

From Bosch to Blackpool

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↑ Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450–1516), *The Conjurer*

FOR three days in late February the English coastal town of Blackpool hosts the world's largest convention of theatrical magicians, an international community of over three thousand professional, semi-professional and amateur practitioners who gather each year to catch up on the latest developments in the magic arts.

For those unfamiliar with the theatrical magic world, Blackpool's convention can be an overwhelming experience. Set within the maze of theatres and Spanish-themed conference halls that make up the city's Winter Gardens complex, the convention comprises a vast and highly specialised marketplace of ingenious gadgetry and recondite information, an extensive programme of lectures delivered by globe-trotting celebrity performers, historians and theorists, and a jostling competition circuit where magicians vie against one another for prized trophies and rosettes of professional merit. Although this panorama of illusionneering has emerged as the most well-attended international event of its kind, the Blackpool convention is just one facet of a larger network of affiliated and unaffiliated magic organisations worldwide. This landscape is dominated by the formidable International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM), whose member groups are bound together through 'linking rings', a metaphorical badge of solidarity that it shares with its membership magazine, in print since January 1923.

Whenever I make the journey to Blackpool and view at close quarters the extensive network of expertise that congregates there each year, I am surprised anew that this ancient art form has attracted so little sustained critical attention from the academy. Theatrical magic's historical durability alone should make it a significant object of enquiry, whilst its *modus operandi*, which offers

models for both the production and consumption of epistemologically precarious experience, provides grist to any number of critical mills, not least in the visual and performing arts. The exhibition *Zauberkünste* [Doing Magic] at the Nordico Museum in Linz in the spring of 2009 was the first in-depth historical survey of the figure of the theatrical magician, and marks a key moment in this respect.¹ Not that magicians themselves are culturally invisible; quite the reverse. In recent years, performers such as Derren Brown and David Blaine have enjoyed both live and mediated audiences that compare in scale to magic's so-called Golden Era (c.1890–1930), a period recently fictionalised in films such as Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006) and Neil Burger's *The Illusionist* (2006). The lexicon of theatrical magic is likewise ubiquitous, although all too often confused with its supernatural near-relation, magick. The descriptor 'magical' abounds culturally, in particular within commercial advertising, and, it should be noted, within the contemporary art world, where the ability of an artist to 'conjure' this or that is habitually presented by commentators as an unqualified guarantee of creative adroitness. Considerable economic and cultural capital thus attaches itself to magic's transformative appeal, with little acknowledgment of the latter's heterogeneity and complex cultural relations.

Two main factors have contributed to theatrical magic's critical estrangement: perception and access. In an era of rationalisation and bewildering technological interfaces, it is perhaps easy to dismiss the spectacle of a man (usually a man, but by no means always) standing on a stage pretending to work miracles, or, as was fashionable a few years ago, detaining and then entertaining the public with tricks on street corners with a camera crew close at hand. Magic's apparent triviality and

gender bias are aggravated by suspicions of its duplicity. Since tactical deception and misdirection are technical pre-requisites for the conjuring arts, its proponents have historically been associated as much with devilry or charlatanism (if not downright criminality) as they have with artistry. Perhaps of more consequence for researchers than perception, however, have been the restrictions placed upon magic's archive by magicians themselves, who for aesthetic and economic reasons have carefully monitored the boundaries of their art. The code upheld by most magicians, neatly summed up by The Magic Circle's motto *Indocilis Privata Loqui* [Not apt to disclose secrets], has meant that significant chunks of theatrical magic's vast and revealing archive have, until only very recently, remained invisible to those on the ticket side of magic's tinselled curtain.

Despite this perceived cultural lightness, potential crookedness and problematised archive, the figure of the theatrical magician has attracted the positive regard of some within academia. In an essay for *Arts Journal* in 1993, Barbara Maria Stafford argued a case for 'remetaphorising' the marginalised figure of the conjuring 'empiric', noting that popular illustrated books such as Henri Decrep's *La Magie blanche dévoilée* [White Magic Unveiled] (1784) had offered the conjurer as a progressive and positive figure of enlightenment, rather than the more commonly dismissed mountebank who encourages 'passive gaping in the uncritically credulous'.² In 'Conjuring - How the Virtuoso Romantic Learned from the Enlightened Charlatan', Stafford writes:

