

Magic: Art of the Impossible

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Michael [watching Rita walk on water]: “Is that your trick, G.O.B.?”

G.O.B.: “No, Michael, that's not my trick. It's my ILLUSION!”

— *Arrested Development*, Season 3, Episode 6

In his book on Indian street magic, *Net of Magic*, magician and religious studies professor Lee Siegel relates the following conversation:

“I'm writing a book on magic,” I explain, and I'm asked, “Real magic?” By real magic people mean miracles, thaumaturgical acts, and supernatural powers. “No,” I answer: “Conjuring tricks, not real magic.” Real magic, in other words, refers to the magic that is not real, while that magic that is real, that can actually be done, is not real magic. (p. 425)

This chapter is not about “real magic,” but *theatrical* magic—magic “that can actually be done.” (So, think Copperfield or Blaine, not Prospero or Potter.) Theatrical magic (henceforth simply ‘magic’) is one of the most popular forms of live entertainment of the last 200 years. Nevertheless, philosophers, art critics, and art historians have paid it scant attention. This is unfortunate, because magic is a rich and fascinating artform that deserves—and rewards—critical reflection.

I. What Magic Isn't

I begin with two common misconceptions.

First, many people think that the goal of a magic performance is to fool the audience (after all, magicians do magic *tricks!*). But this is only half right. There's no question that many magicians—mainly amateurs—derive pleasure from fooling people; and a magic trick that doesn't fool you isn't magical at all. But the point of magic is not trickery. Magician and magic theorist Darwin Ortiz writes: “Magic is not simply about deceiving. It's about creating an illusion, the illusion of impossibility.” In this respect, then, trickery is just a means to an end.

Second, some people believe that magicians want to convince us that they have supernatural powers. Again, this is only half right. Some performers—usually, would-be psychics such as Uri Geller—fit this description; and inasmuch as they profit by using “magic” to con their audiences, they deserve our scorn. But that Geller knowledgeably deploys the magician's tools does not make him a magician. A magician may claim, *as part of a performance*, that he has the ability to read minds or to make coins vanish; however, he actually doesn't expect, or *want*, his audience to believe this. In fact, it's essential to his aesthetic aims that the audience *not* believe that such feats are possible. This is because, as discussed below, *active disbelief* is integral to the experience of magic.

Such misconceptions are troubling because they prevent us from taking magic seriously. After all, why invest in watching or thinking about mere trickery—especially if it wants you to “believe in the impossible?” As magician and essayist Jamy Ian Swiss notes: mere fooling is worse than dull, it's aggravating; and using trickery to promote belief in supernatural phenomena such as psychokinesis

not only intellectually insults the audience, it's ethically loathsome. So, it's very important to distinguish magic from both charlatanry and simple deception. Fine, but still: what *is* magic?

II. What Magic Is

The basic condition for a successful magic performance is that an impossible event appears to happen. David Blaine closes his hand around the coin and—*per impossibile!*—it vanishes. So, we might say that *magic is a form of theater that appears to present impossible events*. But this can't be quite right. As mentioned above, to experience a performance as magical, you must also *believe* that what you are apparently witnessing is impossible. Otherwise, it will seem, at best, like a demonstration of an unusual ability. When true believers watch Geller (pretend to) bend spoons, they don't experience it as magical; instead, they marvel at his powers. And Geller doesn't say he's doing the impossible; he says, "I'm really doing it; so, it's possible." By contrast, the magician says, "This is impossible," and then—as far as the audience can tell—appears to do it anyway. For this reason, we should think of the impossibility of the event depicted by a magic performance as part of the *content* of the performance itself. (For further discussion of this point and the semantic views underlying it, see pages 255–6 of my essay, "The Experience of Magic.") So, then, what is magic? Magic is a form of theater that apparently presents impossible events *as impossible*. Here is how one of magic's most brilliant performers, Teller of *Penn & Teller*, describes it in an interview with *Smithsonian Magazine*:

[Y]ou experience magic as real and unreal at the same time. It's a very, very odd form, compelling, uneasy, and rich in irony.... A romantic novel can make you cry. A horror movie can make you shiver. A symphony can carry you away on an emotional storm; it can go straight to the heart or the feet. But magic goes straight to the brain; its essence is intellectual.

Inasmuch as magic apparently *presents* impossible events, we experience it as real—and so, as possible; but inasmuch as it apparently presents *impossible* events, we experience it as unreal. So, if, like much of Geller's audience, you experience a performance as merely real, then you don't experience it as magic. But still: how is it possible to experience something as "real and unreal at the same time?" This is the key to understanding the experience of magic. First, a few comments.

