

**'THE APOTHEOSIS OF VOICE':  
MESMERISM AS MECHANISATION IN GEORGE DU MAURIER'S *TRILBY***

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*Abstract*

This article considers the relationship between mesmeric and sonic influence in George Du Maurier's *Trilby* to argue that mesmerism offered a significant framework for conceptualising sound in the late-Victorian era. Drawing on Franz Anton Mesmer's theorisation of a 'universally distributed and continuous fluid' affecting all animate and inanimate bodies, I demonstrate how sound similarly constructs networks of influence that facilitate communication but privilege certain individuals over others. Published in 1894, when mesmerism was firmly categorised as unscientific, but set in the 1850s when its legitimacy remained contested, *Trilby* exposes the shift from mesmerism as aspiring science to mesmerism as metaphor. Through a comparison of scenes of looking and listening in the novel, I argue that sound facilitates communication between bodies more readily than sight. While looking is depicted as an individualised process that reinforces the separateness of bodies, listening is represented as a collective endeavour that exposes the interconnectedness of the audience members. *Trilby's* vocalisations facilitate a mode of shared experience previously deemed impossible, yet her figuration as a 'singing-machine' leaves her isolated. Aligning the mesmeric subject with the mechanised human, Du Maurier's work reveals the relationship between mesmeric and sonic influence to depict sound's most threatening implications.

When George Du Maurier's infamous mesmerist Svengali exerts his influence over *Trilby*, she becomes 'just a singing-machine—an organ to play upon—an instrument of music—a Stradivarius—a flexible flageolet of flesh and blood—a voice, and nothing more—just the unconscious voice that Svengali sang with'.<sup>120</sup> This exhaustive description of *Trilby* underscores her inherent lack of autonomy as a mesmeric subject, variously positing her as a phonograph or musical instrument whose vocal production depends on Svengali's manipulation of her body. Published in 1894, when mesmerism was firmly categorised as unscientific, but set in 1850s bohemian Paris when its validity as a science remained contested, *Trilby* tells the story of a young woman who is transformed from a tone-deaf artists' model to an international singing diva at the hands of the disreputable musician and mesmerist Svengali. *Trilby's* retrospective orientation towards mesmerism allows Du Maurier to reveal a significant

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<sup>120</sup> George Du Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 299. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

connection between the mesmeric subject and the mechanised human. Through its persistent equation of Trilby with a 'singing-machine' the novel illustrates how devices like the phonograph severed what had been considered an immutable bond between human voices and human bodies, necessitating a reconceptualisation of the nature of sound that accounted for the voice's newfound independence.

Drawing on Franz Anton Mesmer's theorisation of animal magnetism, this article argues that mesmerism offered a significant framework for thinking about sound at a time when devices like the phonograph allowed the human voice to speak even in the absence of a human speaker. My reading of *Trilby* exposes the shared language of Mesmer and Du Maurier to demonstrate how the latter reappropriates outmoded scientific concepts to critique the impact of sound technologies on late-Victorian society. In his 1779 'Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism' Mesmer posits the existence of a 'universally distributed and continuous fluid' affecting all animate and inanimate bodies.<sup>121</sup> He insists, 'that all bodies [are], like the magnet, capable of communicating this magnetic principle; that this fluid penetrate[s] everything and [can] be stored up and concentrated, like the electric fluid; that it act[s] at a distance' (p. 36). Mesmer's theorisation of the practice popularly termed mesmerism emphasises the capacity of his universal fluid to facilitate communication between bodies, a characteristic underscored in Du Maurier's representation of the phenomenon.<sup>122</sup> Although Mesmer mentions sound only in passing, as something that communicates, propagates, and intensifies the universal fluid, the language he employs to describe animal magnetism precipitates the language used to describe sound not only in Du Maurier's novel, but also in sound studies criticism (p. 55). Like Mesmer's substance, sound is fluid, penetrating, and capable of constructing networks of influence that facilitate communication, but privilege certain individuals as authorities over others.

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<sup>121</sup> *Mesmerism: Being a Translation of Mesmer's Historic Mémoire sur la découverte du Magnétisme Animal to appear in English* (London: MacDonald & Co., 1948), p. 54.

Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>122</sup> Although "mesmerism" has become the popular name for Mesmer's phenomenon, he originally called it "Animal Magnetism" to distinguish it from mineral magnetism. However, Victorians used these terms interchangeably. Mesmer's decision understandably caused many to confuse animal magnetism with magnets. In an effort to refute this erroneous assumption Mesmer ceased using electricity and magnets in his work after 1776. See Fred Kaplan, ' "The Mesmeric Mania": The Early Victorians and Animal Magnetism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35.4 (1974), pp. 691-702 (p. 692).

The conflation of mesmeric and sonic influence in Du Maurier's novel not only exposes the relation between the 'universal fluid' and sound, but also confronts the possibility that like mesmerism, sound could be turned to nefarious purposes. Representing a 'revelation of what the human voice could achieve', the mechanised Trilby is framed as a superior being capable of influencing the emotions and actions of her audience (pp. 214-15). However, her vocal evolution comes at a cost. Placed in a mesmeric trance that mutes her emotional capacity, renders her virtually unconscious, and strips her of autonomy, Trilby becomes 'the apotheosis of voice and virtuosity' at the expense of her "humanness". As a 'singing-machine' she facilitates the shared experience of her listeners, but remains unable to participate in the unique community that convenes around her performances. Through the juxtaposition of mesmeric and sonic influence, *Trilby* demonstrates that while mesmerism eventually failed as a science, it continued to function as a metaphor integral to understanding the shifting soundscape of the late-nineteenth century.

