

Kant's Magic Lantern: Historical Epistemology and Media Archaeology

Otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears.

—Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

Illusion is the kind of mirage that persists even though one knows that the ostensible object is not real.

—Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*¹

IN THE FALL SEMESTER OF 1805/1806, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel gave a lecture course “The Philosophy of Nature and Spirit” at the University of Jena. It was at the same time that he wrote his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which described a succession of different “spiritual shapes” in the progress toward absolute knowledge—from subjective through objective to absolute spirit.² A teleological sequence of spirits was also at the center of Hegel’s Jena lectures where he explicitly referred to contemporaneous optical technologies and the visual medium of the phantasmagoria. These spectral performances, first staged in postrevolutionary Paris by Paul Philidor and Etienne Gaspard Robertson, perfected the use of the magic lantern for the purpose of simulating spirit apparitions. In the dark subterranean vault of a former Capuchin monastery Robertson achieved stunning effects by suddenly magnifying ghostly projections that seemed to loom out at terrified audiences (fig. 1).

In Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of nature and spirit, one early passage describes a stage of abstract negativity that has to be traversed by the subject in its teleological progress toward knowing. In representing the interior of pure selfhood Hegel invokes the darkness and terror that were at

ABSTRACT This essay juxtaposes Kant’s critical epistemology with the visual medium of the phantasmagoria and a contemporaneous debate about spirit apparitions. Kant’s notion of *Erscheinung* as an appearance or apparition of a supersensory thing in itself draws on the previous hypothesis of genuine spirit apparitions from his *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* (1766). His doctrine of transcendental illusion, by contrast, adapts a second, skeptical explanation of spirit visions by describing speculative metaphysics as a “magic lantern of brain phantoms.” Kant thereby transforms the optical instrument into an epistemological figure, highlighting the unreliability and limits of philosophical knowledge. REPRESENTATIONS 115, Summer 2011 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734–6018, electronic ISSN 1533–855X, pages 42–70. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI:10.1525/rep.2011.115.1.42.

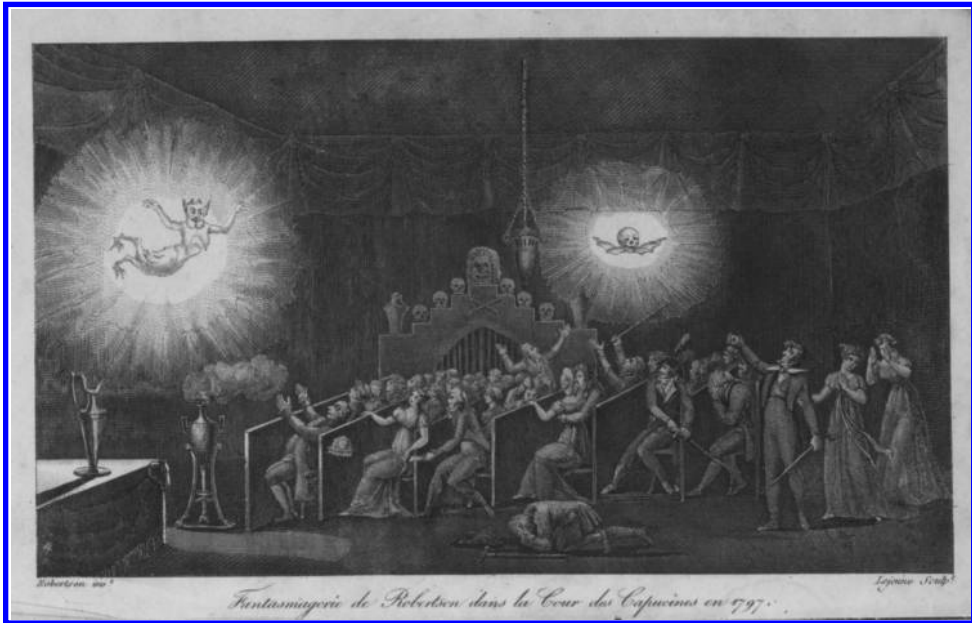


FIGURE 1. “Fantasmagorie de Robertson dans la Cour des Capucines,” frontispiece of Etienne Gaspard Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques* (Paris, 1834). The darkness of the theater, the black background of the magic lantern slides, and the back projection onto hidden screens and smoke allowed for the special effect of magnifications that were perceived as a terrifying approach of the projected figure.

the center of Robertson’s phantasmagoria: “[This] is the night, the inner of nature that exists here—pure self. In phantasmagorical presentations it is night on all sides; here a bloody head suddenly surges forward, there another white form abruptly appears, before vanishing again. One catches sight of this night when looking into the eye of man—into a night that turns dreadful; it is the night of the world that presents itself here.”³

While Hegel’s representation of the “night of the world” has been analyzed in Lacanian terms of bodily dismemberment, this passage has not been linked to the visual medium whose name actually introduced the term “phantasmagoria” into French, German, and English in the 1790s.⁴ In order to historicize the philosophical theories of German idealism, I therefore juxtapose canonical philosophy to the use of the magic lantern in phantasmagorical projections and to a contemporaneous scientific debate about the possibility of spiritual apparitions. For it is not only Hegel’s notion of spirit and his invocation of “phantasmagorical presentations” that link the emergence of German idealism to optical media and theories of the occult that

gained widespread currency in the late eighteenth century. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) also draws on spiritualist notions when conceiving of *Erscheinung* as an "appearance" or "apparition" that is constituted by our forms of intuition but nonetheless related to a supersensory thing in itself. At the same time, Kant's critical doctrine of transcendental illusion described the "mirage" (*Blendwerk*) of dialectical semblance by invoking the phantasmagorical images of the magic lantern, which were real, even if no material bodies corresponded to them.

In characterizing the transcendental illusion of pure, speculative reason as a "magic lantern of brain phantoms," Kant anticipates Karl Marx's use of optical metaphors, especially in *Capital* (1869), where Marx describes the commodity's "phantasmagorical form."⁵ But whereas Marx's reliance on optical figures has generated critical readings that trace the adaptation and transformation of his notion of phantasmagoria in the writings of Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno, earlier philosophical appropriations of this notion have found only marginal attention.⁶ The focus of this essay is therefore on the interrelation of philosophy, spiritualism, and optical media around 1800, combining textual analysis with the exploration of visual technologies in order to make a contribution to historical epistemology and media archaeology.

In establishing the cultural use of the magic lantern in phantasmagorical projections as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of German idealism, I aim to avoid the technological determinism that often characterizes the historiography of media.⁷ Elsewhere I have analyzed the reciprocal interaction between late nineteenth-century theories of psychic television in time and space and the concurrent emergence of the technological medium.⁸ This essay deals less explicitly with cultural and epistemic conditions of technological innovation. Yet in linking Kant's critical epistemology to late eighteenth-century optical media I conceptualize the magic lantern as both a material object within an arrangement of cultural practices and a discursive figure within philosophical texts. This approach builds on Jonathan Crary's account of the camera obscura's mixed status as an optical instrument and as epistemological figure in his *Techniques of the Observer*. But I also propose a revision of Crary's description of the magic lantern as preserving and adhering to the epistemological model of the camera obscura, a model that was predicated on a paradigm of disembodied and purely receptive perception.⁹

Techniques of the Observer describes an epistemic shift that occurs in the early nineteenth century and that is linked to the emergence of optical instruments such as the stereoscope and the phenakistoscope. By contrast, my focus is on the second half of the eighteenth century, when the magic lantern's open display in scientific demonstrations was gradually supplanted by its use

for the back projection of phantasmagorical images.¹⁰ It was around the same time that the magic lantern's deceptive power also became an important discursive figure in epistemological discussions about the unreliability of sensory perception and the limits of philosophical knowledge. Kant's critical epistemology describes a subject that projects its forms of intuition onto the external world and that is inclined to mistake subjective ideas for objectively given substances. At the same time, his critical notion of an appearance that is linked to a supersensory thing in itself places philosophical metaphysics in a surprising proximity to spiritualist theories. Kant himself highlighted this structural affinity in the subtitle of an early precritical text first published in 1766 as *Dreams of a Spirit Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*.

In the introduction to his treatise about the possibility of spirit apparitions, Kant criticized the popularity of supposedly authentic ghost stories, which were intruding upon philosophical theory: "But why is it that the popular tales which find such widespread acceptance . . . circulate with such futility and impunity, insinuating themselves even into scholarly theories?"¹¹ Yet, it is only in the second, "historical" part of his book that Kant discusses the reports about Emanuel Swedenborg's ghostly visions—stories that three years earlier had so strongly impressed him that he had personally sought information to ascertain their veracity.¹² In the first, "dogmatic" part of his text, Kant instead engages in a detailed theoretical discussion of how spirit apparitions might be conceived of—an issue he deliberates in conjunction with classical metaphysical questions such as the relationship between mind and body.

Kant defines spirits as simple, immaterial beings that are endowed with reason but lack spatial extension (*D*, 923/309). But this reiteration of the Cartesian opposition of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* gives rise to the question as to how to conceptualize the unity of human body and spirit: "How mysterious is the community [*Gemeinschaft*] which exists between a spirit and a body?" (935/315). Kant seeks to resolve this mind-body problem by describing the soul as partaking in both the bodily and the spiritual worlds: "The human soul, already in this present life, would therefore have to be regarded as being simultaneously linked to two worlds" (940/319). However, the soul's spiritual dimension eludes our bodily perception. A "clear intuition" or "view" of the spirit world—*das klare Anschauen*—which mesmerist theories would later term "clairvoyance," can be achieved only in the afterlife.¹³

Consequently Kant formulates the assumption that "the human soul, even in this life, stands in an indissoluble community with all the immaterial natures of the spirit world; that, standing in a mutual interaction with these natures, it both has an effect upon them and receives impressions from them. But the soul as a human being is not conscious of them, provided that everything is in good order" (*D*, 941/320*). For the purpose of further elucidating and supporting this hypothesis he introduces a "real

and generally accepted observation” in a digression on social phenomena (942/321*).

