



PERFORMING DECEPTION

LEARNING, SKILL
AND THE ART OF
CONJURING

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4. Natural and Contrived

Borrowing a term from Donna Haraway, the previous two chapters depicted conjuring as an activity of sympoiesis or ‘making-with’.¹ Making-with was accomplished through varied actions: mutual physical coordination; imagining others’ perceptions; sharing attention on an object; forwarding the existence of definite rules, and so on. Yet, in important respects, the making-with as part of an activity of make-believe did not entail a sharing-between.² Magic is predicated on the possibility of fostering fundamentally dissimilar affective and perceptual experiences between conjurors and audiences.³

More than just noting aspects of sharing and divergence, the previous chapters elaborated ways in which learning magic entailed a paradoxical appreciation of doubleness: both becoming closer to and more distant from an understanding of others and self.

Putting these matters in theoretical terms, this doubleness could be glossed through its relation to ‘the natural attitude’. Within the social sciences, Alfred Schutz’s conception of the natural attitude has served as a starting orientation for understanding individuals’ day-to-day experiences.⁴ As Schutz argued, people habitually operate with important but often unrecognized assumptions: we perceive the world as it is; we experience it as others do; and our experiences can serve

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- 1 Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 5.
 - 2 This is a long running theme in attempts to theorize magic, as in Blackstone, Harry. 1977. *Blackstone’s Secrets of Magic*. North Hollywood, CA: Wilshire.
 - 3 Those occasions when an effect is so persuasive that magicians themselves are amazed by what they experience can mark a high point in performance careers; for instance, see Kestenbaum, David. 2017, June 30. ‘The Magic Show—Act Two’, *The American Life*. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/619/the-magic-show/act-two-31>; Granrose, John. 2021. *The Archetype of the Magician*. Agger: Eye Corner Press: 52–53; and Regal, David. 2021, February 9. *Bristol Society of Magic Lecture*.
 - 4 Schutz, A. 1962. *Collected Papers* (Volume 1). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

as a guide for gauging future actions. When such taken-for-granted presumptions come into doubt, then people routinely engage in forms of repair work (for instance, contending that someone erred) that restores a sense that there is a shared world known-in-common.

The past chapters have suggested ways in which learning magic entails an uneasy relation to the natural attitude. This did not take the form of out-and-out doubt about perceptions. My perceptions provided the precondition for practice. The confirmation of the mundane nature of the experience was a regular outcome of many hours of solitary rehearsal. However, learning magic offered many occasions for coming into doubt with how this world is 'seen in common, heard in common, felt in common and in these ways a world which is sensible in common'.⁵ More than my mere personal experiences, professional magicians regularly question how they know themselves and others.

In continuing to approach magic as *deft contrariwise performance*, this chapter considers some of the entanglements between the umbrella notions of 'natural' and 'contrived' as part of instructional guidance. In seeking to manipulate the way others make sense of the world, conjurors labor to thwart detection of their secreted methods. A prime way they do so is by appearing to act naturally. As will be elaborated in this chapter, however, seeing naturalness and acting naturally are routinely treated as abilities that must be cultivated. How this cultivation is done is the focus of this chapter. Specifically, I turn to examine how those learning magic are taught to relate to people and objects in contrived ways that render their behavior natural, uninteresting, as expected and so on.

Acting Natural

In all cases of palming the deck should be covered for the smallest possible space of time, and the covering and exposing should be made under some natural pretext, such as squaring up the cards, or passing the deck to the other hand, or changing its position in the hand, or turning it over.⁶

– S.W. Erdanese (pseudonym)

5 Girton, George D. 1986 'Kung Fu'. In: *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work*, H. Garfinkel (Ed.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 70.

6 Erdnase, S.W. 1955. *The Expert at the Card Table*. Mineola, NY: Dover: 90–91.

Just as control is a frequent theme when magicians reflect on their art, so too with naturalness. The quote above from Erdanese's classic book *The Expert at the Card Table* illustrates how being natural is regarded as necessary and advantageous. Acting in this way provides cover for undertaking sleights—in this case, 'palming' or concealing the cards in one's hand. In wishing to make contrived actions appear otherwise, striving to be natural is a frequent goal.

Doing what is natural is often portrayed as a complicated business by conjurers. For instance, as with *The Expert at the Card Table*, Hugard and Braué's *The Royal Road to Card Magic* makes recurrent reference to naturalness. As one example, Hugard and Braué stipulate that:

Practically everyone, when beginning to practise the palming of cards, will be careful to keep the fingers curved naturally but will overlook the importance of having the thumb lie in its natural position along the side of the hand. When the thumb extends at a right angle from the hand, a reflex action which must be overcome, its unnatural appearance at once attracts attention to the hand and arouses suspicion.⁷

Herein, the mention of 'natural' in the first sentence refers to action that must be deliberately worked at. While lodging a card between one's fingers and the ball of the thumb, the fingers must be made to appear relaxed, as they would be in the absence of the palmed card. In contrast, while thumbs generally lie along the sides of hands, this is not always so during the peculiarities of handling palmed cards. Instead, the habitual response of the thumb needs to be counteracted in order for it to assume the desired natural-appearing position.