I begin with an analysis of nineteenth-century figurations of mesmerists and their subjects, arguing that though entranced individuals were vulnerable, mesmerism offered them a degree of power by provoking changes in their sensory function and intellectual capacity. Turning from mesmeric influence to sonic influence, the second section of my article clarifies the similarities between Mesmer's fluid and sound. I continue to investigate how these forms of influence impact communication between animate bodies, suggesting that the fundamental ideas behind animal magnetism offered a productive model for thinking about how sound technologies like the telephone and phonograph reshaped the relationship between bodies and voices. The final section of my article offers a close reading of Du Maurier's *Trilby*. I compare scenes of looking and listening in the novel to argue that sound facilitates communication between bodies more readily than sight, but destabilises "humanness".

### **Mesmerist and Mesmerised: Power and Mesmeric Practice**

While Mesmer intended to use animal magnetism to benefit humankind, claiming medicine would 'reach its final stage of perfection', it is not difficult to understand the resistance he faced given the supposed power of the mesmerist (p. 56). Fred Kaplan explains that despite mesmerism's potential, it required the public to accept a significant paradigm shift, 'a new theory about the nature of influence and power relationships

between people, and between people and objects in their environment'.<sup>123</sup> Mesmerism did necessitate a reconsideration of how animate and inanimate bodies influence one another, but it also reinforced many biases of the existing social structure. Nineteenth-century conceptualisations of the ideal mesmeric subject emphasise the vulnerability of individuals whose autonomy is already compromised; subordinate members of society are more susceptible to a practice that further moderates self-governance. In his 1843 *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*, J.F.P. Deleuze explains 'magnetism generally exercises no influence upon persons in health. The same man who was insensible to it in a state of good health, will experience the effects of it when ill'.<sup>124</sup> Deleuze's statement aligns susceptibility to mesmeric influence with physical constitution, an association that implicitly establishes nineteenth-century women as more pliant subjects. Imperfect health and nervousness, qualities that recur in most descriptions of the ideal mesmeric subject, were also closely associated with women.<sup>125</sup> Recounting an experiment intended to demonstrate 'that [animal magnetism] acted at a distance', Mesmer inadvertently illustrates the danger male mesmerists posed to female subjects. He writes, 'I pointed my finger at the patient at a distance of eight paces; the next instant, her body was in convulsion to the point of raising her on the bed with every appearance of pain' (p. 38). The striking image of a women convulsing with pain in response to a

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<sup>123</sup> "The Mesmeric Mania", p. 692.

<sup>124</sup> *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism*, trans. Thomas C. Hartshorn (New York: Da Capo Press, 1982), p. 24. Further references are given after quotations in the text. Like Mesmer, Deleuze believed in the existence of a magnetic fluid. In the introduction to his work he writes, 'I believe in the existence of a fluid, the nature of which is unknown to me; but those who deny the existence of this fluid, who compare the action of magnetism in living beings to that of attraction in inanimate bodies, or who admit a spiritual influence without a particular agent, cannot, on that account, contradict the consequences to which I shall arrive. The knowledge of the processes, and of all the conditions necessary for the efficient use of magnetism, is independent of the opinions which serve to explain the phenomena, and of which, up to the present time, none are susceptible of demonstration' (p. 18). One of the major stumbling blocks Mesmer faced was the fact that he could not explain or provide evidence of the magnetic fluid. Deleuze dismisses this as unimportant.

<sup>125</sup> Alison Winter points out that the majority of the experimental subjects used by John Elliotson, a well-respected physician at the University College Hospital, were lower-class women. However, she also explains that a prevalent view of mesmerism in light of Elliotson's experiments with the O'Key sisters was that it allowed morally weak women to take advantage of weaker men. See Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

pointed finger elucidates the extreme fear some felt towards mesmerism. Additionally, the depiction of the male mesmerist exercising unprecedented control over the female body raises questions regarding the use of animal magnetism for reprehensible purposes, an issue central to Du Maurier's depiction of the relationship between Svengali and Trilby.

The potential exploitation of mesmerism was a significant concern, especially since works like Deleuze's claimed that '[t]he faculty of magnetizing exists in all persons' (p. 32). Advocates of mesmerism as science generally implicated amateurs who used mesmerism as entertainment as the primary offenders, suggesting that misuse of the practice was not a concern within professional communities. Mesmer foregrounds this argument in his own work when he states that '[physicians] alone are qualified to put [animal magnetism] into practice' (p. 57). Harriet Martineau, a prominent writer and journalist and a staunch advocate of mesmerism, vehemently opposes what she calls 'itinerant advocates' in her 1845 *Letters on Mesmerism*. Questioning their motivations, she writes,

no man of enlarged views, of knowledge at all adequate to the power he wields, would venture upon the perilous rashness of making a public exhibition of the solemn wonders yet so new and impressive, of playing upon the brain and nerves of human beings, exhibiting for money on a stage states of mind and soul held too sacred in olden times to be elicited elsewhere than in temples, by the hands of the priests and the gods.<sup>126</sup>

Mesmerism places the subject in an intensely vulnerable position not only in relation to the powerful mesmerist but all observers. Calling attention to the manipulation of the human body, specifically 'the brain and nerves of human beings', Martineau highlights the subject's loss of autonomy while in the trance state. She describes the exploitation of mesmerism as a sinful act that violates the intimate connection between mesmerist and subject by turning the 'solemn wonders' of the body into a profit seeking 'public exhibition'. Martineau's sentiment echoes Deleuze, who similarly states that mesmerists 'ought to regard the employment of [magnetism] as a religious act, which demands the greatest self-collectedness, and the greatest purity of intention. —Hence it is a sort of profanation to magnetize for amusement' (p. 27). Ultimately, Martineau and Deleuze

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<sup>126</sup> *Miss Martineau's Letters on Mesmerism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845), p. 21. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

argue that mesmerism must be employed carefully and responsibly as a science, rather than a form of entertainment.

