

The Art of the Impossible

A proposal for the metaLAB Series at MIT Press by Jason Leddington (Bucknell University)

Theatrical magic (think Copperfield, not Potter) is one of the most popular forms of live entertainment of the last 200 years. At the same time, it is generally dismissed as a side-show art no more deserving of “serious” attention than, say, juggling or mime. So, despite its popularity, magic has been widely ignored by art critics, art historians, and philosophers. This is in some ways understandable—the crude theatrics and bad taste of many magicians make it easy fodder for parody; but that magic nevertheless remains hugely popular—and is arguably undergoing a 21st-century renaissance—strongly suggests that there’s more to it than meets the eye. The goal of *The Art of the Impossible (AoI)* is to uncover this hidden substance, to help us to understand what magic is, why we love it, and what this says about us (quite a lot, as it turns out).

This proposal has three parts. First, I describe the methodology, significance, and intended audiences of *AoI*. Next, I explain why it is a good fit for the metaLAB series. Finally, I sketch its content and structure.

Methodology & Significance

First and foremost, *AoI* is a project in philosophical aesthetics in the analytic tradition. In recent decades, the scope of analytic aesthetics has expanded significantly. While traditional issues—such as the nature of art and art-critical concepts such as *representation*—are still hotly debated, the literature is rife with deep studies of particular arts that go well beyond what was once standard fare. There is broad consensus not only that the study of particular arts—rather than “art” as such—can expose interesting and important philosophical questions, but also that many non-canonical arts and art genres—such as comic books, video games, and horror—deserve serious philosophical attention.

That magic is thus deserving has been explicitly acknowledged by the philosophical community. The American Society for Aesthetics has recognized magic as a “neglected art” (2015 Annual Meeting Program) and my 2016 essay, “The Experience of Magic,” was awarded the biennial John Fisher Memorial Prize by the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Forming the basis for *AoI*, this essay is the first systematic philosophical treatment of theatrical magic to appear in the analytic—or, to my knowledge, any—tradition. Its favorable reception helped me to secure an NEH Summer Stipend in support of my project. Following in the footsteps of groundbreaking works on fringe arts and art genres such as Noël Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), *AoI* aims to firmly establish the philosophy of magic as a fruitful new research domain in philosophy of art.

At the same time, *AoI* will target readers who are not professional philosophers. First, some of the most enthusiastic readers of my work on the experience of magic are psychologists working in the science of magic. Indeed, an important element of *AoI* will be engagement with, and reliance upon, relevant psychological research. (This is typical of work in analytic aesthetics, whose questions have significant overlap with those in philosophy of mind and perception—

