Modernity and Enchantment:  
A Historiographic Review

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Specters are once again haunting Europe and America—as are magicians, mermaids, mesmerists, and a mélange of marvels once thought to have been exorcised by the rational and secular processes of modernity. In recent years, historians from disparate fields have independently challenged the long-standing sociological view that modernity is characterized by “disenchantment.” This view, in its broadest terms, maintains that wonders and marvels have been demystified by science, spirituality has been supplanted by secularism, spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucratization, and the imagination has been subordinated to instrumental reason. In the past decade, however, a new historiographic position, if not consensus, has emerged that presents Western modernity as “enchanted.” The ongoing redefinition of such an established view is of consequence for a variety of reasons, not the least of which has to do with the master narratives underlying the stories that historians choose to tell. As Dipesh Chakrabarty usefully reminds us, “The moment we think of the world as disenchanted . . . we set limits to the ways the past can be narrated.”1

The emergent view that modernity is as enchanted as it is disenchanted may conjure alternative vistas to the historical imagination, and at the very least offers the possibility of pulling new rabbits out of old hats.

Narrating a historiography of “modernity and enchantment” has limitations of its own, however. Those historians who challenge the equation of modernity with disenchantment often present their views within the context of topical debates in their respective fields. It will therefore be useful to tease out some of the common concerns and findings that have appeared in otherwise distinct areas of study, such as the histories of science, religion, and mass culture. The works examined here are necessarily eclectic, drawn primarily from European and American histories of these subfields, but they are nevertheless representative of how the topic is currently being handled across historical specialties.

A second challenge has to do with defining such inherently vague and complex terms as “modernity” and “enchantment.” Taken separately, each term has manifold meanings. When the two terms are paired under a particular interpretation of the relationship between “modernity and enchantment,” however, each assumes greater

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specificity through their joint interrelationship. Discussing the historiography of "modernity and enchantment" thus has the benefit of illuminating some of the different stances that historians have taken toward defining modernity as a whole.

Authors tend to present the interrelationship between modernity and enchantment in one of three ways, each of which corresponds to an "ideal type" that the author holds about the question, either explicitly or implicitly. Excavating these three ideal types that underlie so many discussions of modernity and enchantment might help others to use them in a more self-reflexive way. These can be called the binary, dialectical, and antinomial approaches, although those are somewhat rough-and-ready heuristic labels intended to highlight key features of particular interpretations, rather than being all-inclusive models. The binary and the dialectical approaches to the topic, with their "either/or" logic, have been common since the late nineteenth century, but the antinomial approach, with its "both/and" logic, seems to have become the prevailing one in recent years.

A final issue also emerges as a result of the reconfiguration of the discourse. From our present vantage point, it seems incredible that the automatic association of modernity with disenchantment can have had such a long-standing purchase on the historical imagination. A recent commentator has called the trope of disenchantment "one of our most fundamental clichés of the modern period"; another dismisses it as "trite"; a third warns that it is a performative discourse, bringing about the very effects it describes. The question then arises: How did Western elites become so enchanted with that incantatory phrase "the disenchantment of the world"? One might respond that certain aspects of the disenchantment narrative are compelling: the modern Western world has lost the overarching meanings and spiritual purposes formerly provided by religious world views; the prevalent emphases on scientific progress, technology, and instrumental reason can be dehumanizing; the rapid changes of modern existence can yield feelings of anomie, fragmentation, and alienation; and so on. But there are corresponding enchantments to the modern world that, on the whole, have not been as widely and repeatedly rehearsed. Why has this been the case, and why is it changing now?

Not all the works to which we shall turn address these questions directly, but in the aggregate they suggest possible answers. One of the most striking is the role played by a diverse population of "elites" in promulgating the discourse of modern disenchantment. They did this as a way to maintain distinctions between themselves and the masses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to secure the predominance of "normal science" against both religion and alternative forms of knowledge between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, and to retain their cultural authority against the challenges posed to it by the new mass culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Elites have enchanted themselves with the spell of disenchantment, but that spell appears to be breaking, leaving a specifically modern, "disenchanted" enchantment in its wake.

Before we launch into an examination of some of the works of history that are

part of this fresh approach, we need to define in more detail the earlier approaches that dominated the historiography. This will involve a necessarily cursory discussion of an enormous topic—the nature of “modernity”—and then a more in-depth examination of the related discourses of modernity as disenchanted, which assumed either a “binary” or a “dialectical” form for much of the past century. We will then be in a position to examine the emerging “antinomial” understanding of modernity as enchanted in a disenchanted way. This antinomial approach to the topic of modernity and enchantment offers a capacious way to address a host of phenomena formerly treated in a more limited and hierarchical fashion, which is one of its more marvelous features.

“MODERNITY” IS ONE OF THE MOST AMBIGUOUS WORDS in the historian’s lexicon. The term is often used as if there were a common understanding of its meaning, whereas scholars continue to define it in different and sometimes contrasting ways. (One historian likened the term to a “multisided room of mirrors.”)3 In broad outline, modernity has come to signify a mixture of political, social, intellectual, economic, technological, and psychological factors, several of which can be traced to earlier centuries and other cultures, which merged synergistically in the West between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These factors include (but are not exhausted by) the emergence of the autonomous and rational subject; the differentiation of cultural spheres; the rise of liberal and democratic states; the turn to psychologism and self-reflexivity; and the dominance of secularism, nationalism, capitalism, industrialism, urbanism, consumerism, and scientism. Different accounts of modernity may stress diverse combinations or accentuate some factors more than others. There is one characteristic of modernity, however, that has been emphasized fairly consistently by intellectuals since the eighteenth century: that modernity is “disenchanted.”4


Max Weber famously discussed the “disenchantment of the world” in a 1917 lecture, by which he meant the loss of the overarching meanings, animistic connections, magical expectations, and spiritual explanations that had characterized the traditional world, as a result of the ongoing “modern” processes of rationalization, secularization, and bureaucratization. Weber’s memorable phrase encapsulated a long-standing critique, begun by the early romantics during the late eighteenth century and elaborated by “cultural pessimists” through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and science at the expense of other ways of apprehending and being in the world. Enchantment was associated not only with transcendent meaning and purpose, but also with wonder and surprise; these were the qualities that modernity, with its emphasis on inviolable natural laws, threatened to extirpate. By the late nineteenth century, the positivistic approach of scientific naturalism, which eschewed nonmechanistic accounts of existence, had become so prevalent that Weber’s account was recognizable to his contemporaries: “the increasing rationalization and intellectualization . . . means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.” Thus, whatever else modernity might be, in the particular discourse of “modernity and disenchantment” it was equated with a narrow, instrumental rationality and a hollow, expanding secularism permeating the West since at least the seventeenth century.

Perhaps proving that you can never get too much of a bad thing, the discourse of disenchantment continued to be dominant among Western intellectuals in the twentieth century, in two closely related modes that we can distinguish for heuristic purposes as the “binary” and the “dialectical.” The binary discourse, which has been the most prevalent, defined enchantment as the residual, subordinate “other” to modernity’s rational, secular, and progressive tenets. This marked a departure from the way “enchantment” had been used discursively from at least the Middle Ages, when it signified both “delight” in wonders and the possibility of being “deluded” by them. While it could continue to have these ambivalent meanings in everyday speech, with the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the championing of empirical observation, the term “enchantment” and its ambivalent meanings continued to be a cornerstone of critical analysis in the West. The term was later applied to the “disenchantment” of the modern world, which was often used synonymously with “pessimism,” the latter term given currency by the vogue for the “pessimistic” philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer; see Edgar Evertson Saltus, *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* (New York, 1885). The phrase “cultural pessimist” has been applied to a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers who critiqued aspects of the modern West, among them Friedrich Nietzsche, Matthew Arnold, Oswald Spengler, T. S. Eliot, Arnold Toynbee, and Martin Heidegger. See Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York, 1997); for a later trajectory, see Oliver Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh, 2001).
of Enlightenment in the eighteenth, enchantment tended to be defined by elites in a more limited fashion, as a form of duplicity associated with the “superstitions” of organized religion and the dogmatic authority of monarchical rule. Reason would free individuals from being enthralled by such enchantments; science would affirm that what had been taken for centuries as “wonders” and “marvels,” when examined empirically and without reliance on revelation, would be explicable in terms of uniform natural laws.