Vaguely relying on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Kant describes the reconciliation of “private” and “common interest” as the consonance of the individual soul in a ghostly harmony that comprehends the aggregate unity of all “spiritual natures.”¹⁴ The surprisingly detailed foray into moral philosophy postulates an “immediate community of spirits” (945/325*). A “spiritual republic” arises as “a consequence of the natural and general mutual interaction” between private and general will.¹⁵ Our disregard for our own interests and the inclination of “the forces which move the human heart” to “find the focal point of their union outside ourselves” emerge from this imperceptible influence of the general will (942/321). As Kant puts it: “When we relate external things to our need, we cannot do so without at the same time feeling ourselves bound and limited by a certain sensation; this sensation draws our attention to the fact that a foreign will, as it were, is operative within ourselves, and that our own inclination needs external assent as its condition. A *secret power compels us* to direct our will towards the welfare of others or to regulate it in accordance with the will of another, although this often happens contrary to our own will” (943/322*).

The description of being controlled by a “secret power” resembles the economic and Gothic invocations of an “invisible hand” whose ghostly intervention compels us to promote the public interest.¹⁶ But Kant is more interested in deducing this phenomenon from a general moral law and concludes: “As a result, we recognize that, in our most secret motives, we are dependent on the rule [*Regel*] of the general will. It is this rule which confers on the world of spiritual beings a moral unity and systematic constitution according to purely spiritual laws” (*D*, 943/322*). The “rule” of the general will—a phrase that oscillates between external coercion and adherence to a universally valid formula—can thus be interpreted as our being controlled by a foreign will, while simultaneously anticipating the formal principle of practical reason and its ethical legislation.¹⁷ Kant goes on to equate our “moral feeling” with the “sensed dependency of the private will on the general will” (944/323). Introducing a further, speculative explanation of this phenomenon, he relates the mutual attraction of kindred spirits to “pneumatic laws” that may function similar to Isaac Newton’s laws of gravitation.¹⁸ Kant does not clearly subscribe to a belief in this analogy of physics and pneumatology as a science of spiritual forces. Nonetheless he maintains that the compelling influence exerted by the general will constitutes a “real and generally accepted observation” (942/321*). The aggregate specter of the “spiritual community” is therefore a “common and ordinary thing” (946/324*).

The rarity of ghostly visions seems strangely at odds with the constant interaction between our soul and the spiritual republic. Yet Kant explains

this apparent discrepancy by distinguishing between the soul's "immaterial intuition" (*immaterielles Anschauen*) and the sensory intuition and perception of material objects, emphasizing that both modes of perception are "altogether different" from each other (946/325*). The unity of this difference within one single subject can therefore only be maintained in a precarious manner—by introducing the unexpected and initially enigmatic distinction between subject and person. In Kant's words: "While it is true that there is one single subject, which is simultaneously a member of the visible and the invisible world, it is nonetheless not one and the same person" (947/325). Describing the mysterious community of body and spirit, Kant invokes the splitting of one subject into two distinct persons that know nothing about each other. What we perceive "as a human being" retreats from our intuition "as spirit," while spiritual ideas are inaccessible to our sensory perception (947/325). As an empirical analogy to this strange theory of the subject Kant even refers to the "dual personality of sleepwalkers, who on occasion in this state display greater than usual understanding, even though they remember nothing about it when they wake" (947/325n*). The unity of mind and body in one subject corresponds to the identity of a split personality.

Yet, according to Kant, the division between the spiritual and the material worlds can be overcome at certain points "even in this present life" (948/326), when "spiritual impressions . . . arouse kindred fantasies in our imagination" (949/326–27*). This can take place "in persons with organs of unusual sensitivity" (949/327). Such "strange persons," suggests Kant, amplify the images of their fantasy to such a degree that they are "assailed by the appearance of certain objects as being external to them" (949/327*). The true cause of these apparitions is, however, an internal, "genuine spiritual influence" (949/327*). This spiritual influence "cannot be perceived immediately, but it reveals itself to consciousness by means of kindred images of our fantasy that assume the semblance of sensory perception" (949/327*). While presenting mere "shadow images of material objects," ghostly visions are "founded upon a real, spiritual impression" (949/327*). But the actual qualities of the manifesting spirit remain unknown, since the ghost seer's perception of such an appearance does not allow for immediate conclusions about its underlying spiritual substrate.

Summarizing this "metaphysical hypothesis" (950/328), Kant again explains genuine spiritual apparitions as hallucinations that are based on sensory deception and that nonetheless have an objective cause. He writes: "Departed souls and pure spirits can never, it is true, be present to our outer senses, nor can they in any fashion whatever stand in community with matter. But they may indeed act upon the spirit of man, who belongs, with them, to one great republic. And they can exercise this influence in such a way that the representations, which they awaken in him, clothe themselves, according to the

law of his fantasy, in images which are akin to them, and create the external appearance of objects corresponding to them" (950/328*).

Kant thus asserts the possibility of genuine apparitions, which are based upon our constant partaking in a "republic" of spirits. After the book's publication, Kant received a no longer extant letter by Moses Mendelssohn, who would later review *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* as leaving "the reader somewhat unsure as to whether Mr. Kant would rather render metaphysics risible or ghost seeing plausible."¹⁹ In his response to Mendelssohn, Kant claimed that his attempt at an "analogy between a real moral influence by spiritual beings and the force of common gravitation" was "actually not a serious proposition" but "merely intended as an example of how far one can go in philosophical fabrications, completely unhindered, when there are no data."²⁰ This statement has been taken as indicating that the whole first chapter of *Dreams* does not have to be taken seriously. But Kant's uneasy renunciation pertains only to the parallel between Newton's laws of gravitation and the explanation of our moral actions by "pneumatic laws" (945/324), while he never questions the "real and generally accepted observation" (942/321*) of our moral feeling being directed by a secret power. In addition, his text elaborates the surprising "metaphysical hypothesis" (950/328) of genuine spirit apparitions in great detail, and he even feels the need to emphasize that, despite apparent similarities, he conceived his theory of ghost seeing independently from Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia*.²¹

Yet, immediately after establishing how genuine spirit visions could be conceptualized, Kant's treatise formulates a diametrically opposed, equally "dogmatic" model, which dismisses ghost seeing as the perception of delusive phantoms. Kant's metaphysical theory of genuine apparitions puts particular emphasis on the parallel between spiritual visions and the moral influence of the general will. But in explaining the false and deceptive images created by a fanatic and inflamed imagination, Kant foregrounds a medial analogy: the optical production of a ghostly illusion or mirage that a credulous observer mistakenly assumes to be real. This "phantasmagoria," as it was soon to be termed by Philidor, perfected the use of the magic lantern for the purpose of simulating spirit apparitions by projecting images on smoke. Within *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, the parallel between ghostly visions and the perception of optical illusions is made explicit in a passage that denounces the seeing of apparitions as the delusion of an enthusiastic imagination.²² Kant does not explicitly introduce the term "projection," which in German becomes common around 1850 in referring to mental and optical processes. But he describes how pathological spirit seers locate the figments of their own imagination "outside of themselves," mistaking these chimeras for the actual presence of a specter (*D*, 954/331). In 1791, Jakob Friedrich Abel wrote in nearly identical terms: "We see, outside of ourselves, that which

merely haunts our own head.”²³ In an etymologically grounded pun, Kant therefore refers to these *Hirngespinnste*, these “figments of the imagination,” as “brain phantoms”—*Hirngespenster*; and he explains their emergence by invoking the “optical deception” of visual media (*D*, 960/336).²⁴ According to this second, skeptical model of how to explain spiritual apparitions, the deranged ghost seer transposes the “mirage of his imagination” to the exterior world (954/331*), thereby assigning a false, imaginary “focal point” to the perceived object—“as also happens when, by means of a concave mirror, the specter [*Spectrum*] of a body is seen in mid air.”²⁵

The creation of such optical specters by means of concave mirrors was described in numerous contemporaneous texts on natural magic such as Bonaventure Abat’s *Philosophical Amusements on Various Parts of the Sciences* (1763), or the third volume of Edme Gilles Guyot’s *New Physical and Mathematical Amusements* (1769).²⁶ Guyot’s book gave a detailed description of the special effects produced with concave mirrors that allowed for “presenting the image of an object in such a way that even if one imagined holding it in one’s hand, one could clutch only the semblance of it.”²⁷ Providing his readers with extensive instructions for building the necessary apparatus (fig. 2), Guyot explained how “by means of this mirror, all kinds of objects, painted

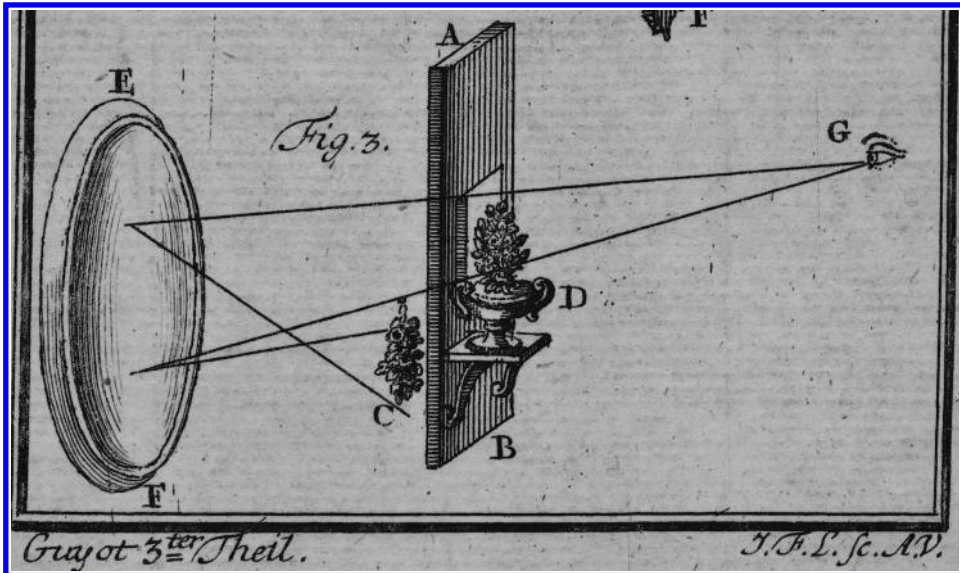


FIGURE 2. Creation of an optical “specter” by means of a concave mirror: a plant hidden from sight behind the wall A-B and located at point C is reflected by the concave mirror E-F and perceived by the observer G as located at point D; from Edme Gilles Guyot, *Neue Physikalische und mathematische Behustigungen* (Augsburg, 1772).