With the frequency and significance attached to naturalness in entertainment magic, it is perhaps not surprising it is subject to alternative portrayals. Elsewhere, in explaining how to glimpse a specific card secretly, Hugard and Braué note:

We shall suppose that you have handed the deck to a spectator to be shuffled. When he has done that, hold out your right hand to take back the deck, purposely holding it rather high so that he will have to raise his hand to give you the deck. Take the pack with your thumb underneath it on the face card, your fingers on the back. At that moment it is natural

7 Hugard, Jean and Braué, Frederick. 2015. *The Royal Road to Card Magic* (Video Edition). London: Foulsham: 87.

for you to glance at the cards, and by tilting them ever so little with the thumb you can glimpse the index of the bottom card at the inner left corner.⁸

In this description, naturalness is positioned as built into the details of the coordinated interaction. And yet, subsequently they go on to state, 'Get the glimpse and then look at the spectator. Make the action a natural one, and no one will have the least suspicion that you have seen the bottom card.'⁹ This later sentence, however, suggests the naturalness of the glimpse has to be secured above and beyond the barebones of the coordinated interaction. Wider than this specific example, within *The Royal Road to Card Magic*, 'natural' varies between being understood as a universally shared interpretation of an action ('a natural way of squaring the cards'¹⁰) and as a characterization dependent on the alignment of action with the specific presentational style of individuals.¹¹

Against his experiences of the question-begging meaning of evocations to be 'natural', magician Darwin Ortiz considered, and then rejected, two ways of settling what is natural. One was based on community standards and the other on analogic resemblance. For him, naturalness should not be determined by what the majority of magicians regard as such. Neither is it a matter of mimicking how lay audience members would behave if they were to handle rings, coins or other props for themselves. Naturalness instead derives from actions being *justified* (the motivations for them within the presentation are immediately apparent to audiences) and *economical* (they are done with what is perceived to be the least amount of energy). Since acting in ways that secure both judgements in the minds of audiences takes considered effort, 'naturalness doesn't come naturally'.¹²

Just as what counts as natural has been subject to different interpretations, so too has the place of naturalness. Hugard and Braué aimed to hold a 'mirror to nature' through their art and therefore

8 *Ibid.*: 67.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*: 190.

11 As in Hugard, Jean and Braué, Frederick. 2015. *The Royal Road to Card Magic* (Video Edition). London: Foulsham: 89.

12 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 316. For a wider discussion on the need for justified movements in the case of acting, see Lecoq, Jacques. 2000. *The Moving Body*. London: Bloomsbury.

sought to undertake natural and (as much as possible) relaxed forms of card handling. In doing so they operated within a style referred to as *modern magic*, a style that still heavily influences the standards by which conjurors are judged today.¹³

As Wally Smith has detailed, the origins of modern magic as a performance style can be seen as a response to the type of stage shows prominent up to the mid-19th century.¹⁴ The latter type entailed the use of elaborate stage set-ups, dim lighting, numerous props and other features that signalled to audiences that relevant features of the scene were being obscured from view. Even if audiences could not identify how the bagginess of the magician's robe mattered, they could surmise that it did. In contrast, the modern stage magic that came to the fore in the mid-19th century strove for minimally visible objects that were often depicted as incidental. The overall intention was to make audiences 'confident that they had seen all they needed to see'.¹⁵ In this respect, it can be said that what was absent from performances was as important as what was present. Along with this orientation to their surroundings, the personas of magicians shifted from the exotic and mystical to the commonplace and conventional. During the 1920s and 1930s, the widespread movement in magic from the stage with large props into small group interactions with everyday objects—what would become labelled as close-up magic—provided a further realization of the modern style. Within close-up magic, a commonplace objective is rendering techniques such as card sleights either unseen or seen but unnoticed.

As Smith identified, at the heart of this style remains a basic tension: its desire for the appearance of effortless is based on carefully designed mechanical repetition and minutely choreographed action. As a result, one danger conjurors face is that as audiences become more familiar with magic, it becomes harder to pass off carefully crafted movements as incidental. Another danger that can be proposed centers on the display of skill. Whereas overt displays of skill hazard reducing magic to something similar to juggling, the absence of such displays risks encouraging audiences to believe anyone could perform the feat.

13 See Tibbs, G. 2013. 'Lennart Green and the Modern Drama of Sleight of Hand', *Journal of Performance Magic*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2013.1119>.

14 Smith, Wally. 2015. 'Technologies of Stage Magic', *Social Studies of Science* (June), 45: 319–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312715577461>.

15 *Ibid.*: 325.

The demands on magicians striving to deceive through naturalness share similarities to other situations in which individuals try to pass themselves off. Garfinkel's classic study of Agnes, a 19-year-old transsexual that sought a sex change, details the incessant measures that can be necessary in order to continuously accomplish being taken by others as a woman when socialized as a man. In the case of Agnes, her studious efforts to conform to a highly conventional image of what it meant to be a woman not only included how she spoke, comported herself, expressed opinions and so on, but how she accounted to others for how she spoke, comported herself, expressed opinions and so on. Accounting-for included coming up with various excuses as to why she had to refrain from certain activities (for instance, not being in the mood for swimming or being modest in situations that required nudity). Agnes' case illustrates the considerable but often overlooked efforts necessary to be taken as acting naturally according to cultural expectations of the day.¹⁶ As with Agnes, magicians need to attend to how their gestures, patter, gaze and so on aligns with the range of commonplace cultural expectations for how magicians ought to behave.

In general terms, magicians in performance situations endeavoring to be natural face both fewer and more demands than Agnes. Fewer because, while Agnes constantly feared any slip up might betray her carefully constructed identity as a conventional woman, a conjuror typically needs a natural style to cover for specific critical moments of deception. More because, unlike those Agnes encountered, audiences to a magic show anticipate a conjuror is trying to deceive them, even as the conjuror attempts to persuade audiences that they have seen all they need to see.

Although hardly unique to magic, conjurors need to attend to how their ongoing behaviour establishes expectations for what counts as consistent and thereby justified conduct (for instance, regarding rhythm and speed, overall demeanour). Any sensed deviations from the emerging pattern performers construct through their individual

16 For a wider analysis of these points in relation to gender generally, see Butler, J. 2007. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge Classics. For a wider analysis specific to magic see Beckman, Karen. 2003. *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384373>.

style are liable to raise suspicions in audiences.¹⁷ ‘Sensed’ is an important qualification. Whether or not those suspicions end up being well-grounded, their arousal can detract away from the prospects of generating wonder.