However, locating the problem of exploitation exclusively in the realm of entertainment fails to account for the increasing authority of the scientific community over individuals' bodies. I would argue that opposition to the exhibition of mesmeric subjects was grounded in a more widespread resistance to the dehumanising effects of treating bodies as objects, a resistance that persisted in relation to the potential mechanisation of human bodies. Physicians like John Elliotson who were eager to persuade sceptical colleagues of mesmerism's validity, were just as exploitative in their mesmeric experiments as 'itinerant advocates', if not more so. Alison Winter explains that the majority of Elliotson's subjects, most of whom were women, were 'from a group whom Victorian physicians did not regard as individuals in the same category as themselves, and possibly not as individuals at all: their charity patients'.<sup>127</sup> Nineteenth-century scientists defined themselves as highly rational and dispassionate figures capable of viewing human bodies as sites of knowledge production. This persona helped physicians establish themselves as professionals, but it also led to questions regarding their willingness to exploit experimental subjects in the name of science. What emerges from Martineau and Deleuze's stipulations about the proper applications of mesmerism is the fact that regulating mesmerists to ensure 'the greatest purity of intention' was virtually impossible, especially since anyone could manipulate the universal fluid.

Although descriptions of mesmerism often emphasise the subject's disempowerment, the mesmeric trance actually grants them a form of influence by changing their sensory function and giving them access to otherwise inaccessible knowledge. Treatises on mesmerism explain that entranced subjects no longer perceive the external world, shifting to a mode of internal perception. Deleuze makes this move from exterior to interior explicit in his discussion of somnambulists. He writes, '[t]he external organs of sense are all, or nearly all, asleep; and yet [the mesmeric subject] experiences sensations, but by another means. There is roused in him an internal sense, which is perhaps the centre of the others, or a sort of instinct' (p. 68). The notion that 'an internal sense' or 'sort of instinct' is 'roused' suggests this kind of sensing is latent in all individuals and simply needs to be accessed by putting the 'external organs of sense' to sleep. Deleuze goes on to argue that magnetism reveals

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<sup>127</sup> *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 61.

the two-fold existence of the *internal* and the *external* man in a single individual. They offer a direct proof of the spirituality of the soul, and an answer to all the objections raised against its immortality. They make evident the truth known to ancient sages, and so well expressed by M. de Bonald, that *man is an intelligence served by organs*. (p. 69).

The bodies of mesmeric subjects thus become new sites of knowledge, exposing relations between the internal and external existence of humankind not apparent in normally sensing individuals. This transformation calls attention to the importance of voice, which moves fluidly between the spatially and temporally distinct realms subjects and mesmerists inhabit even though the body cannot. Furthermore, it grants subjects a degree of authority as repositories of knowledge gleaned using the 'internal sense' and conveyed to observers through dialogue.

In addition to enabling mesmeric subjects to employ the 'internal sense', the trance state allegedly facilitated highly logical thinking and allowed subjects to address metaphysical questions.<sup>128</sup> Martineau recounts a dialogue with a mesmeric subject who explains that mesmerism 'exalts and elevates the thinking powers' (p. 15). In his 1841 *Facts in Mesmerism, with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into It*, Chauncy Hare Townshend relates these intellectual changes to sensory changes in mesmeric subjects. He states, 'separated from the usual action of the senses, the mind appears to gain juster notions, to have quite a new sense of spiritual things, and to be lifted nearer to the fountain of all good and of all truth'.<sup>129</sup> While Townshend contextualises this aspect of mesmerism within religion and spiritualism, *Trilby* links the ascendancy of the mesmeric subject to evolutionary superiority.<sup>130</sup> In both cases, the

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<sup>128</sup> Edgar Allan Poe's 1844 short story 'Mesmeric Revelation' directly engages the idea that mesmeric subjects could address metaphysical questions. The ailing Mr. Vankirk asks to be mesmerised so that he can experience the intellectual enlargement afforded by the trance state and attain knowledge about 'the soul's immortality'. See Edgar Allan Poe, 'Mesmeric Revelation', in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 88-95 (p. 89).

<sup>129</sup> *Facts in Mesmerism, with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into It* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), p. 11. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>130</sup> Anne Stiles tracks the association between genius and insanity prevalent in nineteenth-century scientific discourse, calling attention to the threat of particular kinds of evolution to morality. The overdevelopment of the human brain was considered dangerous because, following Lamarckian thought, the development of any

transcendent nature of the trance state enables subjects to access alternative realms unencumbered by their physical forms. The mind and voice take precedence over the body, which assumes a role comparable to the telephone; it becomes a device that facilitates communication at a distance.