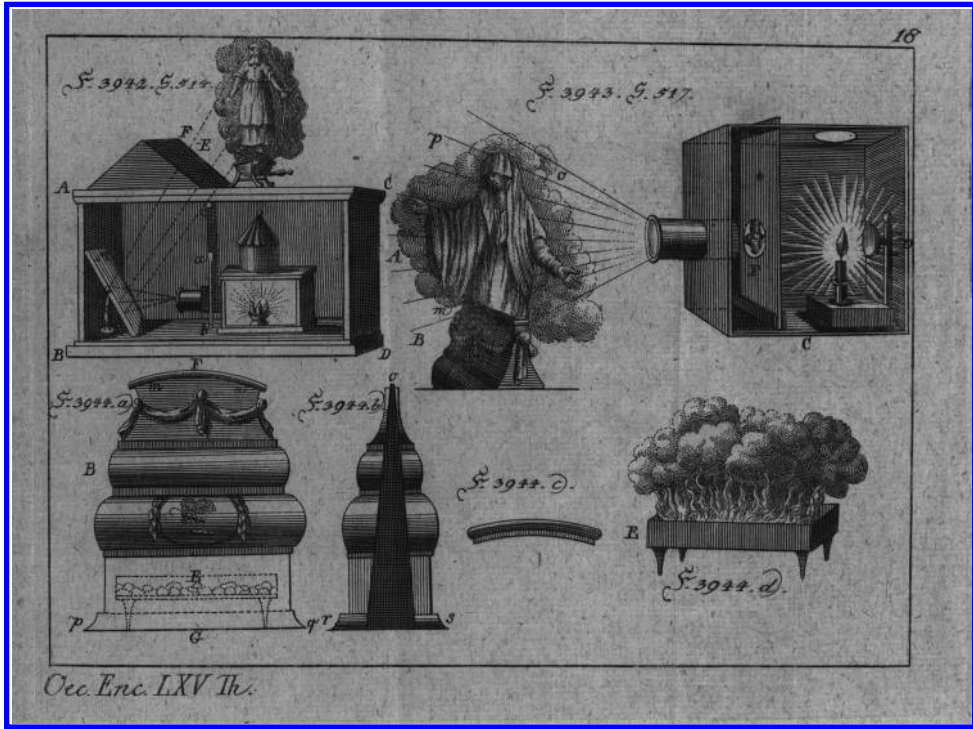


FIGURE 3. Phantasmagorical projection of ghostly images onto smoke; from Johann Georg Krünitz, *Oeconomisch-technologische Encyclopädie*, vol. 65 (Berlin, 1794).

or in demi-relief, could be shown, for instance, an absent person of whom one has only a portrait, or figures of ghosts . . . and many other things.”²⁸

In addition to this description of optical tricks rendered possible by the use of concave mirrors, Guyot also presented various modes of employing hidden magic lanterns, such as the simulation of spirit apparitions by projecting images onto clouds of smoke. This usage of the medium became very popular in the late eighteenth century, since it lent the ghostly apparitions the semblance of corporeality (fig. 3). As Guyot put it: “The observers [will] not know to whom they should ascribe the sudden apparition of this ghost whose head seems to emerge from out of the smoke.”²⁹

Technical innovations like Aimé Argand’s development of an oil burner that, after 1783, replaced simple candles as the light source of magic lanterns allowed for the optical conjuring of spirits before larger audiences. Especially popular were Etienne Gaspard Robertson’s “phantasmagorias,” which took place in the dark subterranean vaults of a former Capuchin monastery in Paris, accompanied by the unearthly sounds of Benjamin Franklin’s glass

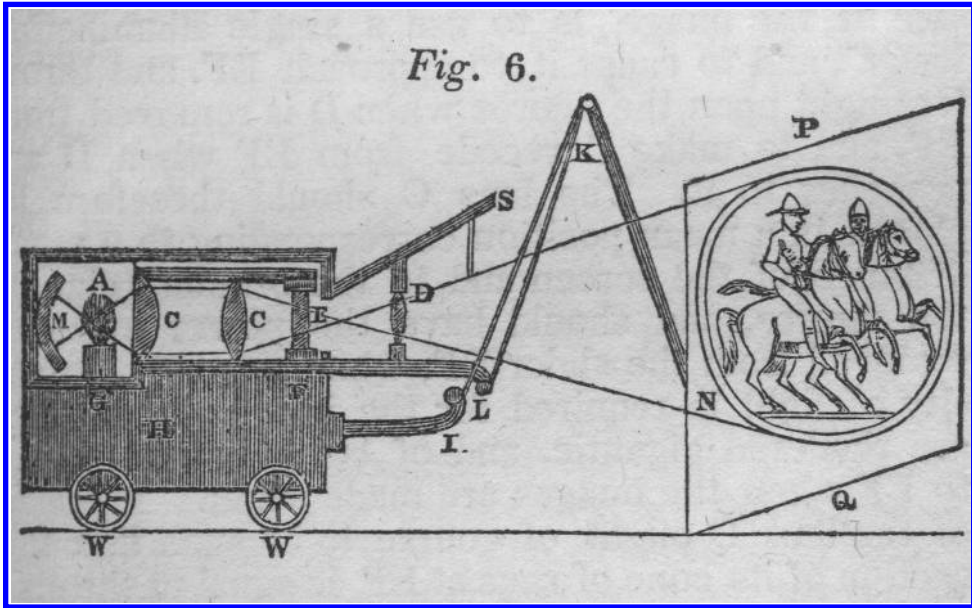


FIGURE 4. The phantascope, a magic lantern on wheels; from David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic* (London, 1832).

harmonica. In staging his elaborate performances, Robertson relied on the phantascope, a magic lantern that was equipped with movable glass slides and mounted on wheels (fig. 4). The moving back projection of the images allowed for powerful special effects that were created by increasing the distance between lantern and image. In the darkness of the vault, astounded audiences perceived the resulting magnification as a terrifying *approach* of the projected figure. To return to Hegel’s previously quoted description of the night of the world: “In phantasmagorical presentations it is night on all sides; here a bloody head *suddenly surges forward*, there another white form abruptly appears, before vanishing again.” Highlights of Robertson’s phantasmagoria included the apparition of the “Bleeding Nun” (fig. 5), a figure from Matthew Lewis’s Gothic novel *The Monk* (1796). Equally popular was the summoning of Louis XVI who had been executed in January of 1793.³⁰

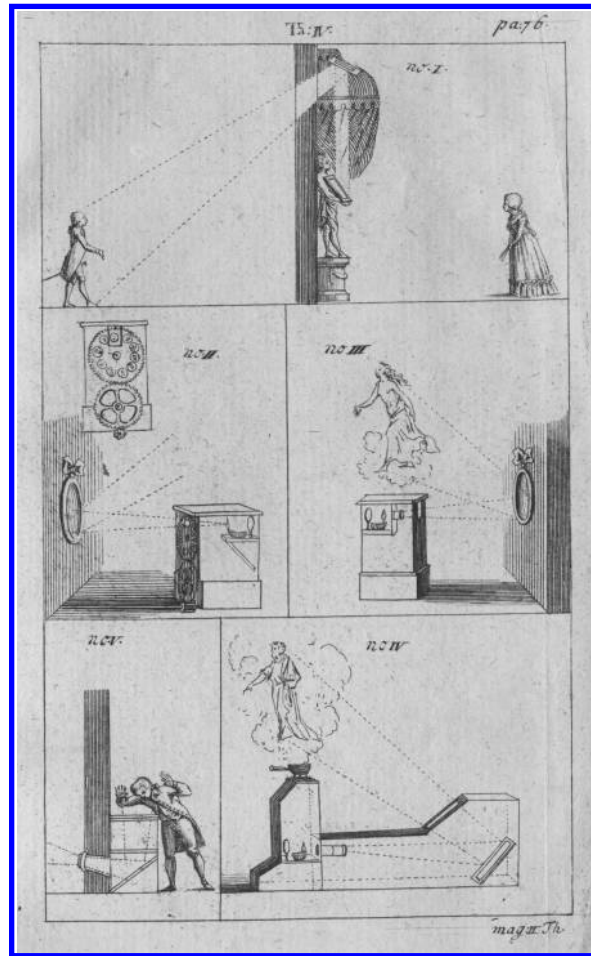
Robertson’s spirit-shows aimed for the production of dread by staging an illusion that could be recognized as smoke and mirrors but that nonetheless exerted a powerful, bodily effect on its observers. By contrast, Gothic novels such as Friedrich Schiller’s *The Ghost Seer: From the Memoirs of Count O*** (1787–89), Cajetan Tschink’s *The Victim of Magical Delusion* (1790–93), and Carl August Grosse’s *Horrid Mysteries* (1791–95) described credulous observers who mistook the phantasmagorical images of a hidden magic lantern for



FIGURE 5. “Le Nonne Sanglante,” Phantasmagoria Glass Slide, Collection Early Visual Media—Thomas Weynants. The alarming red of the blood drops on the dagger is rendered grey by this black-and-white reproduction of the slide. In addition to the dagger in her right, the “bleeding nun” also held a lantern in her left hand, missing in this slide but indicated by her lifted arm and her extended index finger and thumb. A second slide was projected with a different magic lantern onto the same screen, showing an arched walkway through which the figure advanced toward the audience (see Etienne Gaspard Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques*, 1:342–44).

genuine spirit apparitions.³¹ Simultaneously, within the realm of instructional literature, theoretical essays attempted to “enlighten” their readers, warning against the deception and manipulation of gullible victims by impostors like Johann Georg Schröpfer and Cagliostro, who were the most notorious necromancers in the German-speaking countries of the late eighteenth century.³²

FIGURE 6. A series of optical deceptions that are achieved by concave mirrors; from Karl von Eckartshausen, *Aufschlüsse zur Magie* (Munich, 1790). Especially interesting is Eckartshausen's inclusion of the viewer's bodily reaction of terror or surprise within the technical drawing (see lower left, drawing "no. v").