*conjuring was not just mindless spectacle but a force for visual education. Momentary concealment and subsequent revelation were not the same as a permanent lie. This fluid and interactive performance medium demonstrated that legerdemain, camouflage, distraction, misdirection, and above all the perspective one had, permeated the perception of life and need not be evil ... Invited to conceptualise or model generally practiced social strategies of deception, [the public], too, might eventually learn to avoid self-deception.*³

In 2001, James W. Cook extended Stafford's valorisation of this instrumentalised magic in *The Arts of Deception*, but also noted the surprising absence from mainstream academia of extended studies of 'the profane magical practices of the urban exhibition hall. It is almost as if academic historians have taken Max Weber's classic theory about the "disenchantment of the world" as a guide for assessing the social significance of the magician during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.⁴ Indeed it is Max Weber's proposition that modernity leaves a disenchanted, rationalising secularity in its wake which provides the context for academia's most conspicuous and suggestive treatment of the theatrical magician to date, Simon During's *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (2002).

In *Modern Enchantments* During sets out to establish a clear distinction between two constitutively different but historically coexisting magics: magic that draws upon supernatural agency (its occult, shamanic and spiritualist traditions for instance, but also including the supernaturalism of mainstream religion), and magic that makes no claim, or no serious claim at least, to being in contact with supernatural forces. This 'secular magic' is the province of the theatrical conjurer but also the key component of a historical construct that During labels the 'magic-assemblage': 'that loose motley of shows in public spaces where magic was performed ... lantern shows or early film, feats of strength, juggling, posture mastery, ventriloquism, puppet shows, trained animal exhibitions, comic routines, automata displays, lotteries, and joy rides'.⁵ It might be argued by binary theorists of historical development that this secularised form of magic simply replaced its supernatural predecessor in the West as Weber's 'disenchantment' took hold, but During shows that magic's story is considerably more complex: secular magic has co-existed and interacted with its 'opposing twin, magic with a supernatural punch' from (at least) antiquity and on through emergent and late modernity.⁶ Hence our sense of magic's 'doubleness': on the one hand we call upon the idea of magic to articulate, if not instrumentalise,

culture's most complex metaphysical formulations and transactions, and on the other hand use the same term to describe theatricalised shortcuts to the supernatural care of Las Vegas illusionists, or a few marvel-less props bought from a magic dealer in Blackpool.

Having teased out these two historically parallel but discrete magics, During argues that magic's secular form has been a far more significant force in the West than is commonly acknowledged. He demonstrates how conjuring displays and other elements of the magic assemblage helped carve out the cultural and commercial spaces later occupied by the modern entertainment industries (most conspicuously by contributing directly to the emergence of film), guiding curious and questioning subjects towards secularity at the same time as, or even in advance of, an academy-led scientific Enlightenment. Secular magic audiences could be understood thus to have embodied something akin to a lay enlightenment, because their experiences of conjuring displays and other forms of 'rational recreation' left them ultimately un-deluded as to the origin of their enchantment. Habituated by a compelling range of these 'modern enchantments', During's more self-conscious viewer complicates familiar accounts of Western modernity such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 1947), and *Society of the Spectacle* (Guy Debord, 1967), indicating modernising subjects who, far from being overwhelmed by modernity's insidious and dehumanising spell, remain 'critical and ... under spectacle's spell simultaneously'.⁷ Whereas Debord describes the spectacle as the domain of 'the deceived gaze and false consciousness ... the opposite of dialogue',⁸ During argues that this viewing subject could be understood as considerably more capacitated than conventional dialectical accounts allow.

Although the critical academy has been slow to recognise the figure of the secular magician, let alone the more empowered subject *Modern Enchantments* describes, the same could not be said for magic's own peer-academy. Although magic's seminal history, *Lives of the Conjurers*,

