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**AUTHOR'S DRAFT**

**Abracadabra, Alakazam: Colonialism and the Discourse of Entertainment Magic**

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**Abstract**

Magic rituals in cultures around the world have been studied intensively by anthropologists, sometimes with the implicit aim of deriding them as 'primitive' in order to pave the way for the civilising forces of colonisation. However, there is one form of ritual which has evaded academic study: entertainment magic in the west. This paper involves critical analysis of the way that the discourse of western entertainment magic appropriates and misrepresents the narratives of traditional ritual magic. The article concludes by discussing the role of entertainment magic in reproducing colonialist ideology.

**Introduction**

The magician lifts his almost naked assistant and balances her on the tip of a sword. The commentator whispers: 'There are no wires holding her up and only a thin layer of leather stands between the tip of the sword and Charlotte's skin. A few millimetres between a balancing feat and an impalement.' There is a drum-roll as the magician spins his assistant around...she drops, the sword appears to go through her, and sticks defiantly out of her stomach. She goes limp, awaiting the magician's kiss and resurrection. (description of act in *World's Most Dangerous Magic*, World 1999)

This is 'entertainment magic'. It is, of course, a trick, performed in front of an audience well aware that everything on stage is a visual illusion created for their entertainment. Indeed, it is an essential element of the genre that the audience be aware of the deceptive nature of the performance. As Nelms's (1969:34) classic guide to entertainment magic clearly states: 'A conjurer

is allowed to lie about his methods but not to leave his audience with the belief that he really possesses supernatural powers.'

The performance described above is an example of what Burger and Neale (1995:88) call a *literal demonstration*, in which the conjurer merely 'demonstrates the operation or workings of the prop or trick'. This is in contrast to a *symbolic demonstration* in which the conjurer imbues props and performers with symbolic meaning and weaves them into a narrative. As the narrative unfolds, the magician manipulates the symbols he has conjured up until, at the climax of the trick, the magical illusion is disclosed. Eugene Burger, a professional magician, offers the following example of symbolic demonstration:

When I perform the Broken and Restored Thread, for example, I invoke the Hindu story of world creation and destruction... (Burger and Neale 1995:141)

The appropriation of elements of the culture, traditions, arts or rituals of cultures foreign to the audience is a common feature of symbolic demonstrations of magic. Burger, for instance, in addition to Hindu creation myths, advocates the use of parables from the Zen and Sufi religions, and Nelms (1969: 78) suggests drawing symbols from African voodoo: 'Display a small but heavy and strangely designed pendulum...explain that African witch doctors make and use them for divining.'

The array of 'foreign seeming' props used in entertainment magic is extensive, including Arabian carpets and lamps, voodoo dolls, samurai swords and even, in one case, a folding 'origami' box. In addition to physical objects, 'foreign sounding' magic words like 'Hocus Pocus, Abracadabra, Alakazam!' (Nelms 1969:13), 'foreign sounding' music, and 'foreign looking' dances or martial arts are all frequently used.

Far away, in other corners of the world, the people from whose cultures these foreign symbols have been appropriated are practising traditional rituals, telling familiar stories, and using metaphors, for purposes categorised by anthropologists as 'magic'. For instance, the Trobriand Islanders 'sing to their gardens, they chant garden words or spells, and they perform actions, some of which are full of sexual symbolism, for, and also in, their gardens' (MacDonald 1995:137). The same term, 'magic' is applied to these traditional practices as the tricks of the entertainment magician. Despite having the same name, however, the two forms of activity are very different:

the former being an occasion where cultural reality is attested and formed by participants, the latter a kind of entertainment based on deception.

Entertainment magic emerged during the late 19th and early 20th century, a time when the British Empire stretched across more than 20% of the world's total land area. As Pennycook (2001:68) points out, 'Colonialism was the very context in which much of European culture and knowledge was developed'. In the service of entertainment magic, narratives were appropriated from all over the world, travelling back across space towards the imperialist centre.

The key to understanding the contribution of the discourse of entertainment magic to cultural colonialism lies in the polysemy of the word 'magic'. The term 'magic' is applied indiscriminately to deceptive tricks, to the traditional rituals of foreign (but not domestic) cultures, to the imagined manipulation of physical reality by the wizards of fiction (Harry Potter, Gandalf), and to natural phenomena which prompt wonder or enchantment in the viewer (eg, a sunset or a birth).

