

CHAPTER 3

Having missed this golden opportunity to finally attain scientific recognition, hypnotism, just as had mesmerism, soon became more or less relegated to the tawdry domain of the *stage* operators, where a potent combination of tasteless sensationalism, coupled with extremely authoritative induction tactics, would serve to effectively poison the minds of most *everyone* against the phenomenon of trance.

To hear Hudson (1893/1920) tell it,

The idea is being very generally promulgated . . . that the ability of one man to mesmerize or hypnotize another implies the possession of a very dangerous power . . . It would be strange indeed if the average man were not impressed with an indefinable dread of the power of the hypnotist. He sees him, by means of certain mysterious manipulations, throw his subject into a profound sleep, and awaken him by a snap of the fingers . . . All this, and much more, can be seen at public exhibitions of hypnotism. (pp. 122-123)

[see *NOTE 5* on p. 293]

Not surprisingly, induction tactics were expressly tailored to meet the special requirements of these “entertainers”, which meant instilling a sense of righteous awe in the audience.

That effect was always best achieved by appearing to totally *subdue* their subjects.

For example, as a certain “Dr.” Cook (1901/1950) instructed,

Stand directly in front of the subject, about 5 feet from him; have him stare at you blankly while you assume a fierce expression of determination; raise your hands and separate the fingers; gradually move your hands toward him, and then suddenly seize him by the shoulders and give him a . . . quick shove backward; rivet your eyes upon his in the greatest earnestness and intensity. If this method succeeds, the subject will assume a peculiar and unmistakable expression of submission. (p. 259).

Presumably somewhat like that of the legendary Count Dracula's slack-jawed victims after he'd transfixed them (in a curiously similar manner) with his Evil Eye.

Or consider the methodology of Donato, one of the most active of these traveling hypnotists at the close of the nineteenth century. His favorite induction technique (employed at one time or other on some thirty thousand subjects) made use of both "fascination" and a bizarre derivative that was known as "attraction".

Wynaendts Francken (1902) described its manifestation as follows:

The subject becomes paralyzed in his will, follows the operator everywhere, and slavishly imitates his every movement . . . (Donato) had the subjects press the palms of their hands against his; he then applied downward force while at the same time, and with a penetrating stare from his bulging eyes, ordered them to lock gazes with him. While doing this, he whirled around the subject or forced him backwards, until he felt that that one would offer him no more resistance . . . While all this was taking place, his subjects exhibited a taut, staring demeanor, wide-open eyes, a look devoid of all expression, and contorted facial features. (pp. 20-21)

The mind reels at the low-rent horror of it all.

For all intents and purposes, it appeared as if "open season" had been declared on anyone who was either foolhardy or naïve enough to offer themselves as a volunteer. And generally, by the end of each performance, even the most liberal boundaries of common decency had been ruthlessly and shamefully violated.

What the audience got to witness, from that first barked order ("Sleep!") to the last imperious command ("Awaken!"), was an elegantly staged but contemptible illusion of raw power, of total mind control.

As de Laurence (1901/1925) advised his would-be colleagues,

“Tell (the subjects) to close their eyes and that when you have counted three they will open their eyes, but will find a swarm of bees stinging them all over their faces and bodies, and their frantic and half-crazed efforts to drive off the imaginary bees will provoke roars of laughter. Rest them all, and say, now when I count three, you will open your eyes and will find that you are sitting upon a red-hot stove”, and their desperate efforts to get off the chairs will afford great amusement . . . Then take two or three subjects and sew their tongues together with needle and thread, and while in this condition have them sing a song or converse with each other. (pp. 49-51)

[see *NOTE 6* on p. 299]

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Of course, it wouldn't be fair to claim that *all* of these exhibitions were cruel, vile, and repugnant because many of them were merely sleazy, debasing, and loathsome.

But while the lyrics might sometimes differ, the melody was *always* recognizable: what the audience got to witness was how certain of their number were seemingly transformed from responsible human beings into hapless, will-less buffoons.

How otherwise sane and upright citizens were reduced, as if by some evil alchemy, to a succession of entranced *zombies*, lurching and weaving to the clipped commands of the “World's Greatest Hypnotist!”—his arrogant finger snaps acting like a diabolical kind of remote control, instantaneously propelling them through yet another bizarre and frenzied routine.