If magic is experienced, in part, as *unreal*, then it must also be distinguished from demonstrations of skill, endurance stunts, and so on. When sleight-of-hand master Ricky Jay announces and then performs an invisible bottom-deal as part of a demonstration of card-cheating—this is not magic. When David Blaine stands on top of a 22-inch wide, 100-foot tall pillar for 35 hours—this is not magic. These performances are impressive, but they are not magical, because they don't appear to present the *impossible*. Magic is not about pushing the limits of what can be done, but about apparently going beyond them altogether.

Moreover, if magic is experienced, in part, as *real*, then magic is not fiction. Fiction asks us to *imagine* or *make-believe* that something is happening. However, in watching magic, you shouldn't have to imagine the impossible, because you should already (apparently) be presented with it! In other words, magic is not fiction, but illusion. Compare the figures below.



Figure 1

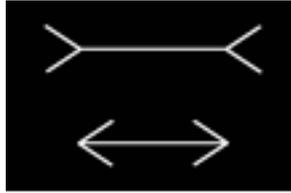


Figure 2

In Figure 1, the lines look, and are, the same length. Nevertheless, you can imagine them being different lengths. (Try it!) But, in Figure 2, you don't need to imagine this, because the lines already *look* as though they are different lengths (yet they are not; this is the Müller-Lyer illusion). Similarly, in watching a performance of Peter Pan, seeing the wires holding the actor aloft doesn't prevent you from enjoying the play: you can still imagine that he is flying. On the other hand, the whole point of David Copperfield's flying illusion is that you should, in some sense, experience it as *real*. If the performance is successful, you shouldn't need to make believe that he is flying, for it should already appear as though he is (which is why you'd better not see any wires!). (For more on the contrast between fiction and illusion, see pages 54–57 of Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*. The example comparing Copperfield to Peter Pan is drawn from the work of Darwin Ortiz. And note that the Müller-Lyer illusion is not (by itself) magical because it is not an illusion as of something impossible. That said, there is a long history—dating at least to the 19th century—of using optical illusions such as the Müller-Lyer in creating magical illusions.)

Finally, if the point of magic is to give us an experience as of something both possible and impossible, real and unreal, then it follows that *magic aims to make us uncomfortable*. After all, if you believe that vanishing a coin is impossible, yet—as far as you can tell—it just happened anyway, the result is a kind of cognitive dissonance. This yields two pressing questions. First, exactly what kind of cognitive dissonance is involved here? What exactly is going on in the mind of someone apparently presented with something they know to be impossible? Second, if magic performance aims to produce cognitive dissonance, why do people seek it out? How is it possible to *enjoy* magic at all? The rest of this chapter focuses on the first of these questions. I'll conclude with a few thoughts about the second.

III. Cognitive Conflict in the Experience of Magic

What happens in the mind of someone taken in by a successful magic performance? What is it like, cognitively, to experience the apparent presentation of an event that you know to be impossible?

Magicians sometimes say that the experience of magic essentially involves *suspension of disbelief*. But this is a mistake. Suspension of disbelief is what allows you to enjoy a performance of Peter Pan even though you see the wires, or to imagine that you are witnessing a swordfight in feudal Denmark rather than actors wielding painted wood in present-day New York. In other words, suspension of disbelief

is what allows us to imaginatively engage with possibilities that we *don't* experience as real. So, while suspension of disbelief is appropriate for fiction, it's wholly irrelevant to magic.

Another way to put the problem with the idea that suspension of disbelief is essential to the experience of magic is that suspending disbelief in the impossible generally does not result in cognitive dissonance. This is because there's no conflict between imagining that Copperfield is flying and firmly believing that it's impossible. So, if cognitive dissonance is integral to the experience of magic, then we need to look elsewhere, and the most obvious candidate is *conflict of belief*. On this account, while Copperfield's audience very firmly believes (in fact, knows) that unaided human flight is impossible, a successful performance will induce in them (at least temporarily) the conflicting belief that he is actually flying. This would be to experience the performance as *thoroughly* real and *thoroughly* unreal at the same time—presumably a powerful experience. However, for starters, it's not obvious that this is psychologically possible; and, even if it is, it cannot be the point of the performance. Copperfield's flying performance is one of the great illusions of modern magic, but it's altogether implausible to think that mature audience members come to believe (even temporarily) that he is actually flying. Again, magic isn't about inducing "belief in the impossible" any more than horror is about inducing belief in monsters (for discussion, see pages 63–68 of Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*). Thus, it seems that a correct characterization of the experience of magic requires an account of cognitive dissonance where active disbelief comes into conflict with a mental state that is not a belief at all.