In the wake of Guyot's *New Physical and Mathematical Amusements*, numerous texts on natural magic appeared that put forward skeptical and esoteric accounts of spirit apparitions. These books included a treatise by Karl von Eckartshausen that was published in three volumes under the title *Revelations on Magic from Verified Experiences in Occult Philosophical Sciences and Rare Secrets of Nature* (fig. 6).³³ Eckartshausen even gave directions for building a “pocket magic lantern” with a built-in cooling system to prevent the supposed necromancer’s clothes from going up in flames. By such means, asserted Eckartshausen, an unsuspecting companion on an evening stroll could be terrified through “optical spirit apparitions.”³⁴

But, apart from this practical demonstration of optical deceptions, Eckartshausen, a former member of the *Illuminati* who had turned to theosophy, also gave a psychological and a metaphysical explanation of apparitions.

Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* presented its two theories of ghostly visions as mutually exclusive, even though it remained unclear whether Kant himself adhered to the metaphysical hypothesis of genuine apparitions or whether he embraced the skeptical denunciation of imaginary brain phantoms. Eckartshausen, who did not explicitly refer to Kant, instead asserted the simultaneous existence of "three kinds of spirit apparitions," defined in the following manner: "The first one is purely artificial, consisting of an optical deception. The second kind is produced through the images of the imagination, that is, by the imagination creating a [false] external image outside of the body. And the third is the true spirit apparition, visible only to the inner sense, and transformed by this very inner sense into an image for the outer senses, which is in fact the true apparition."³⁵

Eckartshausen's typology puts the various explanations of ghostly apparitions inherent in Kant's *Dreams* side by side. Yet, what is surprising about Eckartshausen's psychological and metaphysical account of spiritual appearances is an underlying similarity to the "purely artificial" optical specter. According to Eckartshausen, the second, "false" apparition emerges as a purely subjective figment of the imagination, whereas the "true" apparition is based on an objective, spiritual influence. But both models are marked by a structural affinity to the simulation of a specter by means of a magic lantern since they presuppose the *projection* of an inner mental picture onto the exterior world. An alternately overt and surreptitious recourse to contemporaneous visual media can also be seen in Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*. There, the explicit reference to creating the "specter of a body" by means of a concave mirror serves to discredit the belief in imaginary brain phantoms—by explaining how a fanatic enthusiast refers the figments of his or her imagination to the external world (*D*, 955/332). Yet implicitly Kant's theory of genuine spirit appearances adopts the same mode of explanation; for Kant characterizes authentic visions as arising from internal spiritual impressions that are transposed toward the external world as "shadow images of material objects" (*D*, 949/327*). Even Kant's digression on the moral forces that govern our practical actions draws on an optical model of projection in asserting that these forces "find *the focal point* of their union *outside ourselves*" (*D*, 942/321).³⁶

In Kant's *Dreams*, the explicit invocation of visual instruments serves a skeptical, antimetaphysical function. But Kant's description of real spiritual impressions, which are received internally and then transposed to the external world, is also predicated on the cultural use of concave mirrors and magic lanterns in phantasmagorical projections. Eckartshausen, who seeks to prove the reality of spirit apparitions, even goes so far as to refer to the workings of an optical instrument in his account of genuine spiritual appearances. Explaining how "the inner sense influences the outer senses," he writes

about the “true apparition”: “It is as with a concave mirror: the object, which is invisible to the eye, is reflected in the concave mirror. The mirror concentrates the simple imprint of the image in its hollow, thereby forming an external body visible to our organic system. This is also the way it works with the inner sense—it receives an image which is invisible to us, concentrates its reflected imprints on our outer senses, and thereby we see.”³⁷

Eckartshausen’s typology of three different kinds of spiritual apparitions highlights the constitutive role of optical technologies for late eighteenth-century accounts of false and of genuine apparitions. Yet, in addition to explaining various kinds of ghostly manifestations, Eckartshausen furthermore employed the concept of *Erscheinung* in its meaning of empirical appearance. Assigning the same degree of reality to spiritual apparitions and empirical appearances, Eckartshausen affirmed that even the “normal kind of appearances” do not correspond to the “reality of things.”³⁸ Nine years after the first edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Eckartshausen’s treatise thereby suggests a spiritualist interpretation of Kant’s critical notion of *Erscheinung*.

In *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* Kant had defined metaphysics as the “science of the limits of human reason” (*D*, 983/354). Consequently, he sought to give a new scientific foundation to this philosophical discipline in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Turning against the “dogmatic slumber” of scholastic philosophy,³⁹ Kant’s famous Copernican turn undertook a chiasmic inversion of the traditional assumption that human knowledge is shaped by the cognized object: “Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get further with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition.”⁴⁰ Concurrent with this reversal of the relation between subject and object, Kant distinguishes between *Erscheinung*—“appearance” or “apparition”—and the thing in itself. Our cognition “reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something real for itself but uncognized by us.”⁴¹

Kant’s “transcendental” analysis of perception therefore sets out to grasp the conditions of possibility of our experience, explaining how an “appearance” conforms a priori to the subject’s forms of intuition. Yet, even though the objects cognized by us are “mere appearances,”⁴² Kant nonetheless maintains that there is a relation between this appearance and the thing in itself—a relation, however, of which we cannot gain any knowledge, and which seems to contradict the assumption that appearances are in fact constituted by the knowing subject. Objects are given to human knowledge only as appearances. But, as Kant continues: “The reservation must also be well

noted, that even if we cannot cognize these same objects as things in themselves, we at least must be able to think them as things in themselves. For otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears [Denn sonst würde der ungereimte Satz daraus folgen, daß Erscheinung ohne etwas wäre, was da erscheint].⁴³

Even though Kant elsewhere warns against “moving into the realm of chimeras . . . by cloaking unfounded claims through popular language,” he relies here on the very same mode of argumentation.⁴⁴ He introduces the concept of *Erscheinung*, which is defined in relational terms in the contemporaneous discussion on spirit apparitions, and thereby lends a “cloak” of plausibility to his own speculative claim of a relation between appearance and thing in itself. Elucidating the distinction between perceivable phenomena and conceivable noumena, Kant conflates the distinct meanings of appearance as distortion of reality and appearance as indexical manifestation by asserting: “It . . . follows naturally from the concept of appearance [*Erscheinung*] in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside our mode of presentation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word appearance must already indicate a relation to something.”⁴⁵

But while this “something” is conceivable, it cannot be proven to exist in reality. The precarious relationship between the “something” and its apparition thus takes on the same epistemological status as Kant’s “metaphysical hypothesis” of spirits that affect us in real spiritual impressions and then become perceptible in sensory appearances transposed to the external world by our imagination. Kant’s critical epistemology presumes that our senses are “affected” (*affiziert*) by a principally unknowable thing in itself.⁴⁶ Yet, this assumption cannot be upheld without logical inconsistencies and seems strikingly reminiscent of Kant’s previous theory of a genuine, spiritual influence that is transformed by the spirit seer into a sensory impression. It is the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that defines *Erscheinung* as “an indication of a supersensory substrate,” but the very same phrase could also have been taken from Kant’s *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*.⁴⁷

Introducing a metaphysical hypothesis that postulates the existence of a thinkable entity was exactly what Kant himself had strongly criticized in an earlier letter to Moses Mendelssohn. There he compared such a mode of argumentation to the “dreams” of spirit seeing: “Conceivability (whose semblance derives from the fact that impossibility cannot be proven either) is pure mirage; I would myself dare to defend Swedenborg’s dreamings if someone should attack their possibility.”⁴⁸ Here Kant highlights the structural parallel between the metaphysical postulation of possible entities and Swedenborg’s speculative account of the spiritual realm. In his Copernican turn, Kant sought to substitute scientific statements for these spiritualist

“dreamings.” Nonetheless, his critical epistemology corresponds in its terminology and in its logical structure to his earlier representation of immaterial beings whose sensory appearance is “founded upon a real spiritual impression” (D, 949/327*). In *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* these apparitions are described as a kind of objective hallucination that does not refer to any material object in the outside world but that can nonetheless be traced back to a “genuine spiritual influence” (D, 949/327*). Yet, at the same time, *Erscheinung* as it is defined in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is also an objective hallucination, as it were, constituted by the cognizing subject and nonetheless vaguely related to an undefined and ungraspable thing in itself.