And yet, despite all of these points, it is the very anticipation for deception in magic that provides a basis for realizing it. As a simple example, to demonstrate to audience members that a deck of playing cards is standard, not sequenced in a particular order and so on, a magician can spread the cards face up on a table. While doing so can serve to reassure the audience, it can also be the very technique by which the conjuror identifies the position of critical cards. As Smith contended:

magicians go to elaborate lengths to make their actions *accountable* to spectators, those present and those watching on television [...] And the audience patiently accepts this pattern of making things accountable, because they are involved in a live social interaction in which it is part of the job of the magician to assure them that everything is fair and above board. It is the very need for the magician to be accountable, and the acceptance by the audience that such acts of accountability are ordinary in themselves, that gives the magician space to conceal secret actions...¹⁸

As such, the understandable and intelligible appearance of the magicians’ actions serve both to make those actions sensible as well as to dissimulate. Manipulative displays of accountability need not be limited to the actions and objects of magicians. The working environment of performances can be marshalled to persuade the audience that everything is fair and above board. Filming magic ‘on the street’ with seemingly random members of the public is a way to diminish the suspicions that audiences attach to set piece stage shows.¹⁹

And yet, as with so many other types of naturalized deceptions, the positioning of paraphernalia, actions and settings is a delicate operation. Drawing too much attention to the ordinariness of what is before an audience might in itself generate niggling suspicion and sobering disengagement where there was once unquestioned acceptance and

17 Fitzkee, Dariel. 1945. *Magic by Misdirection*. Provo, UT: Magic Book Productions.

18 As elaborated in Smith, Wally. 2016, April 8. ‘Revelations and Concealments in Conjuring’. *Presentation to Revelations Workshop*. Vadstena.

19 Turner, E. 2016. “‘I Am Alive in Here’: Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine’s Body’, *Journal of Performance Magic*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2016.03>

lively participation. As a result, some instructions call for a minimal approach in which accountability is secured through indirect means.²⁰ For instance, rather than verbally justifying why someone is searching their pockets ('Where is my pen? I have forgotten...Oh, here it is. '), the recommendation is simply to produce a pen casually from a pocket and then make use of it. Accountability becomes 'self-evident'.²¹ As still a further 'and yet', at times a conjuror might seek to generate suspicion and disengagement at specific points to thereby direct attention this way and that too.

Thus, being natural is a subtle undertaking.

It can also be a contrived one. As an example, at the start of the 20th century the American magician William Robinson achieved professional acclaim in a modern style through adopting the stage presence of a Chinese magician called Chung Ling Soo. As Chinn argues, Robinson did not persuasively present himself as authentically Chinese because his outward appearance and conduct were flawless. Instead, he was able to pass as Chinese through the *defects* of his performance. Race relations at the time in which Chinese people were stereotyped and treated as culturally 'other' from white audiences combined with the artifice of stage magic to produce a situation in which 'more unbelievable is not only better, but paradoxically believable'.²² Not for the first or last time in history, the case of Chung Ling Soo illustrates how marketable portrayals of authenticity depend on performers playing to cultural beliefs about the exotic and familiar, as well as on audiences' willingness to go along with impersonations.²³

The points above about naturalness in modern magic have applied to situations in which an identifiable performer acts on a literal or figurative stage. As the audience is anticipating deception, those on stage need to hide certain actions, even as they work to convince others that there is no attempt to do so. However, offstage, many individuals draw on techniques in conjuring to produce feelings of astonishment

20 See Fitzkee, Dariel. 1945. *Magic by Misdirection*. Provo, UT: Magic Book Productions.

21 Earl, Benjamin. n.d. *Real Deck Switches*. Sacramento, CA: Vanishing Inc.

22 Chinn, Mielin 2019. 'Race Magic and the Yellow Peril', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77(4): 425.

23 Rosenthal, Caroline. 2021. 'The Desire to Believe and Belong'. In: *The Imposter as Social Theory* Steve Woolgar, Else Vogel, David Moats, and Claes-Fredrick Helgesson (Eds). Bristol: Bristol University Press: 31–52. <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529213072.003.0001>.

in ways that blur, if not downright dissolve, the line between staged performances and everyday interactions. For instance, consider Jay Sankey's 'Unreal Experiments'. As Charles Rolfe has examined, these experiments entailed dispensing with an identifiable magician-figure, a self-recognized witnessing audience and a planned outcome.²⁴ In one such experiment, Sankey posed as a customer buying sweets that did not have enough money. When the cashier insisted on payment, he opened one of the sweet packets to find a 20-dollar bill inside.

In a related vein, the magician blogger working under the name *The Jerx* advocates an 'amateur' style in which befuddling outcomes that defy everyday expectations are realized in informal social interactions in which no one overtly 'performs' for another. As an example of this style, he recounted how:

I'd be out to eat with someone and while we talked and waited for food I'd be making little tears in a business card [...] When I was done I'd just set down two linked paper circles torn from one business card and never say a word about it. When the person noticed it my response was, "Huh?" That's always my first response with the distracted artist presentation. "Huh? Oh.... that's bizarre." You've got to slow-play this. You're not being humble and you're not acting like you're not responsible for it, you're just not taking credit for it because you don't see it as something to take credit for. These things just happen.²⁵

In such ways, this kind of performance of non-performing sets out to harness a sense of the naturalness of actions (for instance, likening them to doodling), combined with a recognizably odd outcome (for instance, the two linked paper circles) with a portrayed need *not* to be accountable within an interaction in order to bring about a feeling of strangeness. As with the pranks of the past television program *Candid Camera*, or the high jinks in the more recent *The Carbonaro Effect*, Sankey and *The Jerx* set out to discover what response is provoked rather than to realize a specific one. A challenge in doing so is being proficient enough at undertaking the required actions that they are not regarded as planned.²⁶

24 Charles, Rolfe. 2020. 'Theatrical Magic and the Agenda to Enchant the World', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 17(4): 574–596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2015.1112025>.

