The Experience of Magic

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Despite its enduring popularity, theatrical magic remains all but ignored by art critics, art historians, and philosophers.[1] It is easy to understand why. The world of magic has long had an uneasy relationship with two thoroughly disreputable worlds: the world of the supposedly supernatural—the world of psychics, mediums, and other charlatans—and the world of the con—the world of cheats, hustlers, and swindlers. Moreover, magic has undergone a tremendous decline in the last century, thanks largely to the advent of film and television. Once among the most popular and profitable forms of public entertainment, magic is now widely ridiculed as a sideshow art better suited to children's parties and the absurdity of the Las Vegas strip than to realms of "serious" art and culture. Lastly, it is quite rare to witness a live performance by a skilled, theatrically polished, and thoughtful magician. (The vast majority of professional

[1] By 'theatrical magic' (or simply 'magic') I mean what Simon During calls "secular magic," and so, "not the magic of witches or Siberian shamans—not, in other words, what one writer on the subject of the occult calls 'real and potent magic'—but rather the technically produced magic of conjuring shows…" (2002: 1). Theatrical magic is thus distinct from the sorts of practices that anthropologists (Frazer 2009; Lévy-Bruhl 1985), psychologists (Freud 1950), and historians (Thomas 1971) have traditionally called 'magic'. It is also not what R. G. Collingwood calls "magical art"—namely, "art which… evokes of set purpose some emotions rather than others in order to discharge them into the affairs of practical life" (1938: 69). Even if, as I will suggest, *part* of the value of theatrical magic is that it aims to produce a response that *can* bear on practical life, magic does not evoke this response *for* its practical significance.

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magicians do not meet this standard.) All of this points to an "art" deserving dismissal.

Nevertheless, longstanding critical inattention to magic is unfortunate in at least four ways. First, public interest in live magic performance seems to be on the rise. In 2013, a large-scale touring show, *The Illusionists*, sold 31,000 tickets for $3 million in nine days in Sydney and 42,000 tickets for $2.2 million in eight days in Mexico City. Since *The Illusionists* did this without any household names on the marquee, it is clear that the public was coming for a magic show, not some celebrity fan-fest (*The Illusionist Tour* 2014). At the same time, two young card magicians with a conceptual-artistic bent were selling out shows and breaking box office records at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles and the Pershing Square Signature Center in New York City (*Nothing to Hide NYC* 2014). So, the perhaps surprising fact is that theatrical magic is an important contemporary art form that—it is fair to assume, given the lack of critical attention—is badly understood.[2]

[2] On the follow-up to *The Illusionists*' remarkably successful debut tour, see De Matos (2014). For critical reception of *Nothing to Hide*, see Isherwood (2013). Alongside renewed interest in live performance, there has also been a resurgence of magic on television. Among the many examples: *Penn & Teller's Fool Us*, which originally aired in the U.K. in 2012 and is set for a new season on a U.S. cable network in 2015; regular appearances by magicians on talent shows such as *America's Got Talent* (won by magician Mat Franco in 2014); and a 2013 ABC primetime special, *David Blaine: Real or Magic?*, which marked Blaine's return to magic performance after more than a decade focused on endurance stunts. Even independent film has gotten on board, with several feature-length documentaries in recent years, including *Make Believe* (2010), *Deceptive Practice: The Mysteries and Mentors of Ricky Jay* (2012), and *Where the Magic Happens* (in production). (For discussion of some of the aesthetic challenges in presenting magic on television and in film, see notes 8 and 9.) The question *why* magic is presently attracting significant

Second, recent historical scholarship has highlighted the importance of theatrical magic as a cultural force in Europe and the U.S. throughout the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th.[3] Not only were touring magicians the first "global" entertainment superstars, magic gained credibility as a sophisticated theatrical art.[4] Moreover, the public's interest in magic was inseparable from its conflicted fascination with both science and the occult. Magic performances were sometimes presented alongside—or even as—scientific demonstrations, and magicians such as John Neville Maskelyne made names for themselves by debunking spiritualist "humbugs" such as the Davenport brothers.[5] Understanding magic is thus essential to understanding the social,

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public interest is, of course, difficult to answer. Arguably, one factor is our waning fascination with the apparently limitless potential of cinematic special effects. Even the best 3D CGI now seems pedestrian alongside wonders apparently accomplished by actual human bodies.

[3] See, especially, During's *Modern Enchantments* (2002), apparently "[t]he first major academic work on secular magic" (Murphie 2003). See also Nadis (2005).

[4] On the "globalization" of theatrical magic in the latter part of the 19th century, see During (2002: chs. 4-5). The cultural legitimation of magic as theatrical art was due in large part to performers such as Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin in Paris and Johann Nepomuk Hofzinser in Vienna. On Robert-Houdin's enormous influence, see During (2002: ch. 4). On Hofzinser's famous Viennese salon, see Christian (2013: ch. 5).

[5] P. T. Barnum's *The Humbugs of the World* (1866) features nine chapters debunking spiritualists including the Davenports and the Fox sisters. In the 20th century, the practice of debunking became an important part of the culture of theatrical magic thanks mainly to Harry Houdini (see Houdini 1924) and James "The Amazing" Randi, whose "James Randi Educational Foundation was founded in 1996 to help people defend themselves from paranormal and pseudoscientific claims…[and] offers a still-unclaimed million-dollar reward for anyone who can produce evidence of paranormal abilities under controlled conditions" (*About JREF* 2014). Randi's skepticism is the focus of a recent *New York Times Magazine* profile (Higginbotham 2014).

intellectual, and aesthetic climate of an especially important recent historical period.

