***Métempsycose* as Attraction on the Fairground: The Migration of a Ghost**

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ABSTRACT:

Métempsycose shows were popular in fairgrounds in France and Belgium in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, staging mutating ghosts and the supposed migration of the soul as optical illusion. The attraction stands in a tradition of episcopic projection, with mirroring techniques and seamless dissolving views. In this article, we aim to demonstrate the the peculiarity of *métempsycose* by detailing its technique and genealogy and by unveiling its relationship with famous illusionists who experimented with the magic lantern, including Pepper, Robin and Robert-Houdin. The lantern proved vital to the illusion, as it operated as a hidden technology. By rehabilitating *métempsycose* as a late 'phantasmagoria', with a distinctive iconographic narration and specific position in different cultural-historical contexts, this article uncovers how a growing taste for virtual environments with a realistic sense of texture, color and volume was established in a long tradition of obscure apparitions.

FIGURES:

Figure 1: leaflet of the attraction 'Le Triomphe des Dieux de l'Olympe - Métempsycose' by Prof. Berbuto in Liège, s.d. (Collection Vliegende Bladen UGent: BIB.VLBL.HFI.F.033.05).

Figure 2: Picture taken at the fair in Ghent by Arnold Vanderhaeghen (Collection Huis van Alijn: 2004-247-125) – An account of the fairground attraction 'Le Triomphe des Dieux de l'Olympe' was found in *Gazette van Gent*, March 1, 1890.

Figure 3: Le Salon de Métempsycose de Sténégry. Picture by Henri Evenepoel at the Fête des Invalides (1898), Kikirpa Brussels, X077587.

Figure 4: Au secret des dieux – Métempsycose Sténégry, s.d., Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90161728.

Transmigration of the soul

On an autumn day in Liège, a crowd gathered around a live exhibition of six successive tableaux to witness how 'iron, marble or plaster will come to life in full public view, undergoing before the spectator all the evolutions of the transmigration of the souls'. This text appeared on a flyer for a fairground event, billed as 'Le triomphe des Dieux de l'Olympe - Métempsycose' (Figure 1). The spectacular transformation took place inside a typical fairground booth. A picture taken in Ghent in 1890 of the outside of such a booth shows the front adorned by two paintings depicting what was to be expected inside. One scene shows a terrifying skeleton, a maiden and a blank statue, with the other featuring a man in an ancient tunic pensively watching a statue on a pedestal (Figure 2). The latter painting depicts Pygmalion, who in ancient Greek mythology fell in love with one of his sculptures, which then came to life. As noted by Lynda Nead (2007, 74), the general idea of that myth was a popular subject in the arts and culture of the 19th century.

In this case, however, the scene is flanked by the other image of Death as a skeleton wielding a scythe. This is remarkable, as Death rarely appeared in person in Greek mythology, and the icon was surely not part of the ancient Pygmalion story. Its prominent presence in the picture suggests what must have been the deeper appeal of the show: the idea of metempsychosis, – a Greek term referring to the transmigration of the soul, its reincarnation after death and its movement through different bodies. In a typical *métempsycose*, the story of a sculpture becoming woman, life coming from inert stone, indeed merged with the idea that the soul, after it dies, is able to travel through different entities, eventually to be reborn. The attraction stood out because of its distinctive iconographic narrative, in which it displayed the transformation of a plaster or stone bust into an animated maiden, a skeleton and a bouquet of flowers, and then back again. The reverse metamorphosis from the maiden back to death was not uncommon and, in some cases, images of a cage containing live birds or a goblet with fish were inserted.

Leaflets and newspaper articles attest to the omnipresence of this particular attraction at multiple fairgrounds in Belgium.[1] Competition was fierce. The trick was sometimes performed by several operators at the same time at a single fair in order to meet audience demand.[2] Dutch showmen also experienced similar success with such displays,[3] and they even exported the attraction to Colonial Indonesia (Cohen, 2006, 98).

According to Deslandes, the author of the key French work *Histoire Comparée du Cinéma* (1966/1968), the 'animated images' (*images animées*) of the *métempsycose*, which was 'an attraction very much in vogue' in France during the final two decades of the century, would have repercussions until well into the 1950s (159). He mentions two families of fair-stall holders – the Sténégry family and the Bétriou family – who travelled around France with them (1968, 153). Archival documents further show that these families were far from the only ones and that many other self-proclaimed professors brought the *métempsycose* to various French provincial cities, as well as to the capital.[4]