was written in 1876 by a non-magician, the ex-Chartist Thomas Frost, magic historians since have followed his model to capture magic's often anecdotal, not infrequently falsified, and thus potentially errant history.⁹ *An Illustrated History of Magic* (Milbourne Christopher, 1973), *The Great Illusionists* (Edwin A. Dawes, 1979), *Those Beautiful Dames* (Frances Marshall and Amy Dawes, 1984), *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (Ricky Jay, 1986) and *Hiding the Elephant* (Jim Steinmeyer, 2003) are conspicuous examples from a vast library of curtain-side histories that provide detailed and candid perspectives on secular magic's complex lineage. Magician-theorists likewise have been exacting within many volumes, such as *Our Magic* (Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant, 1911), and *Magic in Theory* (Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman, 1998). This highly productive self-regard has come at some cost to the magic community, for the intensity of its singular gaze, combined with an inclination for secrecy, has for long periods of history minimised formal interpenetration from, although not informal collaboration with, other academic fields. Technology, however, has challenged this boundary. An emerging generation of practitioners and historians, first responding to the penetrating gaze of television, and now perhaps unable or unwilling to control the online distribution of magic's archive, have begun to adopt more pragmatic, even dialogical approaches. The recently published *Magic 1400s-1950s* (2009) evolved following collaborations between editor Noel Daniel and magic historians Mike Caveney, Jim Steinmeyer and Ricky Jay. The Conjuring Arts Research Center in New York, opened in 2003, is a further example. The door to magic history's library, and to some extent its technical workshop, is more invitingly open now than it has ever been.

The consequences of this increasing acquiescence are already beginning to be felt. A number of magicians including Teller, the silent half of the iconoclastic American duo Penn & Teller, recently formed part of a collaborative research project at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix, Arizona. The study focused on brain functioning

principles understood intuitively and exploited by magicians for centuries, but little known within the scientific community, and the results were published in the respected *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* in September 2009. Magicians themselves, attending the Third European Conference of Magic History and Collections at Vienna's Naturhistorisches Museum, were addressed, and at times significantly challenged, by representatives of an unexpectedly diverse range of academic fields including ethnology, papyrology, cultural studies, contemporary art and etymology. Another consequence of magic's increasing receptivity has been a far greater sense of the magician's social, economic and even political influence as he or she reaches out and touches audiences far beyond the fourth wall. Conjurers have, for example, collaborated closely with governments during periods of warfare, and elsewhere behind the scenes on the international political stage.¹⁰ The role of secular magic within religious (and other non-secular) rituals can be reassessed, given that the former is often interwoven almost indistinguishably with the latter in many traditional and contemporary contexts.¹¹ It is perhaps of less surprise that conjuring's lexicon and iconography can be found at play widely within commercial advertising – a 'conjuring of consent' one might say, to adapt Edward Bernays' infamous 'engineering of consent'. Here magic shares a stage with everything from breakfast cereal and shoe polish to birth control pills.¹² As technology has accelerated, and magicians have become less constrained, a more complete picture of the secular magician is emerging, a protean figure of historical complexity, socially, economically and often ideologically embedded, an elaborate and elaborating figure of cultural agency.

The question remains, however, as to why we might be interested in this particular form of magic in the first place given that, amongst many other culturally productive and instructive magics, theatrical magic is anything but unpopular. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud observes the behaviour of a child who playfully

vanishes and reappears small objects, while at the same time producing the sounds *fort* [gone], and *da* [there]. Freud relates this *fort/da* game to 'the child's great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting'.¹³ The developing child's quest for greater control over his or her world is echoed in the single-word answer offered by magicians to the question of magic's appeal to us as adults: wonderment. We are captivated by the idea that nature's laws and the capriciousness of chance might not bind us quite as mortally as we imagine; faced with the apparent momentary suspension of such fetters, we are filled with wonder at the possibility. Magic is, in the words of Teller, 'the theatrical linking of a cause with an effect that has no basis in physical reality, but that – in our hearts – ought to'.¹⁴

The construction of the conditions of wonderment can, however, be undertaken for both benign and nefarious ends. Herein lies another clue to our fascination: our concern over the distinction between temporary illusion (from *ludere*, to play) and permanent deception (from *decipere*, to ensnare or trap). This concern can be easily heard in the mixture of curiosity and reproach following any magic performance, summed up in the question 'How did you *do* that?' The other question that is being asked here is, of course, 'How did *you* do that?' and perhaps even, 'Why did you do that?' These are questions we habitually ask of other forms of constructed power that assemble the reality around us, be they governmental, legal, economic, scientific, religious or otherwise. Indeed, magicians in search of audiences have, historically, framed their performances within just these epistemologically volatile territories, where human fragility is most tellingly exposed. During eras of widespread religious belief, therefore, secular magicians in the West framed their performances with reference to Christendom's overarching systems of belief. The 15th century 'juggler' (as the secular magician was known until late in the 18th century) could never risk positive identification with diabolic confederacy, but