The third—and, for my purposes, most significant—reason that critical inattention to magic is unfortunate is that it seems to offer a unique and distinctively intellectual aesthetic experience. On this point, here is one of the most thoughtful and creative performers working today, Teller of *Penn & Teller*:

> [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. (Stromberg 2012)

Following Teller's lead, the purpose of this paper is to initiate a philosophical investigation of the experience of magic with a focus on its cognitive dimension. This is a first step toward giving magic performance the proper critical attention it deserves.[6]

Finally, the fourth reason that magic deserves critical attention is that it raises a host of interesting philosophical and psychological questions that go well beyond the hypothesis that we can learn something about the mind by studying

[6] Since, as discussed below, the distinctive aim of theatrical magic is to produce an experience as of an impossible event, this essay is also a first step toward a general aesthetics of the impossible, and so, of *antinomic*—and not merely *anomalous*—experience. A more complete theory will address related (and similarly neglected) phenomena such as drawings of impossible figures (e.g., Reutersvärd, Escher), impossible sculptures (e.g., Andrus, Tabary, Hamaekers), and even impossible music (e.g., Shepard tones, Risset rhythms), as well as the substantial connections to the aesthetics of both humor and horror broached in the final section of this paper. To develop and defend a general aesthetics of the impossible with a focus on theatrical magic is the goal of my *Antinomic Aesthetics* (manuscript in progress).

how magicians fool us.[7] On the account that I develop in this paper, there are considerable parallels between the experience of magic and both the Kantian sublime and Socratic aporia. Moreover, there are new twists on some traditional aesthetic paradoxes, the resolution of which highlights magic's relevance to recent work in the psychology of explanation, as well as rich and unexplored connections between magic and horror and humor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, magic does not fit neatly into our usual aesthetic categories—*precisely* why it so rewards reflection.

The paper is in five parts. The first part dispels two widespread misconceptions about the nature of theatrical magic and discusses the special sort of depiction it requires. Part two asks, "What is involved in the experience of magic?" and criticizes three candidate replies; part three then argues that Tamar Szabó Gendler's notion of "belief-discordant alief" might be the key to a correct answer (Gendler 2008: 641). On this basis, part four develops an account of the experience of magic that connects it to both the Kantian sublime and Socratic aporia. Finally, part five introduces the two paradoxes of magic and resolves them by appeal, first, to Alison Gopnik's work on the psychology of explanation, and second, to parallels between magic and horror and humor. What emerges is a philosophically rich account of the experience of magic that opens new avenues for inquiry and is directly relevant to core issues in contemporary aesthetics.

[7] This is the rather narrow focus of recent work in the "neuroscience of magic," which has received considerable attention in the popular press. See, for example, Macknik et al. (2008), Kuhn et al. (2008), and Macknik et al. (2010).

I. What Is Magic?

To begin, it is important to address two common misconceptions about theatrical magic.

First, it is widely believed that the magician's primary goal is to fool his audience. This may be true of some professional performers that bill themselves as magicians, and it is clearly true of many amateurs who do "magic tricks." However, most magicians are interested in much more than trickery: they regard deception merely as a *means* to creating a certain type of theatrical event. Darwin Ortiz, a prominent magician who has written extensively on the theory of magic performance, explains: "Magic is not simply about deceiving. It's about creating an illusion, the illusion of impossibility" (2006: 15). *This* is the sort of performance that interests me here—and that most deserves to be called 'magic'.

Second, there is the misconception that the magician aims to convince her audience that she has supernatural powers. This is what leads some people to respond to the threat of a magic performance by announcing, "I don't believe in that stuff." But while some professional and amateur performers indisputably engage in this sort of charlatanry, most magicians do not claim to possess special powers. In large part, this is because they understand that the belief that magic is "real" actually *thwarts* their aesthetic aims. As discussed below, the audience's active *disbelief* is a critical ingredient for creating the experience of magic.

So, if magic is neither charlatanry nor (mere) deception, what is it? Here, again from Teller, is a candidate definition: "Magic is a form of theater that depicts impossible events as though they were really happening" (Stromberg 2012). Not charlatanry, but theater—and no mention of deception! In any case,

Teller's definition deserves unpacking. To this end, it is instructive to distinguish between:

(A) depicting events as though they were happening…;

and

(B) depicting events as though they were *really* happening….

Theater and film are well suited to depicting events as though they were happening, but depicting events as though they were *really* happening is typical of neither. Macbeth is not (usually?) depicted as murdering Duncan *now*, *here,* in the theater, and a screening of *Casablanca* does not depict the events in Rick's Café as unfolding *now,* whether in the cinema or in Morocco. To depict an event as though it were *really* happening is neither to depict it as happening in some other possible world nor to depict it as happening at some other time. Instead, to depict an event as though it were really happening is to depict it as happening *now*, in *this* world—usually, wherever the act of depiction takes place. In this case, what is depicted is depicted as happening right in front of the audience, perhaps even *to* the audience. Consequently, to depict events as though they are really happening is to break the theatrical "fourth wall" between the audience and the action on stage. In this respect, the magician resembles the stage actor less than the standup comic, who speaks directly to the audience, and whose act, even if scripted, often incorporates improvisatory and audience-interactive elements.[8]

[8] Radio and television are interesting cases. Consider, for instance, Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which caused panic (at least among listeners who missed the disclaimer at the beginning of the broadcast) by depicting an alien invasion as though it were happening *at that very moment*. Part of what made this

Performing magic, however, requires more than depicting an impossible event as though it were really happening. A successful magic performance *appears to present* an impossible event, but it is possible to depict an event as though it were really happening without appearing to present it. In particular, a "really happening" depiction may be *fictional* in Kendall Walton's sense of functioning as a prop in a game of make-believe (Walton 1990: ch. 1). Children playing at wizardry may make-believe that they are *actually* casting spells on the cat, and so, depict impossible events as though they are really happening. However, their act of depiction does not appear to present what it depicts: the children do not actually appear to be casting spells! By contrast, it is essential to a magic performance that *impossible events actually appear to happen*.[9] So, it turns out

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possible is that the radio serves—or at any rate, served—as a medium for both fictional entertainment and live newscasts. By contrast, what makes it difficult to imagine that a presentation in a conventional contemporary cinema could pull off this sort of depiction is that its audience knows that it is consuming something recorded and edited in the (more or less distant) past. On the other hand, television, like radio, is a source of both live news and fiction, and so, is a perfect candidate for "really happening" depictions. Arguably, this is what we get from (more or less) scripted, live "reality shows" such as professional wrestling—which, of course, can also be consumed in person as live theater. As we will see, a key difference between this sort of event—whether consumed via live broadcast or in person—and theatrical magic is that it is easy enough to understand how the faux wrestling (or the radio news broadcast) could be fake; but the point of a good magic show is to leave you asking: "How? How could *that* be fake? I don't see *any way*. And yet, it must be, for it is *impossible*."