In French literature, including Jacques Deslandes (1968, 149), Hugues Le Roux (1889, 53-54), Georges Montogreuil (1899, 188) and Alfred Ansart (1913, 37), the attraction is more often associated with the Sténégry name. This is most probably due to the beautiful visual material that has been passed down from him. Eugène Atget, the renowned photographer of Parisian street life, immortalised Sténégry's *Salon de Métempsycose* in his 1898 series of typical fair stalls at the *Fête des Invalides*, along with carousels, wrestling booths and acrobat shows. It is striking that this photograph is almost identical to the one made by the Belgian artist Henri Evenepoel at the same place in the same year (Figure 3). The poster of Sténégry, which is displayed visibly on the sides of the hut in Atget's photograph, neatly depicts the iconographic narrative of the *métempsycose* in cyclically ordered imagery (Figure 4). We observe the evolution, framed by blooming flowers, of an inert marble bust into a beautiful woman, and then into a skull, which is being watched over by a bearded old man – probably some sort of god, or perhaps Pygmalion himself – or into both at the same time, merged into the notion of the eternal mobility of the soul. One of the best descriptions is that written by Jules Lemaître in his *Impressions de théâtre* (1888-1898), which includes a report on his visit to '*la foire de Neuilly*', one of the most fashionable fairs in 19th-century Paris. Although the

description of his 1887 visit does not mention the director of the show, it might as well have been Sténégry:

> On a table within the depths of a kind of chapel is placed the head of Galatea, in plaster form. Gradually the plaster warms up and takes on colour, the eyelids flutter, the pupils within them start to shine, the hair assumes a fairer hue, the mouth partially opens, smiles and says: 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.' Then, the newly alive head is once again taken over and slowly overwhelmed by the pallid rigidity of stone. Then the stone mask contracts and becomes a death's head, a sinister head, which laughs crookedly, hideously. Then, around the death's head, there forms a trellis basket, from which roses burst forth, and one can still glimpse, through the diamond shapes of the basket, the macabre grimace. But in its turn the face of death vanishes and it is the sweet female face from earlier which once again smiles within the bouquet…All these metamorphoses occur by series of changes, alterations of shape and colour, so gradually and so perfectly imperceptibly that it is a marvel (1898, 388).

The show's location says something about the audience for the *métempsycose*. Of the many urban parties and carnivals of the early 19th century, the one in Neuilly was one of the most fashionable and most Parisian of the *Second Empire* and the *Belle Epoque*. The carnival on the outskirts of the city, at the Bois de Boulogne, thus retained something of that other legendary hub of popular culture, the Boulevard du Temple, where theatre, circus and science performances equally attracted 'le tout Paris' until its demolition in 1862. At the fair, the latest scientific developments were converted into entertainment for the '*beau monde*'. Nevertheless, broader layers of the population also visited the shows there as demonstrated by Christiane Py and Cécile Ferenczi in *La fête foraine d'autrefois. Les années 1900* (1987, 21-

26). Reading Lemaître, one can guess that both the combination of the erotic and the edifying ('eminently symbolical of the honest man') in the *métempsycose* performance spoke to all. By definition, the fair was a transnational, liberal and democratic context. The *métempsycose* was popular entertainment in all senses of the phrase.

In this article, we will delineate a genealogy of both the technique and the narrative of *métempsycose* by situating the attraction relative to experiments with the magic lantern. More specifically, we discuss how the attraction related to the possibility of transforming material objects into iconographic narratives. The show used a modification of the lantern to cast a magnified image of an opaque object onto a screen or other object. As such, both the set-up and the iconography of the *métempsycose* are akin to the famous ghost illusions that mesmerised large audiences during the second half of the 19th century. Our genealogy thus brings us into the company of famous illusionists who experimented with the lantern, including Pepper, Robin and Robert-Houdin. In other words, tracing the history and features of the *métempsycose* is tantamount to following the mutation and migration of a ghost as it travelled between England, France and Belgium, crossing contexts ranging from institutional theatres to fairgrounds. Our aim, however, is to demonstrate the peculiarity of the *métempsycose*. The context of the fairground plays a crucial role as its habitat. With the exception of circus acts, panoramas and the advent of cinematography, no thorough and detailed empirical investigation has been conducted on such habitats to date. In this respect, the cultural-historical context of the metempsychosis could explain an alternative history, one that would continue to reverberate even a half century later, as we shall see.