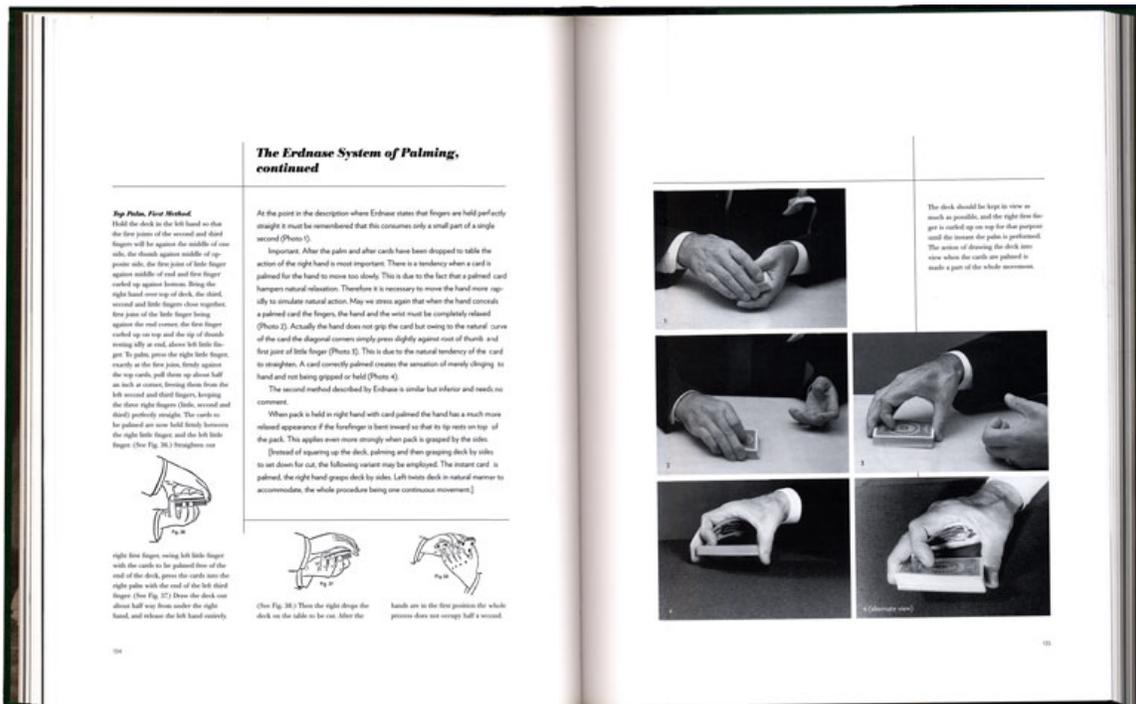
my other main research specialization.) Second, magicians have a long-standing interest in the “theory of magic,” to the point where my work has already resulted in invitations to speak at magic conventions and organization such as the Academy of Magical Arts in Hollywood. Third, magic—both in performance and as a subject-matter—is popular with both the general public and the “cultural elite.” Among the many examples: *Penn & Teller’s Fool Us*, which recently started its fourth season on a U.S. cable network; regular appearances by magicians on talent shows such as *America’s Got Talent* (won by magician Mat Franco in 2014); and, on the “higher” end, Derek Delgaudio’s one-man show, *In & of Itself*, now twice-renewed off-Broadway following a long run in L.A. Consider, too, the attention the press pays to new developments in the science of magic and the surprising number of magic-themed novels and movies to appear in recent years. In short, there is widespread cultural affection for—and curiosity about—magic. So, while the primary audience for *AoI* is the philosophical community, it will also appeal to psychologists, magicians, and intellectually curious cross-sections of the general public. Of course, crafting a book with such broad appeal is no easy task; but it is in many ways a design task, and this is one of the main reasons *AoI* is a great fit for metaLAB.

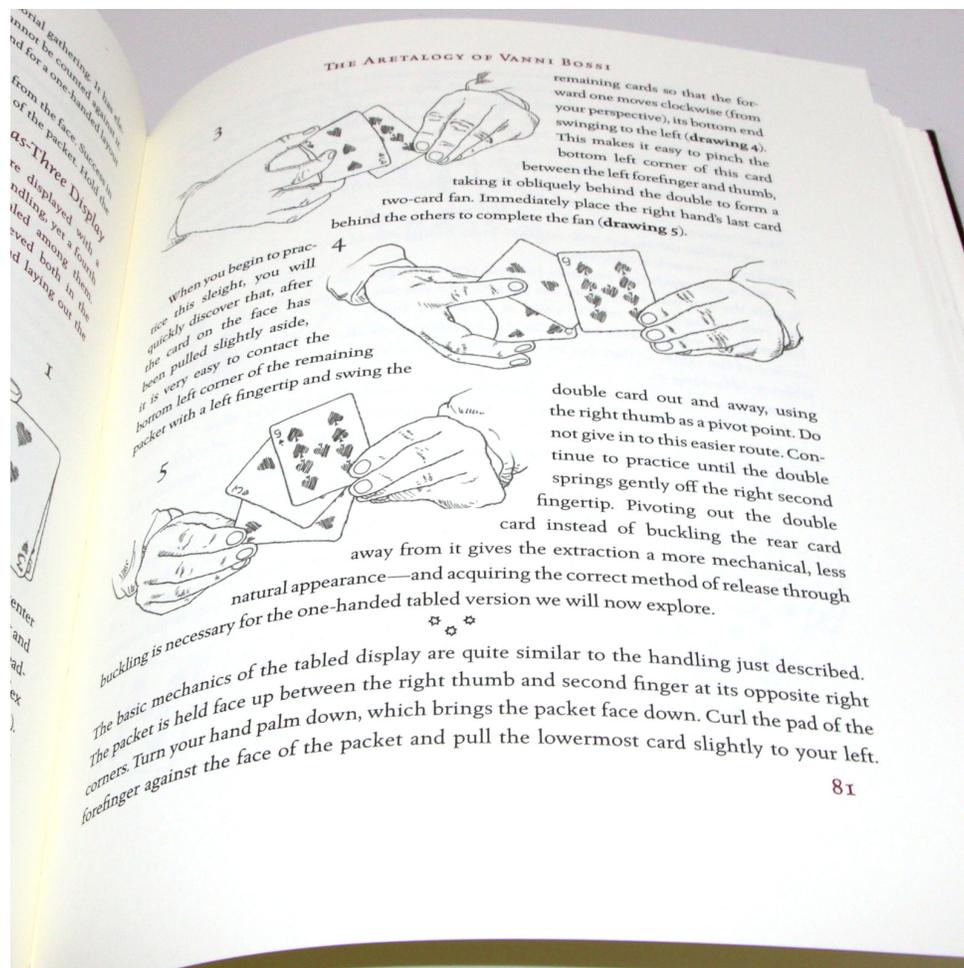
Why metaLAB?