[9] For this reason, making magic effective on TV requires ruling out the possibility of camera tricks and post-production effects: as long as the latter are potentially at work, the apparent impossibility of the performance is compromised. Thus, most contemporary TV magic is a variant on the sort of reality show pioneered by David Blaine in his 1997 special, *Street Magic*. Blaine's principal innovation was to feature the reactions of ordinary live spectators—their expressions of incredulity, their shouts of

that functioning as fiction—as a prop in a game of make-believe in which the spectator *imagines* that an impossible event is taking place—is, at best, orthogonal to the intentions of a magic performance. The spectator should not be called on to imagine that the impossible is happening, because it should already *appear* so. In this respect, magical depiction is not fiction; rather, it consists in the *illusion* that an impossible event is really happening. This, of course, is why it requires deception.[10]

"No way!"—as a central part of the recorded show. This brilliant stratagem all but forces the TV spectator to experience the performance vicariously; in effect, it enrolls the live spectators as epistemic guarantors and emotional guides for the TV spectators, who learn what to think and feel about a performance in part by watching the live audience react. Compare how, according to Carroll, in horror, "the emotional reactions of characters…provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to respond to the monsters in the fiction" (1990: 17–18). Obviously, the horror audience knows that the events depicted in the horror narrative are not really happening, so they take only *emotional*, not *epistemic* cues from the characters. By contrast, it is critical to the *emotional* reactions of Blaine's TV audience that they implicitly regard his live spectators as *epistemically* authoritative vis-à-vis the experience of seeing him live. (On the nature of epistemic authority, see Zagzebski (2012).) In general, unless a TV viewer has reason to distrust the live audience—say, reason to think that the performance was stooged—her response will be guided by a principle such as: "If the live audience treats a performance as apparently impossible, then, ceteris paribus, I should, too." (A structurally similar form of emotional and epistemic authority is evident in live competition programs such as *America's Got Talent*, in which the reactions of the (often skeptical) judges are a big part of the show.)

[10] Note that to deny that magic is fiction is not to deny that imagination plays a role in the experience of magic (on the contrary: see Section IV). The point is just that, unlike props in games of make-believe, magic performances are not invitations to imagine a depicted event. One might object that surely the *magician* is pretending to do the impossible, and so, making-believe. (Walton himself defines pretense in terms of make-believe (1990: 220).) Quite so. However, that the *magician* makes-believe does *not* mean that she invites the *audience* to do so. On the contrary, the whole point of magic is that

Still, in order for a given performance to be "magical," yet a further condition must be met: the audience must *believe* that what they are apparently witnessing is, in fact, impossible. It is no good if the depicted event is impossible but the audience believes otherwise.[11] This is what makes it difficult to perform magic for young children: they do not have a good grasp of the limits of the possible. Similarly, consider performing a mind-reading routine for an audience that believes in psychic phenomena: they might marvel at your "powers," but they cannot experience what you do as magical, because they cannot experience it as impossible. *This* is why, as mentioned above, the magician does *not* want you to believe that magic is real. She wants you to believe that it is impossible, but that, as far as you can tell, it is happening anyway. *This* is the cognitive bind she wants you in.

Arguably, then, a distinguishing feature of magical depiction is that the impossibility of the depicted event is *part* of what is depicted. In other words, not only is the depicted event in fact (*de re*) impossible, but it is also presented (*de dicto*) as impossible. The result, in Teller's words, is "a very, very odd form," in which events are presented *simultaneously* as really happening and as incapable of happening. In this case, not only is the magician's claim—say, to be able to

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what is fiction for the magician should be illusion for the audience. (For the contrast between fiction and illusion, see Walton's discussion of Kasimir Malevich's *Suprematist Painting* (1990: 54–57).)

[11] In Stephen Grimm's helpful terms, the audience's "proto-understanding"—its "convictions *about* the sorts of possibilities that are live or relevant, relative to the situation in question"—must be sufficiently well-developed (2008: 491). Grimm presents proto-understanding "as a further specification of Nozick's notion of a 'network of possibility'; it is something like a person's 'modal sense' of the various alternatives that might have obtained, relative to the fact in question" (2008: 491; see Nozick 1981: 12).

make a coin vanish—essentially ironic (because it occurs within a performative context in which that very act is presented as impossible), the vanishing act itself has an ironic structure: it appears to be what it simultaneously admits cannot be.[12]

II. Three Hypotheses

We are now in a position to ask, "What is involved in the experience of magic?" It has both cognitive and affective dimensions, and while they are closely related, the cognitive side is primary. It is my focus here. (I consider the affective dimension in Section V.) The question is: "How does magic affect cognitive states such as knowledge and belief?" Given that magic is a theatrical art, an obvious hypothesis is:

(H1) The experience of magic essentially involves willing suspension of disbelief.

In fact, as Ortiz notes, this hypothesis is widely accepted by practicing magicians;[13] however, it is clearly false. "Suspending disbelief" is playing make-

[12] Note that treating the impossibility of the coin-vanish as ingredient in its depiction does not require that the magician *say* or otherwise make explicit that coin-vanishing is impossible. That its impossibility nevertheless figures in its depiction is clear from the fact that someone who responds to the performance by saying, "Oh come on, you can't *really* vanish coins," is correctly said not to "get" what the magician is doing. Compare someone who responds to a piece of fiction or game of make-believe by saying, "Oh come on, bears can't really talk"—they don't get how fiction/make-believe works.

[13] "It's become fashionable among those few magicians who even bother to discuss showmanship to talk about getting audiences to 'willingly suspend their disbelief'" (2011: 25). The popularity of this view is due in part to Henning Nelms, whose *Magic and Showmanship: A Handbook for Conjurers* (1969) is widely cited by magicians and explicitly

believe; so, the suspension of disbelief relegates the theatrical event to the realm of fantasy. And while it is surely true that occasional witnesses to a good magic performance will "play along" and indulge in the fantasy that the magic is real, this is not essential to—*and actually interferes with*—the experience of magic. The *whole force* of a magic performance consists in the fact that the audience knows that what they are apparently witnessing is, in fact, impossible. But if the impossible event is relegated to the realm of fantasy via suspension of disbelief, then it is no longer apparently witnessed at all. As discussed above, magic performances are not fictions, not props in games of make-believe; they are illusions. To treat them as invitations to fantasy is precisely to miss the point.