On this very point, here is Ortiz, from his book on magic performance, *Strong Magic*:

[F]orget about creating willing suspension of disbelief. Get your audience to actually believe in magic.... [But how] can you make a sophisticated, modern audience believe in magic? You can't, if you're talking about intellectual belief. I'm talking about emotional belief. An anecdote from the 19th century perfectly captures the difference between intellectual and emotional belief. Madam De Duffand was asked whether she believed in ghosts. She responded, "No. But I am afraid of them." (pp. 25–26)

Even adults that don't believe in ghosts, either consciously or unconsciously, still in various situations respond in various ways as though ghosts exist. Having recently seen *Poltergeist*, you might feel a rising fear and a sudden tension in your body as you enter a darkened room—but not because you now believe in ghosts! Arguably, it's the same with magic. When Copperfield floats off the stage, or the mentalist Banachek appears to read your mind, you don't come to believe in magic, but you do to some degree *respond* as though something you know to be impossible is happening. How should we characterize this response? Ortiz calls it "emotional" belief, presumably to mark the fact that, like emotion, it is not directly sensitive to evidence and needn't involve "intellectual" endorsement. But we can find precisely these features in a notion called "alief," recently introduced to philosophical psychology by Tamar Szabó Gendler (see, especially, her article "Alief and Belief").

Gendler introduces the concept of alief by reflecting on the experience of walking out onto the Grand Canyon Skywalk, a transparent bridge suspended nearly a thousand feet above the canyon floor. Every year, thousands of tourists walk on the Skywalk; and, while they know it's perfectly safe, it still provides a thrill. Why? Because the experience of looking through the transparent floor of the bridge provokes us to respond, at least in part, *as if* we're hanging unsupported in mid-air. So, even though you believe that you are safe (and have good reasons for believing it), *part* of your cognitive system still represents you as unsupported and unsafe. This additional, evidence-insensitive, "as-if" representation is what Gendler calls an *alief*. More precisely:

A paradigmatic alief is a mental state with associatively linked content that is representational, affective and behavioral, and that is activated—consciously or nonconsciously—by features of the subject’s internal or ambient environment. (“Alief and Belief,” p. 642)

Moreover, alief contrasts in important ways with both belief and imagination. First, while belief involves endorsement of a representational content, in alief, a representational content is present in the subject’s cognitive system, but it is *not* endorsed. Still, it is associatively linked to affective and behavioral systems, so it is not *idle*: it makes you feel, and inclines you to act, in certain ways. Second, alief is distinct from imagination. While “we can (for the most part) imagine at will, we do not seem to have the same sort of freedom in alief” (p. 651). Moreover, there is no cognitive conflict involved in imagining that not-*p* while believing that *p*; or, as Szabó Gendler puts it, in doing this, “I am violating no norms.” By contrast,

...if I believe that P and alieve that not-P, something is amiss. Learning that not-P may well not cause me to cease alieving that P—but if it does not, then...I am violating certain norms of cognitive-behavioral coherence. No such criticism is possible in the analogous case of imagining. (p. 651)

Here, then, we have a type of cognitive conflict that is passively-incurred, has affective and behavioral consequences, and is not a matter of conflicting belief. My suggestion, then, is that we should treat the experience of magic as essentially involving, neither suspension of disbelief nor conflict of belief, but the “belief-discordant” alief that *x* is happening, where *x* is impossible and known to be so.

Suppose this is correct. Even so, the point of a magic performance is not simply to generate cognitive dissonance by inducing an alief that an impossible event is happening; rather, as I argue in the next section, the magician must, in a very specific way, *maximize* this dissonance. Only then does the spectator have a properly “magical” experience.