Enchantments did not disappear entirely within the binary model, but were marginalized in various ways as residual phenomena both subordinate to and explicable by modernity’s rational and secular tenets. Wonders and marvels were relegated by elites to the ghettos of popular culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the new mass culture that succeeded them in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, enchantments became associated with the cognitive outlooks of groups traditionally cast as inferior within the discourse of Western elites: “primitives,” children, women, and the lower classes. Rational adults could partake of enchantments through the exercise of their imaginations, but despite the protestations of romantics, the imagination continued to be cast as inferior to reason, and a potentially dangerous instigator of desire, throughout much of the nineteenth century. (Indeed, nineteenth-century concepts of “culture” were formulated partly as a way to contain the transgressive desires of an unregulated imagination.)

Those who sought alternatives to the prevalent discourse of modern disenchantment were often tagged by their critics as reactionary antimodernists engaged in a futile struggle to recapture The World We Have Lost. For example, one finds a range of responses to the discourse of disenchantment in the late nineteenth century,


10 This view was reiterated in 1976 by Bruno Bettelheim. Arguing for the pedagogical importance of fairy tales for children, he maintained that children’s thought is animistic, like that of “all preliterate people”: “A child trusts what the fairy story tells, because its world view accords with his own.” Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York, 1976), 45.

11 Johann P. Arnason, “Reason, Imagination, Interpretation,” in Gillian Robinson and John Rundell, eds., *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity* (London, 1994), 156–169; Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998); John Tinnon Taylor, *Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from 1760 to 1830* (New York, 1943). The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes the dramatic shift in attitudes toward fantasy and the imagination during the course of the past two centuries: “Until recently . . . a case could be made that fantasy and imagination were residual practices, confined to special moments or places . . . [but] this weight has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of possible lives offered by the mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies.” Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1997), 53–54.

12 Christopher Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1991), 35.

but these have usually been characterized by scholars as a reaction against the scientific and secular trends of modernity, a “revolt against positivism” in historian H. Stuart Hughes’s well-known phrase. The revolt was characterized by a fascination with spiritualism and the occult, a vogue for non-Western religions and art, and a turn to aestheticism, neopaganism, and celebrations of the irrational will. Many participants in these movements seemed to accept the binary distinction between modernity and enchantment no less than their critics, as did their successors in the numerous counterculture movements of the twentieth century.

Historians of the modern period were among those elites who tended to neglect the marvelous in their works, although the situation began to change as social history rose first to prominence, and then to preeminence, within the European and American historical profession during the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, most historians who studied “modern” enchantments followed the binary formulation, turning to magic, mesmerism, the occult, the supernatural, and other manifestations of enchantment, much as neurologists scrutinize brain disease to infer the workings of the healthy mind. Their aim may have been to rescue such phenomena from the horrible condescension of posterity, but many continued to depict them as residual holdovers from the premodern world, distinct from the emergent rational attitudes that were to supersede them. Thus Keith Thomas opened his magisterial Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971) with a trenchant demarcation between past and present: “This book began as an attempt to make sense of some of the systems of belief which were current in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, but which no longer enjoy much recognition today. Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, are now all rightly disdained by intelligent persons.” Three years earlier, Robert Darnton reassured the readers of Mesmerism that the eponymous practice, while perhaps bizarre to their eyes, nevertheless illuminated the mentalité of Enlightenment France and thus was worthy of scholarly attention: “Extravagant as it seems today, mesmerism has not warranted the neglect of historians, for it corresponded perfectly to the interests of

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14 H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of Social Thought, 1890–1930 (New York, 1961). In addition to identifying thinkers who tended to express a binary view of modernity, Hughes does acknowledge the attempts by certain thinkers, such as Sigmund Freud and Max Weber, to hold opposing forces—especially reason and the irrational—in the tense harmony represented by the antinomial paradigm. A body of thought known as “Traditionalism” also developed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which was avowedly “antimodernist” and in its more trenchant forms does fit this oppositional, “binary” model: see Mark J. Sedgwick, Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century (New York, 2004).

15 Thus, in an influential work, Morris Berman captured an outlook shared by many progressive movements in Europe and America during the 1960s and 1970s, when he recounted the by now familiar argument: “The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment . . . The story of the modern epoch, at least on the level of the mind, is one of progressive disenchantment. From the sixteenth century on, mind has been progressively expunged from the phenomenal world.” Berman, The Reenchantment of the World (1981; repr., New York, 1988), 2.

literate Frenchmen in the 1780s.” Darnton’s readers may have been even more reassured by his concession that this enchanted mentalité of the eighteenth century was eventually replaced by a more rational mindset, for eighteenth-century scientists “read facts where their descendents read fiction.” Recrudescences of the irrational among modern European elites were similarly hived off as “exceptions” to the normative modern paradigm, most notably in the Sonderweg or “special path” attributed to Germany’s illiberal development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the deluding enchantments of the “psychopathic God,” Adolf Hitler.

Closely related to the binary opposition between modernity and enchantment is the “dialectical” approach. Whereas the binary approach depicts contemporary turns to the irrational and spiritual as atavistic and marginal reactions to the rational and secular tenets of modernity, the dialectical approach posits modernity itself as inherently irrational, a mythic construct no less enchanted than the myths it sought to overcome. In the binary approach, the disenchantment of modernity is often viewed ambivalently: Weber, for example, acknowledged the benefits entailed by rational procedures and bureaucratic organizations, but he also recognized the impoverishments of human experience that accompanied them. Indeed, he feared that modernity could elicit an irrational mode of existence, characterized by reification, on the one hand, or subservience to charismatic authority, on the other. In the dialectical approach, however, there is far less ambivalence: modernity is exposed as dangerously oppressive and inhumane, a condition exacerbated by the hypocritical identification of modernity with reason, progress, and freedom. In the binary approach, modernity is inherently disenchanted, a situation viewed with regret as well as hope; in the dialectical approach, modernity is explicitly enchanted, in the negative sense, its universal promises exposed as self-interested ideologies, false consciousness, and bad faith.

The dialectical approach is implicit in the thought of Karl Marx, whose writings on modernity abound with metaphors and similes of enchantment—specters, ghosts, fetishes, etc.—linking the modern world with the religious world it supposedly had surmounted. Friedrich Nietzsche explicitly equated the Western “faith” in reason and science with an irrational belief, one whose self-reflexivity undermined itself so that by the late nineteenth century its adherents were left with a belief in nothing:

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18 Ibid., 12. As recently as 1998, Jay Winter described the growth of spiritualism in interwar Europe: “The Great War, the most ‘modern’ of wars, triggered an avalanche of the ‘unmodern.’ One salient aspect of this apparent contradiction is the wartime growth in spiritualism.” Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1998), 54.
nihilism. Weber’s thought could be interpreted as straddling the binary and dialectical approaches, as could that of Sigmund Freud in such later works as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), which warns that the repressive cultural forces of modernity, together with its advances in science and technology, could eventuate in humanity’s self-destruction.