25 The Jerx. 2015, June 12. 'Presentation Week Part 5: The Distracted Artist Presentation', *The Jerx*.

26 Regal, David. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 66.

However, the lack of acknowledgement or refutation that any trick (as such) is being performed also means that the immediate audience can find reasons to dismiss the idea that anything magical or noteworthy has taken place. In this way, *The Carbonaro Effect*, Sankey and *The Jerx* occupy an ambiguous relation to entertainment magic, even as they directly draw on its methods.²⁷

The Mirror of Nature

In light of the previous analysis of the negotiated meaning and place of naturalness, the next sections attend to how those teaching magic strive to instil naturalness.

I do so by first considering the situated practices associated with one simple visual aid for gauging the naturalness of actions: a mirror. Practicing in front of a mirror is a common technique for conjurers, and it was one that I utilized once I started practicing sleights. The advantages of this technique, compared to imagining how you appear, can be pronounced. For instance, a common sleight used in conjuring is the ‘double lift’—lifting two cards from the top of the deck as one. At times, however, ensuring two cards (and only two cards) are lifted (and together) can be a fiddly operation, with the thumb and fingers being variously maneuvered. When this kind of fiddling occurs, as it has done many times for me, it is easy to imagine that the card manipulation would be blatant to onlookers. Through enabling simultaneous feedback between actions and one’s own evaluation of them, practicing in front of a mirror visually confirms that a slightly angled deck affords considerable scope for occulting hand movements. With this cover, what otherwise might well appear erratic and suspicious becomes fluid and unremarkable. Although I have practiced this lift hundreds of times to make the handling appear effortless, again and again, I still feel compelled to do so in front of a mirror to confirm the sleight is not readily detectable.

In this respect, then, mirror practice brings together the possibility of perceiving yourself as another person would, with the underlying

27 For a further related discussion concerning what has been called ‘bizarre’ magic, see Taylor, N. 2018. ‘Magic and Broken Knowledge,’ *Journal of Performance Magic*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.5920/jpm.2018.03>

knowledge and experiences of a magician. As such, the mirror functions as a relational device in self-other relations. Psychologist Jacques Lacan, for instance, famously claimed specular images secure self-fantasies: against internal tumultuous bodily drives and fragmentary thoughts, one's mirror image serves as an aspirational representation of a stable, whole and coherent self.²⁸ In certain respects, practicing magic entails a kind of identification with the mirror image. Whatever one's fraught internal affective and physical states, as a representation of self that is observable to others, the mirror image serves as a touchstone for gauging naturalness.

Or at least in certain respects it does. Generally, more than just providing an external reflection, mirrors extend an invitation for internal reflection.²⁹ In my case, the very need to revisit the double lift in front of a mirror, for instance, signals the lack of definitiveness of specular self-witnessing. One limitation is that the seeing done during mirror practice is the situated seeing of one who knows what to look for. Yet, audiences may not perceive or give significance to what might be glaringly obvious to a magician.³⁰ Indeed, as magicians operating in the modern style often (but not always) strive to *not* bring attention to card manipulations in the first place, what might be at the center of concern for a magician looking in the mirror may not be meant to be relevant to audiences at all. Looking in a mirror—properly—thus needs to involve something else than looking closely. How and where to gaze, though, are not necessarily straightforward.

Conversely, though, while audiences might not apprehend card sleights, a common refrain in professional advice is they can be highly perceptive in sensing certain kinds of subtleties. When conjurers unconsciously tense up in anticipation of a difficult manipulation, the audience can pick up on it 'like a dog senses fear'.³¹ As a response to both sets of considerations, instructions often direct learners not to

28 Lacan, J. 1977. *Ecrits: A Selection* (trans. Alan Sheridan). New York: Norton.

29 For a discussion of both possibilities, see Colie, Rosalie. 1966. *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

30 Along these lines, in teaching situations magicians often tell their students to ignore what they are seeing because they know what to look for, see 1:17:20 in DaOrtiz, Dani. 2017. *Penguin Dani DaOrtiz LIVE ACT*. Available from: <https://www.penguinmagic.com/p/11142>

31 Regal, David. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 143.

get preoccupied with making sleights visually perfect, but instead to engage with audiences and thereby produce a relaxed atmosphere that disarms scrutiny.³²

As a result of the competing considerations noted in the previous paragraphs, learning through mirror practice entails a delicate process of seeking to refine the physical handling of cards through greater visual discrimination, while also attending to whether and how ‘seeing’ is relevant.

Performing in a Material World

This analysis of mirror practice also offers an opportunity for a slight diversion to consider magic as a socio-material activity. One way to conceive of this, from the perspective of the magician, is as a relation of asymmetrical dualism. Just as it has been said that conjuring is always about ‘control, control, CONTROL!’³³ of their audiences, much the same could be said of the material world. The job of the magician is to render things and environments into docile and manageable objects so that they can serve as instruments of performance.

Striving for this sort of mastery has obvious rationales within attempts to accomplish planned effects. Yet, whether the aim of control is a good descriptor for characterizing the practice of conjuring or any other activity is another matter. As Andy Pickering has contended, the notion that an entity in the world can be rendered into a passive object to be manipulated at will requires it ‘does exactly what we intend *and no more*’.³⁴ However, ‘even when we successfully arrive at a situation in which the world does our bidding, it typically does something else *as well*’.³⁵

The case of the development of bubble chambers in particle physics is one of the many examples Pickering has given to illustrate how that ‘something else’ comes about and what it can entail.³⁶ In the case of the

32 For instance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUrtygFXPDQ>

33 Thun, Helge 2019. ‘Control’, *Genii*, December: 71.

34 Pickering, Andrew. 2017. ‘In Our Place: Performance, Dualism, and Islands of Stability’, *Common Knowledge*, 23(3): 392. <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754x-3987761>. Emphasis in original.