First, in part because many of its intended readers have minimal exposure to magic, *AoI* must deliver more than philosophical arguments; it must also provide an introduction to a badly-misunderstood artform with a rich culture and history. To this end, *AoI* will feature several different types of content, such as history, descriptions of classic magic effects, performer profiles and interviews, and discussions of psychological research. *AoI* will also be deeply integrated with a companion website where readers (and potential readers) can explore multimedia exhibitions directly tied to book’s contents. As I envision it, this additional content—whether web- or book-based—will not simply bookend the philosophical arguments; instead, the reader should experience them as tightly interwoven, but *without* compromising the integrity and readability of the arguments themselves. This is a design challenge that exceeds the capacities of the traditional scholarly monograph.

A second reason *AoI* is a good fit for metaLAB is that, as discussed above, it is not just aimed at philosophers, but also at psychologists, magicians, and even a general readership. A design-driven text with a variety of contents that can be explored in a variety of ways is an excellent way to broaden the book’s appeal without compromising its scholarly value.

Finally, making design integral to *AoI* makes the project responsive to its place within the history of books about magic. Magic books are generally produced by magicians for magicians—a relatively small market—so it is perhaps surprising that they have a reputation for beautiful design, both inside and out. But sensitivity to visual design is critical to their goal: to teach the production of illusions using often complex movements and devices. (See Edward Tufte’s *Visual Explanations*, Chapter 3, “Explaining Magic,” co-authored with magician Jamy Ian Swiss.) Here are some examples of magic book design—the first from *Revelation* by Dai Vernon, the rest from *The Aretalogy of Vanni Bossi* by Stephen Minch.





As I envision it, *AoI* will not only make a substantial scholarly contribution and provide a rich and interesting reader experience, it will also embody and pay homage to the design values of the primary art on which it reflects and the textual history in which it partakes.

Content & Structure

In arguably the greatest flying illusion ever performed, David Copperfield really looks as if he is flying above the stage. But of course we know it's a trick. So, then, why do we enjoy it? This deceptively simple question lies at the heart of *AoI*. 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, my essay, “The Experience of Magic,” initiates an examination of the experience of magic with a focus on its cognitive dimension. I argue that magic offers a unique and distinctively intellectual aesthetic experience that actually *depends* on our knowledge that what we are witnessing is a trick. This essay was a first step toward giving magic the critical attention it deserves; it was also, for me, a first step in the present project. Since magic’s

distinctive aim is to produce an experience as of an impossible event, the aesthetics of magic is part of a general aesthetics of the impossible. 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., Tabary, Hamackers), and even impossible music (e.g., Shepard, Risset), as well as substantial connections to the aesthetics of both humor and horror. To develop and defend a general aesthetics of the impossible with a focus on theatrical magic is the central goal of *AoI*.

As I envision it, the book is structured around seven main chapters. I say “structured around” because the chapters, mostly philosophical, will form a spine that is designed to interact with—to support and be supported by—the other types of content mentioned above.

Chapter 1 is a condensed history of magic as a performance art with a focus on its development as a popular form in the 18th and 19th centuries, its transformation in response to film and television in the 20th century, and its surprising persistence in the 21st. My aims here are: (1) to make the case that magic deserves attention from philosophers and historians of art; (2) to lay the foundation for a theory of the aesthetics of magic by situating magic in relation to key historical phenomena—including enlightenment secularization, romanticism, the rise of science in the popular imagination, and the spiritualist movement; and (3) to develop and provisionally defend a hypothesis explaining the recent intensification of public interest in magic.