It is thus not surprising that the most influential articulation of the dialectical approach was made by two philosophers who brought together the various insights of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, and Freud in a single, coruscating work. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) indicts Western modernity as a globalizing enchantment whose reliance on instrumental reason abolishes individuality, distorts human nature, and represses autonomy. Modernity becomes a self-legitimating force that transcends its own properties of self-criticism: “For the scientific temper, any deviation of thought from the business of manipulating the actual . . . is no less senseless and self-destructive than it would be for the magician to step outside the magic circle drawn for his incantation; and in both cases violation of the taboo caries a heavy price for the offender. The mastery of nature draws the circle in which the critique of pure reason holds thought spellbound.”

Horkheimer and Adorno’s dialectical approach, like the binary approach, also condemns mass culture as a dangerous vector of delusion rather than delight, although their model defines nearly all forms of culture as complicit with the “totalitarian” logic of Enlightenment, “high” as well as “low.” The two gesture feebly toward a saving remnant of “genuine” artistic expressions that remain inassimilable to reductive reason and its attendant logic of capitalist commodification, but on the whole the rational and secular claims of modernity stand condemned as the ultimate expression of a beguiling enchantment: “The more completely the machinery of thought subjugates existence, the more blindly it is satisfied with reproducing it. Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape.”

The binary and dialectical approaches to the problem of modern enchantment continue to influence scholarship, but since the 1990s there has been a concerted attempt to rethink the discourse from a vantage point that rejects the “either/or” logic of both of these slants. This is because the concept of “modernity” itself has come under renewed scrutiny by postmodern and postcolonial scholarship, with corresponding effects on the discourse of modernity and enchantment. The postmodern critique of binary oppositions has led to a rethinking of modernity that moves away from many of the categorical distinctions that were so prominent in earlier discussions. Interrogations of the concept have been particularly fruitful within postcolonial studies: scholars have argued that the binary approach was more ideological than real, a useful conceptual tool for Western colonial purposes that obscured the tensions and contradictions within the modern world. The seeming “universal” dist-

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24 Ibid., 20.
tinctions championed by the Western metropole between modernity and tradition, or secularism and superstition, often do not hold up when viewed from the “periphery” of non-Western cultures negotiating processes of modernization in complex ways.25 Similarly, historians of science, religion, and mass culture have explored how multivalent and interdependent these phenomena have been, further eroding the simpler oppositions between science and religion, religion and rationality, rationality and mass culture.26 These and related critiques have redirected the attention of historians from theoretical models to the competing conceptions of “modernity” propounded by historical subjects themselves, whose “alternative modernities” have legitimate claims to our attention.27

Indeed, the binary and dialectical approaches are in the process of being replaced by the recognition that modernity is characterized by fruitful tensions between seemingly irreconcilable forces and ideas. Modernity is defined less by binaries arranged in an implicit hierarchy, or by the dialectical transformation of one term into its opposite, than by unresolved contradictions and oppositions, or antinomies: modernity is Janus-faced. This is reflected in new similes and metaphors that scholars have used to capture the complexities of a modernity made messy. Lynda Nead suggests that “modernity . . . can be imagined as pleated or crumpled time, drawing together past, present, and future into constant and unexpected relations,” and Dipesh Chakrabarty characterizes modernity’s “problem of entangled times” with the equally evocative image of a “timeknot.”28

As a result of this reconceptualization, the long-accepted discourses of modernity and enchantment have also been interrogated. Scholars have criticized various aspects of the binary and dialectical formulations, but not until the past decade has the discourse as a whole been subject to searching critique. In 2001, James Cook expressed surprise that his fellow historians had not looked at the efflorescence of magic and magicians in the nineteenth-century United States, and suggested that they had ignored this rich vein of cultural history because they were mesmerized by


26 As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park observed, “the last twenty years have seen a deep questioning of ideals of order, rationality, and good taste—‘traditional hierarchies of the important and the essential’—that had seemed self-evident to intellectuals since the origins of the modern Republic of Letters in the late seventeenth century.” Daston and Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature (New York, 1998), 10.


the prevailing discourses: “It’s almost as if academic historians have taken Max Weber’s classic theory about the ‘disenchantment of the world’ as a guide for assessing the social significance of the magician during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”29 Alex Owen echoed this sentiment when she observed in 2004 that “[historians] have been slow to take up the challenge of modern enchantment.”30

Medieval and early modern historians no longer have a monopoly on wonders and marvels, just as many modern historians no longer subscribe to the binary and dialectical approaches, finding the antinomial approach more true to the lived experience of their subjects.31 The differing approaches by contemporary historians to

30 Alex Owen, The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern (Chicago, 2004), 6. T. J. Jackson Lears was one early exception to this rule, and his own views on the topic have continued to develop since 1981, when he published No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920 (New York, 1981). The subtitle suggests that Lears accepted the binary distinction between the rationalizing and secularizing processes of modernity, and the corresponding reactions by intellectuals and artists who sought to restore enchantment to fin-de-siècle America through more traditional means. This binary thread does run through the book, as does the related dialectical approach. For example, Lears argues that fundamental aspects of the antimodern reaction, such as the quest for “authentic” experience, actually eased America’s transition to modernity: “The shift from a Protestant to a therapeutic world view, which antimodern sentiment reinforced, marked a key transformation in the cultural hegemony of the dominant classes in America . . . [promoting] new modes of accommodation to routinized work and bureaucratic ‘rationality’” (xviii). So far, so standard. But Lears also acknowledges that the antimodern tradition he charts was complex and unstable, containing progressive elements that resisted incorporation into the new status quo (xiv, 6).

If this was not a full-fledged embrace of the antinomial understanding, his next two works, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York, 1994) and Something for Nothing: Luck in America (New York, 2003), moved more decisively in this direction. In them, Lears offers a more complex understanding of the Protestant ethic than that advanced by Max Weber, who identified Protestantism as an important factor in the emergence of modern instrumental rationality. In Fables of Abundance, Lears highlights the antinomias of Protestantism that have helped shape Western modernity. In addition to its stress on rational calculation, which Weber considered central to the disenchantment of the world, Lears points to a countervailing aspect of Protestantism, stemming from its Pietist branch: an emphasis on subjectivity, which is capable of imbuing the material world with significance.

Fables of Abundance argues against a notion of modern disenchantment, for animistic tendencies continue to exist in the modern world—not only in certain works of elite culture, but also in some manifestations of mass culture, including modern advertising. Modernity thus consists of both the “rational, managerial ethos” and an animistic countertextendity: “Throughout the twentieth century, people have imagined alternatives to the disembodied corporate vision of abundance; many fastened on the detritus of commodity civilization itself as they seek another way of being in the world. Bricolage, verbal or artifactual, has been a strategy for reanimating matter” (10, 133). And in his history of the concept of “luck” in American culture, Lears demonstrates a similar tension in modern American culture between the antinomias of a Protestant “cultur de control” and the more pagan (as well as pietistic and scientific) celebrations of the “culture of chance.” Lears’s work has been implicitly concerned with exploring the different forms of specifically modern enchantments, anticipating the spate of recent works that address the topic directly.

the varieties of modern enchantment will be our central focus. There are forms of enchantment compatible with, and even dependent upon, those tenets of modernity usually seen as disenchancing the world, such as rationality and self-reflexivity. Modern enchantment often depends upon its antinomial other, modern disenchantment, and a specifically modern enchantment might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously: one that delights but does not delude.