To drive this point home, here is an example from Ortiz (2011: 25). Compare a Broadway performance of Peter Pan to David Copperfield's flying illusion. Suppose that you see the wires holding Peter Pan aloft; does this interfere with your experience of the play? Not at all: you can still willingly suspend disbelief. By contrast, suppose that you see wires moving David Copperfield through the air. This completely destroys the performance, and not because it interferes with some fantasy of flight, but because you are no longer witness to an apparently impossible event.

Here, then, is a second hypothesis, due, again, to Teller:

(H2) The experience of magic essentially involves unwilling suspension of disbelief (Stromberg).

What this hypothesis captures is the involuntary nature of our response to a well-executed magic performance. You do not *decide* to respond to Copperfield

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assimilates magic performance to theatrical fiction requiring suspension of disbelief. (For another example of resistance to Nelms' view, see Sankey (2003: 89–90).)

as though he is really flying; rather, a successful performance somehow *forces* this response from you. (Teller elsewhere describes magic performance as a kind of "theatrical rape" (Swiss 1995: 492).[14]) Thus, if suspension of disbelief is important to the experience of magic, it is not *willing* suspension of disbelief. Still, for the reasons I detailed above, focusing on the notion of suspension of disbelief misses the point. Whether it is willing or unwilling, suspension of disbelief relegates the impossible event to the realm of fantasy, and so, prevents us from apparently witnessing it at all. To put the point another way: *active disbelief* is an essential ingredient in the theatrical experience of magic; that is, the audience should actively disbelieve that what they are apparently witnessing is possible.[15] This is why the magician knows she has succeeded in part when she hears the audience exclaim, "No way!" or, "Impossible!"—hardly appropriate responses to

[14] This stunning phrase provides a good excuse to comment on the glaring prevalence of white men in magic. Even today, non-white (especially black) or female magicians are difficult for audiences to accept. There are clearly strong implicit biases at work here. What During writes of the latter half of the 19th century remains true: "[E]nlightened conjurers were… associated, more or less subliminally, with occult or supernatural agency…. Magic [therefore] placed them in a position of power and knowledge; but because of its black and white color-coding, also associated them with the forces of darkness" (2002: 108). Contemporary audiences remain uncomfortable with women and non-white men presented in ways that elicit such associations; so, performers must find ways to comfort them. Thus, predictably, most female magicians embellish their performances with "sex appeal," and black men standardly do "comedy magic."

[15] Charles Isherwood picks up on this in his *New York Times* review of *Nothing to Hide*:

> Theater is often said to require the willing suspension of disbelief. Without stating as much, Mr. DelGaudio and Mr. Guimarães challenge you to bring all the disbelief you can muster to their show. And then, with an insouciant air of doing nothing too impressive, they proceed to detonate the armor of cynicism that the most jaded New Yorker could assemble, as easily as if they were blowing those wisps of white flower off a young dandelion. (2013)

mere fantasy. In sum, then, the problem with giving suspension of disbelief a central role in an account of the experience of magic is that it cannot do justice to the cognitive dissonance this experience involves.

Focusing on the idea that cognitive dissonance is essential to the experience magic immediately suggests the following hypothesis:

(H3) The experience of magic essentially involves *conflict of belief*.

On this hypothesis, Copperfield is successful only if he gets you to somehow *believe and disbelieve* that he is flying. But presumably Copperfield's audience does not typically come to believe a contradiction, no matter how good his performance. The experience of magic is neither an experience of forced fantasy nor an experience of inadvertent self-contradiction. There is cognitive dissonance, but it is not the sort that demands resolution on pain of irrationality. The audience never really believes that Copperfield is flying—that magic is real—any more than the frightened audience of *The Exorcist* really believes that Regan is possessed by the demon Pazuzu.[16] So, the right account of the experience of magic must include an account of cognitive dissonance that is not a

[16] In other words, we should reject (H3) just as we should reject a belief-based reply to the "paradox of fiction," which challenges us to explain how audiences could have genuine emotional responses to what they know to be fiction. The view that emotional responses to fiction are explained by a (temporary) belief in the reality of the depicted events is deeply implausible for the sorts of reasons discussed in Carroll (1990: 63-8). That said, I think that the possibility of understanding the experience of magic as involving a kind of temporary belief in its reality (and so, the corresponding cognitive dissonance as a kind of experience of contradiction) has considerably greater plausibility than a belief-based response to the paradox of fiction. Jamy Ian Swiss convinced me of this in conversation, and while I think the view is incorrect, I believe it deserves more serious consideration than I can give it here.

matter of conflicting beliefs. The next section suggests that Szabó Gendler's notion of "belief-discordant alief" might just do the trick.

III. Alieving in Magic

To motivate introducing the theoretical concept of alief, Szabó Gendler considers the experience of walking on the Grand Canyon Skywalk. The Skywalk is a transparent horseshoe-shaped cantilever bridge that extends over 70 feet beyond the edge of the canyon and hangs nearly 1000 feet in the air. Unsurprisingly, walking on the Skywalk can be a harrowing experience. Still, thousands of tourists do it every year, and presumably they *know* that they are safe. Nevertheless, a normal person who walks out on the bridge for the first time is, in some measure, conflicted about doing so. How should we describe this conflict?

Szabó Gendler convincingly argues that we should understand it as a tension between belief and a more primitive, non-doxastic, representational mental state she calls *alief*. She explains:

> 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 (Gendler 2008: 642)

On her analysis of the Skywalk, the visual stimulus induced by the transparent bridge causes a mental state with the following associatively linked contents:

- Representational: *Really high up; no support!*

- Affective: *Unsafe!*

- Behavioral: *Get off!*

There are two points to note here. First, *belief* involves *endorsement* of a representational content. By contrast, 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 contents, 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" (Gendler 2008: 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. (Gendler 2008: 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. The question is whether it can be applied to yield a plausible account of the experience of magic.