might encourage crowds through risky proximity. Throughout more rationalising and industrialising periods, secular magicians shape-shifted into 'professors of science', aligning their conjuring displays with the cultural uncertainties stemming from the destabilising forces of scientific discovery. And in our own era, when we fear that the self might be reducible merely to the brain's chemical self-management, a magician such as Derren Brown is well-placed to tap our ontological anxieties, fears of being inadvertently controlled and even our desire to surrender our will altogether in the face of a troublingly indifferent universe. In a recent television appearance he explained that the show would fuse 'magic, suggestion, psychology, misdirection and showmanship',¹⁵ but the show's framing and thus its operative power was located elsewhere, in his references throughout to academically plausible but fuzzy concepts such as 'the wisdom of crowds', 'deep maths' and 'perception without awareness', as well as other types of persuasion assumed to be culturally rife, including subliminal advertising, political propaganda and neuro-linguistic programming. Brown deftly repurposes these abstractions to construct mediated or live events that depend, in fact, upon the deployment of theatrical magic principles that are often many centuries old.

The power that the theatrical magician wields is simulated.¹⁶ This is not simply to say that such magic is not real. Theatrical magic is certainly not real, in that it is not supernatural – a fact that all such magicians must eventually admit, no matter how much, or for how long, they might couch their performances within the rhetoric of the supernatural agency. The moment for that admission is of course a matter of theatrical timing, and may take anything from a second on stage to a lifetime, and sometimes comes even from beyond the grave, via technical secrets sealed in envelopes discovered in hidden compartments of domestic furniture, or through assistants, stagehands, or prop-makers finally free to communicate the extent of their role before the footlights or offstage. Yet once a 'natural', rather than 'supernatural', basis for theatrical magic is established, its undoubted ability

to radically disorder our epistemological assumptions about the world can be understood in terms of the magician's capacity to establish and maintain a frame through which simulated power over natural causality is experienced as real. In this sense, therefore, this form of magic is not only secular, but also simulacral. And it is the intentional presence and infinite malleability of this reifying frame, whether in the form of narrative or other contingent means, that brings simulacral magic alongside its sibling arts, and not least the visual arts with which it now shares more conceptual territory than perhaps at any other time.

Theatrical magic and the visual arts have shared, of course, literal pictorial frames throughout art history, with the conjurer appearing alongside other figures of popular entertainment within engravings such as Hogarth's *Southwark Fair* (1734), and as a versatile satirical tool in many popular prints – Daumier's lithograph of the swindler Robert-Macaire (1839) being a conspicuous example. Although the earliest representation of the magician as a sleight-of-hand artist known to date is thought to be a scene within a cassone-painting by Giovanni di Francesco Toscani, *The Garden of Love* (c.1420–30) in the Berlin State Museum, Gemäldegalerie,¹⁷ art history's most conspicuous depiction of such a scene is Hieronymus Bosch's *The Conjurer* (p. 16), a work that survives now only as a copy in the Musée Municipal in St. Germain-en-Laye. Bosch's paintings are subject to considerable speculation by art historians, due in part to the fact that, unlike many other paintings of the period, their iconography cannot be matched with an identifiable patron. One thesis, Jeffrey Hamburger's *Bosch's "Conjurer": An Attack on Magic and Sacramental Heresy* (1984), interprets the scene as an 'anti-mass', proposing a cautioning and moralising Bosch intent on associating pre-Reformation anxieties over heretical sacramental rites with diabolically assisted sorcery. The latter is represented by the lowly itinerant entertainer who leads souls to damnation and impecuniosity via a blasphemous communion using conjurer's cups and a handful of cork balls. The conjurer's fingers, fixed in a parody of the *iunctio digitis* (the gesture

adopted by priests during the consecration of the host during the Catholic mass), and the toad of heresy issuing symbolically from the mouth of the conjurer's astonished victim, also blind to a nearby pickpocket, all lend tolerable credence to this iconographic decoding. Magic/art historian Volker Huber, however, notes that causing a toad to leap from a spectator's mouth (the key element of Hamburger's analysis) was a common conjuring trick during the period, and suggests that we should proceed with caution when assigning significance to Bosch's conspicuously magic-related imagery. Huber highlights instead the only work on the same theme confirmed as Bosch's own – an ink drawing in the Department of Graphic Arts in the Louvre, which depicts the commonplace scene of a convivial performer plying his trade to an expectant audience on the streets of 15th-century Netherlands. His point is that a working knowledge of secular magic's social history and often surprising visual conventions can offer art historians important interpretive material that can lead to very different iconographical readings.¹⁸

