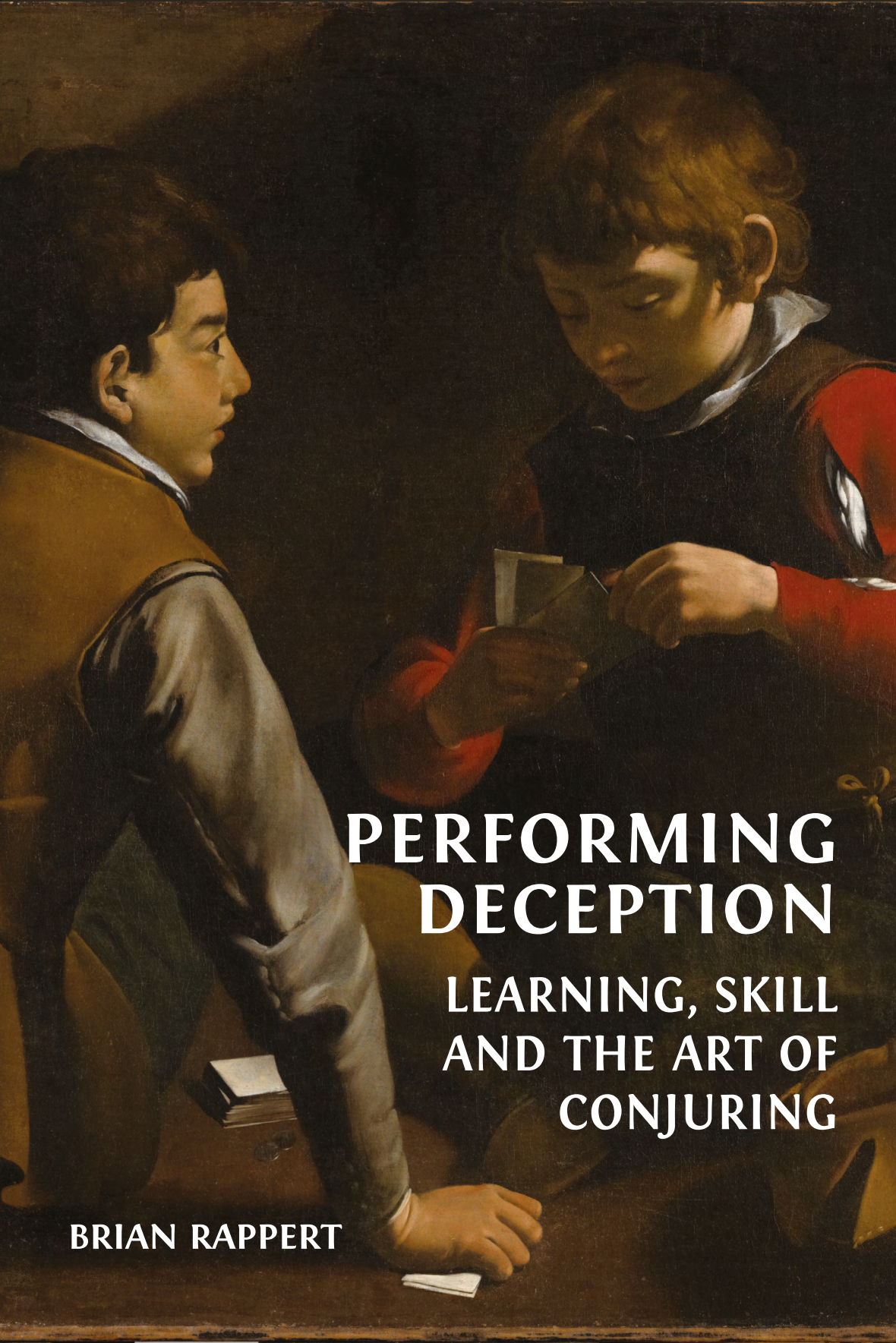

PERFORMING DECEPTION

LEARNING, SKILL AND THE ART OF CONJURING

BRIAN RAPPERT

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5. Proficiency and Inability

Performing Deception opened with a characterization of entertainment magic as *deft contrariwise performance*. The three previous chapters have explored the possibilities, troubles and hauntings associated with the play of opposites in learning conjuring: both becoming closer to and more distant from an appreciation of self; both developing a connection with and recognizing a disconnection from others; both seeking to engineer control of the audience and depending on their lively cooperation; and both cultivating naturalness and pursuing affectation.