Dissolving spectres

In contrast to magic theatre, in which professional magicians usually highlighted the ambivalent character of their tricks by simultaneously exposing them (thereby exhibiting their skill and talent), operators of the *métempsycose* at the fair preferred to leave the illusion intact. The lantern was vital to the trick - all the more so because it operated as a hidden technology. Showmen kept the mechanism hidden, but journalists proved more talkative. On 14 November 1887, the *Gazette de Charleroi* made no secret of the fact that the trick of a certain M. Burton was 'obtained by the same process as the dissolving spectres which are conjured up one after the other without interruption.' As revealed by the journalist, the direct observation of an object slowly disappeared behind the reflection of an object from backstage in 'a two-way mirror, vertical, tilted at 45 degrees (…) placed at an angle at the opening of the stage entrance.' The gradual dimming of the lighting on the bust and the simultaneous strengthening of lighting on the head of the invisible woman produced the reflection of Galatea on the glass. The *métempsycose* could fully unfold its narrative as the bust behind the reflection was subsequently replaced by yet another object, which became visible in a third set and which could once again be projected. Similar descriptions of this technique and narrative are noted by Hugues Le Roux (1889, 54), JulienLefèvre (1894, 237-239) and Émile Kress (1912, 13-14). In the nineteenth century, people had become familiar with reflection on glass, a procedure that was attributed to ancient times and that was used primarily to create the appearance of bringing the dead to life as mentioned by Georges Montorgueil in *La Vie de Montmartre*, (1899, 188). [5]

Following a long tradition of obscure apparitions – with such lanternists as Robertson and Philidor as the high point – it would not be until the 1860s that reflective glass would start to be used intensely, immediately becoming all the rage in the City of Light. 'The spectres have invaded the capital', exclaimed Louis Figuier, an ardent populariser of science, in *L'Année Scientifique et Industrielle* in 1864, 'spectres on the huge stage of Chatelet, at the "salle Robin", spectres at the Théâtre Déjazet; it was all one saw on the stages of Paris, and the province also had its share of this exhibition of ghosts' (53). What was characteristic of the booming industry of that time was the patent struggle between Pepper and the French Henri Robin, a debate that continues to this very day, as discussed by Christian Fechner (2002, 167-271), Laurent Mannoni (1994, 235), Jim Steinmeyer (2005, 41–43) and Vanhoutte & Wynants (2017, 164), but that, as it turns out, also played a role in the emergence of the *métempsycose*. Georges Moynet gives in *La Machinerie Théâtrale. Trucs et Décors* an account of Pepper and Tobyn bringing apparitions to the Parisian audience using reflective glass in the play *Le Secret de Miss Aurore* in Théâtre du Châtelet in 1863 (1893, 276). Earlier that year, Pepper and his assistant, Dircks, had already presented what would eventually go down in history as 'Pepper's Ghost' in the Royal Polytechnic Institute in London. Even before the ghost had crossed the channel and appeared in Théâtre du Châtelet, however, Parisian theatres had been announcing the trick, prominently featuring Henri Robin and his 'living and impalpable spectres', despite Pepper's patent. The French competitors appealed to Séguin's 1852 patent for a toy known as 'the Polyoscope', which was based on a principle comparable to that of Pepper's Ghost as indicated by the contemporary illlusionist Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin in *Les secrets de la prestidigitation et de la magie : comment on devient sorcier.* (1868, 94-95) and even today discussed by Laurent Manoni (1994. 5-26) and Fechner (2002, 166). Moynet noted that Pepper was reportedly unable to do much about this, and he let his many imitators go their own way (1893, 281).

The ghosts spread faster than their reputed father could keep track of, and they spread even further in the imagination, and the technique was refined. One of these refinements would be patented as 'Metempsychosis' by Pepper himself in 1879, after he had developed a new procedure in collaboration with the American organ builder James Walker (Brooker 2013, 136). [6]

A new type of glass combined the transparent glass and a mirror in a single piece of glass. This glass was not an ordinary mirror, but one with increasingly thicker strips of the silver scratched away, leaving it transparent in those positions. On the left side, the glass was almost entirely a mirror, while on the right, it was much more like a plain piece of glass. When the glass was slid on or off the stage, the reflected image seemed to fade gradually into view, appearing out of nowhere. The projected images were placed next to the stage, such that no deeper level was needed. Pepper demonstrated this technique in what Simon During in *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* aptly referred to as 'a comic overturning of the science lecture' (2004, 148), in which sausages were transformed into a poodle, in which oranges were transformed into marmalade and in which the audience could be delighted by the 'dyspeptic illusion' (Pepper) of 'curried prawns', as described by Jeremy Brooker in "The polytechnic ghost: Pepper's ghost, metempsychosis and the magic lantern at the royal polytechnic institution" (2007, 201).

There is no doubt that the illusion had already been a hit on the continent, in conflict with Pepper's patent, although it was accomplished with simpler techniques and lantern projections. In the publication *La Machinerie Théâtrale. Trucs et décors* (1893), Georges Moynet mentions that carnival attractions that brought busts to life using lighting and

transformed bouquets into skeletons had already been displayed in the theatre 20 years before, albeit using simple accessories (e.g. tables or chairs) and tricks with mirrors (Moynet 1893, 289). Jacques Deslandes also emphasises that elements of the illusion had been in the repertoire of *'féeries theatres* such as *le Châtelet,* and even the *théâtre Robert-Houdin*' for years before the *métempsycose* would make its appearance as an attraction at fairs in the 1880s (1986, 150).