35 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

36 Pickering, Andrew. 1995. *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: Chapter 2.

inventor of the bubble chamber, Donald Glaser, his attempts at devising novel forms of manipulating atoms in the 1950s consisted of back-and-forth movement between human and non-human agency. As Pickering set out:

Over a couple of years, Glaser, as an active human agent, would put together some configuration of apparatus. Then, while the agency of the material object took over, he became passive, standing back with a movie camera in his hand to record what his latest setup would do. Switching back to an active role, Glaser would then react to the machine's performance (which was usually not what he wanted), and the dance would continue. Its upshot was a new instrument that did new things in a new way—revealing the paths of elementary particles as strings of bubbles forming in a liquid (and winning Glaser a Nobel Prize). At the same time, Glaser himself was transformed: shifting from small science to big science, becoming the leader of a sizable group and becoming famous, changing his ideas about how bubbles form and what bubble chambers should look like, and moving from one subfield (cosmic-ray physics) to another (accelerator-based experimentation).³⁷

This example illustrates how attempts at controlling the world can result in an alteration of the person notionally in command. Parallel cases of complex, iterative adaptation can be found in the case of conjuring. Today, with the rise of social media as a platform for performing magic, leading innovators in this medium have contended that the need for immediacy in effects is radically shifting the compulsory skills of magicians and previously held community ideals for what it means to act in an apposite manner.³⁸

How I have characterized learning magic in this book—as a socio-material practice entailing paradoxical movements between becoming closer to and more distant from an understanding of others and self—is aligned with treating agency and control as highly negotiated. My experience entailed interactions with the world, in which my agency and my abilities have shifted over time through my attempts to exercise agency and perceive the world.

37 Pickering, Andrew. 2017. 'In Our Place: Performance, Dualism, and Islands of Stability', *Common Knowledge*, 23(3): 382–833. <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754x-3987761>.

38 For instance, Elderfield, Tom. 2019, June 17. *The Insider*. <https://www.vanishingincmagic.com/blog/the-insider-tom-elderfield>.

Experienced magicians, too, have recognized ways in which engaging with the material world can change them. For instance, despite mirror practice being a common technique, the authors of *The Royal Road to Card Magic* advise against such training. As Hugard and Braué warn, ‘mirror watching has tendency to cause the eyes to widen; this isn’t attractive and can become a fixed habit’.³⁹ Herein, rather than magicians arranging mirrors, mirrors arrange magicians. They do so by conditioning viewers into unnatural forms of acting, and in ways that might not even be noticed by the conjuror. Ben Earl too has cautioned against the extensive use of mirrors because such practice can lock magicians into rigid movements and positions that appear persuasive within the confines of solo mirror practice, but are not so within the dynamism of live performances.⁴⁰ Perhaps even more invasive, Augusto Corrieri contended the extent of his mirror practice has resulted in a dissociation: rather than seeing through his own lived senses, once on stage he cannot but see himself from the outside, as if he is an audience member.⁴¹ For such reasons, a neat subject-object distinction become untenable. Magicians configure mirrors to suit their purposes, but the capacities of magicians emerge through their mirror-use.

Finding Naturality

While, in the abstract, acting naturally ought to come easy, the previous sections surveyed some of the many questions, choices and implications associated with being seen to be behaving naturally in conjuring. In doing so, I wished to underscore its cultivated and contrived status. Following on from the previous sections, this one further attends to the achievement of naturalness by examining how this appearance is taught. Given the previous argument, one question that can be asked of instructional training is how it reconciles treating naturalness as both readily apparent to any onlooker and not adequately appreciated by learners.

39 Hugard, Jean and Braué, Frederick. 2015. *The Royal Road to Card Magic* (Video Edition). London: Foulsham: 219.

40 Earl, Ben. 2020. Deep Magic Seminar, 18 July.

41 Corrieri, Augusto. 2016. ‘An Autobiography of Hands’, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 7(2): 283–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2016.1175501>.

Two instructional resources that figured in my learning are examined: an audiovisual DVD by Ben Earl and a face-to-face masterclass by Dani DaOrtiz. I became aware of both through their lectures at the first magic convention I attended: the 2019 Session Convention organized by Vanishing Inc. The lasting impressions their performance made on me led me to seek them out afterwards. For both instructional resources, I consider not only the prominent place given to naturalness but how the acclaimed performers varyingly make naturalness witnessable (or not) to learners. As will be suggested, how this is done is a nuanced socio-material, undertaken wherein students are both encouraged to see what is plainly in front of them and cautioned against taking what they see at face value.

Switching Decks, Switching Registers

Benjamin Earl's DVD titled *Real Deck Switches* provides instructions for variations of 25 ways to covertly change one card deck for another during a show. As with many audiovisual tutorials, *Real Deck Switches* positions the learner as an audience. The primary camera offers a view of Earl as if positioned straight across a playing table.⁴² Through this set-up, viewers are invited to see for themselves—again and again—how convincing the deck switches appear. And yet, while switches are demonstrated, what is put on display is also acknowledged as implicating a sense of what is not shown. For example, at various points, Earl speaks to how the switches would be seen from angles not displayed by the camera frames. Instead of seeing for yourself, in these instances, the learner is asked to imagine what the deck handling would look like. In other ways, too, what is visibly displayed points toward what is not shown. On occasions, card handling that would normally take place under the table is displayed on top of the table. On other occasions, Earl's handling is obscured by the table. At these latter points, audiences need to envisage what is taking place out of sight.