The changes to mesmeric subjects' sensory function and intellectual capacity described by well-known theorists of mesmerism like Deleuze and Townshend gesture towards a unique form of empowerment. Yet, literary representations of the relationship between mesmerist and mesmerised often exaggerate the latter's vulnerability, depicting mesmerists as having unilateral power that they wield with villainous intent. Du Maurier's Svengali fully embodies this stereotype, to the extent that the noun Svengali has come to 'designate a person who exercises a controlling or mesmeric influence on another, freq. for some sinister purpose'.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, Svengali has been a major focus in critical treatments of the novel, far overshadowing the titular character, and leading critics like Laura Vorachek to suggest that the focus on Svengali has obscured other lines of enquiry.<sup>132</sup> However, the mesmerist's role in Trilby's demise has become a subject of debate. Does the sinister Svengali, a talented musician 'walking up and down the earth seeking whom he might cheat, betray, exploit, borrow money from, make brutal fun of, bully if he dared', absolutely determine Trilby's fate? (p. 42). Hilary Grimes claims that critics like Maria M. Tatar, Alison Winter, and Daniel Pick provide static readings of mesmerism that inaccurately portray Svengali as exercising constant and absolute power over Trilby. She argues that 'mesmerism does not simply describe a powerful mesmerist and a powerless subject, but rather a merging and blurring of identities and powers of both mesmeriser and mesmerised'.<sup>133</sup> By shifting attention away from Svengali, Grimes pushes readers to consider the broader implications of mesmeric influence and highlights the networks of bodies constructed through the practice. While I follow Grimes's formulation of

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one organ necessarily led to the deterioration of others. Stiles writes, 'One possible conclusion of rapid Lamarckian brain evolution, then, was a species of morally insane beings boasting enormous cerebrums and miniscule bodies'. See Anne Stiles, 'Literature in "Mind": H.G. Wells and the Evolution of the Mad Scientist', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70.2 (April 2009), pp. 317-39 (p. 329).

<sup>131</sup> 'Svengali, n.', in *OED Online* <[www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)> [accessed 12 May 2015].

<sup>132</sup> 'Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in *Trilby*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37.1 (2009), pp. 197-215 (p. 200).

<sup>133</sup> 'Power in Flux: Mesmerism, Mesmeric Manuals and Du Maurier's *Trilby*', *Gothic Studies* 10.2 (2008), pp. 67-83 (p. 67).



mesmerism as a 'merging and blurring of identities and powers', I contend that Trilby's mechanisation and resultant unconsciousness inhibits a fully cooperative relationship. Furthermore, her status as a 'singing-machine' excludes her from the community that convenes around her vocal performances. My next section considers Trilby's isolation in relation to broader discussions of the inherent isolation of corporeality. I argue that mesmerism and sound technologies offered potential means of overcoming such barriers and enabling shared experience.

### **Human Voices, Mechanical Bodies**

Contemplating the English landscape after social expectations prevent him from marrying Trilby and a consequent illness renders him affectless, Little Billee wonders: 'Why couldn't these waves of air and water be turned into equivalent waves of sound, that he might feel them through the only channel that reached his emotions!' (p. 178). Despite his renown as a painter, Little Billee recognises the capacity of 'waves of sound' to exert a particular influence over human emotions. His desire for a synesthetic experience privileges sound as a fluid substance that moves through the channels of his body to awaken latent feelings in a way visual stimuli cannot. This understanding of sound aligns with the very characteristics Mesmer associates with the 'universally distributed and continuous fluid' essential to animal magnetism, a comparison rendered more apparent in the context of Du Maurier's novel because of its dual concern with mesmeric and sonic influence.<sup>134</sup> Little Billee's frustrated exclamation also gestures towards his deep need for connection, a need that was central to discussions of how mesmerism and sound technologies might overcome the isolating nature of human corporeality.

Mesmerism's potential for facilitating the emotional connection Little Billee craves is apparent in M. Loewe's 1822 text, *A Treatise on the Phenomena of Animal Magnetism*. Loewe explicitly links the disabling of the external senses in the trance state with a new form of communication

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<sup>134</sup> The notion that sound is 'universal' and 'continuous' like Mesmer's fluid is also evident in the contemporary rhetoric of sound studies critics like Steven Connor, who characterises sound as 'omnipresent, nondirectional, and mobile', and Edith Lecourt, who remarks that 'sound reaches us from everywhere, it surrounds us, goes through us'. See Steven Connor, 'Sound and the Self', in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. by Mark M. Smith (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), pp. 54-66 (p. 57); see also Edith Lecourt, quoted in Steven Connor, 'The Modern Auditory I', in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 203-23 (p. 214).

between bodies. He claims that ‘shut[ting] the avenues of the organs of sense against external influence’ transforms the ‘whole man’ into ‘an organ of admission for the external impressions’.<sup>135</sup> Exploring the potential of this state of being he writes,

[i]f all men were in such a condition, their respective ideas would be communicated to each other by one simultaneous feeling, even without any speech or other sign; for speech and all other signs are only assistants, to obtain our perceptions by means of the usual organs of sense. Hence a person in the above state can obtain perceptions of the ideas of another, who is not in that state; but the other cannot do so, without their being indicated by the usual signs. (p. 65).