Several changes would have to be made before the *métempsycose* could conquer the carnivals. Necessity forced fair-stall holders to use simpler equipment that was scaled to a small booth, such that the possibilities were far removed from the polyvalent architecture of the institutional theatres or the lecture halls of the Polytechnic Institute. In *Les Propos d'un escamoteur: étude critique et humoristique. Prestidigitation. Magnétisme. Spiritisme* (1894), the famed French illusionist Edouard-Joseph Raynaly (1842-1918) describes the costs associated with the *métempsycose* and similar illusions when carnival workers acquired the attraction – after it had proved its success in the metropolis – and took it on tour. Although the equipment was available for purchase, it required a heavy investment. The techniques were expensive – particularly the lighting – as were maintenance and insurance, not to mention the costs of transport and location. Moreover, according to Raynaly, operators needed to possess a certain measure of authority and professionalism in order to coordinate the various employees and assistants involved in the performance. In short, 'we are very far from the man who will offer his little performance as though it were a mere stroll in the park, as it were' (1894, 71-72). In other words, the changes implied a reduction in scale, cheaper equipment and more practical techniques.

Episcopic projection

Carnival workers led a precarious existence, and everything depended upon the popularity of an attraction. Showmen knew better than anyone how to identify the rapidly shifting interests of the ever-curious audience. In general, for an attraction to become a success in the second half of the 19th century and on the fairground, it had to provide an embracing, physical environment that would invite the audience to be transported to a conceived 'other' world. The *métempsycose* required a set-up that combined immersive projection with objects. Only then could it become a modern spectacle, with a variety of sub-texts, addressing a variety of audiences and producing a variety of modes of reception characteristic of the fairground. Experiments with the magic lantern were indicative of these developments.

'Many take also a great interest in projecting opaque bodies, solid objects in relief', noted Abbé Moigno, commonly known in France as the apostle of the magic lantern, in his 1872 standard work *L'art des projections* (76). In episcopic projection, the surface of an object is brilliantly illuminated, and its reflected image is directed and focused onto a reflective screen by means of an optical system including an objective lens. One well-known example was the '*mégascope*', a lantern in which an object could be placed. A megascope is simply a reverse *camera obscura* working with artificial light in a controlled environment. The combination was further composed of diascopic and episcopic projections in a double lantern, and less expensive versions known as 'Wonder Cameras (*chambre-miracle*)' or aphengoscopes. In Moigno's view, these modifications to the lantern emerged primarily in order to allow artists to create realistic images of volumes like statues, *bas-reliëfs* and other tableaux. They could then be copied on canvas and distributed as less expensive reproductions. At the same time, these devices were eagerly used in academic lectures, where they were typically employed to project images of book pages, drawings, mineral specimens, leaves. They moreover allowed

the projection of moving parts, such as mechanically driven objects (Moigno mentions a clock) or even body parts.

Episcopic illumination produced with the lantern generated a 3D effect that retained the colour, texture and volume of the original in a highly credible manner. As Moigno writes, however, the fact that they allowed 'extremely interesting dissolving views' was at least as spectacular (1872, 79). There was thus an apparent sense of continuity between such innovations with the lantern and the *métempsycose*. Indeed, one of the most central poles of attraction when witnessing the *métempsycose*, as could be deduced from the quote of Lemaître at the Neuilly fair, was its astuteness to create seamless dissolves with 3D objects. Smooth movement is what brought the scenes together, while simultaneously building tension in the climactic moments. The attraction even added text and sound, which served as yet another way of creating the transition between scenes. This was accomplished with such precision that sound and image became editing techniques in tune with the tone of the narrative. Dialogue even emerged between the living bust and the director, further enhancing the feeling of true presence (Deslandes 1986, 152). As a consequence, the appearance of the moving icon must have been akin to a body image that was more realistic than the picture that was yet to be produced by cinema.