“Enchantment,” as we have seen, is an ambiguous term. For historians of science Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, it encompasses “wonder,” which they explore both as an intellectual concept and as an emotional response in *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*. A brief coda takes their story from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, and in a fundamental respect their discussion of elites and enchantment corresponds to the traditional binary approach. Wonders, as well as marvels and miracles, were central to the medieval and early modern world views, but since the late eighteenth century they have been subordinated to Enlightenment reason: “To be a member of a modern elite is to regard wonder and wonders with studied indifference; enlightenment is still defined in part as the anti-marvelous.”

This point of view, though, may say more about Daston and Park’s generation of scholars than it does about current attitudes among the “modern elite.” As graduate students in the late 1970s, the two were pioneers in the historical exploration of “monsters,” but at the time, “our enthusiasm was not infectious.” A new generation of scholars is more comfortable embracing modern wonders and marvels, notably those purveyed by mass culture. This has something to do with their being trained

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33 Ibid., 9.

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in an academic culture permeated with a postmodern skepticism toward binary distinctions, including those between “elite” and “mass” cultures, “enlightenment” and “marvels.” But the new generation of scholars is also beholden to Daston and Park’s pioneering work in making the study of marvels and other enchantments respectable. The current generation stands on their shoulders to see giants, and every other type of wonder imaginable.

Daston and Park’s apparent conformity to the binary approach can also be attributed to their own disciplinary focus on the medieval and early modern fields: although they do touch very briefly on the modern period, theirs is not a history of modern enchantment. Indeed, their analysis of the many facets of “wonder” between the twelfth and the late seventeenth centuries is so nuanced that had they attempted an equally sustained examination of the modern period, one suspects they would have qualified or rejected the binary approach altogether. Their account provides astute contextual analyses of terms that, to modern eyes, might seem so closely related as to be indistinguishable. The reader learns much about the specific meanings at particular times of marvels, wonders, prodigies, miracles, monstrosities, the supernatural, and the preternatural. The profusion of examples and illustrations are themselves marvelous; if ever an academic monograph called for a luxurious leather-bound edition, this would be it. (As it is, the book’s design intentionally evokes the sumptuously illustrated folios of Renaissance virtuosi.)

But within this exuberant excursus on the social and cultural meanings of griffin claws, unicorn horns, magical devices, mechanical automata, monsters, Wunderkammern, and peculiar emanations celestial and terrestrial, there are three innovative arguments that are important for histories of modern enchantment, no less than for the medieval and early modern periods. For their chosen period of emphasis, Daston and Park challenge the traditional, linear historical narrative concerning the gradual naturalization of wonders, arguing instead that elite attitudes toward them were undulatory and sometimes cyclic.34 Specific fractions among the elite had distinct attitudes toward wonders at different times, and it was not until the late seventeenth century that they united to promote the idea of disenchantment. Prior to this, seemingly unique, “marvelous” objects and events had a numinous aura that many elites hoped to appropriate for more worldly aims. Princes and courtiers collected marvelous items and categorized wonderful events to further their political, military, and cultural goals; for similar reasons, physicians and naturalists had recourse to wonders in their respective practices. Natural philosophers, on the other hand, were more ambivalent about wonders between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, as extraordinary objects and atypical occurrences challenged the habitual workings of nature upheld by scholasticism. By the seventeenth century, however, the development of the scientific method and the new understanding of empirical “facts” led natural philosophers to be more enthusiastic about investigating wonderful objects and events. In this respect, enchantment waxed rather than waned by the time of the Enlightenment, countering more linear narratives of progressive disenchantment.

The second innovatory element of this history is its examination of wonder as a “cognitive passion” as well as an object or event.35 Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes

34 Ibid., 17.
35 Ibid., 14–15. Other histories of emotions include Hans Medick and David W. Sabean, eds., Interest
emphasized the importance of wonder in generating philosophical questions, but what did they mean when they used the term? Daston and Park argue that historicizing the emotion of wonder will prevent anachronistic accounts, and that attending to the fluctuating emotional valences attached to objects and events defined as “wonders” will help us understand the specific functions that the category is meant to perform at different times and places. Wonder in all its forms is always historically contingent: “The passion and the object mutually defined each other, a process in which neither remained static.”

Daston and Park do not claim that wonder has been expunged from the modern world. But they do argue that elites have defined it as a disreputable passion and consigned it to the realm of the vulgar, where it continues to flourish within mass culture. This argument constitutes their third innovatory stance: the West became disenchanted in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because of social factors, rather than the intellectual factors—the rise of science, the spread of instrumental reason, and the growth of secularism—underscored in previous accounts. Until this period, elites had maintained a monopoly on wonders, utilizing them for their own political, intellectual, and aesthetic purposes. But with the sixteenth-century Reformation and its attendant religious conflicts through the seventeenth century, the masses were using marvels and wonders for their own purposes. Elites responded to the threat of anarchy by regularizing nature, thereby marginalizing wonders as a religious and political rallying cry; they replaced the passion of wonder, now associated with the enthusiastic and gullible crowd, with the more respectable attitude of “curiosity.” There thus “emerged a new cultural opposition between the enlightened and the vulgar, which turned on contrasting valuations of wonder and wonders. Central to the new, secular meaning of enlightenment as a state of mind and a way of life was the rejection of the marvelous.” When it came to the issue of enchantment, the late seventeenth century witnessed a transvaluation of values—but rather than Nietzsche’s triumph of a “slave morality,” we have the ascendancy of a snob mentality.

This final point is an important complement to earlier accounts highlighting the role of Enlightenment rationality in exorcising enchantment from the modern world. From the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries, elites have tended to associate wonders with the disreputable no less than the irrational, and during this period the self-conscious celebration of wonders and marvels has gravitated from elite to “popular” and then “mass” culture. Nevertheless, the conclusion that Daston and Park reach is also too neat. It provides their otherwise rich and complex history with a rapid narrative closure that undermines their earlier emphasis on the undulating, nonlinear history of wonders. It assumes too great a unanimity among Western elites in regard to modern disenchantment; it underplays the continued passion for wonder, and the ways in which modern developments in science and technology might

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36 Daston and Park, Wonders and the Order of Nature, 17. The issue of wonder as a cognitive passion is also addressed in Fisher, Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences.

incite rather than dampen that passion among all classes. It fails to acknowledge the intricate interfaces between elite and mass cultures, reason and the imagination, empirical science and the unquantifiable, all of which were to be central to nineteenth- and twentieth-century understandings of “modern enchantment.” Their history ends with binaries rather than antinomies. Fortunately, Daston and Park’s history is not really about the modern period. Their brief conclusions about modern disenchantment should be understood as the last gasp of the tenacious binary approach, whereas the remainder of their brilliant study stands as an authoritative account of premodern enchantment. Scholars interested in modern enchantment would do well to consult it not only for necessary background material, but as a model of how the subject can be pursued.

The histories of modern enchantment to which we now turn might be considered inadvertent sequels to Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750, as they provide answers to two critical questions that this work raises about enchantment in the West since the eighteenth century. The first has to do with the ways modern elites negotiated the issue of science and enchantment, and the second has to do with how modern elites construed the relationship between mass culture and enchantment. In both instances, contrary to Daston and Park’s claims, Western elites were not unified in their opposition to wonders and enchantments between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Some feared that the world was irrevocably disenchanted, others worried that modernity fostered an irrational form of enchantment, and others rejoiced that enchantment was compatible with such tenets of modernity as rationality, secularism, individualism, and consumerism. Binary, dialectical, and antinomial approaches coexisted among elites at the time, just as they do among historians of the period today.