Loewe’s contrast between the ‘simultaneous feeling’ and the ‘usual signs’ of communication like speech identifies one of the central barriers to shared experience: the isolation inherent to corporeality. John Durham Peters explains that prior to the invention of technologies like the telegraph, communication was framed as an insurmountable physiological problem irrespective of voice. Reinforcing the constraints of embodiment Peters writes, ‘my nerve endings terminate in my own brain, not yours, no central exchange exists where I can patch my sensory input into yours, nor is there any sort of “wireless” contact through which to transmit my immediate experience of the world to you’.<sup>136</sup> Loewe’s description of communication between mesmerised individuals presents mesmerism as a solution to the unsharable nature of human experience. In essence, the practice creates Peters’s ‘central exchange’ where ‘respective ideas [can] be communicated’ regardless of corporeal boundaries. However, lurking behind Loewe’s theorisation of mesmeric communication is the ever-present threat of exploitation. The idea that subjects can ‘obtain perceptions of the ideas of another, who is not in that state’ while ‘the other cannot do so’ leaves observers vulnerable to mental violation.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *A Treatise on the Phenomena of Animal Magnetism: In which the Same are Systematically Explained According to the Laws of Nature* (London: G. Schulze, 1822), p. 64. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>136</sup> *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 4. Further references are given are quotations in the text.

<sup>137</sup> George Eliot addresses this theme in her 1859 novella *The Lifted Veil*, which features a character who is able to telepathically access others’ thoughts. He becomes obsessed

Little Billee's desire that the English landscape present itself as waves of sound suggests that like the mesmeric fluid, sound could facilitate particular modes of communication and emotional connection. The language that sound studies critics like Steven Connor use to describe the human voice further underscores the shared properties of sound and Mesmer's fluid: both substances penetrate animate bodies and expose networks of influence. Connor explains,

voice comes from the inside of a body and radiates through space which is exterior to and expands beyond that body. In moving from interior to exterior, and therefore marking out the relations of interior and exterior, a voice announces and verifies the cooperation of bodies and the environments in which they have their being.<sup>138</sup>

Connor's description of voice as both expanding beyond the body and 'marking out the relations of interior and exterior' echoes Deleuze's claim that mesmerism exposes 'the two-fold existence of the *internal* and the *external* man in a single individual'; both sound and the mesmeric fluid work to disrupt the internal/external binary central to nineteenth-century understandings of embodiment. Furthermore, the idea that 'voice announces and verifies the cooperation of bodies' emphasises its capacity to expose connections between individuals, a quality Mesmer associates with his substance. However, sound does not acquire the same capacity to communicate the 'simultaneous feeling' that Loewe describes until it becomes independent like the mesmeric fluid, a change brought about by the proliferation of sound technologies.

Nineteenth-century innovations like the telephone and phonograph affected human bodies in ways comparable to mesmerism: these devices reshaped sensory function, liberated human voices from human bodies, and generated new forms of communication. Peters explains that as communication shifted from being a 'physical transfer or transmission' to a 'quasi-physical connection across the obstacles of time and space' questions of embodiment turned to questions of disembodiment (p. 5). While Peters associates this change with the development of

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with his brother's fiancé Bertha because her mind is difficult to read and discovers her manipulative and dishonest nature after he eventually marries her. Bertha, suspicious that Latimer is able to gain access to her mind, plots to kill him. See George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>138</sup> *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 6. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

communication technologies, mesmerism might have inspired a similar shift if not for the widespread scepticism regarding its authenticity. Viewed in this light, Martineau's contention that '[i]t is important to society to know whether mesmerism is true' carries a bit more weight (p. 3). Regardless, under both definitions of communication voice proved elusive in terms of categorisation, failing to fit into the dominant visual culture associated with nineteenth-century science. Sound shared many qualities with Mesmer's universal fluid, but it differed in its emanation from material bodies.

While mesmerism inspired only those who accepted the practice to rethink the conditions of embodiment, the introduction of devices like the phonograph required society at large to develop a new understanding of the relationship between human voices and human bodies. Jonathan Sterne explains,

Before the invention of sound-reproduction technologies, we are told, sound withered away. It existed only as it went out of existence. Once telephones, phonographs, and radios populated the world, sound lost a little of its ephemeral character. The voice became a little more unmoored from the body, and people's ears could take them into the past or across vast distances.<sup>139</sup>

Like mesmerism, sound reproduction technologies reshaped spatial and temporal limitations, unmooring sound from the human body and allowing individuals to move 'into the past or across vast distances'. Trilby's unique position as a 'singing-machine' allows her to provoke precisely this kind of movement 'into the past' in her audience members, who experience happy scenes of childhood while listening to her voice. Yet devices like the phonograph also introduced mechanical bodies that reinvigorated the question of what it means to be human. The problem of embodiment was complicated not only by the changing functionality of the sensory organs, but also by the possibility of disembodiment or re-embodiment within non-human forms.

Turning to electronic telecommunications, Jeffrey Sconce explains that devices like the telephone 'have compelled citizens of the media age to reconsider increasingly disassociative relationships among body, mind,

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<sup>139</sup> *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 1.

space, and time'.<sup>140</sup> While 'presence' takes different forms in relation to different mediums, Sconce outlines a recurrent mode of conceptualisation that employs language reminiscent of Mesmer's explanation of animal magnetism. He writes

fantastic conceptions of media presence [...] have often evoked a series of interrelated metaphors of 'flow' suggesting analogies between electricity, consciousness, and information that enables fantastic forms of electronic transmutation, substitution, and exchange. In the historical reception of each electronic telecommunications medium [...] popular culture has consistently imagined the convergence of three 'flowing' agents conceptualized in terms of their apparent liquidity:

- (1) the electricity that powers the medium
- (2) the information that occupies the medium
- (3) the consciousness of the viewer/listener (pp. 7-8).