Admittedly, the megascope and related lanterns were not the first of their kind. Various versions of opaque projectors had been around since the mid-18th century – Robertson's phantoscope could be also used for the projection of three-dimensional objects, provided modifications were made to the lens – and Pepper even used one to cast an image of a live person's face onto the screen (Hecht, Robinson and Herbert, 2001, 106-107) . The fascination with procedures that allowed a 3D effect of moving images was nevertheless a remarkable

phenomenon of the 1860s. For example, the '*spectres fondants*' or 'dissolving spectres' described by Julien Lefèvre in *L'Electricité au Théâtre* (1894) as 'a modification of the usual ghosts *dispositif*' that distinguished impalpable spectres through their successive transformation in the same place without interruption and attributed to Robert Houdin (236), heralded the start of an entire series of new mirror illusions that added even more depth to phantasmagoria. The illusion was relocated to a different scenography, particularly in the case of '*cabinets mystérieux*', like the Cabinet of Proteus (disappearing act) and the Sphinx ('*décapité parlant*'), both of which were first displayed in the Polytechnic Institute in London in 1865 (During 2004, 148). Beginning in the 1860s, such cabinets shot up like toadstools throughout Europe. All of them used mirrors, double walls and bases to produce supernatural apparitions (McCosker 1982, 545-546). Performances in the famed Parisian Folies-Bergère also made regular use of spiritualist cabinets in the 1860s (Lachapelle 2015, 34). In Belgium, Pickmann used the technique to imitate the Davenport Brothers' internationally famous box illusion (Van Herwegen & Van Herwegen 2014, 27-28).[7] All of these developments seem to indicate that the simplification and scale reduction of the technique brought the illusion within the reach of carnival workers.

From theatre to fairground

Episcopic projection and illusionist cabinets made the scale reduction possible and created one of the conditions needed for the *métempsycose* at the carnival. It would nevertheless be two decades before the attraction would make its entrance in this context. Was an earlier breakthrough hindered by the price of the glass or the light sources? One of the most remarkable experiments in the attraction's genealogy was performed by a legendary conjuror who spared no effort to make the illusion work. As early as the mid-1860s, at the height of the ghost rage, Robert-Houdin built a chalet in the garden on his estate for the sole purpose of

developing a special ghost illusion. In 1868, the already famous showman and inventor, was asked to develop spectres for the production of the play *La Czarine* in the Théâtre de l'Ambigu. In his book *The secrets of Stage Conjuring*, he recounts how he perceived this as an opportunity to transform the illusion into a technique that would make it possible to produce the ghost outside of theatrical settings as well (1868, 97). This assumed the presence of a lower level, a smaller setting and, most importantly, ensuring that viewers could stand erect. Using an ingenious system of two trapdoors to dim the lighting and to reflect the objects backstage, the magician personally organised the possibility of switching the physical objects on the set and providing alternating images. The interplay of light and darkness resulted in the appearance of the Virgin Maria, who rose from a grave and whose cheeks gradually became pink, until she ultimately transformed into a young lady with a white cloth, on which more and more flowers appeared. These flowers grew larger until they formed an enormous bouquet, with a vase eventually appearing beneath it, finally taking the place of the young girl.

Robert-Houdin's spatial scenography along with its lighting scheme was an ingenious design. It is moreover remarkable that the iconography of the conjurer's experiment corresponded closely to that of the *métempsycose*, which, within two decades, would conquer the fairgrounds. This raises the question of where Robert-Houdin had picked up the narrative. Spiritual apparitions were the order of the day, but the evocation of the Virgin Maria might give an indication of what inspired Robert-Houdin in this particular case. Only a decade earlier (in 1858), Bernadette Soubirous' visions of the Virgin Mary had almost instantly transformed the small village of Lourdes into a centre of consumerism and tourism as already debated by Henri Laserre in *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (1868).[8] This phenomenon might not have gone unnoticed by the conjurer, who was a life-long pioneer of illusionist techniques

with great audience appeal. Whatever the case may be, it is remarkable that a friend of Robert-Houdin presumably also played a role in the transition from the theatre to the fair. This friend was Emile Voisin, the owner of the shop Maison Voisin, which was known by contemporaries as 'this mysterious backroom' in rue Vieille-du-Temple, 'whose recently appeared marvels are the last word in the extraordinary in terms of illusionism' (Raynaly 1894, 71). [9]

Voisin purportedly specialised in raising presumably lost, usually classical female bodies: *'La femme sans corps, la métempsychose, la Sibylle de Cumes, Amphytrite, la statue animée, etc.'* Known as '*magies noires*', these evocations emerged from a combination of mirrors and illusions, assisted by light sources and black fabric. According to Raynaly, Voisin's attractions had been adapted to fair life before they attracted great success in the capital city (1894, 225). One of the shows was a successful performance of a *métempsycose* in the Eden-Théâtre. An interesting court case that broke in September 1887 (Société Genevoise de droit et de législation 1887, 622-623) and that was the subject of many newspapers in France,[10] as well as in Belgium[11] and England,[12] appears to confirm this proposition. Voisin dragged the fair-stall holder Goujon (better known under the stage name Adrien Delille) into *le tribunal de commerce* on charges of plagiarism. *La Réforme: Organe de la Démocratie Libérale,* reported on 17 September 1887 the demand of the 'removal of posters and leaflets by the name of *métempsycose* and prohibition of the use of Mr Voisin's device'. Remarkably, Voisin won only half of the case. The judge ruled that Delille, who had achieved considerable success with the suspected plagiarism at fairs just outside Paris, would have to adjust the name of the *métempsycose* illusion, but that he could still use the technique, given that he (Delille) had not used the device what was the property of Voisin, but only certain 'items belonging to the public domain' (*La Réforme*, 17 September 1887). In other words, the *métempsycose* was free

