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STS.310 Introduction to the History of Science
Book Review
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Alison Winter's *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago, 1998) lives up to the promise of its title and enthralls the reader with its social and cultural history of mesmerism, which, as the author depicts it, is not a state of mind or "a body of doctrine but... a diverse, fragile set of practices" (10). Furthermore, mesmerism is not, Winter declares, a forerunner of the Freudian unconscious (10). Then, one may ask, what *is* mesmerism? Winter never explicitly defines the boundaries of mesmerism, and her historical actors, from doctors to servants to colonial subjects, don't spell it out either. But it is a testament to this book's success as a cultural history that the reader does not finish the book desperately in need of definitions; *Mesmerized's* multifaceted portrayal of mesmerism, firmly grounded in extensive and varied historical research, leaves the reader with a coherent vision of Victorian society through the lens of mesmerism.

Winter sets out to establish mesmerism as a widespread cultural practice in Great Britain from the 1830s to the 1860s, to locate mesmerism squarely in the midst of debates about scientific and medical authority, and to highlight its role in power relations within a hierarchical social order (5,10). Winter's historiographical tact is to move mesmerism from the fringe to the center (4), and to complicate three strains of an historiographical tradition that have either labeled mesmerism an ancestor of cognitive psychology, hypnotism, and psychoanalysis, or dismissed mesmerism entirely as a false product of a cultural fringe (10). This historiographical move by Winter accomplishes two important things: first, an escape from the limiting frame of micro-history by centering

mesmerism and thus linking it to the larger epistemological issue of the construction of consensus during an age of sweeping reform and shifting definitions of the scientist (8-9); second, a portrayal of one aspect of Victorian science that is not an evolutionary step on the way to 20th century notions of mind and science.

Winter begins and ends *Mesmerized* with references to the island of Mesmeria, a satiric vision of Britain published in the serial *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1845; this narrative frame is significant in that it underscores the importance of place to the history of mesmerism. As such, Winter's structure is not a simple chronological one; each chapter treats mesmerism from a slightly different angle, spatially or thematically. As Winter notes, mesmerism was always contingent on geography, to the extent that "Mesmerism meant different things in different places. Conversely, it also *made different places mean different things*" (11). *↳ this her euphemism + yours? with way, you show* As such, roughly half of Winter's chapters focus on a particular space of mesmerism, public or private. After leaving the fictional Island of Mesmeria, Winter focuses on London as a site pregnant with "'progressive' and 'philosophical'" ideas about mind and body, a site ready for the arrival of animal magnetism, an experimental and somewhat democratic technique (anybody could try it) that overcame "incommensurability" between sciences in part by functioning as therapeutic application, not abstracted knowledge (55-57). Winter's next stop is the "Carnival, Chapel, and Pantomime" chapter in which she adopts a class resistance model to reconstruct the context for mesmerism as it was experienced by historically voiceless actors like the Irish O'Key sisters, teen-aged servants who underwent treatment at the University College Hospital at the hands of Dr. John Elliotson and ultimately became the center of intense public debate regarding the validity of their mesmeric experiences.

Winter looks through a lens inverted in invoking the notion of the carnivalesque to try to understand the University College saga from the O'Keys' point of view. The public trials of animal magnetism ended up putting doctors like Elliotson on trial and transferring their medical and scientific authority to the bodies—however disembodied--of their mesmerized subjects. In the next chapter Winter takes the mesmeric show on the road in an exploration of “The Peripatetic Power of the ‘New Science,’” a chapter in which she ascribes the rising prevalence of mesmerism to the traveling lecturers who served as a link between London and the provinces (110). Significantly, these traveling performances about the nature of scientific authority gave rise to the “anti-mesmerist” as a “new breed of scientific lecturer” (126).