### ***The definition of magic***

From a constructivist standpoint, definitions of abstract phenomena such as *justice*, *democracy* or *magic*, do not simply reflect a pre-existing reality, even though some of the definers pretend that they do. Rather, definition plays a direct role in the realisation and social construction of the defined abstraction, particularly when the definer enjoys a position of authority and power. And magic, in particular, is a concept which has been defined in many ways by many such authorities.

Some social anthropologists have, in the past, represented magic in the terms of Darwinism: primitive (and backward) societies believe in magic, but progress gradually to religion, and eventually to science (Sharot 1989). For instance, Frazer's (1890) classic study of magic described the 'savage' for whom:

...the very idea of science is lacking in his undeveloped mind. Is it for the philosophic student...to discern the spurious science behind the bastard art...[Magic is familiar to] the crude intelligence not only of the savage, but of ignorant and dull-witted people

everywhere (27) [Sympathetic magic] is still resorted to by cunning and malignant savages in Australia, Africa and Scotland (p28)

For Frazer then, magic is an 'erroneous system' of 'mistaken notions of cause and effect' between two things which happen to be similar (sympathy) or happen have come into contact with each other (contagion) (Frazer 1890:32). This definition has been highly influential and is still used in definitions of magic to this day, albeit without the explicit negative comments. For example, Nemeroff and Rozin (2000:3) state that 'A prototypical example of similarity is the voodoo practice of burning a representation of an enemy to cause the enemy harm. Action on the image is believed to result in effects on the object that it represents'. Likewise, Nemeroff and Rozin's (2000:5) definition includes the statement 'Magic generally does not make sense in terms of contemporary understanding of science...[and involves]...the principles of similarity and contagion...'

The discipline of psychology has constructed a similar hierarchy of magical, religious, and scientific thought, although in this case the model is developmental. Freud and Piaget saw magic as a primitive level of confused thinking which children grow out of as they gradually progress to religious and ultimately scientific thinking. Psychological research as recent as 2002 still presents a similar view, defining magic in terms of 'rituals and compulsive-like phenomena with the belief that such behaviours are causally linked to some outcome...particularly salient in certain kinds of psychological disorders' (Evans et al 2002:57).

By defining magic in terms of mistaken belief, it becomes something that only children, 'dull-witted' people or people with 'psychological disorders' believe in the west, but is widely believed in primitive, foreign cultures. Academic discourses in general construct magic so negatively that Neusner (1989:4) concludes that science and religion both enjoy 'the standing of a socially acceptable form of activity and knowledge, and both stand against magic as disreputable or unacceptable.' The church contributed to the stigmatisation of 'magic' by applying the term indiscriminately to any 'ritual practices of indigenous religions [and]...symbolic performances of which missionaries and local pastors disapprove' (MacDonald 1995:5).

MacDonald challenges these definitions through her analysis of the gardening songs of the Trobriands, asking 'Why have our disciplines designated such words as magic rather than as poetry or prayer?' Basing her definition on Levi-Strauss and Tambia (who describe magic as metaphor or analogy), MacDonald defines magic as 'part of a communication system that unites people to each

other and locates them in relation to the land, the plants, the sea, the fish' (MacDonald 1995:13). This presents magic in a more positive way, but still assigns magic to 'them' (people living in close connection to the land and sea) rather than 'us' (civilised people living in cities).

Bourdieu (1991) provides a very different way of looking at magic, through his analysis of 'social magic'. According to Bourdieu, performative statements such as 'I now declare you husband and wife' are a form of 'social magic' since they magically change social reality and create things (a marriage) which did not exist before. As Butler points out 'a speaker who declares a war or performs a wedding ceremony, and pronounces into being that which he declares to be true, will be able to animate the 'social magic' of the performative to the extent that that subject is already authorised...to perform such binding speech acts' (Butler 1999:122).

Although Bourdieu is not specifically talking about the magic rituals described by anthropologists, it is important to note that magic rituals are always social events, and occur within a historical and cultural context which authorises participants to change social reality in various ways. Using Bourdieu's definition, magic can be seen as, among other things, a form of social construction, where narratives, rituals, poems and songs effect real changes in social reality.