Consider the following passage from Ortiz:

> [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." (2011: 25–6)

Ortiz characterizes the cognitive dissonance at the heart of the experience of magic as a conflict between "intellectual belief" and "emotional belief." Intellectually, the audience knows that magic is impossible; but on a more

primitive, emotional level, a good performance induces them to "believe" it is actually happening. This seems very much like the contrast between belief and alief. It is easy to imagine someone standing on the Skywalk saying, "*Intellectually*, I believe—*I know*—that I'm safe; but *emotionally*, I believe that I'm in danger." So, my suggestion is that the same theoretical tool that Szabó Gendler introduces to handle the problem of our resistance to walking out on the perfectly safe Skywalk can be used to give an account of the cognitive dissonance that is essential to the experience of magic:

> (H4) The experience of magic essentially involves a *belief-discordant alief* that an impossible event is happening.[17]

If this is correct—and it deserves much deeper consideration—the question arises: "What are the affective and behavioral contents of magical alief?" That is, how does such an alief make you feel, and what does it make you want to do? I touch on these issues in Section V. In the meantime, however, the point of a magic performance is not simply to generate cognitive dissonance by inducing an alief that an impossible event is happening, but to *maximize* this dissonance. Only then does the spectator have a properly "magical" experience. The next section defends this claim and articulates some of its consequences.

[17] In speaking of "alief that *p*," I am treating alief as a two-place relation between a subject and a representational content rather than, as Szabó Gendler recommends, a four-place relation between a subject and a "representational-affective-behavioral content" (2008: 645). However, in so doing, I am following her own "'loose' usage" (647). Nothing in my argument hangs on the difference.

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 performance of an apparently impossible event, you typically *will* have some ideas about possible methods, the magician has to do more than conceal the actual method, she also has to "cancel" all the methods that might reasonably occur to you.[18] Only then are you likely to have the sort of experience she wants you to have. As Ortiz writes:

> 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. (Ortiz 2006: 37)[19]

It is very helpful to consider a concrete example. Consider again David Copperfield's flying illusion, which, despite the schmaltzy theatrics, is perhaps

[18] This use of the term 'canceling' apparently derives from Stephen Minch's *Secrets of a "Puerto Rican Gambler"*, on the magic of Daryl Martinez. Minch writes:

> Not far into this work you should be ready to observe the workings of the Second Rule of Darylism. He calls it 'canceling'. The formula runs thus: "Each time you do something in a routine, try to figure out what possible method a spectator might surmise for its explanation. Then structure the next portion of the routine to knock over, or *cancel*, this possibility in the audience's mind." (1980: 11)

[19] Compare Juan Tamariz's discussion of "the method of false solutions" and "the magic way" (2014: 3–19). Discussion of Tamariz's rich theory is beyond the scope of this paper.

the best flying illusion ever performed. For each stage of the performance, we can see that Copperfield takes pains to cancel the various methods that might occur to a spectator.[20]

> **Stage I.** Copperfield rises off the stage. A reasonably intelligent spectator thinks: "Of course there are wires attached to his back."
>
> **Stage II.** Copperfield does a full somersault in midair. The spectator thinks: "Ah, so the wires can't be attached to his back; still, there must be wires."
>
> **Stage III.** Copperfield flies through a series of spinning metal hoops. Spectator: "What? Then how can there be wires? Maybe they somehow rotate them to avoid the hoops?"
>
> **Stage IV.** Copperfield flies into a glass box, is shut inside, flies around inside the box, and flies out when the cover is removed. "What? Clearly there can't be wires. What else? Magnets? A fan? No. None of that makes sense. I'm completely baffled. This seems altogether impossible. And yet, it's happening. I don't know what to say."

At no point does the spectator come to believe that Copperfield is flying. But even at Stage I, it certainly *looks* as though he is, and this suffices to induce the corresponding belief-discordant alief. Thus, the performance immediately produces cognitive dissonance in the spectator; and, as Linda Zagzebski points out, the natural, immediate response to such "psychic dissonance" is to try to restore harmony.[21] In this case, there are three options. First, the spectator can try to dislodge the alief that Copperfield is flying. But since the illusion is robust, the alief refuses to budge.[22] Second, she can try to revise her belief that Copperfield

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[20] At the time of this writing, video of Copperfield's performance is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70U2yybKhKg.

[21] Zagzebski (2012: esp. ch. 2) develops a theory on which rationality is the expression of a natural drive to maintain psychic harmony.

[22] Compare the Müller-Lyer illusion, which is "robust" in the sense that knowledge of the illusion does not prevent the lines from looking as though they are of different lengths, and so, from generating a persistent alief to that effect.

cannot fly. But this is rationally unacceptable—at least in part because it would generate more psychic dissonance than it would resolve. Third, if she can shift neither alief nor belief, the spectator can at least try to *mitigate* their discord by devising a plausible explanation for what she sees. *This* is the natural, immediate response to an effective magical illusion: the spectator struggles to minimize cognitive dissonance by explaining away the appearance of impossibility. But 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. There are several things to note here.

First, the experience of magic occurs *only* when the spectator has a belief-discordant alief in the impossible that—thanks to the cancelation of methods—she *sees no way to rationalize*. In Copperfield's performance, as described above, this happens only at Stage IV: only then does the spectator enjoy the experience of an apparent impossibility *absent any resources to explain it away*. The experience of magic is, therefore, the result of an "intellectual process" (Ortiz 2006: 36). With sleeves rolled up and her arms held well away from her body, the magician borrows a coin and passes it from her right hand to her left fist. She concentrates on her left hand for a moment and then opens it to show that the coin has vanished. If this sequence is well executed, it will occasion a belief-discordant alief that the coin has vanished. Impressive, surprising—but not yet magical. An intelligent spectator will very quickly turn his attention to the other hand. Only when the magician *also* shows her right hand empty will the spectator (perhaps) undergo the total bafflement constitutive of the experience of magic.