Devices like the telephone are thus situated within networks of 'flowing' agents' that, like Mesmer's universal fluid, facilitate communication between bodies. The fact that public imagination persistently evokes this metaphor suggests the fundamental ideas behind animal magnetism, a force that connects all animate and inanimate bodies and allows them to influence one another, remain pertinent in the media age. Additionally, the inclusion of 'the consciousness of the viewer/listener' as one of the agents implies that electronic telecommunications devices reconfigure embodiment, allowing individuals to flow in and out of their corporeal selves. Loewe's concept of 'simultaneous feeling' as a mode of communication aptly captures the fluidity of thought and emotion implicated in 'media presence'. The final section of my article considers mesmeric and sonic influence in Du Maurier's novel to argue that *Trilby* exposes the importance of mesmerism as a metaphor for sound.

### **Mesmeric and Sonic Influence in George Du Maurier's *Trilby***

Employing mesmerism as a metaphor for sonic influence, George Du Maurier's *Trilby* explores the ramifications of shutting down not only the external senses, but also the consciousness of the mesmeric subject. Taffy, the Laird, and the sensitive Little Billee, a group of artists affectionately

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<sup>140</sup> *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 7. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

termed 'The Three Englishmen', bear witness to Trilby's transformation from a tone-deaf artists' model to an international singing diva known as 'La Svengali'. Du Maurier's novel endorses the curative powers of mesmerism, demonstrating its usefulness in treating the painful neuralgia in Trilby's eyes, but primarily focuses on mesmerism as a form of entertainment. On the surface, *Trilby* confronts the possibility that mesmerists will abuse their positions to exercise control over subjects and seek personal gains. Emphasising the potential for exploitation, the Laird worries that mesmerists 'get you into their power, and just make you do any blessed thing they please—lie, murder, steal—anything!' (p. 52). Svengali's sexual desire for Trilby, who he presents as his wife throughout her performances, exacerbates this danger by illustrating how male mesmerists might take advantage of female subjects. However, the novel more fundamentally speaks to the seductive power of sound at the turn of the nineteenth century. 'La Svengali' captivates and entrances audiences with her voice, expanding the scope of mesmeric influence from a single subject to a large assemblage.

The two manifestations of Trilby, one an autonomous young woman and the other a 'singing-machine' controlled by Svengali, elucidate the shifting relationship between bodies and voices consequent to inventions like the phonograph. The juxtaposition of Trilby's imperfect voice, emanating from her human body, and La Svengali's otherworldly voice, emanating from a mechanical surrogate, raises questions regarding how the evolution of sound might impact humanness. The character gains an enormous degree of power because of her superior vocal ability, but compromises the qualities that make her human. While Trilby O'Ferrall is an empathetic, autonomous individual, who inspires the love and devotion of the artistic community, La Svengali is a dispassionate, unconscious machine that manipulates the emotions and actions of the audience. Using the discounted practice of mesmerism as a metaphor for influence more broadly, Du Maurier exposes how sound can similarly reshape the human sensorium and create networks of animate and inanimate bodies.

Du Maurier's depictions of sensory experience emphasise movement between exterior and interior, underscoring the idea that sights and sounds taken into the body exert a powerful influence over the individual. Populated primarily by artists, *Trilby* calls attention to the dominance of the gaze in nineteenth-century culture and considers the differences between looking and listening. The Three Englishmen in particular, who use models for many of their paintings, spend a great deal of time walking

through the city and ‘gazing’ at the sights: ‘they gazed and gazed, [and] each framed unto himself, mentally, a little picture of the Thames they had just left’ (p. 196). The gaze of the men, who physically see Paris but mentally imagine London, posits looking as a contemplative process of turning one’s sight inward, rather than observing what is actually present. This division between the exterior world and the interior world of the artist’s imagination is further evident in the Laird’s representations of toreadors, which ‘ceased to please (or sell) after he had been to Seville and Madrid; so he took to painting Roman cardinals and Neapolitan pifferari from the depths of his consciousness—and was so successful that he made up his mind he would never spoil his market by going to Italy!’ (p. 151). The Laird more successfully depicts toreadors using a studio model and ‘a complete toreador’s kit—a bargain which he had picked up for a mere song’, than when he works from life, implying that reproductions of the human form derived ‘from the depths of [the artist’s] consciousness’ appear more authentic to buyers (p. 5). What becomes evident in these examples is the independent nature of looking and the ability to control what one sees. Although the Three Englishmen traverse Paris together, often walking arm in arm, the phrase ‘each framed unto himself’ reinforces the unsharable nature of embodied experience. Each character constructs his own vision of the Thames and cannot share it with the others. The artists’ imposition of a London scene on the Parisian landscape demonstrates that individuals have an enormous amount of control over what they see: a fact reinforced by the Laird’s need to change from toreadors to cardinals and pifferari after his paintings stop selling. When buyers are no longer interested in looking at his representations of toreadors, he must find a new subject that they want to see.