According to Kant, in both cases the sensory appearance does not allow for any conclusions about its underlying substrate. Therefore the most important difference between these phenomena derives from the fact that spirit apparitions become visible only to “persons with organs of unusual sensitivity” (D, 949/327*). The apparition, through which the supersensory thing in itself “affects” our senses is, by contrast, perceptible to everybody. Yet even in his critical writings Kant insists that the word *Erscheinung*, in its double meaning of appearance and apparition, necessarily implies “a relation to something,” thereby placing the epistemology of transcendental idealism in precarious proximity to the contemporaneous debate about spirit apparitions.⁴⁹ Kant’s Copernican turn may have been intended as a transformation of philosophical metaphysics into a “pure,” enlightened discipline, but late eighteenth-century occultist assumptions about a link between sensory and supersensory realms retain a crucial role for his critical distinction between appearance and thing in itself.

In *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* Kant first introduced metaphysical assumptions in his description of an “immediate community of spirits” (D, 945/325) before transferring the notion of a real, spiritual impression to his theory of genuine spirit apparitions. Within Kant’s critical philosophy, the concept of *Erscheinung* fulfills a comparable argumentative function, since it is meant to ground the speculative claim of an indexical relation between an appearance and a supersensory thing in itself. But the explicit invocation of optical media that underlies Kant’s skeptical turn against imaginary “brain phantoms” (D, 953/330) also finds a continuation in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant’s doctrine of “transcendental illusion” or “transcendental semblance” (*transzendentaler Schein*) conceives of the dialectic of speculative reason by comparing its mirage (*Blendwerk*) to the seemingly paradoxical status of phantasmagorical projections.

According to Kant, the transcendental illusion seduces us into employing the concepts of our understanding in an enthusiastic, *transcendent* rather than *transcendental* manner that oversteps the limits of sensory experience. It is the inner dialectic of pure, speculative reason that gives rise to this

transcendental illusion. Therefore Kant insists on a strict differentiation between transcendental and empirical semblance, asserting: "Our concern here is not to treat of empirical, for instance optical, semblance [*Schein*] . . . rather, we have to deal only with transcendental semblance, which . . . contrary to all the warnings of criticism, carries us beyond the empirical use of the categories, and holds out to us the mirage [*Blendwerk*] of extending the pure understanding."⁵⁰ Yet, despite this distinction between optical and transcendental semblance, Kant again and again invokes contemporaneous optical instruments in his description of speculative reason. In doing so, his critical philosophy transforms the material apparatus of the magic lantern and its use in the visual medium of the phantasmagoria into an epistemic figure, highlighting the limits and unreliability of philosophical knowledge.

For Kant, the dialectic of pure speculative reason corresponds to a "logic of semblance."⁵¹ It emerges from the inner nature of reason, which, based on a knowledge of finite conditions seeks to draw conclusions about the unconditioned or absolute. The mirage of transcendental illusion may therefore be seen through, but it cannot be abolished—in Kant's terms: "Hence there is a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason . . . [which] even after we have exposed its mirage . . . will still not cease to mislead our reason with imaginary objects, continually propelling it into momentary deceptions that always need to be corrected again."⁵² Kant explains this persistence of "transcendental illusion" by invoking the persistence of optical illusions that deceive our sensory apparatus despite our better knowledge.⁵³ As Kant writes, even an astronomer perceives the moon to be larger at the horizon than high in the sky, despite better knowledge.⁵⁴ Or, to quote a statement from Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* that is key for understanding his doctrine of dialectical semblance, since it goes beyond this traditional example of perceptive distortion: "Illusion is the kind of mirage that persists even though one knows that the ostensible object is not real [Illusion ist dasjenige Blendwerk, welches bleibt, ob man gleich weiß, daß der vermeinte Gegenstand nicht wirklich ist]."⁵⁵

Kant thus defines illusion as different from a mere distortion of reality. Describing a conflict between knowledge and perception, his notion of *Blendwerk* (mirage or delusion) is modeled on the use of concave mirrors and magic lanterns for simulating an "ostensible object" that does not really exist. In refuting the paralogsms and false conclusions of pure reason, Kant repeatedly invokes optical terms, warning against the mirage of transcendental illusion that "deceives" us with the "mirror image" of the soul as a material entity.⁵⁶ Yet, as Kant affirms, the single proposition of rational psychology—"I think"—does not presuppose any kind of substance. Traditional metaphysical problems, such as the seemingly impossible "community of the soul with an organic body,"⁵⁷ are therefore based on "hypostatizing" or reifying a "mirage,"

which is mistaken to be a real object. Kant describes this process as if referring to the images of a phantasmagoria that a credulous observer falsely considers to be a real, physical object: “Now I assert that all the difficulties which one believes to find in these questions . . . rest on a mere mirage, according to which one hypostatizes that which exists merely in thought and thus assumes it to be a real object outside of the thinking subject.”⁵⁸ The transcendental illusion emerges from mistaking a subjective idea for an objectively given substance, and it is worth noting that Marx’s chapter on “commodity fetishism” in *Capital* remains surprisingly faithful to Kant’s critique of the dialectic of reason that leads us to reify the subjective conditions of appearances.

In Marx’s *German Ideology* (1845), the “camera obscura” of idealism is described as producing a cognitive error that is false but that can be turned into a faithful representation of reality by a simple inversion: “In all ideologies, human beings and their circumstances [appear] upside-down as in a camera obscura.”⁵⁹ Marx’s preface to the second edition of *Capital* reiterates this argument in announcing that Hegel’s philosophy “stands on its head,” but that one can discover its “rational kernel” by “overturning it.”⁶⁰ Yet in his chapter on “commodity fetishism” Marx sets out to expose a much more intricate and persistent illusion that he describes in analogy to the magic lantern and its use in the visual medium of the phantasmagoria. Idealist philosophy gives a distorted picture of reality but, similar to a camera obscura, its falsification can be corrected by a simple inversion. Economic structures of capitalist exchange, by contrast, produce the mirage of an object, a simulacrum that has no referent in the material world. Marx thus adapts Kant’s warning that we mistake “that which exists merely in thought” for “a real object outside of the thinking subject,”⁶¹ and he transforms Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion into a critique of our tendency to reify social relations. Explaining the “thing-like semblance of the social determination of labor,” Marx describes the commodity’s “spectral objectivity [*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*]” as emerging from the social formation of capitalism: “It is only the specific social relation of human beings that here assumes . . . the phantasmagorical form of a relation of objects.”⁶²

But whereas Marx locates the source of this mirage in capitalist exchange, Kant describes the four antinomies of traditional metaphysics as emerging from the inner dialectic of pure, speculative reason. While anticipating Marx’s turn against conflating the social with the objective realm, Kant characterizes these antinomies as arising from our tendency to take “*subjective* conditions of our thinking for *objective* conditions of things themselves and to consider a hypothesis that is necessary for the satisfaction of our reason for a dogma.”⁶³ The “skeptical method,” employed by Kant in his famous staging of the conflict between thesis and antithesis, therefore, does not refute their content, but rather corrects the epistemological status of both

propositions. Kant presents this strategy as “the method of watching or even occasioning a contest between assertions, not in order to resolve it to the advantage of one party or the other, but to investigate whether the object of the dispute is not perhaps a mere mirage [*Blendwerk*] at which each would clutch in vain.”⁶⁴

Confusing an idea with an object or a hypothesis with a dogma is here once more described in terms that seem to cite Kant’s own account of an optical “specter” produced by means of a concave mirror (*D*, 955/332)—or a text such as Guyot’s *New Philosophical Amusements* with its instructions on how to “present the image of an object in such a way that even if one imagined holding it in one’s hand one could clutch only the semblance of it.”⁶⁵ Kant’s August 1789 letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi also deploys notions that come quite close to this critical account of speculative reason and its dialectical semblance. Turning against Johann Gottfried von Herder’s philosophical “syncretism,” Kant characterizes his philosophical opponent as “very adept at producing a mirage that, *like a magic lantern*, makes wonderful things for a moment real before they vanish forever; meanwhile, uninformed observers marvel that something extraordinary would have to be behind this, which they strive in vain to clutch.”⁶⁶

Kant’s critical philosophy transforms the optical instrument of the magic lantern into an epistemological figure. He asserts that the antinomies of traditional metaphysics do not emerge from incorrect deductions; the specific content of any particular thesis or antithesis is not necessarily false. The problem is instead that we mistakenly conceive a necessary hypothesis as a theoretical dogma. Kant’s emphasis on the persistence of this speculative illusion could also relate to the inescapable deception of our eyesight by the *trompe l’oeil*, a sensory delusion that Kant refers to in his *Anthropology*.⁶⁷ But his critical explanation of how we “hypostatize that which exists merely in thought and thus assume it to be a real object outside of the thinking subject” is clearly modeled on the projections of the magic lantern that lead us to assign a false imaginary focal point to an optical specter.⁶⁸ Kant assumed this dialectic of speculative reason to be operative even within theology, a discipline that he regarded as the apex of philosophical metaphysics. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) Kant thus reaffirms the “speculative restriction” undertaken by the *Critique of Pure Reason*,⁶⁹ and, in an explicit invocation of contemporaneous media technology and its spectral projections, he emphasizes that only the critical limitation of speculative reason could prevent philosophical enthusiasm from producing “theories of the supersensory, to which we can see no end . . . thereby transforming theology into *a magic lantern of brain phantoms*.”⁷⁰

Within Kant’s critical writings, this passage constitutes one of the few overt references to the magic lantern and its cultural use in phantasmagorical

ghost projections. But it is important to note that his whole doctrine of transcendental illusion is predicated on a notion of “mirage” (*Blendwerk*) that is fundamentally and inextricably linked to late eighteenth-century visual media. The reference to the use of concave mirrors and magic lanterns in phantasmagorical projections has therefore a constitutive rather than illustrative function for Kant’s theory of transcendental illusion. One could even go so far as to say that the reader of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, who has followed the skeptical solution of the antinomies, parallels the enlightened observer of a phantasmagoria. That viewer knows about the imaginary status of the magic lantern’s ghostly projections and is nonetheless—to use terms from Kant’s description of transcendental semblance—thrown into “momentary deceptions” by the reality of the phantasmagorical images and the “power of their illusion.”⁷¹ As Kant asserts in regard to the transcendental illusion: “There is a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason . . . [that] even after we have exposed its mirage . . . will still not cease to mislead our reason with imaginary objects, continually propelling it into momentary deceptions that always need to be corrected again.”⁷² The images of a phantasmagoria truly exist, and the conflict between sensory deception and skeptical knowledge does not disappear once we recognize the lantern’s projections to be a simulation rather than a ghost: “Illusion is the kind of mirage that persists even though one knows that the ostensible object is not real.”⁷³

