

Research Seminar: Trivializing the Confused Eye: The Private "Personality" of Optical Illusion

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G.16, Victoria Rooms



Abstract: Recent scholarship on European art music and visual culture in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focuses primarily on the special effects created by optical instruments. These effects provide recent music scholars with the basis of a fresh way to interpret compositional devices in select repertory of the period. In this context, the grandeur of optical illusion shows that the mechanisms that created the special effects, the individuals who performed in these shows, and the association of optical illusion with scientific progress and discoveries in ophthalmology attracts enormous attention in both newspapers at the time and recent scholarship in music, art history, and literature. This approach portrays optical illusion as a peculiar aspect of the entertainment industry, with the illusionists as superstars, whose manipulation of the viewers' vision was the sole focus of the presentation. However, this overt emphasis on the staged setting of optical illusion ignores the audience, who, sitting in the dark, became no more than passive observers of the show. It also bypasses the more biased reading of optical illusion embedded in the design of some optical instruments and the commercial products involving optical illusion.

My presentation focuses on a critical assessment of the Nekes collection of optical instruments at the Getty Research Centre (LA). This special collection includes portable optical instruments such as the stereoscope and the magic lantern, their accessories such as magic lantern slides, illustrated books and paper dolls, sets of advertisements for tourist attractions, and postcards. These items involve various renditions of optical illusion, which added to the education of children or served as collectors' items or souvenirs for tourists. Stripped of their staged presentation in theatrical setting, the objects of optical illusion in this collection convey the perspective of the middle-class audience, who, in their everyday life, were less concerned with the mystery or spectacle in optical illusion than with its "use value," either as a commodity or a tool for education. These objects also reflect nineteenth-century bourgeois readings of optical illusion in relation to the social and racial peripheral, which inevitably formed part of children's education in this context. By situating objects of optical illusion in the middle-class household setting rather than reading the presentation of confused vision in a dramatic, staged, and performative act, I offer an alternative reading of optical illusion, which, outside its glamorous theatrical setting, functioned as an educational tool, as well as a mirror reflecting the association of confused vision with Otherness. This "mundane" reading of optical illusion also offers an explanation for the derogative meaning of confused vision (and viewer) implicit in select music works from the nineteenth century.

Bio: Feng-Shu Lee is an associate professor of musicology at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University (Hsinchu, Taiwan), and a visiting research fellow at the University of Bristol in spring 2026. She received her PhD in music from the University of Chicago. Her current research interest examines the intersections between music and visual culture in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. She has published in *Acta Musicologica*, *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, and *Music in Art*, and contributed an essay to the anthology *Richard Wagner: Myth, Poem, Score, Stage*. She is currently working on a book project, tentatively entitled *Discrediting Sight through Sound: Optical Illusion and Nineteenth-Century Operas*.