Two studies of mesmerism in Great Britain during the nineteenth century demonstrate how the concept of enchantment flourished in the modern period, and draw attention to the important role it played in struggles over the professionalization of science. In Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain, historian Alison Winter details the centrality of debates about mesmerism to nineteenth-century definitions of gender, class, spirituality, and especially science and medicine. She reveals that during the first half of the century, mesmerism was seen by many not as a disreputable

38 Walter Benjamin, Sigfried Kracauer, Humphrey Jennings, and certain French surrealists were among the early-twentieth-century intellectuals in Europe who tried to reconcile the processes of modernity with the idea of enchantment, although until recently their project tended to be overshadowed by the greater attention given to the “cultural pessimists”; see Michael Saler, “Whigs and Surrealists: The ‘Subtle Links’ of Humphrey Jennings’ Pudicaamonium,” in George Behlmer and Fred Leventhal, eds., Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture (Stanford, Calif., 2000), 123–142. Other works that have addressed perceptions by contemporaries of the “wonders” of modernity include Christoph Asendorf, Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity, trans. Don Renau (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); Erik Davis, TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information (New York, 1998); Erik Larson, The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America (New York, 2003); David Nye, Electrifying America: Social Meanings of New Technology, 1880–1940 (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York, 1967); Vanessa R. Schwartz, Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (Berkeley, Calif., 1999); Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen (Los Angeles, 2001); and Robin Walz, Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century France (Berkeley, Calif., 2000).

relic from an earlier period, but rather as a viable medical practice that was contested for reasons of power and prestige rather than efficacy. Established medical doctors from London tended to be dismissive toward it, whereas many itinerant medical lecturers from the provinces embraced it. This had more to do with the contest for legitimacy between the two groups than with the empirical validity of mesmerism versus other forms of medical practice. Nor was mesmerism a “fringe” science at this time: popular lecturers extolling the virtues of mesmeric trances and “animal magnetism” were everywhere, and their claims were given attentive hearings, particularly in debates concerning the use of anesthesia in operations.40

Winter does not address the specific issue of modernity and enchantment in so many words, but her richly researched study shows that at least until mid-century, many among the Victorian upper classes did not disdain wonders. Indeed, they frequently found enchantment and science compatible. They discussed science in terms of magical influences and vital correspondences, and when vitalism began to be superseded by more mechanistic explanations in the 1830s, magic still remained part of the discourse—now called “natural magic,” to be sure, but no less “marvelous” for being the result of determinate and predictable natural processes.41

If the antinomial approach predominates in Winter’s account of the first half of the nineteenth century, with elites and marvels, medicine and enchantment coinciding, she gives us more of a binary account for the second half, with a sharper separation between science and wonder, elites and mass culture. Professional scientists distanced themselves from the “wonders” purveyed within popular culture, such as mesmerism, or those to be found in less “civilized” cultures, such as India.42 They sought to distinguish their profession from the apparent pseudoscience of itinerant practitioners by defining mesmeric effects as unconscious responses to suggestion, capable of being examined in the laboratory and analyzed through specialized discourses closed to non-initiates. Public science of the first half of the century was thus replaced by professionalized science in the second, which developed its own consensus as to what constituted proper areas of scientific investigation. Mesmerism became naturalized in different ways: as hypnotism, for example, it operated on the patient’s suggestibility rather than through mysterious “animal spirits”; it also survived as a conceptual tool to help critics explain social cohesion and crowd psychology. In Winter’s narrative, the borders between science and “pseudoscience,” reason and enchantment, were more porous at the beginning of the century than at its close.

This culminating aspect of her wide-ranging, stimulating book is belied by Daniel Pick’s study of mesmerism in Britain during the fin-de-siècle, Svengali’s Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture.43 Proving the cogency of Daston and Park’s observation that Western attitudes toward wonders tend to be less linear than undulatory, Pick demonstrates that elite and popular interest in mesmerism was intense at the end of the century, and that scientific opinions concerning mesmerism were by no means settled. Indeed, Pick’s book is specifically concerned with the topic of

40 Ibid., 125, 184.
41 Ibid., 38.
42 Ibid., 211.
43 Daniel Pick, Svengali’s Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture (New Haven, Conn., 2000).
modern enchantment, and he surveys contemporary discussions about mesmerism in popular fiction, sociology, psychology, and science in order to challenge the traditional binary association of modernity with disenchantment.

Pick’s narrative focuses on the widespread fad for George du Maurier’s novel *Trilby* (1894), in which a Jewish musician, the mesmerizing Svengali, transforms the eponymous heroine into a great singer through his hypnotic powers. The *Trilby* mania, Pick argues, reflected a widespread anxiety about “imperceptible” or “unconscious” forces affecting individuals and groups, which contemporaries believed to be an outcome of the diffuse processes of modernity. Despite the pretensions of materialist science and the challenges of secularist critics, invisible forces remained almost palpable presences in modern life. These forces were made manifest in the powers of demagogues to captivate mass audiences in newly democratized societies; in the strangely autonomous life of the “crowd”; in the beguiling effects of mass culture; in the hyperstimulating effects on the psyche of rapid social and technological changes. Pick demonstrates that racism and antisemitism were closely associated with this fear of external manipulation through appeals to the unconscious. Jews in particular were depicted as masters of psychological manipulation, and the contemporary vogue for *Trilby* was beholden to the ways the leering, hook-nosed character Svengali tapped into these fears. (In fact, his name continues to be associated with “alien” thought control, long after Trilby, or the hat she inspired, has faded from popular memory.)

While Pick begins and ends with an account of the cultural meanings of *Trilby*, much of his book is a wider excursus on the varieties of specifically “modern” enchantments to be found in the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He explicitly rejects the binary approach, noting that while “traditional” political and religious practices persisted during this period more vigorously than linear accounts of modernity have been willing to acknowledge, even these were novel amalgams of the old and the new. At times, Pick appears to embrace the antinomial approach to modernity and enchantment. Citing studies by Ruth Harris and David Blackbourn of religious enthusiasms in France and Germany in the nineteenth century, as well as the continued enthusiasm for Marianite cults after World War I, he suggests that these manifestations were “arguably the signs of a contradictorily modern faith rather than the mere survival of an older ‘tradition.’”44 He observes that secular culture also became a locus for innovative forms of spiritual enchantments in the modern age, among them Richard Wagner’s aim of reviving the spirit of the communal religious spectacles of ancient Greece through his “music-dramas” at Bayreuth. Science and reason were not arrayed against wonders and enchantments either. Many scientists of the *fin-de-siècle* “remained poised between adherence to and repudiation of Victorian natural science,” including those involved in psychical research and psychology.45 Mesmerism, in its more “scientific” guise of hypnotism, represented the tense equilibrium of antinomies characteristic of modernity: “Victorian hypnotism con-

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45 Pick, *Svengali’s Web*, 20. Pamela Thurschwell pursues the connections among new communications
continued to exist on the border between the medically sober and the erotically intoxicated, science and theatre, work and abandon, treatment and amusement.”