In the same manner, the mirage of dialectical semblance does not disappear, even after we have worked through the critique of pure speculative reason. Instead, our constant oscillation between skeptical knowledge and “momentary deceptions” (*augenblickliche Verirrungen*) leads us repeatedly to cross the limits of pure speculative reason. In doing so, we “hypostatize” a subjective idea as an objectively given substance and thereby transform philosophical metaphysics into “a magic lantern of brain phantoms.”⁷⁴ Similarly, on the level of optical projection, we are led again and again, “for an instant” or, literally, “for the blink of an eye” (*augenblicklich*) to mistake visual semblance for reality and to ascribe a material body to the magic lantern’s phantasmagorical projections. The *Critique of Pure Reason* hence not only adapts and appropriates its notion of *Erscheinung* as appearance and apparition from a contemporaneous debate about ghostly visions. In addition, Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion transforms the material apparatus of the magic lantern and its use in the visual medium of the phantasmagoria into an epistemological figure. Kant distinguishes between optical and transcendental semblance. Yet he describes our tendency to mistake a subjective idea for a material object by drawing on contemporaneous optical projections. The analogy between pure, speculative reason and the visual instrument of the magic lantern is thus inherent to and constitutive of Kant’s critical epistemology.

In this manner, *The Critique of Pure Reason* anticipates not only Marx's description of the commodity's "phantasmagorical form" but also the philosophical work of Arthur Schopenhauer. In 1851, Schopenhauer published his *Essay on Spirit Seeing*, which merged Kant's critical epistemology with Kant's metaphysical hypothesis of genuine spirit apparitions from *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*.⁷⁵ In addition, Schopenhauer undertook an optical and physiological reformulation of Kant's epistemology in *The World as Will and Presentation* (1819). Describing our intellectual faculties as a material apparatus of cognition, Schopenhauer foregrounds the reference to visual media that underlies Kant's description of the mirage of dialectical semblance. But in doing so, he comes close to abolishing Kant's distinction between semblance and appearance. Casting the opposition between appearance and thing in itself in spiritualist *and* medial terms, Schopenhauer writes: "What Kant refers to as the appearance [*Erscheinung*] in contrast to the thing in itself . . . [is] a magical effect conjured into being, an unstable and inconstant semblance [*Schein*] without substance, comparable to the optical illusion and the dream. Such clear cognition and calm, deliberate representation of the dreamlike quality of the whole world is indeed the foundation of the whole Kantian philosophy . . . and its greatest merit."⁷⁶ In the second edition of his main treatise from 1844 Schopenhauer expands upon this argument by stating: "[Kant] achieved all this by disassembling and presenting piece by piece the whole machinery of our cognitive faculties that brings about the phantasmagoria of the objective world."⁷⁷

Notes

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1. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, in *Werkausgabe* ed. W. Weischedel, 12 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 3/4:B XXVI. Translated by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood as *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, 1999), 115*, hereafter cited as *CPR* followed by page references first to the German edition, then to the English. Throughout this essay an asterisk * indicates that the published English translation has been modified. Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), in *Werkausgabe*, 12:A 40, B 40. Translated by Mary Gregor as *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (The Hague, 1974), 53*, hereafter referred to as *Anthropologie* followed by page references first in German, then in English.

2. “Gestalten des Geistes”; G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), 46. Translated by A. V. Miller as *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford, 1977), 28*.
3. “Dies [ist] die Nacht, das Innere der Natur, das hier existiert—reines Selbst. In phantasmagorischen Vorstellungen ist es ringsum Nacht; hier schießt dann ein blutig[er] Kopf, dort ein[e] andere weiße Gestalt plötzlich hervor und verschwinden ebenso. Diese Nacht erblickt man, wenn man dem Menschen ins Auge blickt—in eine Nacht hinein, die furchtbar wird; es hängt die Nacht der Welt hier einem entgegen”; G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie. Vorlesungsmanuskripte zur Philosophie der Natur und des Geistes von 1805–1806*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg, 1967), 180–81.
4. For a Lacanian reading of this passage see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, 1999), 29–30. Already in 1988 Terry Castle had emphasized that the word “phantasmagoria” was first coined to describe the optical medium and only subsequently transferred to the description of inner, mental images. See her article “Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie,” *Critical Inquiry* 15, no.1 (Autumn 1988): 26–61. According to Laurent Mannoni, the first usage of the term occurs in December 1792 when Paul Philidor, a precursor of Etienne Gaspard Robertson, advertised his ghost shows in the daily newspaper *Les Affiches* as a “phantasmagoria”; Laurent Mannoni, “The Phantasmagoria,” *Film History* 8 (1996): 393. A common but incorrect etymology of “phantasmagoria” as describing a public speech act can be found in Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, which displays a surprising lack of interest in visual media: “‘phantasmagoria’, a word that . . . is generally relieved of its literal sense which links it to speech and to public speech”; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. P. Kamuf (New York, 1994), 108.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in *Werkausgabe*, 7:A 254. Translated by Mary Gregor as *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge, 1997), 117*, hereafter referred to as *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* followed by page references first to the German, then to the English. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, vol. 1, *Der Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals* (1869/72) (Berlin, 1979), 52. Translated by Ben Fowkes as *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1976), 1:165*. Hereafter referred to as *Das Kapital* followed by page references first to the German, then to the English.
6. See Margaret Cohen, “Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria,” *New German Critique* 48 (Fall 1989): 87–107; Tom Gunning, “Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusions and Wonder: Toward a Cultural Optics of the Cinematic Apparatus,” in *The Cinema: A New Technology for the 20th Century*, ed. Andre Gaudreault et al. (Lausanne, 2004), 31–44.
7. Friedrich Kittler hints in passing at a link between the magic lantern and German idealism but restricts himself to the reductive claim that “German idealism, too, sprang from the history of optical media”; Friedrich Kittler, *Optische Medien* (Berlin, 2002), 123. Translated by Anthony Enns as *Optical Media* (Malden, MA, 2010), 96*.
8. See Stefan Andriopoulos, “Psychic Television,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 618–37.
9. On the mixed status of the camera obscura as a material object and an epistemological figure see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and*

- Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 30–31. On the camera obscura and the magic lantern see *ibid.*, 33: “The magic lantern . . . never occupied an effective discursive or social position from which to challenge the dominant model of the camera obscura.” Don Ihde similarly focuses on the camera obscura as an “epistemology engine” without taking note of the specific change that occurs in the second half of the eighteenth century when the projective and deceptive capabilities of the magic lantern become a predominant model within critical epistemology; Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis, 2001), 71–75.
10. On the use of the magic lantern in scientific lectures during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries see Thomas Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, “The Magic Lantern and the Art of Demonstration,” in *Instruments and the Imagination* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 37–71. On the interrelation of the magic lantern to the occult in the seventeenth century see Koen Vermeir, “The Magic of the Magic Lantern (1660–1700): On Analogical Demonstration and the Visualization of the Invisible,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 38 (2005): 127–59.
 11. Immanuel Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers, erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik*, in *Werkausgabe*, vol. 2, *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768*, 923. Translated by David Walford as *Dreams of a Spirit Seer, Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*, in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770* (Cambridge, 1992), 305*. Citations from these editions hereafter in parentheses with the abbreviation *D*, the first page number referring to the German original and the second to the English translation: (*D*, 923/305).
 12. See Immanuel Kant’s letter “An Fräulein Charlotte von Knobloch. 10. Aug. [1763],” in *Briefe*, ed. Jürgen Zehbe (Göttingen, 1970), 21–25. Translated by Arnulf Zweig as “To Charlotte von Knobloch. August 10, 1763,” in Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence* (Cambridge, 1999), 70–74. Hereafter referred to as *Briefe* followed by page references first to the German, then to the English.
 13. *D*, 940/319. The notes for Kant’s *Lectures on Metaphysics*, which were given in the 1780s but published posthumously, were not edited by Kant himself and have to be treated with caution. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in these texts Kant describes the transition from physical to immaterial intuition in nearly identical terms: “But when the soul separates itself from the body, then it will not have the same sensory intuition [*Anschauung*] of this world; it will not intuit [*anschauen*] the world as it appears, but rather as it is. Accordingly the separation of the soul from the body consists in the transformation of sensory into spiritual intuition” (255/104*). In describing the “other world,” Kant here refers explicitly to Swedenborg: “The thought of Swedenborg is in this quite sublime” (257/105). Yet, in contrast to *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, Kant categorically denies the possibility of spirit seeing in this life: “But one question still remains: whether the soul, which already sees itself spiritually in the other world, will and can appear in the visible world through visible effects? This is not possible, for only matter can be intuited sensorily and fall in the outer senses, but not a spirit. . . . When I still have a sensory intuition in this world, I cannot at the same time have a spiritual intuition. I cannot be at the same time in this and also in that world” (259/105–6*); *Immanuel Kants Vorlesungen über die Metaphysik. Zum Drucke befördert von dem Herausgeber der Kantischen Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (1821; reprint, Darmstadt, 1988). Translated by Karl Americks and Steve Naragon as *Lectures on Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 1997).