Second, there is more to the experience of magic than not knowing how a trick is done. The latter requires only being deceived as to its method. For

instance, in Copperfield's flying illusion, at no point does the audience *know how* the illusion is produced. They are deceived throughout. However, only at Stage IV, when they lose their grip on how the illusion *could be* produced by natural means, do they actually have the experience of magic. What was at first a "puzzle" to be solved ("Where does he hook up the wires?") comes, via the bafflement of the intellect, to "suggest the operation of something outside of normal cause and effect" (LePaul 1987: 129).[23]

Third, it should now be clear exactly how magic engages a spectator's imagination. While fiction *invites* the audience to imagine the depicted event—and the main point of the fiction is to *help* them in this—magic *coerces* the audience into trying to imagine how the illusion of the depicted event might be produced—and the main point of the performance is to *prevent* them from succeeding. So, while the experience of fiction requires imaginative success, the experience of magic consists in a kind of imaginative failure.

Fourth, it follows that spectators with different cognitive resources may have very different experiences of the very same performance. If the magician's job is to anticipate explanations her audience is likely to consider and to develop a performance that "cancels" them, then performing for, say, a group of engineers may impose different demands than performing for a group of vision

[23] Thus Simon Aronson's oft-cited comment: "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" (Aronson 1990: 171). See also Ortiz (2006: 32–33).

scientists. In general, the variety of possible explanations we are capable of imagining for a magical illusion depends on our background knowledge.[24]

Fifth, the idea of an aesthetic experience involving imaginative failure calls to mind the Kant's conception of the mathematically sublime (Kant 2000: 131–143; Ak. 5: 248–260). Of course, for Kant, "the imagination"—a faculty whose role is to synthesize sensory input for empirical cognition—is quite different from what usually goes under the name. Still, there are parallels worth exploring. On Kant's account, the experience of beauty occurs when the imagination presents the object of sensory awareness to the understanding not, as is usually the case, to be thought under a determinate concept, rather *merely as thinkable* (102–104; Ak. 5: 217–219). Thus, for Kant, to experience the world as beautiful is to experience it as *intelligible*, which means that the experience of beauty is an experience of the *harmony* of the world with our cognitive faculties. By contrast, the experience of magic occurs when you are sensorily presented with an event that, despite your best efforts, *resists* intelligibility.[25] Similarly, according to Kant, the experience of the mathematically sublime occurs when you encounter something that, because of its size, literally makes no sense to your senses. The sublime object overwhelms the imagination, which fails in its attempt to make the object available for empirical cognition. This cognitive failure is the negative moment in the experience of the mathematically sublime. Critically, however, for Kant, a positive moment follows: unable to cognize the object empirically, you

[24] The most difficult audience is, naturally, a group of magicians, precisely because they are familiar with so *many* ways in which illusions can be produced. The flip-side of this is that learning how to perform magic makes the experience of magic hard to come by.

[25] Following a good performance, it's not uncommon to hear spectators say, "That makes no sense!"

grasp it by means of an idea of reason; in so doing, you experience the superiority of your rational self over your merely animal, empirical nature (140–143; Ak. 5: 257–260). Arguably, the experience of magic has a similar, albeit not transcendental, structure: there is a moment of cognitive failure that is nevertheless "contained" by the knowledge that "it's just a trick." In this respect, despite her total bafflement, the spectator remains master over the illusion.[26]

Fifth, the intellectual process that leads to the experience of magic has a very clear philosophical parallel. A series of possible explanations are discounted, leaving the spectator baffled, speechless. This is an *aporetic* process, and it directly mirrors the experience of an interlocutor in a Socratic dialogue. Consider, for instance, what happens in the *Euthyphro*.[27] A question is posed ("What is piety?" (5d)) and a series of accounts are then offered, each of which is rejected on the basis of new argument:

- "Piety is what I'm doing now" (5d–e)
    - "But it can't be, because…" (6d–e)
- "Piety is what is dear to the gods" (7a)
    - "But it can't be, because…." (7a–8a)
- etc….

Until, finally, Euthyphro reaches *aporia*, bafflement, and *no longer knows what to say*. Critically, this does *not* mean that Euthyphro—or Socrates, for that matter—thereby gives up on the idea that there *is* a correct account of piety. Rather, the proper aporetic attitude is: "There *must* be a correct account, but I have no idea

[26] For more on the idea that the experience of magic involves the "containment" of a negative experience, see the discussion of magic and humor in Section V.

[27] All references to Plato's dialogues are to the Hackett edition of his complete works (Plato 1997).

how there could be. All the possibilities seem to have been exhausted."[28] Similarly, in the case of magic, the spectator does not give up on the idea that there is an explanation for what she is witnessing; instead, her attitude is: "There *must* be an explanation, but I have no idea how there could be. All the possibilities seem to have been exhausted." (No wonder, then, that Socrates was sometimes called a "magician" by his contemporaries.)[29] As magician Whit Haydn 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. (Haydn 2009: 6)

This could just as well describe the work Socrates performs in an aporetic dialogue: leaving the interlocutor with "a burr under the saddle of the mind." And just as some of Socrates's interlocutors recoil from the experience of philosophy, so, too, do some people recoil from the experience of magic. After

[28] Still, there is good reason to think that Euthyphro himself fails to adopt the proper aporetic attitude. At the end of the dialogue, he abandons his conversation with Socrates because he is "in a hurry" (15e), presumably to get on with prosecuting his father for murder *because piety demands it* (4d5–5a2). That Euthyphro is apparently willing to proceed with the prosecution suggests that he does not take his aporetic experience seriously. Instead, like Socrates's other "misologistic" interlocutors (for instance, Anytus in *Meno*), he seems willing to sacrifice virtue for what is practically expedient. (On "misology," see *Phaedo* 89d.)

[29] For Plato and Socrates, maintaining the belief that there is a correct account of piety (or virtue, or justice,…) in the face of *aporia* is of paramount *ethical* importance (see, for instance, *Meno* 86b6–c2). Notably, there are many magicians (James Randi, *Penn & Teller*, and Jamy Ian Swiss, for instance) who feel the same way about the audience's belief that what they are witnessing has an explanation, and so, is "merely" a trick. That the audience should preserve this belief is, for them, an ethical matter. It is also, for reasons I have discussed, an aesthetic one.

all, as Haydn writes: "This is a creative and disturbing place to be" (Haydn 2009: 5). Still, of course, there is an important difference between philosophy and magic. The goal of philosophy is not aporia, but *sophia*: wisdom.[30] On the other hand, those who love magic seek an aporetic experience for its own sake. The question is why. The next section offers an answer.