Bourdieu's definition applies as much to magic in the kind of society that anthropologists are fond of studying, as to political acts in their native countries. One example was a peace protest shortly after the war in Iraq, where a statue of George Bush was toppled in London's Trafalgar Square and its head trampled by protesters. There is no direct physical link between toppling a statue and Bush himself falling from power, so this could be considered a form of magic based on 'similarity'. The televised images, however, did have the potential to influence perceptions of Mr Bush, thereby altering socially constructed reality. If that occurred, then the magic worked.

A further example of the influence of sympathetic magic upon physical reality is provided by the ritual swearing of allegiance to the U.S.A flag, as if the flag was a person. It is illegal, in the U.S.A, to burn the flag, a law which only makes sense on the (quite reasonable) assumption that symbolic action can influence social reality, which can in turn influence physical reality.

### ***Narratives of Entertainment Magic***

At the heart of entertainment magic, whether literal or symbolic, are illusions of the physically impossible. Consider again Burger's example of symbolic demonstration in his instruction manual for conjurers:

When I perform the Broken and Restored Thread, for example, I invoke the Hindu story of world creation and destruction. It is no longer a magic trick that is simply about breaking...a piece of thread and restoring it. It is about that, to be sure, but it also points beyond this literal demonstration to cosmic meanings. (Burger and Neale 1995:141)

The reference to 'cosmic meanings' can be taken as a bit of professional padding on the part of Burger; in fact he is just as comfortable when using the narrative of the 'carnival swindle' in his tricks (Burger and Neale 1995:141). His flippant attitude to world traditions is quite clear in his recommendation of the use of what he calls Zen and Sufi 'parables':

We begin with parables told in non-western religious traditions - Zen and Sufi. They are very serious and we could actually spend a lifetime meditating on any one of them...They are also very funny and can be listened to as jokes. They are spiritual jokes, a kind of ultimate nonsense. So, here they are in all their glory. (Ideally we'd have a brass band play a few bars between each reading. You might hum to yourself a few bars from "Stars and Stripes Forever") (Burger and Neale 1995:146)

Another entertainment magician, Kaye (1973), shows a similar lack of respect, defining magic as 'first, witchcraft, wizardry and all the attendant mumbo-jumbo of mysticism...' So, too, does Nelms (1969:2), when referring to the way in which 'witch doctors, pagan priests, spiritualist mediums and confidence men have impressed their dupes.'

These entertainment magicians are clearly not basing their narratives on Hinduism, Zen, Sufi and Voodoo in order to share insights from these traditions with their audiences. In fact, when describing a card trick called 'Sole Survivor', performed by Neale, Burger gives away an important secret at the heart of the discourse of entertainment magic: *symbols and narratives are used to disguise the operation of deceptive manoeuvres*. The Sole Survivor trick, if performed literally, would be full of strange requests like 'put this card here', for no apparent reason, arousing suspicion. However:

Neale has completely masked the strangeness of the procedure by introducing meanings. The performer and the spectator together play the role of Fate. The cards are the residents of the town. Mixing them illustrates their interactions with each other. The plague comes to the town...What was previously a suspect procedure here makes perfect sense and, therefore, the inherent suspiciousness of the procedure has been completely masked and eliminated. (Burger and Neale 1995:143)

This shows the crucial difference between entertainment magic and traditional ritual magic. In entertainment magic, the narrative is mere dressing for a trick. If there is no trick there is no magic, and any number of narratives may serve to dress a given trick. Traditional rituals may contain some kind of trick as part of their narratives (Burger and Neale 1995:50 describe the tent shaking of Native American Shamans), but this is by no means required or even common. In traditional rituals, the narratives and their effects on socially constructed reality *are* the magic, with no illusion required.

To illustrate the dispensable nature of narrative in the discourse of entertainment magic, consider a trick appearing in the Greatest Magic video (Greatest Magic 1997): at a literal level, the trick can be described as 'A woman climbs into a large box which has been placed on a table. The magician then gradually folds up the box until it is flat - the woman has been made to magically disappear!' However, this simple visual illusion is dressed in an autobiographical narrative, which starts with the words 'During a one year stay in Japan I met a girl called Cheng. She taught me a lot of her culture...part of her culture was the art of Orgami (sic)...I practice the art of Orgami.' After more details about Japan, a ninja appears and briefly fights with the magician. The assistant hides in the box and the magician folds it flat, making her safely disappear.