14. *D*, 942/321; *D*, 944/323*.
15. *D*, 945/325n; *D*, 944/323.
16. See Stefan Andriopoulos, "The Invisible Hand: Supernatural Agency in Political Economy and the Gothic Novel," *English Literary History* 66, no. 3 (1999): 739–58.
17. The structural parallel between the *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* and Kant's moral philosophy is also highlighted by Schmucker and Zammito. See Josef Schmucker, *Die Ursprünge der Ethik Kants* [Origins of Kant's ethics] (Meisenheim, 1961), 162–63, 168–73; John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago, 2002), 205. A demonic version of being controlled by a foreign will is to be found around 1900 in debates about hypnotism and the agency of corporate aggregates—see Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (Chicago, 2008).
18. *D*, 945/324; see also *D*, 945/324n*: "The reciprocal effects which take their origin from the ground of morality and which human beings and the members of the spirit world exercise upon each other in accordance with the laws of pneumatic influence—these reciprocal effects might be construed in the following terms: there naturally arises from these reciprocal effects a closer community between a good (or bad) soul and a good (or bad) spirit; as a result, the former associate themselves with the part of the spiritual republic that is consonant with their moral constitution." That any theory of the "spiritual republic" is simultaneously a theory of the social can also be seen in Friedrich Schelling's "Thoughts on a Philosophy of the Spirit World" (1810): "And just as the spirit world is joined to nature in general by a necessary consensus harmonicus, so too are the individual objects of the spirit and natural worlds. Thus there must be communities within the spirit world, *corresponding to those on earth*" (my emphasis); F. W. J. Schelling, "Gedanken über eine Philosophie der Geisterwelt" [Thoughts on a philosophy of the spirit world], in *Werke*, ed. M. Schröter (Munich, 1927), 4:373.
19. Moses Mendelssohn, "Kant's Träume eines Geistersehers" [Kant's dreams of a spirit seer] (1767), in *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Eva J. Engel et al. (Stuttgart, 1971), 5.2:73.
20. Immanuel Kant, "To Moses Mendelssohn [April 8, 1766]," in *Briefe*, 33/93*.
21. See *D*, 972–73/346–47: "I declare . . . either that one must suppose that there is more cleverness and truth in Schwedenberg's [*sic*] writings than first appearances would suggest, or that, if there is any agreement between him and my system, it is a matter of pure chance. . . . Nonetheless, there prevails in that work such a wondrous harmony with what the most subtle ruminations of reason can produce on a like topic."
22. On the Enlightenment and its turn against fanaticism see also Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, "The Enlightenment and the Anti-Marvelous," in *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998).
23. "Wir sehen ausser uns, was bloß in unserem Kopfe spukt"; Jacob F. Abel, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über die Verbindung der Menschen mit höheren Geistern* [Philosophical investigations into the connection of humans with higher spirits] (Stuttgart, 1791), 116; the imagination is often described as the source of sensory delusions—see also Justius Christian Hennings's *Von Geistern und Geistersehern* [Of spirits and spirit seers] (Leipzig, 1780), 8: "The imagination is the first and comprehensively fertile source of phantoms and deceptive sensations of all

- kinds.” (Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.) See also Gottfried Immanuel Wenzel, *Geist- Wunder- Hexen- und Zaubergeschichten, vorzüglich neuester Zeit, erzählt und erklärt von G. I. Wenzel* [Tales of ghosts, miracles, witches and magic, chiefly from our own time, narrated and explained by G. I. Wenzel] (Prague, 1793), 55: “The cloud of smoke is there; now the *imagination* becomes sensation.” Ferriar refers to this kind of mental disorder as hallucination. See John Ferriar, *An Essay Towards a Theory of Apparitions* (London, 1813), 95: “In medicine, we have fine names, at least for every species of disease. The peculiar disorder, which I have endeavoured to elucidate, is termed generally HALLUCINATION, including all delusive impressions, from the wandering mote before the eye, to the tremendous specter, which is equally destitute of existence.”
24. “Hirngespinnste” (*D*, 954/331); “Hirngespenster” (*D*, 953/330, 958/334, 959/335). A critical turn against “Hirngespenster” or “brain phantoms” is also to be found in Christoph Martin Wieland, *Euthanasia. Drey Gespräche über das Leben nach dem Tode* [Euthanasia: three conversations on life after death] (Leipzig, 1805), 10. Kant himself, in his *Versuch über die Krankheiten des Kopfes* [Essay on the diseases of the head] (1764), had already developed a similar explanation of pathological visions (see Kant, *Werkausgabe*, 2:893). Furthermore, Kant’s *Anthropologie*, first published in 1798, formulated a comparable model according to which “man . . . takes imaginations for sensations, or for inspirations [*Eingebugen*] caused by a different being that is not an object of the external senses; in these cases the illusion soon turns into enthusiasm or spirit seeing, and both are deceptions of the inner sense”; *Anthropologie*, 12:457/39*.
 25. *D*, 955/322. In 1802, Johann Gottfried Herder similarly invoked the medium of the magic lantern in order to describe Swedenborg’s projection of his inner fantasies toward the external world: “Swedenborg’s celestial secret was that he saw and believed the fantasies that had risen from his innermost being; this conviction gave reality to the appearances in his inner world, presenting them to his senses. Heaven and hell emerged from, and resided in his interior; *a magic lantern of his own thoughts*”; Johann Gottfried Herder, “Emanuel Swedenborg, der größte Geisterseher des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts,” in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 10, *Adrastea* (1802), ed. Günter Arnold (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), 567–68.
 26. Bonaventure Abat, *Amusemens philosophiques sur diverses parties des sciences, et principalement de la physique et des mathématiques* [Philosophical amusements on various parts of sciences, chiefly physics and mathematics] (Amsterdam, 1763); Edme Gilles Guyot, *Nouvelles récréations physiques et mathématiques* (Paris, 1769–1770). On the production of optical “specters” with concave mirrors see also Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Der Spiegel. Entdeckungen, Täuschungen, Phantasien* [The mirror: discoveries, deceptions, fantasies] (Gießen, 1986), 247–72.
 27. Edme Gilles Guyot, *Neue Physikalische und mathematische Belustigungen oder Sammlung von neuen Kunststücken zum Vergüngen mit dem Magnete, mit den Zahlen, aus der Optik sowohl, als auch aus der Chymie. Dritter Theil* [New physical and mathematical amusements, or a collection of enjoyable new tricks with magnets, numbers, optics and chemistry. Third part] (Augsburg, 1772), 159. On the description of concave mirrors, see also 142.
 28. *Ibid.*, 160–61.
 29. *Ibid.*, 191.

30. On Robertson's phantasmagoria see also Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern* (Hastings, 2006); Tom Gunning, "Phantasmagoria and the Manufacturing of Illusions and Wonder"; Barbara Maria Stafford, "Phantomware," in *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Los Angeles, 2001), 79–90, 134–37; Mannoni, "The Phantasmagoria."
31. See Friedrich Schiller, "Der Geisterseher. Aus den Papieren des Grafen von O," in *Historische Schriften und Erzählungen II*, ed. Otto Dann (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), 602–21. Translated by Henry G. Bohn as *The Ghost-Seer* (Columbia, SC, 1992), 8–24. Cajetan Tschink, *The Victim of Magical Delusion; or, The Mystery of the Revolution of P—L: a Magico-Political Tale*, trans. Peter Will, 3 vols. (London, 1795). The German original was published as *Geschichte eines Geistersehers. Aus den Papieren des Mannes mit der eisernen Larve*, 3 vols. (Vienna, 1790–93); Carl Grosse, *Der Genius. Aus den Papieren des Marquis C* von G*** [1791–95], ed. Hanne Witte (Frankfurt am Main, 1982); Grosse's novel appeared in two different English translations: *Horrid Mysteries: A Story*, trans. Peter Will, 3 vols. (London, 1796), and *The Genius: or, The Mysterious Adventures of Don Carlos de Grandez*, trans. Joseph Trapp, 2 vols. (London, 1796).
32. See *Cagliostro. Dokumente zu Aufklärung und Okkultismus* [Cagliostro: documents on enlightenment and occultism], ed. Klaus H. Kiefer (Munich, 1991). On Johann Georg Schröpfer see Christian August Crusius, *Bedenken eines berühmten Gelehrten über des famosen Schröpfers Geister-Citieren* [Doubts of a famous scholar regarding the notorious Schröpfer's necromancy] (Frankfurt, 1775); Johann Salomon Semler, *Samlungen von Briefen und Aufsätzen über die Gaßnerischen und Schröpferischen Geisterbeschwörungen, mit vielen eigenen Anmerkungen* [Collection of letters and articles on Gaßner's and Schröpfer's conjuring of ghosts, with many additional remarks] (Halle, 1776).
33. Karl von Eckartshausen, *Aufschlüsse zur Magie aus geprüften Erfahrungen über verborgene philosophische Wissenschaften und seltne [sic] Geheimnisse der Natur* (Munich, 1790). For other treatises on natural magic see Johann Wallberg, *Sammlung natürlicher Zauberkünste oder aufrichtige Entdeckung vieler [sic] bewährter, lustiger und nützlicher Geheimnisse* [Collection of natural magic or honest discovery of many worthwhile, amusing and useful secrets] (Stuttgart, 1768); Johann Peter Eberhard, *Abhandlungen vom physikalischen Aberglauben und der Magie* [Essays on physical superstition and magic] (Halle, 1778); Johann Christian Wiegleb, *Die natürliche Magie, aus allerhand belustigenden und nützlichen Kunststücken bestehend* [Natural magic, consisting of many kinds of amusing and useful tricks] (Berlin, 1780); Christlieb B. Funk, *Natürliche Magie oder Erklärung verschiedener Wahrsager und natürlicher Zauberkünste* [Natural magic or an explanation of various soothsayers and natural conjuring tricks] (Berlin, 1783); Johann Samuel Halle, *Magie; oder, die Zauberkräfte der Natur, so auf den Nutzen und die Belustigung angewandt worden* [Magic: or the magical powers of nature, applied for use and amusement] (Berlin, 1783–86); Henri Decremps, *The Conjuror Unmasked*, trans. A. Denton (London, 1790); Johann C. Gütle, *Versuche, Unterhaltungen und Belustigungen aus der natürlichen Magie* (Leipzig, 1791); David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic* (London, 1832); Theodor Philadelphus, *Phantasmagorie oder die Kunst, Geister erscheinen zu lassen* [Phantasmagoria, or the art of making ghosts appear] (Leipzig, 1833).
34. Eckartshausen, *Aufschlüsse. Zweyter Theil*, 74–75.
35. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