These aspects of Pick’s account represent a step forward in our understanding of the complexities of modernity, particularly in its ability to conjoin reason and enchantment. But Pick does not pursue this line very thoroughly, and ultimately retreats to the dialectical approach, showing how the “enlightened” emphases of modernity have resulted in an increased awareness of, and capitulation to, the irrational. The logic of his subject matter dictates this approach. He is dealing, after all, with a practice that is predicated on the manipulations of the unconscious, and the fears that this practice elicited; a crucial aspect of modernity is its exploration of human subjectivity, which in turn has led to a greater appreciation of the “psychopathology of everyday life.” But the cumulative effect of his narrative, despite its many subtleties and qualifications, is to reaffirm the picture of modern reason being transformed ineluctably into its opposite that was expressed so vividly by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Thus the vogue for fictional characters at the turn of the century, represented by the marketing of *Trilby* memorabilia and the creation of advertising characters, is adduced by Pick as an irrational phantas-magoria, a world of beguiling and negative enchantments: “quasi-religious and magical beliefs [reemerged] within this changing world: wondrous beliefs and beliefs in the power of wonder [were] arguably as apparent at the end of the nineteenth century as ever before. Capitalism, so it is now recognized, did not demystify social relations nearly as much as Marx and others had sometimes hoped. Industrial modernization and psychological enchantment turned out to be deeply compatible.”

Horkheimer and Adorno would recognize this picture, which is certainly part of the story—but is it the whole story? One remains tantalized by the other tangents of Pick’s argument, those that point to a reconciliation of modern disenchantment and a form of enchantment that delights but does not delude, a disenchanted enchantment. The potential for this type of specifically modern enchantment is suggested by Pick, but not fully excavated in his otherwise innovatory and persuasive account.

It is possible to interpret *fin-de-siècle* occultism as an instance of a distinctly modern form of enchantment, as Corinna Treitel demonstrates in *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern*. In part, Treitel is able to make a convincing case because she argues that there were multiple or “alternative modernities” at play in German culture, and that the occult movements contributed most notably to one of these strands, that of “psychological modernism.” By eschewing a single definition of modernity, Treitel has more flexibility in exploring what the different forms of occult practices reveal about the condition of modernity technologies, scientific thought, and the vogue for the occult and supernatural during the *fin-de-siècle* in *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, 2001).

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46 Pick, *Svengali’s Web*, 100.
47 Ibid..
48 Alex Owen makes a similar argument for the occultist movement of *fin-de-siècle* Britain in *The Place of Enchantment*. I have already considered it in these pages; see *AHR* 110, no. 3 (June 2005): 871–872.
and about German culture as a whole during the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries.\textsuperscript{50} She presents statistical data and analytic overviews of the size, geo-
graphic diffusion, and social and political composition of the occult movement, and
deftly connects the occult to other facets of modernity, such as mass consumerism,
aesthetic modernism, social reformism, and the policing powers effected by church
and state. Her study uses occultism to highlight the Janus-faced, “ambivalent” nature
of modernity.\textsuperscript{51} German occultists sought to redress scientific positivism by exploring
the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the psyche; they sought to ameliorate modern
social conditions by creating therapeutic techniques based on traditional practices;
they sought to justify their own commitments to an intuitive form of knowledge by
citing contemporary claims for the provisionality of all knowledge. Modern occultism
thus exemplifies the antinomial, rather than binary or dialectical, nature of moder-
nity: “Germans turned to occult beliefs and practices . . . not just to challenge but
also to utilize the forces of modernity shaping their mental universe and very ex-
perience of life.”\textsuperscript{52}

Treitel examines the interface between modern science and the modern occult’s
pretensions to be scientific. The German scientific tradition in the nineteenth century
consisted of a mix of empiricism and idealism that was hospitable to the metaphysical
preoccupations of modern occultists. Treitel notes that by the late nineteenth cen-
tury, German psychology had largely rejected its idealist origins and proclaimed itself
a positivist science. Nevertheless, the metaphysical preoccupations of the earlier
tradition of \textit{naturphilosophie} had not completely disappeared. Indeed, at the turn of
the century, the idealist currents were revived in various forms of \textit{lebensphilosophie},
rendering the occultists’ preoccupation with a “scientific” exploration of the “soul”
a more intellectually coherent enterprise in Germany than it was in Britain, which
had a more empirical and inductive tradition for most of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{53}

But Treitel does not claim that the German occultists were always scientific when
they were not, or that they were committed to formal rationality when they were
more interested in other epistemologies. By the early twentieth century, many of the
German occultists acknowledged that their interest in transcendental states of con-
sciousness was not always compatible with claims to scientific objectivity, and focused
instead on the pragmatic applications of their own explorations of the self.\textsuperscript{54} It was
this flexible focus on self-knowledge and self-realization, the creation of a “tran-
scendental lifestyle” through occult practices, that constituted their contribution to
psychological modernism.\textsuperscript{55} Occultism in Germany became less avowedly scientific,
but more populist, as much a part of mass culture as of elite culture. This too con-
stituted occultism’s modernity: its “emphasis on achieving satisfaction in this world

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 245.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. She refers to this mixture of the traditional and the new as “the heterogeneous presence of
scientific modernity.” This aspect of German intellectual history is also addressed in Anne Harrington,
\textit{Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler} (Princeton, N.J., 1996).
\textsuperscript{54} Treitel, \textit{A Science for the Soul}, 53–55.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 52. For an incisive exploration of “psychological modernism,” see Jan Goldstein, “The Ad-
vent of Psychological Modernism in France: An Alternate Narrative,” in Ross, \textit{Modernist Impulses in
the Human Sciences}, 190–209.
rather than the next was well suited to the offerings of the modern marketplace and its ability to cater to the ethic of ‘personal satisfaction.’

Such direct associations of occultism with consumerism, mass culture, and personal satisfaction would have been seized by those advocating the “dialectical” model of modernity as proof that modernity fosters irrationalism. Indeed, many earlier histories of occultism in modern Germany identify it as one of the foundational strands within National Socialist ideology, which itself has been understood to epitomize the “dialectic of Enlightenment.” Treitel is well aware of this, and will have none of it. In addition to rejecting the dialectical account of modernity that this argument represents, she also demonstrates that the links between the Nazis and occult groups were limited. There were occultists with volkisch sympathies, but many more embraced individualism and internationalism, which in turn led the National Socialists to ban occultism in 1937. The German occult movement was part of the “cosmopolitan modernity” that the Nazis claimed to reject. (And even National Socialism exemplified the antinomial rather than the dialectical approach, given its support of progressive public health policies and its embrace of modern technology.)

Treitel’s study thus relates how occultism was engaged in a dialogue with nearly all facets of modern German culture, including science, social reform, aesthetics, and mass culture. It appealed across class and gender divisions, providing many with a genuinely modern source of enchantment that did not deny the validity of reason or scientific practices. Instead, it complemented these with an emphasis on equally valid subjective forms of knowledge concurrently being explored by psychologists and philosophers, “psychological modernism.” By focusing on the many ways that occultist practices intersected with modern processes, Treitel makes a convincing case that occultism in Germany did not represent a strictly reactionary impulse. It embodied the ambivalences of modernity that were expressed at the time in a host of alternative modernities.

IN ALL OF THE WORKS WE HAVE EXAMINED SO FAR, the relation between science and enchantment has been paramount. Treitel’s study foregrounds another important dimension to the question of modern enchantment, that of mass culture. She observes that the occultists’ emphasis on human potential and spiritual growth was admirably suited to the marketing imperatives of the new mass culture, and that occultism flourished rather than diminished in the modern period partly because mass culture was able to bring it to the attention of a wide audience. But this fact has been used by those upholding either the binary or the dialectical approach to the issue of modernity and enchantment, in support of their belief that mass culture fosters an escapist or irrationalist outlook opposed to the dictates of Enlightenment reason. Daston and Park demonstrated that seventeenth-century elites consigned wonder to the “irrational” domain of popular culture, and many Western critics continue to identify the new mass culture of the nineteenth century as a locus of

56 Treitel, A Science for the Soul, 75.
beguiling enchantment, delighting the masses while also deluding them.\textsuperscript{58} Treitel’s study does not overturn this negative picture of mass culture entirely, although she does show that elites no less than the masses found mass culture to be an important domain that gratified their yearnings for modern wonders, and facilitated their negotiation of the conflicting meanings of modernity. However, other revisionist accounts of modernity and enchantment have gone further, arguing that mass culture itself has become the purveyor of specifically rational and secular forms of enchantment.

