoria', p. 33.

³⁵ Majewski, 'Fantasmagoria', p. 33; Zielinski, *Archeologia mediów*, pp. 183–186. In the apparatus constructed by Kircher, a special arrangement of images and mirrors meant that spectators looking at the mirror did not see their own reflection, but an image located out of their sight.

³⁶ See Gunning, 'Illusions'.

Theodora, the one which confirms her determination to remain on the side of hatred and revenge.

At first, the inhabitants of Oz are also scared when they see the phantasm; only later, when they notice the witches' uncertainty, do they begin to believe in its positive power. In other words, the phantasmagoric mirror reflects various images depending on the identity of the beholder. Oscar's "*greatest trick*" in the Emerald City corresponds to the understanding of phantasmagoria as a mirror-like representation of the recipient's internal states projected on to the images created by the magic lantern. Once again, everyone perceives phantasmagoric shadows in a different way. The Wizard from the novel also used his people's fear by appearing to each character in a form which could evoke her/his terror. However, Oscar's show is dominated by two possible models of phantasmagoric image perception, one present in the diegesis, the other at the interface between the world of Oz and the space of cinematic reception; in the case of the film – which in addition to being so rich in special effects and CGI is available to watch in 3D – a true appreciation of its references to phantasmagoria spectacles is perhaps only possible in the cinema itself.

The mechanism which "*operates directly on [...] perception*"³⁷ used by Evanora, Theodora and the inhabitants of Oz is slightly different from the one affecting the viewers of Raimi's film. Why does Oscar – who belongs to the real world and does not possess any supernatural power (and probably even does not believe in it) – win over the Wicked Witches of the Land of Oz? From the rational viewpoint of the world presented in the film, the fight in which he engages is extremely dangerous because of the true magic power of the witches, a power which is not a mere illusion but which can change reality. And yet it is Oz who turns out to be "*the great and powerful*". I infer that the uncanny dimension of the phantasmagoria effect is of decisive importance to the outcome of the battle between the illusionist and the witches. The spectacle in front of the palace in the Emerald City creates in the minds of both witches the fear that Oz might be the wizard mentioned in the prophecy.

The reversal of the situation described by Gunning occurs here. In the Land of Oz, faith in magic and sorcery is the equivalent of the rational world-view in the real world. During the action, however, Theodora and Evanora cease to believe that Oscar who came from an unknown Kansas is the expected wizard; he proves to be an arrogant poser, seducer, a man thirsty for power and wealth. However, the tricks he presents to the witches raise fearful doubts over their supremacy and turn out to be more powerful than Theodora's and Evanora's fantasy spells. The women lose their footing, their vision of a world ruled by magic falls apart. Thus Oscar accomplishes his mission of freeing the Land from the rule of evil, and he manages to do it following the principles of the fantasy genre. Unlike fairy-tale heroes who win through magic, the heroes of fantasy stories are not supposed to make use of

³⁷ See Gunning, 'Illusions', p. 10.

supernatural powers in order to achieve their goal. After all, Oscar's praxino-phantasmagoria is only the illusion created by a prestidigitator.

However, at the beginning of the 21st Century, a spectator familiar with new technologies of illusion, virtual reality and immersive entertainment perceives the spectacle in the Emerald City in a different way. In the 3D version of the film, which enables full immersion into Oz's world, the sequence under analysis simply dazzles, completing the effect of phantasmagoria from the late 18th Century – when more and more importance was assigned to the role of darkness in the creation of spectacle as the new form of phantasmagoria replaced the illuminated nature of the traditional stage and auditorium.³⁸ These new conditions for the projection of moving images, of course, later became fundamental for the medium of cinema.³⁹ The spectacle in the Emerald City does not take place in complete darkness, but in the twilight of dusk. Only the cinema hall allows spectators of Raimi's film to experience the quasi-material nature of phantasmagoric image projected on the clouds of smoke and reproduced by 3D technology. The true audience for Oz's "*greatest trick*" is then the cinema audience for whom the elaborate world of the Land of Oz was created.