Chapter 2 builds on this historical foundation to develop a historically-informed theory of the nature of magic performance as a theatrical art. I argue that magic is distinguished from other arts in virtue of involving a very special sort of depiction. In particular, I argue that a magic performance is the apparent presentation of an impossible event *as impossible*. This, I believe, is the key to magic’s distinctive appeal, and it helps to make sense of Teller’s claim that we “experience magic as real and unreal at the same time.” In this respect, magic is neither fiction nor non-fiction, but something in-between: a self-conscious art of illusion.

With a theory of the nature of magic performance in place, Chapter 3 turns in detail to the experience of magic. Here the goal is further to develop the core thesis of “The Experience of Magic”—namely, that good magic induces an “aporetic” experience that is closely related to both the Kantian sublime and Socratic aporia. My account builds on Tamar Szabó Gendler’s influential work on the non-doxastic cognitive state she calls “alief,” which is inspired by dual-processing theories in psychology and helps to explain a variety of puzzling psychological phenomena (Gendler 2008). The point here is, in part, that the experience of magic is a puzzling phenomenon, but we can make sense of it with the right view of the mind.

Next, Chapter 4 introduces and resolves two novel aesthetic paradoxes concerning the experience of magic. First, the Paradox of Magical Affect asks us to explain how something we know to be fake (a trick!) could move us powerfully—as good magic often does. (This is closely related to the classic paradox of fiction, which asks how we can be moved by something we know to be fictional; but since magic is not a form of fiction, the Paradox of Magical Affect is importantly different.) Second, the Paradox of Magical Pleasure asks us to explain how the experience of magic, if aporetic, could be enjoyable. Why would anyone want to be baffled? (This is closely related to the classic paradoxes of tragedy and horror, which ask how we could

enjoy sad and frightening stories; but since magic is neither tragic nor horrifying, the Paradox of Magical Pleasure is importantly different.) In addressing these paradoxes, I draw on recent work in the philosophy and psychology of explanation and understanding (Gopnik 1998; Trout 2002; Strevens 2013); explore the puzzle of “negative emotion” in art (Levinson 2014); argue that magic is closely related to humor and horror—and examine influential philosophical and psychological theories of those genres (Morreall 2009; Carroll 1990; Carroll 1999); and finally, explain why Philip Fisher’s conception of magic as a “dumbfounding” practice hostile to thought is badly mistaken (Fisher 1998).

Next, Chapter 5 explores ethical and social issues connected to magic. On the theory of developed in Chapters 2–4, it is *aesthetically* critical to magic performance that audiences know they are witnessing a trick rather than, say, a demonstration of paranormal powers. Arguably, it is also *ethically* critical (Swiss 2002). Still, quite a few magicians permit, or even encourage, uncertainty about the metaphysical status of their work. Especially among “mentalists,” who specialize in psychic impossibilities, it is common to leave it to audiences to “decide for themselves” whether they’ve witnessed trickery or the real deal. Such ambiguous performances can be quite powerful—especially given high levels of public belief in psychic phenomena. However, in the first half of Chapter 5, I argue that these performances are both aesthetically confused and, on grounds of epistemic justice, ethically problematic (Fricker 2007). Possessed of knowledge of the secret method, the magician is in a position of epistemic power of non-trivial ethical and social significance. Moreover, reflecting on the nature of this power can illuminate magic’s long-standing and deeply troubling relationship to gender and race. Thus, following a study of the power dynamics embedded in magic performance, the latter half of Chapter 5 critically engages the history, aesthetics, and culture of magic through the complementary lenses of epistemic power, race, and gender.

Chapter 6 then extends my theory of magic to embrace the related aesthetic phenomena mentioned above—including drawings of impossible figures, impossible sculptures, and impossible music. I argue that, like magic performances, such artworks provoke *perceptual* curiosity; however, unlike magic performances, they are generally incapable of provoking the sort of *intellectual* curiosity necessary for inducing aporetic experience.

Finally, Chapter 7 engages in a critical and empirically-grounded exploration of the idea that, as many magicians say, “Magic is about wonder.” Though it overstates the point, there is something right about this idea. In particular, I argue that, while magic and related arts don’t provide *authentic* experiences of wonder, they do *playfully recreate* such moments. In this respect, they help to *attune* us to wonder, and this is part of what makes them valuable.

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