More than five hundred years, but just four hundred miles, from Bosch's native city of 's-Hertogenbosch, in Blackpool's Winter Gardens a small crowd has gathered in front of a table behind which a conjurer is causing small cork balls to appear, vanish and multiply beneath polished brass cups at the touch of a wand. Although most practitioners understand the misdirection required to accomplish these nimble sleights – indeed the mastery of a classic cups and balls routine is the magic equivalent of an article of faith through which an enthusiast becomes a devotee – even magicians themselves can be duped. Suddenly, mid-routine, the conjurer stops, and begins to fumble around on the tabletop with closed eyes as if searching for something lost. From beneath one of the cups, a pair of dark glasses is mysteriously discovered. The routine is supposed to develop with the elegant, if surprising, revelation of a large orange or lemon, so this increasingly unpredictable version is already tantamount to conjuring heresy. Now the remaining cups are located and tilted over. But they reveal

neither the expected fruit, nor any of the previously used cork balls. Instead, staring up towards the audience, are two perfectly formed painted glass eyeballs. Before anyone has time to respond to this ludicrous dénouement, the conjurer transforms her wand into a long white cane and, now sporting dark glasses, wanders away from the table with convincing unsteadiness before vanishing into the crowds.

Notes

¹ *Zauberkünste – In Linz und der Welt* [Doing Magic – in Linz and the World], exh. cat., Nordico – Museum der Stadt Linz, 2009, curated by Brigitte Felderer.

² Barbara Maria Stafford, 'How the Virtuoso Romantic Learned from the Enlightened Charlatan', *Art Journal*, Summer 1993, p. 28.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2001, p. 166.

⁵ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2002, p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ Simon During, 'Modern Enchantments: An Interview with Simon During/Sina Najafi', *Cabinet*, no. 26, Summer 2007, pp. 88-95.

⁸ Guy Ernest Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, trans. Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak, Black & Red, Detroit, 1970, Chapter 1, sections 3 and 18.

⁹ An ex-Chartist, Frost's motivation for chronicling performers in *Lives of the Conjurers* (1876) and *Old Showmen* (1874) was primarily political, aiming to improve the working conditions of, and to gain political representation for, otherwise socially and economically marginalised groups.

¹⁰ Jonathan Allen, 'Deceptionists at War', *Cabinet*, no. 26, Summer 2007, pp. 65-72.

¹¹ See Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, AAR, Oxford 2004, and Jonathan Allen, 'Gospel Magic', *Contemporary*, no. 68, 2004.

¹² 'The engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest.' Edward L. Bernays, 'The Engineering of Consent', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1947. See also Jim Hagy, *Magic for Free*, Reginald Scot Books, Glenview, 2006.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, *Standard Edition* vol. 18, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ Teller, 'Sleights of Mind', *New York Times*, 21 Aug. 2007.

¹⁵ Derren Brown, 'The Events – How to Control The Nation', first broadcast 18 Sept. 2009, Channel 4.

¹⁶ Jean-Eugène Robert Houdin's description of theatrical magic as 'l'art de la magie simulée', was translated by Professor Hoffmann as 'fictitious magic' in *The Secrets of Conjuring and Magic or How to Become a Wizard*, Routledge, London, 1878.

¹⁷ For many years, the earliest known depiction of a secular magician was thought to be an illuminated manuscript titled *The Children of the Planets, Luna* by Joseph of Ulm, dated 1404 (Libr. Univ. of Tübingen). This dating has been called into question by Dieter Blume, who indicates 1475 as a more accurate origination date (D. Blume, *Regenten des Himmels. Astrologische Bilder im Mittelalter und Renaissance* [Regents of the Heavens: Astrological Images of the Middle Ages and Renaissance], Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 2000). I am grateful to Pierre Taillefer for indicating these revised historical timelines.

¹⁸ In *Gibecière: The Journal of The Conjuring Arts Research Centre*, vol.3, no.1, Winter 2008, Volker Huber comments on two works by Max Beckmann, *Magic Mirror* (1946) and *Three Headed Woman* (1946), both much elaborated upon by art historians. Huber demonstrates that the source of the iconography within each of these enigmatic compositions can be identified as popular Victorian stage illusions.