While the artistic community employs a model a looking focused on exterior appearances, Svengali’s close visual scrutiny of Trilby epitomises the medical gaze Michel Foucault famously associates with the clinic. Many characters comment on the beautiful qualities of Trilby’s voice, but the ‘well-featured but sinister’ Svengali is the first to recognise its true potential and examine her body not as an aesthetic object, but as a site of vocal production (p. 11). His first significant evaluation of Trilby occurs when he uses mesmerism to cure the painful neuralgia in her eyes. Happy that her pain is gone, Trilby lets out the ‘Milk below!’ cry she typically uses to signify her arrival at the artists’ flat. Svengali notes, ‘It is a wonderful cry, matemoiselle—*wundershön!* It comes straight through the heart; it has its roots in the stomach, and blossoms into music on the lips [...] It is good production—*c’est un cri du coeur!*’ (p. 50). Svengali traces

the production of Trilby's voice through the interior of her body, moving from her stomach to her lips, straight through the heart of the listener. Taking advantage of her 'pride and pleasure', he asks to perform a more intense examination of her mouth, a request she unquestioningly accedes to. The mesmerist exclaims,

Himmel! The roof of your mouth is like the dome of the Panthéon [...] The entrance to your throat is like the middle porch of St. Sulpice [...] and not one tooth is missing—thirty-two British teeth as white as milk and as big as knuckle-bones! and your little tongue is scooped out like the leaf of a pink peony, and the bridge of your nose is like the belly of a Stradivarius—what a sounding-board! and inside your beautiful big chest the lungs are made of leather! (pp. 50-1).

The comparison of Trilby's anatomy to architectural details recalls the gaze of Taffy, the Laird, and Little Billee as they walk through Paris casually gazing at various landmarks. However, Svengali's gaze differs in its intense focus on the interior of the body. While the Three Englishmen turn their sight inward to imagine the Thames, Svengali extends his gaze into Trilby to imagine the lungs contained in her 'beautiful big chest'. He points out the different components of her body required for vocal production, such as the roof of her mouth, throat, teeth, tongue, nose, and lungs. Although he uses metaphors like the pink peony to flatter Trilby, his emphasis on resonant structures like the 'dome of the Panthéon' and the 'belly of a Stradivarius' reveal his predominant interest in her bodily architecture. Despite the differences in these two modes of looking, both emphasise sight as an individualised process often used to advance personal and professional desires. Looking does not function like the mesmeric fluid; instead of exposing the interconnectedness of bodies, sight reinforces the isolating nature of embodiment.

Scenes of listening within the novel alternatively underscore sound's similarity to the mesmeric fluid; sound flows within and between bodies, facilitating communication and allowing individuals to share thoughts and feelings in spite of their corporeality. La Svengali's sonic influence reveals an inherent connection between sound and human emotion, a relationship underscored by Little Billee's description of the return of his feelings as 'the sudden curing of a deafness that has been lasting for years' (p. 213). Throughout her performance at the Cirque des Bashibazoucks, La Svengali evokes powerful emotions from her listeners, imbuing even the



simplest nursery rhyme with deep significance. Her voice, which ‘seemed to be pouring itself out from all around’, leaves ‘some five or six thousand gay French people [...] sniffing and mopping their eyes like so many Niobes’ (pp. 210-11; p. 217). The image of her voice ‘pouring itself out’ heightens its similarity to Mesmer’s substance, both by calling attention to its fluid nature and suggesting it functions independently. Commentary from the crowd reinforces the idea that the musical selection is unimportant; it is the voice itself that exerts an influence. Under Svengali’s control, ‘La Svengali’s’ body projects ‘[e]very voice a mortal woman can have [...] and of such a quality that people who can’t tell one tune from another cry with pleasure at the mere sound of it directly they hear it’ (p. 170). For all of the listeners, especially Little Billee, the allure of her voice seems to stem from its ability to awaken their emotions and stimulate their senses. It invokes

all the sights and scents and sounds that are the birthright of happy children, happy savages in favored climes—things within the remembrance and reach of most of us! All this, the memory and feel of it, are in Trilby’s voice [...] and those who hear feel it all, and remember it with her. It is irresistible; it forces itself on you; no words, no pictures, could ever do the like! (p. 218).

Through their collective sensory experience, the spellbound listeners achieve the kind of communication that Peters discounts as impossible based on the limitations of embodiment. ‘La Svengali’s’ voice not only reaches the listeners emotionally, it places them in a kind of mesmeric trance that makes them employ a different kind of sensing. Additionally, it actualises Loewe’s vision of all men being in the same condition such that they communicate through ‘simultaneous feeling’. Sitting in the theatre listening to ‘La Svengali’, the audience mutually perceives ‘sights and scents and sounds’ beyond the temporal and spatial situation they physically inhabit.

However, ‘La Svengali’ also inspires a kind of ‘savagery’ or ‘madness’ in the audience, suggesting that like mesmerism, sonic influence could pose a threat to vulnerable listeners. Before attending her performance, the Three Englishmen hear accounts of how her voice ‘gives one cold all down the back! it drives you mad! it makes you weep hot tears by the spoonful!’ (p. 169). Another listener, the young Lord Witlow, states, ‘[s]he sang at Siloszech’s, and all the fellows went mad and gave her their watches and diamond studs and gold scarf-pins. By gad! I never heard or

saw anything like it. I don't know much about music myself [...] but I was mad as the rest' (p. 171). Witlow's lack of control despite his ignorance about music indicates that La Svengali's voice impacts listeners regardless of their musical sensibilities, affecting all bodies indiscriminately. Furthermore, his association of madness with the valuable 'watches and diamond studs and gold scarf-pins' the audience gives La Svengali returns to the idea of the exploitative mesmerist, demonstrating how Svengali uses Trilby to attain fame and fortune. Transforming his subject into 'an unconscious Trilby of marble, who could produce wonderful sounds—'just the sounds he wanted, and nothing else', Svengali exerts a dehumanising effect on both the young woman and her captive audience (p. 299).