Concerning naturalness specifically, similar alternations in what is offered to the learner can be identified. In line with the style of modern magic, in *Real Deck Switches* Earl repeatedly makes the case for the

42 A set-up that has been the source of some criticism; see <https://www.themagiccafe.com/forums/viewtopic.php?topic=659980&forum=218>

importance of achieving a smooth, economical and relaxed appearance. At times, the presence of such qualities in the card handling is treated as available to viewers by simply seeing his displayed movements. Switches are accompanied by verbal evaluations so that the movements appear natural, but without any further pointers as to why. As a result, a central element of the work for learners in comprehending the instructions is spotting for themselves the qualities of the card handling that exemplify naturalness.

At other times though the situation is presented as more complicated. One way this is done is by distinguishing between *feeling* and *looking*. For instance, Earl comments:

The thing with these switches is to try to make them feel right. As well as look right, it is much more the feeling of the cards being cut than anything else. If you can get the timing and the movements soft, then they tend to feel deceptive and that is really the point.⁴³

In this advice, how actions 'feel' is said to be more important than how they 'look'.

Elsewhere in *Real Deck Switches*, feelings are said to be able to override what is logically derived and visually witnessed. For instance, in working through a switch in which a discrepancy exists between how one deck leaves the table and another is brought in, Earl argues:

Now it kind of doesn't make much sense. Because it is like the ((pause)) deck has morphed through the box. ((switch performed)) It should be on the other side. But how it feels ((switch performed)). To me, it just feels like you are putting the box away and the deck is still there. It does not really feel like the deck goes out of view.⁴⁴

As such, learners are encouraged to harness a sense of a feeling/impression that cannot be reduced to the physical positioning of cards, the card box and his hands. This encouragement is given even as learners' attention is directed toward visually scrutinizing these precise positionings. The figurative pointing out of the discrepancy is thus no

43 Emphasis in delivery.

44 Emphasis in delivery. As an additional point to underscore, in this quote, how a move feels is not presented as definite and assured, but as a matter of individual opinion. Elsewhere, Earl likewise appeals to his own judgement by stating 'It just, for me, *feels* right. So you are in this position here. We are going to look for the box. Here we go, let's open that, and it really does not feel like a switch happened.'

simple undertaking, but a construing of the objects and movements that demands active involvement of the learner to make sense of what is being instructed by the instructions.⁴⁵

Following such instructions necessitates trying to appreciate what is being referred to by this feeling/impression and to recognize how the switch possesses this quality. The way I created a feeling/impression was to refrain from a pinpoint focus on the deck, and instead to pan back my visual field as if I was taking in the scene as a whole. With this kind of orientation, even though I knew there was a discrepancy, I did not register a visual jarring associated with the placements of the decks. Through doing so, my way of looking conditioned my generated feelings.

At other points in *Real Deck Switches*, however, learners are instructed to not rely on feel, but instead to rely on looks. In attempting to palm a whole deck, for example, Earl notes that the deck certainly can feel awkward in the hand. Rather than relying on that feeling as a guide to what will be perceived by audiences, his suggestion is to attend to what is visibly displayed. He encourages this by demonstrating for the camera how palming a whole deck can be undetectable through careful positioning of the deck in relation to the table and his body.

Although distinctions are made on numerous occasions between feeling and looking, nowhere in *Real Deck Switches* are set definitions given for the two. At times, feeling is explicitly related to the touch of the magician. For instance, Earl suggests the decks should feel loose, soft and light in the hands. At other times, though, what is felt by the magician is contrasted with what is perceived by the audience.

As a result of the various kinds of positioning noted above, a vital element of work associated with following the instructions of *Real Deck Switches* is shifting between assessing how the imperative to feel relates to both the embodied experiences of the magician and the audience.

45 For a wider discussion on how figurative and literal pointing can entail complex inter-relation between participants, see Goodwin, C. 2003. 'Pointing as Situated Practice'. In: *Pointing: Where Language, Culture and Cognition Meet*, S. Kita (Ed.). Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum; and Kendon, A. 1986. 'Some Reasons for Studying Gesture', *Semiotica*, 62: 3-28.

Naturalness Through Sensation

The second set of instructions I want to consider are those given in a face-to-face masterclass with the world-renowned magician Dani DaOrtiz. I attended one of these classes over 26–28 July 2019 at his villa outside of Malaga, Spain. Within a setting that entail ‘prestigious imitation’,⁴⁶ students in masterclasses become socialized and skilled into a ‘community of practice’ through attending to the language and behavior of a recognized authority figure.⁴⁷

Widely praised for a casual yet chaotic manner of card handling, in which exacting control appears unthinkable, DaOrtiz offers a highly contrasting presentational style to that of the smooth and soft precision of Earl. Despite this, cultivating feelings and perspectives to achieve a sense of naturalness is likewise central to DaOrtiz’s approach.

While no dictionary-type definition was given for ‘natural’ during the weekend, DaOrtiz repeatedly used the term to signal how the magician’s actions should be expected, justified and regarded as ordinary from the spectator’s point of view. Within our small group sessions, DaOrtiz outlined his preparation strategy for achieving this impression of naturality. As he explained, naturalness was not realized by an attitude of indifference to planning, but rather the contrary. As conveyed, his shows were studiously prepared for and his interactions with audiences meticulously choreographed despite their haphazard appearance. Throughout the class, he offered step-by-step explanations for how to manipulate cards, how to position one’s body and surrounding objects, as well as how to direct attention through glances and gestures in ways that would be taken as natural by audiences. For instance, we were taught how to position our feet on the ground when facing a spectator, so that the audience would expect from the subtleties of our contortions that we would subsequently turn back. This turning back provided cover for a sleight-of-hand manipulation. Justifications could work backwards in time too; actions were undertaken at one point to make what he had done previously look natural in retrospect.