to be used by anyone wishing to perform the trick. Moreover, the proliferation of *métempsycose* spectacles in Belgium beginning in 1887 suggests that the judge's ruling was of little or no effect. The ghost had migrated and was out for all to see.

Icons of Attraction

Whereas Robert-Houdin invoked the Virgin Mary, carnival audiences gathered around the lovely Galatea and her phantom image. The erotic eloquence of the *métempsycose* is unmistakable. The theatrical game of seduction and rejection that the attraction played with the viewer was undoubtedly one of the main reasons for its popularity. 'The real attraction of this establishment is Mdlle. Stenegry herself', noted a visitor to Sténégry's show in 1889, 'a *Romanische* of rare beauty, who with her golden sequins and Egyptian diadem forms the most perfect "Esmeralda" that you ever dreamed of at sixteen. Inside we find a second young lady, equally lovely, a charming blonde—Mademoiselle Lutèce. She fills the role of Galatea, "the marble statue that acquired life beneath the burning kisses of Pygmalion"' (Le Roux 1889, 54). The quotation clearly indicates the extent to which live performance built up tension between presence and absence, the body of the actress and the fleeting appearance of the image.

First, there was the image. The lovely Galatea appeared as a receding vision before the eyes of the viewer. 'Spectators of the *métempsycose* witnessed with their own eyes how a radiantly beautiful woman appeared from within the stone, only to disappear again as a fleeting illusion behind a death mask. 'Do you love (me), Galatea?' he asked her. 'No', replied the bust': in the '*cabinet mysterieux*' of a certain *Professeur* Henry Wilden in 1887, the audience in Liège could see how a bust of Galatea gained colour and lifted her eyes towards her admirer, whose advances she nevertheless resolutely refused, as reported in *La Meuse* on 13 September, 1887.

When the professor tried to grasp his object of desire, she abruptly transformed into a bouquet of flowers, subsequently re-appearing to and disappearing from her admirer until he was ultimately left begging for love from a stone. Moreover, *métempsycose* was often a tactile experience. Many descriptions in press records exist of the sensation felt upon being able to touch the plaster bust that transformed into a woman.

Some shows refined the trick and went even further to make the image tangible. After coming to life, Galatea often appeared in the flesh amongst the audience.[13] Although we can only guess as to what happened next, we can indeed imagine the sensation of this act. The very fact that the morality of the *métempsycose* did not go unchallenged speaks volumes. Flyers aimed to assure viewers that the attraction did indeed involve a 'a respectable illusionist', that 'morality and decency are strictly observed' and that 'little children can bring their parents'. The warnings indirectly indicate that the visual representation of a female statue coming alive correlated with sexual gratification. *Métempsycose* can indeed be regarded a performance centred on the man as creatively and sexually dominant, in contrast to the woman, who is portrayed as a passive substitute, desired rather than desiring, material rather than spiritual. Woman had a role in this elevated sphere of beauty, but only insofar as her undeniable attractiveness could be moulded according to the man's fantasies and to develop his perceptions concerning the structure of ideal beauty.

The erotic fascination for animated female statues is also associated with the technological revolution of the visual culture, which was exceptionally acute during the heyday of the *métempsycose*. 'It is historically consistent that the story of Pygmalion enjoyed a renewed popularity in the visual arts late in the nineteenth century, just when attempts to design machines to create living pictures and moving images were escalating and had assumed a

pressing momentum', writes Lynda Nead in *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900*. In her account of late-Victorian popular entertainment, the author advances a fascinating and informative analysis of the dream of motion haunting the visual arts. She links Pygmalionist fantasies of animated statues to the wildly popular *tableaux-vivants* (performances in which live models reproduced iconic paintings or sculptures and held the pose for a set period of time) and such spin-offs as the 'Statuette Portrait' or the 'Poses Plastiques'. What these performances had in common with the equally popular conjuring tricks, fantastic illusions and automatons of the magic theatre was that their '(s)mooth, flowing passages of movement linked the sudden freezing of the body into a living picture or statue, creating a distinctive temporality and rhythm in the performance' (Nead 2007, 74). The highly sophisticated dissolving tricks of the *métempsycose* attraction certainly would not have seemed out of place in Nead's account. The constant and provocative oscillation between stasis and movement of this fairground attraction indeed quite literally set the imagination of the (male) audience in motion.[14]