Why does Svengali use mesmerism to transform Trilby into a device comparable to a phonograph, shutting down her external sensory organs but also inhibiting the internal sense associated with mesmeric subjects? Drawing on William Carpenter's *The Doctrine of Human Automatism and Principles of Human Physiology*, Ashley Miller provides a conceptualisation of voice that may account for Svengali's need to render Trilby unconscious. Voice, Miller argues, 'is inherently reproductive rather than productive: the ear provides the original sound that the voice then reproduces. If the human voice is an instrument, it is an instrument that is played by the ear'.<sup>141</sup> Miller's formulation of the human voice suggests that in order to 'play' Trilby's voice, Svengali needs to control her ear, replacing her tone-deaf organ with his own. Her claim raises an important question: what does it mean for voice to be 'inherently reproductive' in the face of sound reproduction technologies? For Trilby, it means that without the intervention of Svengali, she could never produce the otherworldly voice of 'La Svengali'. When her body is mechanised, incapable of sensing or voicing anything Svengali does not permit her to, Trilby is no longer subject to the complex relation between voice and ear that Miller describes. However, as a result of his intervention she becomes a repository for Svengali's voice, which he etches into her mind using his mesmeric influence. Trilby's performance of Chopin's impromptu in A flat on her death bed, as well as her final repetition of the mesmerist's phrase, 'Svengali...Svengali...Svengali...', demonstrate that she retains her status as a phonograph after Svengali's death (p. 284).

Trilby's preservation of Svengali's voice not only reinforces her role as a sound technology, but also calls attention to the newfound capacity

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<sup>141</sup> 'Speech Paralysis: Ingestion, Suffocation, and the Torture of Listening', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 36.5 (2014), 473-87 (p. 477).

of the human voice to continue speaking after death. As Connor explains, technologies like the gramophone created an atmosphere in which the voices of the dead could continue to speak. The classic image of Nipper the dog, listening to his master's voice emanate from the horn of the gramophone, suggests the voices of the dead exert power over the living even when they emerge from mechanical bodies. Connor points out that early versions of the image appear to situate the gramophone on top of a coffin, arguing, 'If the dog's attentive listening is taking place on a coffin, then this involves the unpleasant suggestion of some kind of physical connection between the machine and the deceased anatomy of the master' (p. 386). Like the gramophone, Trilby becomes a surrogate body that preserves the voice of Svengali and allows it to be played back to the listener. In his 1878 article, 'The Phonograph and Its Future' Thomas A. Edison states that the device 'permits of an indefinite multiplication of a record, and its preservation for all time'.<sup>142</sup> He explicitly claims that the eternal preservation of sound is possible 'without regard to the existence or non-existence of the original source' (p. 530). Trilby adheres to Edison's description, faithfully preserving the voice crafted by Svengali despite his death.

## Conclusion

Like the mesmeric fluid, sound facilitates communication between bodies; both forces reshape the human sensorium and expose networks of influence, necessitating new definitions of humanness that account for variations in the conditions of embodiment. Nineteenth century descriptions of mesmerism often emphasise the power of mesmerists, expressing anxiety about the potential exploitation of the practice. The perceived vulnerability of mesmeric subjects, a theme prevalent in literary representations of mesmerism, hinders understandings of the phenomenon as the mutual wielding of power Grimes describes. In truth, subjects acquire authority through their ability to utilise what Deleuze terms an 'internal sense' as well as their expanded intellectual capacity.

The shifting soundscape of the late-nineteenth century, which saw the proliferation of sound technologies like the phonograph, required individuals to confront the interconnectedness of animate and inanimate bodies. The human voice was 'a little more unmoored from the body', to borrow Sterne's words, reinvigorating discussions of embodiment as a

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<sup>142</sup> 'The Phonograph and Its Future', *The North American Review* 126.262 (May-Jun., 1878), pp. 527-36 (p. 529). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

marker of humanness. The possibility that voices could be disembodied, or re-embodied in mechanical forms, disrupted spatial and temporal restrictions fundamental to understandings of life and death. Du Maurier's *Trilby* demonstrates that mesmerism functions as an apt metaphor for sonic influence, offering a framework for thinking about changes in sensory experience. By blurring the distinction between mesmeric subject and mechanised human, the novel elucidates key differences between the two. Unlike the mesmeric subject, Trilby becomes an unconscious instrument that Svengali uses to exert influence over the audience. While her manipulation of the listeners suggests the mechanised human possesses unprecedented power, surpassing that of mesmerism, the conditions of Trilby's altered state also suggest that in order to gain such abilities she must be stripped of basic human qualities. Her voice provokes a largely positive emotional response in the audience members and enables shared experience. Yet, 'La Svengali' is excluded from the network of bodies created by her performance. Trilby has no recollection of these moments of connection when she emerges from the trance state, indicating her exclusion from the shared experiences her voice facilitates. In an atmosphere where mesmerism was mainly a form of entertainment rather than a medical tool, Du Maurier demonstrates its continued importance as a cultural phenomenon.

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