James W. Cook’s \textit{The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum}, for example, suggests that urban mass culture in America during the antebellum period was often self-reflexive, rational, ironical, and skeptical—in other words, disenchanted. But this form of disenchanted also yielded enchantment: showmen such as P. T. Barnum or modern magicians challenged their audiences to spot their “artful deceptions,” which generated much of the entertainment value of the shows. Barnum himself stated in the mid-nineteenth century, “the public appears to be disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived.”\textsuperscript{59} Jean Robert-Houdin, who revolutionized the practice of magic in Europe and America at this time, similarly construed magic as a self-reflexive form of entertainment by defining the magician as an actor who is playing a magician.\textsuperscript{60} American audiences were challenged by such wonders as the “Feejee Mermaid” or the “automaton chess player” to determine whether they were real, and if not, how such lifelike illusions were created. In this way, mass culture elicited the cognitive passion of wonder discussed by Daston and Park, in which novelties stimulate curiosity, the satisfaction of which is endlessly deferred by the production of new wonders. Cook demonstrates how showmen expertly manipulated the new mass media, such as newspapers, to promote debates about the authenticity of their exhibits, yielding “a new, media-driven form of curiosity—perpetually excited, yet never fully satisfied.”\textsuperscript{61} Further, he argues that these enchantments inculcated in their audiences an ironic and skeptical outlook. Mass culture promoted Enlightenment rationality rather than eclipsed it, involving “enchantment and disenchantment, energetic public exposé and momentary suspension of disbelief.”\textsuperscript{62} According to Cook, the artful deceptions of Barnum and other showmen “suggested in principle (if not always in practice) that the older Enlightenment ideals of reasoned analysis, exposé, and perceptual mastery were still possible.”\textsuperscript{63} But such perceptual mastery itself proved to be an illusion, given the ceaseless proliferation of representations and consequent undermining of truth as a stable category. The showmen’s illusions and the discussions they engendered served to wean middle-class audiences away from the Victorian cult of truth and “sincerity” to what we would label a “postmodern” awareness of contingency and perspectivalism. Cook repudiates the dialectical view of modernity and enchantment of Horkheimer and Adorno, concluding that “long before the late twentieth-century

\textsuperscript{58} Patrick Brantlinger, \textit{Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay} (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993); Andrew Ross, \textit{No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture} (New York, 1989).
\textsuperscript{59} Cook, \textit{The Arts of Deception}, 16.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 15, 169.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 28.
insights of critical theory and postmodernism... many American consumers thought
about, discussed, and resisted the ways that they were manipulated by the culture
industry.”

In addition to showing the rational aspects of the enchantments of mass culture,
Cook (like Treitel) demonstrates how mass culture was useful in helping its middle-
class consumers negotiate the manifold meanings of modernity. He connects con-
temporary discussions about artful deceptions to emerging perspectives about mo-
dernity generated from the changing nature of the economy, contested accounts of
race, class, and gender, and novel findings by scientists and philosophers about the
connections between perception and reality. He makes a persuasive case for the
centrality of “illusionism” to modern life, given the ubiquity of representations gen-
erated by the mass market that blurred the distinctions between artifice and reality.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many among the middle classes were con-
versant and even comfortable with the notion that subjective truths had an episte-
mological value equal to, and perhaps more valid than, the earlier positivist faith in
objectivity. Antebellum artful deceptions contributed to the emergence of the psy-
chological modernism that Treitel examined through the prism of modern occultism,
but in Cook’s narrative the rational elements of this strand of modernity are high-
lighted. In overturning earlier views of mass culture as “deluding”—enchanting in
the negative sense—and emphasizing a distinctly modern enchantment compatible
with reason, secularism, democracy, and consumerism, Cook may present too rosy
a picture. He does minimize many of the negative aspects of mass culture and con-
sumerism, which remain an important aspect of any narrative of modernity and en-
chantment. But because these have been central to the binary and dialectical ac-
counts, one can understand why Cook chose to emphasize the more positive facets
that these earlier accounts have tended to deny or ignore.

In Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic, Simon During
approaches the issue of artful deceptions and “modern magic” from the disciplinary
conventions of cultural studies, arriving at conclusions similar to those of James
Cook. For During, modern, “secular” magic defines itself as creating illusions and
tricks rather than accessing the supernatural, a concept that was broached initially
in the seventeenth century but emerged in its characteristic form only in the nine-
teenth, when figures such as Robert-Houdin made magic a respectable middle-class
entertainment. During emphasizes the antinomial qualities of modernity, in which
disenchantment and enchantment, reason and wonder come into play, and critiques
the binary and dialectical models. He rejects the dialectical account, maintaining that
Adorno’s sweeping argument for the irrational, “negative” form of modern enchant-
ment misses “the spread of pleasures, competencies, and experiences that flourish
within the modern cultures of secular magic, and... of the capacity of modernized
individuals to fall almost simultaneously into enchantment and disenchantment...

64 Ibid., 308 n.11. Cook acknowledges his debt to Neil Harris’s concept of an “operational aesthetic,”
which Harris defined in his cultural history of P. T. Barnum as “an approach to experience that equated
beauty with information and technique, accepting guile because it was more complicated than candor.”
Harris also observes that Barnum’s exhibits and hoaxes “trained Americans to absorb knowledge. This
was an aesthetic of the operational, a delight in observing process and examining for literal truth. In
place of intensive spiritual absorption, Barnum’s exhibitions concentrated on information and then prob-
lems of deception.” Harris, Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum (Boston, 1973), 57, 79.
at their own leisure and pleasure.” Audiences were encouraged by mid-nineteenth-century illusionists to ask questions and reason through the tricks on display, a rational process that stimulated the sense of wonder while honing cognitive skills that could prevent beguilement.

During provides a rich history of magic and magicians in the West from the seventeenth century, but his account is about a much larger cultural phenomenon. The self-conscious and reflexive illusions of modern magic are but one expression of the centrality of illusions in modern mass culture. While Cook associated such “artful deceptions” with the growth of a capitalist market economy and middle-class anxieties concerning the status of truth, During places more emphasis on how the discourse of disenchantment itself fostered secular and rational enchantments aimed at the imagination—and at how the imagination itself has become a central source of modern enchantment. The early romantics turned to the imagination for this purpose, and During utilizes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s notion of experiencing fictional wonders through the “willing suspension of disbelief.” In a compelling analysis, During contends that a specifically modern enchantment is to be found via the prevalence of fictions in the modern world, and the ways in which these fictions become interiorized within the modern imagination.

Modern magic is a part of this turn to self-reflexive fictions, but so too are works of avant-garde art, literature, the cinema, and “show business” in general, all of which receive some analysis in this work. During defines all of these as “magical assemblages” that delight one’s reason and imagination without deluding them. His understanding of the modern efflorescence of representations departs in interesting ways from the more disenchanted views of certain postmodernists. While figures such as Jean Baudrillard maintain that representations and reality have become virtually indistinguishable, rendering modernity almost impervious to critical analysis, During contends that the prevalence of illusions in modern culture has trained its audiences to distinguish the “real” from the “fictional.” Modern magic affirms the concept of the real in the process of appealing to the imagination, for “consumers of modern culture learn to accept one set of propositions in relation to the domain of fiction, and another in relation to the everyday world.”