What's more, as Boekhoudt (1890) pointed out, “Suggestion in the hands of the stage-magnetizers can be a dangerous weapon. When Hanson, for example, says to the hypnotized subject, ‘Your hair is on fire!’ (Vos cheveux brûlent!) it really shouldn't be surprising that this might be so shocking to the subject as to cause considerable harm to his nervous system” (p. 80).

Fortunately enough, no one was ever actually killed or crippled—at least, not permanently. But as Kost (1965, p. 222) rightfully lamented, one inevitable side effect was that no matter how hard an audience might “roar with laughter” at the ludicrous antics of those subjects, they simultaneously “develop a fear and a revulsion at the debasing of the human being which they are observing, and often come away with the mental reservation that no one is *ever* going to hypnotize *them*”.

While people occasionally winced at the incredible excesses committed by those

operators, they nevertheless continued to frequent their performances, thereafter breathlessly spreading the word to others that a hypnotist was someone who could “*make*” (*force!*) people to do anything he *wanted* them to do.

[see *NOTE 7* on p. 311]

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With each and every exhibition, that choice bit of disinformation became further ingrained in the public consciousness; and the common reaction, understandably enough, usually ranged from a vague but anxious distaste all the way to stark, raving *terror*.

Such as when an operator named Carl Sextus (1893/1895) described how while giving one of his performances, he was

greatly surprised to see a couple of fellows take from their pockets some lemons which, in accordance with some ceremonies to me unknown, they cut into pieces. With these they carefully rubbed their temples, forehead, etc. Even their poorly-blackened shoes did not miss this peculiar treatment. These mystic experiments, I learned later, were supposed to be safeguards against my hypnotic influence. Another young gentleman, who was seemingly well-built, had a prominence on his chest which looked like a deformity. Later in the evening . . . when he removed his coat and vest, there was much merriment in the audience when a couple of thick copper plates, some roofing zinc, and a large horseshoe dropped to the floor with resounding noise. This gentleman was evidently (also)
very well prepared. (p. 274)

All in all, I suppose Sextus should have been satisfied that they hadn’t decided to try their luck with a sharpened stake or silver bullets. From a purely *ethical* standpoint, it wouldn’t have been altogether unjustified.

Indeed, thanks to the employment of such exceedingly authoritarian techniques, the figure of the “hypnotist” had by now become popularly conceptualized as a creature *so* vile and menacing that he practically left a trail of *slime* in his wake. Once again, as Sextus bemusedly related,

Wherever I appeared on the street the children hurried away, stopping their

play, ceasing their merry laughter, while they sought shelter in the doors and alleys. A tall boy . . . who had the courage to stare at me in daring proximity, was taken into the house by his anxious mother. Polish, Bohemian and Italian women crossed themselves solemnly whenever I passed them during my stay in that locality. (ibid, p. 276)

While the prevalence of this attitude was to tragically result in the senseless obliteration of hypnotism's therapeutic potential, it at least provided lots of juicy material for sordid "dime novels" in which a common theme, as Ludwig (1963, p. 73) noted, tended to depict a sweet, guileless female seduced through hypnosis into love and bondage by a cunning and much-older Simon Legree type of villain. While in this state, she was completely powerless to resist his wishes and commands.

Needless to say, they sold briskly, and the added impact of lurid and sensationalistic accounts in the daily press contributed to the *further* degeneration of hypnotism's (*already* thoroughly battered) image.

[see **NOTE 8** on p. 322]

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All things considered, it's not particularly *surprising* that mankind's concept of the hypnotic experience had by now been effectively transformed into an unsavory parody. In fact, to hear Satow (1923) tell it,

As lately as 1890, the celebrated Professor DuBois-Reymond regarded it as "a form of insanity", and even the brilliant physiologist Helmholtz called it "a worthless conjuring-trick" . . . A certain Professor Fuchs . . . is reported to have said: "I shall acknowledge hypnotism when a hypnotist succeeds in inducing Professor Helmholtz to behave like a bashful girl, or Professor DuBois-Reymond to growl like a dog and tear his napkin to pieces with his teeth. (p. 17)

[see **NOTE 9** on p. 329]

Worst of all, not only were such appalling misconceptions being *deliberately* fostered by legions of enterprising and unscrupulous *showmen*, they were also being *unintentionally* fostered by legions of well-meaning but ignorant *investigators*.

Regrettably enough, it seems that the time was just not ripe for some wise and respected

authority to rise up in furious indignation and, once and for all, expose these ruinous fallacies for what they really were.

If anything, my friend, the *opposite* was true.