The narrative in this trick implies the transfer of 'magical' power from Japanese culture to the magician ('I practice the art of Orgami (sic)'). In fact there are several inaccuracies in the narrative - Cheng is a Chinese name, not Japanese, the assistant is wearing a Chinese dress, Origami is mispronounced as 'Orgami', and the ninja has a large Japanese flag on his back. The whole narrative seems to be an attempt to draw attention away from the fact that the vaguely oriental looking table is unusually thick, thick enough for the thin assistant to squeeze into.

This pattern is typical: The magician borrows elements from a non-western culture, which he/she presents as magical, even if they are not considered magical within the culture they were borrowed from (origami being a case in point). The 'magic' is shown to have transferred to the

western magician, who uses it to perform a trick involving physical impossibility. The audience, meanwhile, knows very well that what occurred was just a deceptive illusion.

By reducing magic to the level of the deceptive physical illusion, the discourse of entertainment magic focuses attention away from the effects that magic rituals can have on the social reality of the cultures which perform them. Instead, the focus is on scientifically describable direct effects on physical reality. Ironically, entertainment magic depends on science since the illusions it creates must go against the audience's scientific knowledge. As Lance Burton, Master Magician, explains 'The magician takes a Kleenex, tears it up into little pieces and it's restored into one piece. But Science won't let you do that because you can't put the molecules back together.' (Science 1997)

The Fox Special, *Magic's Biggest Secrets Finally Revealed* (Fox 1997) represents the attitude of audience members watching a trick. The voice-over in a levitation trick says 'It appears she is floating in mid-air. Obviously this is impossible...It seems pretty magical but, obviously, there has to be a logical explanation...despite all the artistry we all know it was just one big trick.' Thus the 'rational' audience (who knows there is a rational explanation), is contrasted with 'irrational' non-western cultures who are constructed as *actually believing* in things like this by anthropologists. The western audience may, in fact, be indulging in a little temporary belief in the impossible, since the massive popularity of fictional wizards shows that it is indeed an attractive prospect. In this case the whole emphasis on rationality 'there has to be a rational explanation', 'it's only a trick' could be a way of immediately denying the naivety of the temporary indulgence.

The conflation of rationality with superiority, and the (false) attribution of irrationality to one's enemies is a piece of real social magic often employed in oppression: women are made out to be less rational than men, so sexism is justified. Likewise, non-western (magic) cultures are made out to be less rational than western (scientific) cultures, so colonialism is justified; and animals are considered less rational than humans so it is acceptable to confine them in cages. It is no co-incidence, then, that the majority of entertainment magicians are white men, and that their 'beautiful assistant' (this is a job title, not a description of an assistant who happens to be beautiful) is female.

Magic acts frequently involve the symbolic distortion, dismemberment, impalement and burning of the bodies of sexily dressed (or undressed) women by men. Animals, too, are used in magic acts as objects, made to appear or disappear at the whim of the magician, or, alternatively,

presented as the dangerous and disgusting 'other' (a box full of rats or snakes, or a hoard of snapping alligators). In this way, the magician appears to display his power over the arts of 'less rational' non-western cultures, which he appropriates, reduces to purely physical phenomena, and shows to be mere deception. And he also displays his power over women and animals, both of whom have been traditionally constructed as 'irrational'.

The link between the discourse of entertainment magic and the privileging of rationality and science is most clearly visible in the work of the self-appointed 'magician debunkers', foremost among whom is James Randi. Randi uses a definition of magic as 'the attempt to control nature by means of spells and incantations' and goes on to say 'You can spell and incant all you want...the lady will still be...imprisoned in the box with the saw blade descending...Spells and incantations don't work' (Randi 1992:22). Randi's mission, in the name of 'logic, rational thought, and common sense' (Randi 1995:xvii) is to 'debunk' magic of all kinds. His technique is to reduce any magical claims to simple physical manipulations of nature, and show that these manipulations are just deceptive tricks. This he accomplishes by copying the fake magicians and producing exactly the same effect himself in a magic show where onlookers know that all is deception.