The Victorian emphasis on authenticity and sincerity prevented many early-nineteenth-century commentators from acknowledging that fictions need not threaten the rational apprehension of the real. This prejudice contributed to the critical disparagement by elites of mass culture, and the modern enchantments of the imagination more generally. As During notes, “modern culture was slow to develop a lexicon for describing or affirming the power and attractions of fictions as illusions. Hence recognition of the cultural centrality of fictions and illusions was delayed.”

But now we are able to acknowledge that mass culture is not simply an irrational form of escapism from the rational responsibilities of adulthood, as the binary approach

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66 Ibid., 102–103.
67 Ibid., 49–50.
68 Ibid., 66–71.
69 Ibid., 50.
70 Ibid.
suggested, nor a dangerous threat to critical thought, as the dialectical approach maintained. In the antinomial approach that During presents, disenchanted reason coexists with an enchanted imagination; wonders have become interiorized and are enjoyed with a certain ironic distance. Like several of the other authors we have examined, During makes a persuasive case that there are distinctly modern forms of enchantment compatible with modern rationality, secularism, psychologism, and commercial culture.

Perhaps there is some poetic justice in the fact that many of these imaginative forms of modern enchantment have been summoned forth by the discourse of disenchantment. It is reminiscent of the famous segment of Walt Disney’s Fantasia in which the sorcerer’s apprentice sets out to contain water, but unleashes a flood instead.

Our survey of the literature has shown that a variety of elites in the West began to characterize the modern world as disenchanted in the seventeenth century, but it nevertheless remained enchanted in historically contingent ways. The gradual professionalization of science made magic, marvels, and wonders contested categories, but it was not until the mid- to late nineteenth century that “natural magic” (including mesmerism and other vitalist currents of thought) began to be clearly demarcated from a narrowly construed concept of science as positivistic. Even so, many rejected this definition of science as too limiting and offered alternative definitions that accommodated nonmaterial agents and transcendental explanations. And as science itself moved away from the materialistic and determinist perspectives at the turn of the century to entertain more probabilistic and counterintuitive explanations of the physical world, the wonders described by occultists were rivaled by those proposed by “mature science” itself. Rather than disenchanting the world, modern science has become a central locus of modern enchantment. It may not provide the transcendent meanings and purposes of a religious world view, but that does not mean that the modern world is bereft of wonders, enchantment defined as “delight.”

Max Weber’s pessimistic concept of disenchantment focused on the absence of overarching meanings in the modern world, leaving its inhabitants vulnerable to the more irrational enchantments of charismatic authorities promising to restore spiritual significance to existence. It would be foolish to deny the acuity of this analysis in the light of modern history. But not enough emphasis has been given to the ways in which many in the West have gradually acclimated themselves to the lack of shared meaning by embracing the enchanting possibilities inherent within contingent and provisional meanings. The corollary to the alleged predominance of instrumental reason in the modern world is a greater acceptance of the imagination as a source of multiple yet finite meanings that enchant in their own way. These meanings are often enjoyed with a certain ironic detachment—they delight but do not delude—and this acceptance of contingent meanings, provisional wonders, only expands the possible sources of enchantment in the modern world.

Fictions become one importance source, and mass culture, as the dominant purveyor of fictions, has become a locus of enchantment equal to that of modern science.
(The emergence of “science fiction” as a distinct genre in the twentieth century is emblematic of the importance of these two areas for modern enchantment.) Western elites long defined mass culture and its enchantments as inherently irrational, fit only for the childlike hoi polloi, but historians have demonstrated that elites themselves participated in mass culture because it offered enchantments that appealed to their reason as well as their imagination. “Artful deceptions” and “magic assemblages” provided modern wonders for a disenchanted age, and these self-reflexive enchantments continue to provide delight as well as meaning, challenging the more pessimistic pronouncements of the binary and dialectical views of modernity and enchantment. Elites disparaged mass culture, less because it fostered irrationality than because it represented a challenge to their own authority—just as they disparaged wonders in the seventeenth century when those no longer fell under their exclusive control. But this conflict has been settled in favor of mass culture, and elites have had to come to terms with it. The discourse of modernity as disenchanted, and enchantment itself as infantile, could be maintained only so long as mass culture was marginalized as an inferior and less rational arena than that of so-called “high” or “elite” culture. But for all the real and potential flaws of mass culture, this categorical dismissal is no longer tenable. To be sure, the modern enchantments of mass culture are not without their superficialities, irrationalities, prejudices, and problems. One can accept this, and still concede that mass culture is a vital source of contingent and rational enchantments as well.

Historians have started to recognize the contours of this new landscape of modernity, and thus they probably would not be surprised to find their own discipline described as “enchanted” by Mark A. Schneider. In *Culture and Enchantment*, Schneider argues that enchantment stems from the feeling of wonder that arises when we cannot fully explain an occurrence; once a satisfactory explanation is presented, disenchantment sets in. The mature sciences tend to be disenchanted, because they are able to provide empirically supportable answers to their queries that, if not fully complete, nonetheless yield “intelligibility and practical competence.”

The interpretive disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences, are less able to produce such neat explanations, and often resort to invisible or mysterious agents to account for the phenomena they investigate. While their investigations and conclusions are usually conducted in the naturalistic register of the sciences, the “occult” aspects remain to intrigue, mystify, and enchant. Clifford Geertz’s ambiguous account of “culture as text,” Michel Foucault’s reliance on the mysterious matrix of “power/knowledge,” the New Historicists’ invocation of “circulating energies”: these explanations, while logically argued and supported by evidence, nevertheless differ little from the explanations offered by seventeenth-century natural philosophers, “whose investigations sought more to preserve than to dispel enchantment.”

Schneider suggests that the interpretive disciplines have promulgated the discourse of modern disenchantment because they want to be considered scientific: “Disenchanting the world, as a social process, involves sorting its behavior into mundane and magical categories—and stigmatizing the latter, making it a disreputable

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71 Mark A. Schneider, *Culture and Enchantment* (Chicago, 1993), 4.
72 Ibid., 73–81, 4.
object of inquiry. We become disenchanted only when this invidious distinction is
developed, and remain so only while it lasts: in its absence, by contrast, the magical
and the mundane appear to us as largely indistinguishable.”73 (Once again, we see
the discourse of disenchantment as the contingent creation of elites for purposes of
prestige.) Within these self-imposed distinctions of enchantment/disenchantment,
the interpretive disciplines might approximate the disenchanted nature of the ma-
ture sciences if they investigated phenomena that could be controlled and explained.
But the interpretive disciplines are distinguished precisely from the scientific dis-
ciplines by their concern with phenomena that usually do not meet such criteria.
Thus, Schneider concludes, these disciplines ought not to pretend that they, or the
world, are disenchanted. “Enchantment . . . is part of our normal condition, and far
from having fled with the rise of science, it continues to exist (though often unrec-
ognized) wherever our capacity to explain the world’s behavior is slim, that is, where
neither science nor practical knowledge seem of much utility.”74

“Modernity” itself is just such an enchanted category that we have created. So
too is the discourse of “modern disenchantment,” a haunting presence that will not
cease to disturb our thoughts until it is reunited with its antinominal partner, “modern
enchantment.”

73 Ibid., ix.
74 Ibid., x.