There is also a strong sense of continuity between *métempsycose* and the conceptions of early filmmakers. At the end of the 19th century, Delille (the fair-stall holder who had previously been accused of plagiarism by Voisin in the *métempsycose* case) traded installation for cinematography (Deslandes 1968, 148). He was far from the only one. During the same period, fair-stall holders in England who had become known for ghost illusions also switched to film (Heard 2011, IV). The *métempsycose* would nevertheless continue to haunt the new era of film. Méliès, who had studied with Voisin, would perform a related illusion in the Théâtre Robert-Houdin in 1889. The 'Fairy of the flowers, or Cagliostro's Mirror' called upon a spectator to come on stage and to look at his reflection, whereupon the mirror transformed into a bed of flowers, in the centre of which was a large bouquet in a vase with a

woman's head in the middle. The illusion was achieved using a technique similar to metempsychosis (McCosker 1982, 671).[15] It is thus no coincidence that the cinematographic projects of Méliès often alluded to the iconography of the *métempsycose*. Such projects included 'Pygmalion et Galathée' (1898), 'Extraordinary Illusions' (1903) and 'Le Parapluie fantastique, ou dix femmes sous une ombrelle' (1903).[16]

In theory, the superimposition techniques eliminated the necessity of complex illusions with lanterns, mirrors and small cabinets. The *métempsycose* survives to the present day in carnivals, where it has a certain retro-effect, although it has become extremely rare as a live performance. For a time, the iconography continued to have effects on the early cinema, where the transmigration of the soul admittedly took on a less dramatic and shady form. Such appears to have been the case for Méliès, as well as for similar trick films of the time, in which death and resurrection were replaced by images of beauty and fertility that were of a more enchanting character. One good example is *Métempsycose* by Segundo de Chomon, the film that he created in 1907 before returning to Barcelona three years later. Vaudeville was crucial for the Spanish director, whose enchanting theatricality runs throughout his work. If viewed against the backdrop of the fairground attractions, Chomon's film appears to be a meta-commentary on the intermedial transition from illusion theatre to the cinema. The movie commences with a woman, a sort of assistant to an absent illusionist, placing a bust on a table in a theatrical frame. The plaster comes to life briefly before transforming into dancing midgets and a butterfly. Finally, the woman pulls babies out of a large cabbage, out of the illusionist setting and into the foreground, holding the newborns demonstratively before the camera.

Conclusion

The consistent popularity of the *métempycose* at the end of the nineteenth century indicates that the wandering ghost, who had been roaming England and the continental countries via optical media for a long time already, was still very much alive. Many showmen in Belgium, France and even the colonies kept on feeding the illusion in the secluded but crowded space of the fairground booth. The *métempsycose* attraction can be said to descend from the illusionistic arts of celebrities such as Robert-Houdin and John Henry Pepper. Meanwhile, however, the ghostly apparition had taken on new guises in confrontation with a global and no doubt socially heterogeneous audience. It had migrated from the theatre to the fairground where it responded to the growing fascination of large audiences for immersive environments and moving images. Remarkably enough, these new spectres differed technically and iconographically from the 'Metempsychosis' distributed throughout the English world by Pepper and others. As demonstrated by the explicit reference to the process of transmigration of the soul, the audience took delight in movement itself. Not only the ritual of evocation or the final form of transformation mesmerized the spectator, but also the process of metamorphism and shape shifting as such. In addition, the métempsycose realised some of the goals set by inventors of episcopic lantern projection, feeding the growing taste for virtual environments with a realistic sense of texture, colour and volume - a sensation which was in some cases even complemented with touch. The sensualistic dimension proved key to the popularity of the attraction, and it is to be assumed that mythological references to the Pygmalion myth may have well increased the erotic appeal. At the same time, the embodiment of ancient and proven icons also provided legitimacy to the act. Eventually, the iconography dissolved into early cinematographic spectacle, where it provided early moving picture pioneers with magnificent materials.

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[1] Press Reports on the topic of Métempsycose / Galathée / Galathea / Pygmalion based on a search in Belgica Press (https://www.belgicapress.be/): *La Meuse,* 5 November 1887; *La Meuse,* 19 November 1987; *Gazette de Charleroi,* 14 November 1887; *La Meuse,* 13 September 1887; *La Meuse,* 28 July 1888; *La Meuse,* 8 October 1888 and 10 October 1888; *La Meuse*, 16 September 1887; *La Meuse,* 4 February 1888; *Journal de bruxelles,* 27 January 1889; *La Meuse,* 2 October 1889; *La Meuse,* 14 May 1890; *La Meuse,* 4 October 1890; *Journal de Bruxelles,* 9 November 1890.