IV. The Experience of Magic

The best way to understand the experience of magic is to consider what undermines it. Take Copperfield’s flying illusion. If you see the wires, you cannot have an experience of magic. But concealing the wires is not enough, either, for if you so much as *suspect* that there are wires, you cannot have an experience of magic (no matter how good the illusion). In general, suspecting that you know how a magic performance is accomplished is enough to ruin it. And since, when witnessing the apparent presentation of an impossibility, you typically *will* have some ideas about possible methods, the magician has to do more than conceal the actual method—namely, “cancel” all the methods that might reasonably occur to you. Only then are you likely to have the sort of experience the magician wants you to have. As Ortiz writes in *Designing Miracles* (2006):

Magic can only be established by a process of elimination. There is no way that you can directly apprehend that you’re witnessing magic. You conclude that it’s magic because there is no alternative. Therefore, the primary task in giving someone the experience of witnessing magic is to eliminate every other possible cause. (p. 37)

It is very helpful to consider a concrete example.

Imagine this. With my right hand, I take a silver coin from my pocket. I drop it into my left. I squeeze the coin tightly and, a moment later, I open my hand to show that the silver coin has apparently been transformed into a green poker chip. Executed well, this performance should immediately occasion cognitive dissonance by producing a belief-discordant alief that the coin was magically transformed. The automatic response is to try to mitigate the discord by devising a plausible explanation for the appearance of impossibility: “Perhaps he used his sleeves or his pockets? Perhaps he switched the coin when I wasn’t looking? Perhaps it was a trick coin?” *This* is the natural, immediate response to an effective magical illusion: the spectator struggles to minimize cognitive dissonance by explaining away appearances. The job of the magician—and the point of the strategy of canceling methods—is precisely to thwart this attempt, and so, to *maximize* the cognitive dissonance that spectators experience by depriving them of any means to mitigate it. And note that methods can be canceled before, during, and even after a performance. So, to begin, I might roll up my sleeves and ask you to inspect the coin; then, while performing, I might keep my hands in front of and away from my body, move slowly, and be sure not to distract you from watching closely; finally, afterward, I might slowly and carefully show my hands otherwise empty as I hand you the poker chip for examination. (For a very clear example of the strategy of canceling methods in action, see Copperfield’s flying illusion. At the time of this writing, video of the performance is available on YouTube. It’s worth thinking about exactly why Copperfield constructs his performance as he does.)

What’s the resulting experience like? It’s not just that you don’t know how the trick was done. It’s much worse (or better!) than this. Magician Simon Aronson captures the point in a quote well-known to magicians: “There is a world of difference between a spectator’s not knowing how something’s done versus his knowing that it can’t be done.” In other words, the idea is that, while you know it’s a trick, you don’t see how it could be. This means that, in a very important sense, you can’t make sense of what you’ve witnessed. The result isn’t just puzzlement—it’s total bafflement, and *this* is the experience of magic. As Whit Haydn, another very thoughtful magician, writes:

The job of the magician is to trap the spectator in this logical conundrum. The result of this is a peculiar mental excitation—a burr under the saddle of the mind. If the operation is performed correctly, the patient will not be able to ignore the problem, but will keep coming back to it again and again.

Indeed, as any performing magician knows, a good magic trick can stay with someone—like a “burr under the saddle of the mind”—for a very long time (decades, even).

V. Concluding Questions

I hope that this chapter provokes more questions than it answers.

First, if I’m right that the experience of magic consists in a total bafflement of the intellect, why do people seek it out? How do we explain magic’s persisting popularity? Moreover, isn’t it surprising that such a popular artform could be one whose “essence is intellectual,” as Teller puts it?

Second, in thinking about this, it’s worth reflecting on similar experiences, aesthetic and otherwise. In “The Experience of Magic,” I compare the bafflement constitutive of the experience of magic both to the experience of a philosophically-inclined interlocutor at the end of a Socratic (aporetic) dialogue and to the experience of the Kantian mathematically sublime. More generally, we should study the

experience of magic alongside the puzzle of negative emotion in art. How does the experience of magic relate to other “negative” aesthetic experiences, such as experiences of tragedy or horror?

Third, even if strong magic is disturbing, we should keep in mind that the experience of magic is emotionally complex. For example, *laughter* is one of the main responses to good magic. Why? What do magic and comedy have in common? (A hint: the experience of incongruity.) How do they differ? (A suggestion: magic is more disturbing.)

Fourth, does magic matter? What value does it have? Magicians often talk of magic in relation to big ideas such as *mystery*, *astonishment*, and *wonder*. Is this overblown? How can a card trick speak to such stuff? Or is there a sense in which magic reveals, and speaks to, something deep, whether within or without us?

Finally, I hope this chapter has piqued your interest in magic and given you some appreciation for how difficult it is to perform well. It’s one thing to fool an audience; it’s another thing to baffle it completely. But that, and no less, is magic’s goal.