Winter then moves inside with a chapter on interior, ostensibly private mesmeric spaces, titled “Consultations, Conversazioni, and Institutions,” in which she explores mesmeric manuals and normative, idealized images of mesmerism, aligns the performative nature of mesmerism with aristocratic ideals of recreation, and establishes mesmerism as a holistic threat to the rising status of hospital medicine. Mesmerism, Winter argues, was actually a better fit for British sensibilities than traditional hospital medicine (162). Winter’s last stop before returning to the Island of Mesmeria at the end of her book is colonial India, the site of the longest and most intense practice of mesmerism (186). Despite an absence of narrative sources from Indian patients, Winter follows the Scottish doctor James Esdaile through his attempts to turn a Calcutta hospital into “mesmeric factory” (191), his performance for a government committee, and his departure from British conclusions about mesmerism and its altered consciousness and social relations in his more colonialist framework of power relations (200). India functioned as a mesmeric laboratory for Victorian Britain, a separate

space in which mesmeric practices and racial hierarchies could be established and tested in a controlled environment. With *Mesmerized's* spatially-oriented narrative structure, Winter's explorations of mesmerism are always carefully contextualized, and it is these rich contexts that convince the reader that Winter is offering a portrait of not only mesmerism but also of Victorian society and culture as it struggled with contested and changing definitions of scientific and medical authority against the backdrop of public consensus.

The second theme embedded in Winter's chapter structure is the body as a site of knowledge production and a power struggle between doctor and patient as well as between scientific authority and quackery. In her early chapter titled "Experimental Subjects as Scientific Instruments," Winter explores the mechanisms by which charity patients came to exist as "forms of evidence" (61) and also as demonstrations of medical and social reforms. In a later chapter on anaesthesia and medical pain, Winter explores mesmeric anesthesia as a test case for mesmerism more generally and charts the shift to the more effective ether anesthesia, concluding that mesmerism and ether were not mere sides of a medical debate but "tools" in the doctor-patient relationship (184). One of Winter's most compelling chapters is her chapter on the sickroom as a space of intellectual authority, inhabited by noted female intellectuals such as journalist and social critic Harriet Martineau, mathematician Ada Lovelace, and poet Elizabeth Barrett. In this chapter Winter examines the mesmeric patient as a strong invalid, one who, through physical weakness, gains mental access to a mysterious yet empowering type of knowledge and experience. Finally, Winter concludes with the notion of the social body and its relationship to the production of consensus in a chapter on mesmerism and

mental physiology in cultural, social, and intellectual spheres. She concludes with a paradoxical definition of mesmerism as both problem and opportunity:

It was a problem because, before, the 1850s, it was the dominant example of unhealthy incorporation: it made two people one, erasing the boundaries between them, and it supplied a vocabulary and an explanation...for descriptions of madness in crowds. But it was also a resource. In the 1850s and 1860s its phenomena, and others associated with it, became fundamental to respectable, "benign," mid-Victorian accounts of how one could be made out of many. (342)

The final irony of mesmerism as a "science of possibility" (345), according to Winter, is that all of its destabilizing of social and medical norms ultimately shaped an emergent physiology of agreement before mesmerism disappeared entirely, absorbed into different disciplines in the second half of the 19th century and rendered "historically invisible" until now (347-48).

Mesmerized is an elegantly written and persuasively argued social and cultural history of mesmerism as both a set of practices and a sensibility. In her thoroughly researched chapters, Winter moves fluidly from fine-grained detail of mesmeric performances to broader claims about Victorian science and knowledge production in different spaces. Her primary sources include material from over 50 different archives in Great Britain and the U.S. and over 30 newspapers from Great Britain and India, as well as numerous 19th century publications ranging from the letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to the lecture titled "Epidemic Delusions" from Science Lectures for the People in 1871. Winter's secondary sources are just as thick, and the reader is further rewarded with carefully annotated endnotes that analyze the literature in more detail.

In viewing many seemingly disparate strands of Victorian culture and experience, all through the lens of mesmerism, Winter constructs a coherent and necessarily interdisciplinary history of Victorian Britain. Historians of technology will be fascinated by Berlioz's telegraphic conductor (317), and literary historians will be delighted by the portraits of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning as mesmerically inclined. Eighty-seven illustrations ranging from *Punch* cartoons to painted portraits to *Illustrated London News* sketches make the pre-photographic phenomenon of mesmerism even less elusive.

In restoring mesmerism's centrality to Victorian culture, however, Winter turns away from the linear narrative that pinpoints the origins of mesmerism and traces its rise and fall. As a result, mesmerism arrives somewhat mysteriously in Winter's account. Although it is undoubtedly covered in the historiography Winter draws upon, mesmerism's early origins, seemingly in animal magnetism, could be more clearly delineated in this book. The slippage between "mesmerism" and "animal magnetism" and the end points of Winter's narrative (the mysterious arrival and subsequent absorption of mesmerism into other medical and scientific practices) could have been more carefully probed in this generally incisive and illuminating book.