This is, of course, valid where the original claim was of magic as a direct manipulation of physical reality by special powers (and there are plenty of fakes who make claims like this). However, Randi goes further and extends his critical gaze to a huge range of what he calls 'alternative realities', including acupuncture, chakras, chiropractors, Hare Krishna, yoga, mantras, and the concepts of yin/yang in Chinese medicine (Randi 2000). In all cases he takes things literally, ignoring the effects on social reality of the symbols, metaphors, and analogies involved. For example, his way of investigating curses is to statistically analyse the number of people who die in a cursed area, rather than investigating the very real social effects that occur when places are declared cursed by someone with the authority to make such declarations.

Another illustration of ignoring the symbolic aspects of magic is the way that Randi approaches the topic of *Kundalini* energy, a term used in yoga. He writes that 'This is the fiery snake said to sleep, coiled up, at the base of the human spine. Diligent searches by anatomists have so far failed to locate the kundalini.' Whether he is joking or not, he is still reducing things to the level of the physical rather than the symbolic. He could equally have described how images (such as a snake rising up the spine used in yoga) have recently been found helpful in coordinating exercise movements and improving posture (Siler 2000:8).

Summer (1998) notes that 'Sceptics have worked together with magicians to great advantage', and Nelms (1969:34) points out that 'the magical profession has done more to combat fake spiritualism than all other groups combined.' Randi and magician debunkers like him are explicit in their aim of using entertainment magic to debunk traditional magic in order to promote rationality. And in doing so they entrench definitions of magic as irrational belief. Debunkers are, at least, explicit about their aims, but it could be argued that the discourse of *most* entertainment magic implicitly plays a similar role.

### **Conclusion**

We are living in postcolonial times, but the discourse of entertainment magic seems to contain remnants of a colonial and sexist past which would be condemned if they appeared in other mediums. This persistence may be due to the way that the discourse of magic is passed down in secretive 'magic circles' which are not open to critical scrutiny. Entertainment magic rarely appears anywhere except for live performance, and the usual audience consists of children, or the occasional adult who is interested enough to pay to see the show. This constitutes a fairly uncritical audience, and magic is not considered a high form of art (except by some magicians themselves), so is unlikely to attract artistic criticism. It is, none-the-less, important to conduct critical analysis of the discourse of entertainment magic because it has the potential to influence a large number of children.

Nemeroff and Rozin (2000:1) find so many diverse meanings of the word magic (traditional ritual, deceptive trick, false belief, sense of wonder and enchantment, etc) that they 'entertain the possibility that...the term 'magic' in current usage has become...a garbage bin filled with various odds and ends that we do not otherwise know what to do with.' However, examining the discourse of entertainment magic in the context of its colonial origins suggests that there may be a pattern behind the meanings of 'magic'.

The predominant usage of the term 'magic' could be argued to have arisen through definition and decree by authorities in imperialist countries, and associated with the traditional cultural practices of the countries they exploit. Through strong threads in fiction, psychology and anthropology, magic is given a narrow definition of direct physical effects created impossibly by

unrelated causes. Entertainment magic seems to follow and entrench this position, adding to it the aspect of deception. Anyone who actually believes in the impossible is, by definition, irrational, making people in exploitable countries appear less rational (and hence inferior, given western attitudes to rationality).

At the same time, defining magic only in terms of physical impossibility potentially denies the existence of the very real social magic which is ubiquitous in western cultures. As MacDonald (1995:4) points out in discussing the Trobriand Islanders, there is a tendency for “our...rituals” and “our scientific ways” to be situated in contrast to “their Melanesian magic”.

Finally, the simultaneous use of the term ‘magic’ for deceptive tricks as well as a sense of wonder and enchantment with the world needs examining. The entertainment magician David Copperfield (2000) laments that ‘We are educated so much and we know so much now that we lose that sense of awe and wonder that we're given everyday. The miracle of birth or snow falling from the sky...’ Ironically, entertainment magic itself is part of this ‘education’, since children are often encouraged to believe in magic, Santa Claus etc, only to be dis-illusioned in a rite of passage when it is revealed that Santa does not exist and entertainment magicians cheat. This may prepare children for ‘rational’ society, where enchantment with the beauty of nature is undervalued because it does not contribute to economic production or consumption, and the power of the real social magic of authority figures is disguised to prevent it from being challenged.

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