Through such a rehearsed self-presentation, magicians’ actions could appear uncontrived; indeed, in the chaotic style of Dani DaOrtiz,

46 Mauss, M. 1973 [1934]. ‘Techniques of the Body’, *Economy and Society*, 2(1): 70–88.

47 Wenger, E. 1999. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

the actions appear as out of control. Much of the instruction over the weekend consisted of him teaching us how to perceive magic from a spectator's point of view, so as to appreciate how such perceptions could be harness to produce wonder.

Chapter 5 examines some of the ways perceiving as a spectator was presented as more or less possible within the masterclass. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to concentrate on one specific aspect of perceiving as another: gauging the feelings of spectators. Spectators' feelings are at the center of DaOrtiz's instructions, because skillfully affecting them is taken as his end aim of magic, not skillfully handling playing cards. As he advocated:

It doesn't matter if you do a palm, a double lift, or a shuffle, it does not matter. The final is what the spectator feels. And this is the effect. Not what you do here. ((spreads out an imaginary deck in his hands)) The effect is not the card in the bottle. The effect is the card inside an object near to me when the magician is there. ((points away)) S!#t ((opens arms to the side)) This is the effect. Not one signed card is inside a bottle. No, no. This is the physical effect. Wow is the effect you remember. And for that we need to work.

Feelings and naturalness were presented as intertwined because: (i) emotional engagement reduces the extent of critical scrutiny by audiences, and (ii) audience judgements that the magician's actions are expected, justified and ordinary heighten the resulting emotional reactions.

In terms of (i), DaOrtiz advocated a chaotic means of card handling, both because it fosters visceral sensations, and because it reduces the likelihood that spectators will attempt to (as well as successfully be able to) reconstruct the methods for effects.⁴⁸ Spectators cannot understand what happened if the magician acts naturally, because rational memory reconstructs the past using actions regarded as noteworthy. To act as expected therefore provides little by the way of mental hooks for recall.

⁴⁸ To be clear, displayed chaos is located in the means, not the ends. This is to say that, while the process of handling cards should appear disordered, the end effect should be clear for spectators to grasp. Thus, whilst producing a sense of chaos, we were also instructed to construct moments of significance in our performances (so-called 'memory pillars') that could provide a straightforward basis for spectators to fashion a sense of what had taken place, and thereby the significance of a trick's culmination.

Instead, what lingers for spectators are the potent sensations associated with the culmination of a trick.

In terms of (ii), we were instructed how naturalness was achieved by doing and saying *less*. Rather than telling spectators, ‘Put your card back here’ whilst pointing to a deck, we were advised instead to simply say ‘Put back’ with our bodily and hand positioning providing cues about the precise placement. Through combining the shortened directives with a relaxed style, DaOrtiz contended, spectators wouldn’t *think* or (more importantly) *feel* to question why their card was being put in that specific location. This lack of regard for the location of the placement would then underpin the generation of an emotional and sensational response to the subsequent identification of a chosen card.

Consistent with the importance attached to feelings, again and again in the masterclass, DaOrtiz sought to engender emotions and sensations within us as students by performing tricks in line with his style, by contrasting different presentations for individual effects, by play-acting as a naïve spectator, and by asking the students to act out scenarios. Through such enactments, what was sought was a kind of ‘hot’ authentication based on experiencing affective states, rather than the ‘cool’ authentication gained by hearing expert pronunciations alone.⁴⁹ That hot authentication was a bodily experience, routinely demonstrated through non-verbal actions (glosses of some of the non-verbal actions are listed in the right-hand column with the left-hand column providing a direct transcript):

Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
Always the finale need to be a sensitive	<i>Takes hand to heart</i>
thing, never a rational thing.	<i>Points finger to his head</i>
Always sensitive. It’s like a <u>s#!t</u>	<i>Slams his hand on the table.</i>
No	<i>Moves eyes and fingers in a gesture of thinking</i>

49 To borrow a distinction from Cohen, Erik and Cohen, Scott A. 2012. ‘Authentication: Hot and Cold’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(3): 1294–1314. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2012.03.004>. See as well Ruhleder, K. and Stoltzfus, F. 2000. ‘The Etiquette of the Masterclass’, *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 7(3): 186–196. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca0703_06.

Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
No, no, no, it's a look and feel.	<i>Leans forward and looks down</i> <i>Takes hand to heart</i>
Look and feel.	<i>Leans forward</i> <i>Replaces hand to heart</i>
Always	

In this instance, the hand gestures, talk, gaze and bodily movements undertaken served to underscore the divisions central to DaOrtiz's teaching in general and his speech at that movement—looking/feeling and rational/sensational. Recognition of those divisions and the importance of attending to feelings and sensations were repeatedly presented as vital by DaOrtiz. It was through these undertakings that magicians can generate feelings of wonder in others.

With the masterclass, DaOrtiz evoked feelings to assess different ways of performing well-known sleights. Doing so meant challenging how we as students might well have made sense of our experiences up until that point in time. For instance, as mentioned above, a double lift involves taking two cards from a deck together, typically to convince the audience only one card is in play. In speaking to the naturalness of moments using the double lift, DaOrtiz contended:

Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
The double lift is one of the best technique; at the same time it is one of the worst technique.	<i>Hand gesture pointing away</i> <i>Hand gesture pointing toward chest</i>
Why?	<i>Spreads hands</i>
Because technically, physically, it is unbelievable. Sensationally, it is very bad.	<i>Rubs fingers together</i> <i>Clasps heart</i>

Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
<p>Look. I show you six of clubs. <u>Yes?</u></p> <p>I put the six of clubs on the table.</p> <p>I snap my finger and change.</p> <p>And you say ‘Wow’. It is very good. *!#%. But you are feeling two cards. Why? Because the <i>first</i> card you see here, not there.</p> <p>You don’t know how I changed but you are feeling more than one card. Then if you are making sensations, this is what you need to do.</p> <p>((Dani explains how to execute the double lift in line with his presentational style))</p>	<p><i>Overturms cards on the top of a deck in his hand thereby performing a double lift. Flips over cards again to be face down on deck.</i></p> <p><i>Card on top of deck put face down on table</i></p> <p><i>Finger snap. The card on table overturned to show the queen of spades.</i></p> <p><i>Points to deck in hand and then to table.</i></p>