V. The Paradoxes of Magic

I have argued that the experience of magic occurs when a spectator witnesses what she knows is an illusion of an impossible event absent resources to explain how it *could* be an illusion. Experienced performers know that this can provoke a range of powerful behavioral and emotional responses, from laughter and joy to frustration and anger.[31] Spectators are often able to recall the details of a particular magic trick many years—even decades—after witnessing it, and they seem to relish recounting those details to willing listeners. In an important respect, this is surprising. How could an audience be *genuinely moved* by what it knows to be an illusion? Here, then, is *the first paradox of magic*:

The Paradox of Magical Affect

A. Many of us are genuinely moved by magic.

B. We know that magic depicts non-actual events.

C. Nothing we believe is non-actual can genuinely move us.

[30] Not that all wisdom is non-aporetic: Socrates's "human wisdom," which consists in his knowing only that he doesn't know, is a form of sustained aporia (*Apology* 20d–23b).

[31] That said, not everyone is moved by magic. Some people seem to experience—at best—a kind of detached, intellectual appreciation for the magician's ability to deceive. Nevertheless, most spectators are substantially moved by good performances—even though they remain fully aware that they are being fooled—and they generally enjoy themselves in the process.

The paradox of magical affect is a near relative to the paradox of fiction (see note 14): in both cases, there is a puzzle about how the depiction of something we know to be unreal can genuinely move us. Arguably, the most plausible general solution to the paradox of fiction is Noël Carroll's "thought theory," which "maintains that we can be moved by the content of thoughts entertained; that emotional response does not require the belief that the things that move us be actual" (1990: 88).[32] This applies directly to magic performance. When Copperfield performs his flying illusion, we may be moved by the thought of supernatural flight. But an ordinary production of Peter Pan can move us with this very same thought. So, while thought theory captures *one* way in which a magic performance can move us, it does not capture what is distinctive about it.

The key to magic's aesthetic power is that it provokes experiences that resist intelligibility. You know that what you are witnessing *must be* an illusion, but you don't see how it *could* be. Not only do you fail to understand *how* it's done, you don't even understand how it *could* be. Outside of magic, this sort of resistance to intelligibility is very rare. Even the most unexpected events in everyday life "make sense."[33] This is why technically competent but otherwise abysmal magic performances can be so memorable. No matter what inane "patter" comes out of the magician's mouth, you have no grip on how he could have known that you were thinking of the nine of diamonds. It is hardly

[32] Note that Gendler and Kovakovich (2006) offer a solution to the paradox of fiction that gives a central role to alief-like states (see 250–251) and arguably counts as a version of thought theory. Cf. Gendler (2008: 637; 643 n. 18).

[33] If only on the assumption of sufficient prior exposure to present technology; for, as Arthur C. Clarke has famously remarked: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (1973: 21 n. 1).

surprising that such a disruption of ordinarily intelligible experience should move us. In fact, there is a good psychological basis for it.

Alison Gopnik has compellingly argued that "everyday cognition" centrally involves the operation of a "theory-formation system…devoted to uncovering the underlying causal structure of the world" (1998: 101). If she is right, then successful magic performance *frustrates* a critically important cognitive system that, in normal adults, generally operates fluidly behind the scenes. Furthermore, if "[t]heories change in the face of evidence in order to give better causal representations," there must be a tight connection between the theory-formation and memory systems, and experiences not easily accommodated by theorizing ought to be *especially memorable* (104). Finally, Gopnik argues that the theory-formation system is accompanied by an "evolutionarily determined" "theory drive" with distinctive phenomenological markers: the "hmm" of puzzlement and the "aha" of causal explanatory success (102; 108–110). In particular, she writes:

> Even in adults, the 'hmm' is, to varying degrees, an unsettling, disturbing, and arousing experience, one that seems to compel us to some sort of resolution and action (the two great resources by which popular fiction holds our attention are titillation and mystery, nothing like unsatisfied fundamental drives to keep the pages turning). (109)

In this case, an experience that sets the theory drive into motion only to drive it to aporia—and so, *deprive* it of any hope of satisfaction—might be *highly* "unsettling, disturbing, and arousing."[34] Thus, if Gopnik's view is even roughly

[34] Cf. Gopnik's remarks on the surprise and puzzlement that children experience when confronted with "impossible events" (116).

correct, we should expect that the experience of magic should be singularly memorable, phenomenologically distinctive, and quite powerful.

This resolves the paradox of magical affect, but *not* by showing how the non-actual, depicted event could move us; rather, by showing how we can be moved by an experience's apparent unintelligibility. But this immediately re-raises the question articulated at the end of Section IV: why would anyone seek out such an experience? This is *the second paradox of magic*:

The Paradox of Magical Pleasure

A. Many of us enjoy the experience of magic.

B. The experience of magic is aporetic.

C. Aporetic experiences are unpleasant.[35]

Like the paradox of magical affect, the paradox of magical pleasure is a near relative to another aesthetic paradox—in this case, the "paradox of horror," a puzzle about "how people can be attracted by what is repulsive" (Carroll 1990: 160). The difference is that the events depicted by a magic performance need not be—and typically are not—repulsive, and horror is typically not magical, but fictional. Still, the parallel is significant.