[2] During the October fair in 1889 in Liège, the so-called Musée Spitzner simultaneously showed 'Métempsycose', 'Le Rêve de Pygmalion', and 'Le Secrèt de Pygmalion' (article in *La Meuse,* 2 October 1889).

[3] *De Gooi en Eemlander*, 28 July 1888; *Algemeen Handelsblad,* 16 March 1897; *Haarlem's Dagblad,* 16 January 1888; *Haarlem's Dagblad,* 14 September 1892.

[4] In the collection 'Vliegende Bladen' we found many leaflets advertising the attraction such as 'Miss Castro dans la Métempsycose ou la Légende de Galathée' in the fairgound in Dunerkque (s.d.), 'Professeur Paul Dulon' with 'La Métempsycose' in Boulogne-Sur-Mer (s.d.). Prof. Henry appears in the Paris Eden-Théâtre in December 1886 (*Officiel-artiste : journal hebdomadaire*, 16 December 1886), where a year before Emile Voisin was seen performing his show (*La Réforme: Organe de la Démocratie Libérale*, 17 September 1887).

[5] *La Réforme: Organe de la Démocratie Libérale,* 28 October 1887.

[6] Walker already developed the technique in 1869 to obtain a ghost effect for 'The Mysteries of Udolpho', but the Metempsychosis would be patented by Walker and Pepper as late as 28 March 1879.

[7] In addition, see a description of Pickmann's show in *L'Indépendant Belge*, 25 March 1885.

[8] This book enjoyed huge succes: with more than 200 editions, it was translated into about forty languages, and explicitly celebrated by the French bishops and Pope Pius IX himself.

[9] In addition, see Wood, Gaby. 2003. *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life*, New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 176.

[10] *Le Rappel*, 16 september 1887 and *Le XIXe Siècle*, 14 September 1887.

[11] *La Réforme: Organe de la Démocratie Libérale,* 17 September 1887.

[12] *Congleton & Macclesfield Mercury, and Chesire General Advertiser,* 24 september 1887; *Dundee Evening Telegraph,* 17 september 1887; *East Anglian Daily Times,* 17 september 1887;
Witney Gazette and West Oxfordshire Advertiser, 24 september 1887; *Belfast News-Letter,* 17 september 1887; *Western Morning News,* 19 september 1887; *Banbury Advertiser,* 22 september 1887;
Eddowes's Journal, and General Advertiser for Shropshire, and the Principality of Wales, 21 september 1887; *Eastern Daily Press,* 19 september 1887; *Edinburgh Evening News,* 17 september 1887; *Belfast Weekly News*, 24 september 1887; *Belfast News-Letter*, 22 september 1887; *Globe,* 16 september 1887; *Weekly Freeman's Journal,* 1 october 1887; *Cornish & Devon Post,* 1 October 1887.

[13] *La Meuse,* 10 October 1888: 'Ensuite reparaît la statue de Galathée reprenant vie encore, et, cette fois, une vie indéniable et durable, car elle descend de son piédestal pour venir dans le public.'; *Gazette de Charleroi,* 14 November 1887: 'M. Burton met à la place un vase de fleurs qu'il a fait d'abord toucher par les spectateurs.'; *La Meuse,* 16 September 1887:

'Lequel marbre bientôt se transforme en une corbeille de fleurs bien visible et bien tangibles.'; *Le Peuple* 16 July 1889: 'Qui s'anime peu à peu et qui se transforme bientôt en une charmante et fraîche fille d'Eve qui descend de son piédestal pour venir saluer le public. Le secret de Pygmalion obtiendra un succès mérité à la foire de Bruxelles.'

[14] Tableaux vivants were very popular fairground attractions. The fascination for animated female statues also helps understanding why 'métempsycose' was often part of cabinets with wax figures. We found traces of the 'métempsychose' by Maurice Castan in september 1887 (*La Meuse,* 4 February 1888) and January 1889 (*Journal de Bruxelles*, 27 January 1889) and by Spitzner in October 1889 (*La Meuse,* 2 October 1889).

[15] In addition, see Lachapelle, *A History of Scientific Entertainment and Stage Magic,* 111 and Deslandes, *Histoire Comparée*, 153.

[16] Deslandes, *Histoire comparée,* 153; Gaudreault, André , "Theatricality, Narrativity, and Trickality: Reevaluating the Cinema of Georges Méliès," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 15, 3 (Fall 1987): 110–119 and Bloom, Michelle E. 2000. "Pygmalionesque Delusions and Illusions of Movement: Animation from Hoffmann to Truffaut." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4, 291–320.