36. In this phrase the first emphasis is my own, the second is Kant's.
37. *Ibid.*, 64–65.
38. Eckartshausen describes a genuine spiritual manifestation as “an apparition [*Erscheinung*] different from normal appearances [*Erscheinungen*], yet equally real as that which we normally conceive as reality.” Simultaneously, he affirms that even the “normal kind of appearance” does not correspond to the “reality of things”; *ibid.*, 32.
39. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können* [1783], in *Werkausgabe*, 5:A 13; *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. G. Hatfield (Cambridge, 1997), 10; hereafter cited as *Prolegomena* followed by page references first to the German edition, then to the English.
40. *CPR*, 3/4:B XVI.
41. *CPR*, B XXI/112.
42. “Bloße Erscheinungen”; *CPR*, B 66/188.
43. *CPR*, B XXVI/115*.
44. *Prolegomena*, A 104/68*.
45. “Es folgt auch natürlicher Weise aus dem Begriffe einer Erscheinung überhaupt: daß ihr etwas entsprechen müsse, was an sich nicht Erscheinung ist, weil Erscheinung nichts vor sich selbst, und außer unserer Vorstellungsart sein kann, mithin, wo nicht ein beständiger Zirkel herauskommen soll, das Wort Erscheinung schon eine Beziehung auf etwas anzeigt”; *CPR*, A 252/348*.
46. Kant suggests that “things” appear “as objects . . . that exist outside of us” by “affecting our senses”; *Prolegomena*, A 63/40*. See also *Prolegomena*, A 105/68, on “the way in which our senses are affected by this unknown something.”
47. “Anzeige eines übersinnlichen Substrats”; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), in *Werkausgabe*, 10:108 (B LVII, A LV). Translated by Werner S. Pluhar as *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis, 1987), 37*. Gerold Prauss and, in his wake, many other philosophers dismiss these invocations of a supersensory substrate. Distinguishing between different meanings of *Erscheinung* and thing in itself they set out to discard what they consider “transcendent-metaphysical nonsense” in order to preserve the “transcendental-philosophical sense” of these notions; see Gerold Prauss, *Kant und das Problem der Dinge an sich* [Kant and the problem of things in themselves] (Bonn, 1974), 43. See also Gerold Prauss, *Erscheinung bei Kant. Ein Problem der “Kritik der reinen Vernunft”* [Appearance in Kant: a problem of the “Critique of Pure Reason”] (Berlin, 1971), 20. By contrast, my historicist reading of Kant’s texts does not aim for a purified, logically consistent reformulation of Kant’s epistemology. Instead my goal is to establish how Kant’s critical philosophy draws on late eighteenth-century spiritualism and the visual medium of the phantasmagoria as cultural practices that have been neglected in previous readings of Kant.
48. “Die Dencklichkeit (deren Schein daher kommt daß sich auch keine Unmöglichkeit davon darthun läßt) ist ein bloßes Blendwerk wie ich denn die Träumer-eyen des Schwedenbergs [*sic*] selbst, wenn jemand ihre Möglichkeit angriffe, mir zu vertheidigen getraute”; *Briefe*, 32–33/91–92*.
49. *CPR*, A 252/327.
50. *CPR*, B 351–52/385*.
51. “Logik des Scheins”; *CPR*, B 86/198*. Michelle Grier’s *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge, 2001) is one of the very few texts that point to the role

- of optical metaphors in Kant's philosophy, referring to Kant's reliance on optical figures as "one of the most interesting aspects of Kant's account of transcendental illusion" (129n51; see also 273n20 and 278–79). Yet even Grier does not interpolate Kant's philosophical texts with late eighteenth-century optical instruments and quotes only Newton's *Opticks*, thereby ignoring the visual medium of the phantasmagoria and its use of the concave mirror and magic lantern.
52. "Es gibt also eine natürliche und unvermeidliche Dialektik der reinen Vernunft, [die] . . . selbst, nachdem wir ihr Blendwerk aufgedeckt haben, dennoch nicht aufhören wird, ihr [der Vernunft] vorzugaukeln und sie unablässig in augenblickliche Verirrungen zu stoßen, die jederzeit gehoben zu werden bedürfen"; *CPR*, B 355, A 298/386–87*. See also *CPR*, B 450/467–68*, on the "natural and unavoidable semblance [*Schein*], which even if one is no longer fooled [*hintergehen*] by it, still deceives [*täuschen*], though it does not defraud [*betrügen*], and which thus can be rendered harmless but never be destroyed." See also: "The transcendental semblance, on the other hand, does not cease even after one has uncovered it and has clearly seen into its nullity by transcendental criticism"; *CPR*, A 297, B 353/386*.
 53. *CPR*, B 723/618.
 54. "[This is] an illusion that cannot be avoided at all, just as little as we can avoid it that the sea appears higher in the middle than at the shores, since we see the former through higher rays of light than the latter, or even better, just as little as the astronomer can prevent the rising moon from appearing larger to him, even when he is not deceived by this illusion"; *CPR*, A 297, B 354/386.
 55. *Anthropologie*, A 40, B 40/29*. A similar notion of illusion is also to be found in Kant's posthumously published lectures on metaphysics where Kant refers to "illusion" as an "overhasty judgment," which "the following one immediately contests": "We are not deceived by an optical box, for we know that it is not so; but we are moved to a judgment which is immediately refuted by the understanding"; *Kants Vorlesungen über die Metaphysik*, 147–48/53–54. In contrast to these lectures on metaphysics Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* was published during his lifetime, in 1798, but the text draws on earlier lectures. On the relation between Kant's critical turn and his lectures on anthropology see Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, 255–307.
 56. *CPR*, A 366/424. In the original German, the verb used here is *vorspiegeln*.
 57. *CPR*, A 384/433. This problem, already addressed in *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, is resolved (or perhaps merely circumvented) in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, by ascribing to both the soul and the organic body the same status as *Erscheinung* or "appearance," and by asserting that the things in themselves underlying these appearances may not be of "such altogether different . . . substances"; *CPR*, A 385/434. See also: "But if one considers that the two kinds of objects are different not inwardly but only insofar as one of them appears outwardly to the other, hence that what grounds the appearance of matter as thing in itself might perhaps not be so different in kind, then this difficulty vanishes"; *CPR*, B 427/456.
 58. *CPR*, A 384/434*.
 59. "In der ganzen Ideologie [erscheinen] die Menschen und ihre Verhältnisse wie in einer Camera obscura auf den Kopf gestellt"; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Die deutsche Ideologie," in *Werke* (Berlin, 1958), 3:26. Translated by W. Lough as "The German Ideology," in *Collected Works*, vol. 5, *Marx and Engels: 1845–47* (New York, 1976), 36.

60. *Das Kapital*, 21/103.
61. *CPR*, A 384/434*.
62. “Gegenständlicher Schein der gesellschaftlichen Arbeitsbestimmungen” (*Das Kapital*, 61/176*), “gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit” (20/128*), “Es ist nur das bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Menschen, welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt” (52/165*).
63. *Prolegomena*, A 159/102.
64. *CPR*, A 424, B 452/468*.
65. Guyot, *Neue physikalische Belustigungen*, 159.
66. “Eine Gemüthseigenschaft, die diesem großen Künstler von Blendwerken (die, wie durch eine Zauberalaterne, Wunderdinge einen Augenblicke lang vorstellig machen, bald darauf aber auf immer verschwinden, indessen daß sie doch bey Unwissenden eine Bewunderung hinterlassen, daß etwas Außerordentliches dahinter stecken müsse, welches sie nur nicht haschen können) besonders eigen ist.” Kant, “To Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. August 30, 1789,” in *Briefe*, 157/319*.
67. *Anthropologie*, A 40, B 40/29*.
68. *CPR*, A 384/434*.
69. “Spekulative Einschränkung”; *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 255/117*.
70. “Mit Theorien des Übersinnlichen, wovon man kein Ende absieht, . . . die Theologie zur Zauberalaterne von Hirngespennern zu machen”; *ibid.*, A 254/117*. Kant also describes the dialectic of practical reason as “the ground of an error of subreption (vitium subreptionis) and, as it were, of an optical illusion in the self-consciousness of what one does, as distinguished from what one feels”; *ibid.*, A 210/97.
71. “Augenblickliche Verirrungen”; *CPR*, B 355, A 298/386–387*. “Macht ihrer Illusion”; *CPR*, B 622/565.
72. *CPR*, B 355, A 298/386–87.
73. *Anthropologie*, A 40, B 40/29*.
74. *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A 254/117*.
75. Arthur Schopenhauer, “Versuch über das Geistersehn und was damit zusammenhängt” (1851), in *Parerga und Paralipomena I*, ed. W. F. v. Löhneysen (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), 273–372. Translated by E. F. J. Payne as “Essay on Spirit Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith,” in Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena I* (Oxford, 2000), 225–310.
76. “Ein hervorgerufener Zauber, ein bestandloser, an sich wesensloser Schein, der optischen Illusion und dem Traume vergleichbar”; Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I*, ed. W. F. v. Löhneysen (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), 567. Translated by Richard E. Aquila as *The World as Will and Presentation* (New York, 2008), 1:484.
77. *Ibid.*, 567/485*.