Herein, through verbal and non-verbal actions, DaOrtiz seeks to bring to the fore an unease that he suggests audiences will experience in witnessing sleight of hand. It is a feeling of unease that is characterized as operating below the initial positive sensation (‘Wow’) of seeing a conventional double lift.⁵⁰ In forwarding a distinction between initial reactions and deeper experiences, DaOrtiz sought to make something known to the group; namely that we did not properly grasp what to look for in assessing a basic technique familiar to all around the table. His non-verbal pointing accompanying his verbal explanation served to provide a public display for how this lack of understanding could become appreciated. By attending to specific ‘domains of scrutiny’⁵¹

50 That is, a sensation generated from the visual dissonance between the identity of the card initially shown in his hand, and the one eventually revealed on the table.

51 Goodwin, Charles. 1994. ‘Professional Vision’, *American Anthropologist*, 96(3): 606–633.

(the two positions of cards), we were encouraged to appreciate what we visually saw but did not properly register. The demand placed upon us as learners was to search out how we experienced the feeling that two cards were involved. This needed to be done even though all of us had pre-existing knowledge that a double lift involves two cards. Such examples, it could be said, brought home to us how our attention—and therefore the attention of the audiences for our magic—is ‘sometimes voluntarily controlled and performed intentionally while it is not always so controlled and not always performed intentionally’.⁵² Such were the complicated dynamics presented as at play in appreciating the presence of and sources for naturalness.

A task that we, as learners, faced *after* the masterclass was how to incorporate the teaching into our own practice. As suggested in the description given above, DaOrtiz offers a holistic presentational style; the subtle timing of gestures, the nuances of speech, the forms of the sleights undertaken, the details of bodily comportment, the precise direction of gaze, and many other details besides are purposefully crafted to project a sense to the audience that the behavior is natural. This integrated coordination poses a basic tension: only bringing into discrete, individual elements of DaOrtiz’s approach would reduce the prospects for recreating a sense of magic generated through his style. Yet seeking to reproduce his style as a whole takes the risk of sliding into mere copying.

Copying is a noteworthy option because avoiding imitation is a frequent refrain in instructions for beginners. Since each individual has a different personality, many magicians argue that attempts to duplicate another person’s presentational style are bound to end in disappointment.⁵³ High-profile professional magicians have spoken out against how some in the magic fraternity lazily copy well-known artists.⁵⁴ In contrast to such typical guidance, DaOrtiz maintains that copying others for their precise timing and movements is a predictable

52 Watzl, Sebastian. 2017. *Structuring Mind: The Nature of Attention and How It Shapes Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199658428.001.0001>

53 Nelms, Henning. [1969] 2000. *Magic and Showmanship*. Mineola, NY: Dover: 54.

54 For one discussion of this, read Regal, David. 2019. *Interpreting Magic*. Blue Bike Productions: 209–218. See, as well, Greenbaum, Harrison. *The Insider*. 18 November 2019. <https://www.vanishinginmagic.com/blog/the-insider-harrison-greenbaum>

first step in being able to work under the influence of others. Indeed, this was the course he adopted in his own development.⁵⁵

Conclusion

As has been said, within the contrived circumstances of modern magic, ‘naturalness doesn’t come naturally’.⁵⁶ Conjurors expend a great deal of effort trying to convince audiences that they are acting in ways that are ordinary, even as others likely suspect that the naturalness is purposefully designed to dissimulate.

With my focus on examining how magic is learnt, in this chapter I have sought to consider how appreciating the quality of naturalness is varyingly presented as possible. At the heart of this has been a basic tension with instructions. If perceiving (un)naturalness came effortlessly, there would be nothing worth pointing out as part of the instructions, since everything worthy of note would be obvious. If perceiving (un) naturalness was not possible at all, there could be nothing to point out.

Instead of either of these extremes, the instructional examples surveyed in this chapter sought to advance skilful bases for perceiving and displaying naturalness to generate feelings and sensations of wonder. Drawing distinctions between looking and feeling, as well as coaching how to move between the two, for instance, served as a basis for grasping what was natural.

In their degree of attention to affect as part of shoring up a sense of naturalness, those surveyed in this chapter would take some issue with psychologist Margaret Wetherell’s contention that:

Because we engage in affective practice all the time, every member of society possesses a wide-ranging, inarticulate, utilitarian knowledge about affective performance: how to enact it, how to categorise it, and how to assign moral and social significance to affective displays.⁵⁷

55 DaOrtiz, Dani. 2017. Penguin Dani DaOrtiz LIVE ACT. <https://www.penguinmagic.com/p/11142>

56 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 316. For a wider discussion on the need for justified movements in the case of acting, see Lecoq, Jacques. 2000. *The Moving Body*. London: Bloomsbury.

57 Wetherell, Margaret. 2012. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage: Chapter 4. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446250945>.

At times, the practitioners examined in this chapter would contend that everyone possesses the ability to know how to enact affect, categorize it and assign it significance. These abilities could thereby be labelled as 'ubiquitous' forms of expertise,⁵⁸ like speaking your native language. However, the practitioners in this chapter would not always do so. Learning magic—and, in particular, learning modern magic—is also done through consciously questioning our affective understanding.

The next chapter extends this one by considering in more detail how the prospects for seeing what is taking place before one's eyes is varyingly portrayed in conjuring tuition.

58 Collins, H. and Evans, R. 2002. *Rethinking Expertise*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226113623.001.0001>.