At this point it is worth remembering that the most famous magician in the history of the cinema, Georges Méliès, also noticed and used the ambiguous role of film technology. The director whom Edgar Morin described as "[a] *magician who put the cinematograph into a hat and took out Cinema*"⁴⁰ was aware that by means of the theatrical and illusionist machinery he could create images which – most of all thanks to constant metamorphoses – spectators would perceive as a magical or oneiric show. The spectator's encounter with *Oz the Great and Powerful* is a re-enactment of the phenomenon which was defined as a perfect illusion by phantasmagoria experts. We are aware that the three-dimensional phantasms are only immaterial images present in the cinema space thanks to a projector; we understand perfectly well the operation of the machinery built by Oz; we observe his plans and projects and the stages of the process by which illusion is produced. We are also aware that there are projectors behind us in the cinema, even if we cannot see them. We are well aware that phantasms do not exist. And yet we get involved in the film world of Kansas and the Land of Oz, for a moment doubting the certainty of our rationalised view of reality, and, above all, we sensually experience the spectral, ethereal phenomenon which is a three-dimensional image within the space of projection. Oscar's face on the pillar of smoke takes shape, is almost tangible.

³⁸ See Gunning, 'Illusions', p. 2.

³⁹ For more detailed discussion please see my book *Dotyk światła. O zmysłowym doznawaniu kina*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo FA-art, 2012, pp. 23-60.

⁴⁰ Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, p. 81.

I refer once more to Morin's notion that whenever a shadow appears, it makes us assume the existence of a surreal and fantastical world. Sam Raimi, for his part, reminds us that in the second century of cinema, the theorist's intuition is still valid. It is confirmed by the sensations evoked by films of the new epoch in which it is possible to present virtually anything. Imagination, transformation and metamorphosis – considered by Morin to be basic elements of a cinematographic spectacle, demonstrating its magical dimension – have been effectively perfected using new technological tools.⁴¹ And film-makers do not hide from the audience the mechanisms of production of the most perfect tricks and illusions: each new film where new CGI technological inventions are used is thoroughly described and commented on by experts. Only in the cinema itself is the machine hidden, and understanding of the images produced is left to the discretion of the spectator. The most intense experience of this issue is in the case of the fantasy genre, with its various types of miracles – on the one hand those connected with a primordial religious world-view, and on the other those belonging to the sphere of technological magic and which rely on a rational approach which places the human being at the centre of the universe.⁴²

With the figure of Oscar/Oz Sam Raimi presents a set of questions and phantoms referring to the still enchanting nature of the cinematographic spectacle. Victor Fleming in *The Wizard of Oz* achieved a similar effect, emphasising the relation between cinema, the fairy-tale, and nostalgia for childhood wishes and beliefs. In an essay on Fleming's film Katherine A. Fowkes reflects upon the relation between the cinema machinery and fantasy: How can we reconcile our desire for illusion and for enjoying a fantasy film with the knowledge that the wizard himself is a fraud? If the Wizard of Oz is a failed magician, his use of technology to create awe through visual illusion nevertheless recalls the connection between the technology of cinema and fantasy in general.⁴³ The need to experience a spectacle which not only provides the satisfaction stemming from a powerful illusory craft but also touches our deepest and most primitive deposits of fear – evoking a magical attitude towards media images – is clearly still powerful. And if fantasy is supposed to fulfil the function of a cognitive strategy, as Oziewicz puts it, we need wizards just like Oz the Great and Powerful to inspire us to reconsider ways of learning about the world of images by re-evoking the need for *mythos* in a modern epoch of scientifically ordered reality. And who to remind us about it better than an illusionist?

⁴¹ Morin, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, pp. 70–79.

⁴² See Grzybkowska-Lewicka, 'Trzy typy cudowności w literaturze fantasy', p. 128.

⁴³ Katherine A. Fowkes, *The Fantasy Film*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 63.