According to Carroll, what is distinctive of horror is that "the genre specializes in impossible, and, in principle, unknowable beings. This is the attraction of the genre" (1990: 191). It is also what binds it so closely to magic. While other genres can provoke emotions such as fear and disgust, they "do not

[35] A related, lesser paradox wonders how people can enjoy knowingly being fooled (cf. Swiss 2002a: 5–6). Since, however, knowingly being fooled is not sufficient for an experience of magic, and the experience of magic *involves* knowingly being fooled, resolving the paradox of magical pleasure *ipso facto* resolves this lesser paradox.

afford the same type of fascination" as horror precisely because they do not depict beings that are "essentially categorical violations," and so, *impossible* (191). Carroll writes:

> [A]nomalies are…interesting. The very fact that they are anomalies fascinates us. Their deviation from the paradigms of our classificatory scheme captures our attention immediately. It holds us spellbound. It commands and retains our attention. It is an attracting force; it attracts curiosity, i.e., it makes us curious; it invites inquisitiveness about its surprising properties. One wants to gaze upon the unusual, even when it is simultaneously repelling. (188)[36]

Again, this applies directly to the experience of magic performance. When Copperfield rises off the stage, it appears impossible, and this "attracts our curiosity." Moreover, as the performance progressively undermines our attempts to explain away the appearance of impossibility, our curiosity is heightened, finally reaching a peak at the moment of aporia. The flip-side of the cognitive failure constitutive of the experience of magic is an unusually intense experience of curiosity. Recall Haydn:

> 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. (Haydn 2009: 6)

[36] Note that Carroll uses the term 'anomaly' where I use 'antinomy' to emphasize that what is at issue is a violation of *natural law*, not merely of what is usual or ordinary. That Carroll actually does have antinomies in mind is reinforced by his discussion of the difference between fantasy (including fairy tales) and horror (1990: 16). On his compelling analysis, there is nothing especially discordant about a monster in a fantasy narrative: it may be unusual, even unique, but no matter how frightening it is, like any ordinary wizard or elf it remains bound by the natural laws of the fantasy world. By contrast, in horror, the monster disrupts the natural order of the world depicted by the narrative. In *Nightmare on Elm Street*, Freddy Kruger murders people in their dreams; he is not just an anomaly, he is a violation of *natural law*; he is *antinomic*.

In other words, a successful magic performance can be an object of *unending fascination*—not *despite* the fact that we know it's a trick, but precisely *because we know it's a trick and we don't see how it could be*.[37]

The parallel with horror captures a central aspect of the pleasure we take in magic, but it also leaves something out—namely, *humor*. One of the main responses that magic provokes is the sort of exclamatory laughter that punctuates certain experiences of surprise. Moreover, this is precisely what we should expect if "comic amusement" is fundamentally a response to "perceived incongruity" (Carroll 2014: 4; 37) . After all, what could be more incongruous than witnessing an apparent impossibility, a disruption of ordinarily intelligible experience? And while extreme, persistent incongruity can be "threating" or "anxiety producing" in everyday contexts, it can be safely enjoyed in a magic show because we know it's just a trick (Carroll 2014: 37).[38] In this respect, as discussed above in relation to the mathematically sublime, the experience of magic involves the subjective containment or neutralization of what would otherwise be a negative experience.[39]

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[37] On this analysis, magic performance provokes what Rosemarie Garland-Thompson calls "baroque staring," which "bears witness to a failure of intelligibility" and "indicates wonder rather than mastery," and so, "opens up toward new knowledge" (2009: 50–51).

[38] Apparent psychokinesis is one thing in the theater, another in the coffee shop. For a vivid demonstration of this point, see the "Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise" marketing campaign for the 2013 cinematic remake of Stephen King's *Carrie*. (Discussed in Suebsaeng (2013).) Also, for a taxonomy of possible responses to incongruity, see Morreall (1987). A useful way to think of the experience of magic might just be in terms of interplay between different ways of responding to incongruity. (Cf. note 40.)

[39] In the language of the "Benign Violation Theory" of humor, magical illusions are apparent violations rendered benign by the context in which they are presented. (See

In sum, then, the solution to the paradox of magical pleasure is to reject the idea that aporetic experiences are simply unpleasant. The very best magic performances present illusions that, *because* they so strongly resist intelligibility, are disturbing, but also fascinating *and* humorous.[40] And though much remains to be said about how magic relates to horror and humor, it seems evident that, aesthetically, it inhabits a space between them. I think this helps to explain both magic's unique appeal *and* why many performances are infused with comedy or an ironic theater of the supernatural. It also suggests a further reason why magic has received so little critical attention—namely, that it doesn't fit neatly into any of our usual genre categories, which, perhaps, is appropriate for an art form that aims to disrupt the ordinary intelligibility of experience.

In conclusion, a comment on the value of magic. In *Wonder, The Rainbow and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Philip Fisher elaborates on Descartes' distinction between astonishment (*l'étonnement*) and wonder (*l'admiration*):

McGraw and Warren (2014).) It's notable that there is almost no mention of magic in either philosophical or empirical work on humor. For instance, in the 800+ pages of the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Attardo 2014), there is not a single mention of magic as a source of humor. This indicates a rich opportunity for future inquiry.

[40] One of the most remarkable things about performing magic is watching an audience cycle through these different, inevitably overlapping responses. Each pulls in a different direction, and none yields any sort of final satisfaction. As Haydn's remark (cited above) indicates, this process can repeat itself again and again, both during the performance *and* after it, when only the memory of the trick remains. This sort of persistent emotional confusion is distinctive of magic. (For some vivid examples, see the spectator reactions in David Blaine's 2013 TV special, *David Blaine: Real or Magic?*) However, it also recalls Kant's description of the experience of the mathematically sublime, in which "[t]he mind feels itself *moved*…. This movement... may be compared to a vibration, i.e., to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object" (2000: 141; Ak. 5: 258).

> …[I]t is the distinction between astonishment and wonder that saves the second for intellectual, scientific uses. To be dumbfounded by miracles or tricks…is just as hostile to the process of wonder as the stupidity that finds nothing surprising. Astonishment is the pleasure we take in the face of the magician's tricks. It never leads to explanation or even to thought. Astonishment is a technique for the enjoyment of the state of not knowing how, or why. (1998: 47)

If nothing else, I hope to have shown that this conception of magic as a "dumbfounding" practice hostile to thought is badly mistaken. The experience of magic is no more a static enjoyment of ignorance than Socratic aporia is an abandonment of philosophy. On the contrary, to be baffled by a magic performance is to experience a dramatic and dynamic *intensification* of the drive to understand. In this respect, magic performance aims at a playful recreation of the moment of wonder that lies at the root of all inquiry.[41] Far from encouraging intellectual stultification, magic may have a legitimate claim to being of all arts the most philosophical. Surely, then, it deserves our attention.[42]

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[41] As Jamy Ian Swiss writes, "I believe that one of the reasons scientists and other intelligent audiences so delight in smart and stylish conjuring (as has consistently been my professional experience) is because they view magic as a burlesque of their own work" (2002b: 269).

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