This chapter turns to address the interplay of proficiency and inability in practicing and performing magic. Not least because of the reliance on secreted methods, what counts as proficiency in conjuring can be a topic of disagreement. The previous chapter ended by touching on one such matter: is the meticulous imitation of idols by novices a necessary stage of artistic development or a stifling dead-end? Similar questions implicating the place of skill abound. Is the mastering of sleight-of-hand techniques a requisite competency of magicians or not? To what extent can magicians rely on so-called self-working tricks (of the kind set out in Chapter 2)?

Many of those theorizing about magic have argued against the importance of the technical sophistication of tricks.[1] Since what is sought is the ability to elicit feelings of mystery or awe, whether or not artists use demanding sleight-of-hand techniques is neither here nor there. This way of thinking can apply even when magicians evaluate each other. For instance, in February 2021 I entered my first magic competition. Whilst I spent considerable time honing a series of sleights applied to a single standard deck of cards, the winning performance

1 For classic statements along these lines, see Fitzkee, Dariel. 1945. *Magic by Misdirection*. Provo, UT: Magic Book Productions; and Devant, D. and Maskelyne, N. 1912. *Our Magic*. London: George Routledge & Sons.

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relied on several specially designed, pre-arranged card decks used one after the other.

At times, however, the ability to perform sleight of hand does matter. For instance, in 2021 I gained membership into the Magic Circle, an international society of professional and amateur magicians. For this, I needed to pass a performance examination. While the routine could include self-working tricks, applicants to the Circle were advised that 'an act consisting entirely of a succession of standard self-working dealer tricks is unlikely to earn you sufficient marks' to pass.[2]

Questions of skill impact directly on questions of identity. Since, as Derren Brown argued, 'any child who can search endlessly for your card in a special deck from a toyshop can call [themselves] a magician',[3] leading figures in the field often vocally question what distinguishes proper conjurors from pretenders. Do conjurors need to develop their effects and presentations to be considered legitimate artists? If they do not, are they no more than band cover artists or, worse, karaoke singers?[4]

Of the many potential areas in which attempts to define proficiency play out, this chapter attends to the manner in which perception underlies claims to proficiency. Perception here refers to how sensory input is identified, interpreted, experienced and, thereby, informs our beliefs about the world. In general terms, magic has an unsettled relationship with the senses. When audiences witness a magician's assistant getting locked into a cabinet and then its doors are opened to reveal emptiness, a contradictory invitation is extended. Audiences are both invited to rely on their sight in a matter-of-fact way and yet also issued with a caution against doing so. As is the case for audiences, so too for newcomers. Learning magic entails honing something of an 'eye' for detail. Becoming proficient with cards, for instance, requires attending to subtleties of their touch, positioning and other qualities. And yet, becoming proficient also entails minding the fallibility of the senses.

How individuals are invited to closely attend to—and come into doubt about—what they perceive is the recurring theme in this

2 See Magic Circle. 2017. *Guide to Examinations* (November). London: Magic Circle. See https://themagiccircle.co.uk/images/The-Magic-Circle-guide-to-examinations.pdf

3 Brown, Derren. 2006. *Tricks of the Mind*. London: Channel 4 Books: 34.

4 The former claim being one advanced in Greenbaum, Harrison. *The Insider*. 18 November 2019. https://www.vanishingincmagic.com/blog/the-insider-harrison-greenbaum.

chapter. To do so, I explore questions such as: who can perceive magic performances, properly? How are the skills associated with perception socially distributed? How do experts demonstrate to learners the limits of their perception? The basic orientation for addressing these questions is to treat perception as practical accomplishment involving a host of considerations far beyond our physiology.

Maxims for Magic

As initially outlined in Chapter 2, the importance of experiencing magic from the audience's point of view is a frequent refrain among conjurors. The failure to do so often serves as a basis for professional reprimand. As Darwin Ortiz counselled fellow conjurors in his widely acclaimed book *Strong Magic*, seeing an effect from the audience's point of view 'is something you must always strive for, yet which most magicians fail to do.'[5]

More than just this though, at times he argued that seasoned performers are decisively *worse* than uninitiated audiences in bringing a discerning eye to bear. As Ortiz contended, the 'moral here as elsewhere is that magicians generally are *less perceptive* audiences than laypeople and an unreliable guide as to what constitutes strong magic.'[6] In arguing that conjurors miss what is strong (and fail to recognize that they miss what is strong), he is hardly alone.[7]

With particular reference to Ortiz's *Strong Magic*, this section outlines contrasting claims made about who is capable of perceiving and feeling what.

To begin, an assumption often operating within conjuring discussions is that with greater experience comes a greater discernment.[8] In this spirit, the front dust jacket of Ortiz's *Strong Magic* outlines his lengthy

5 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 76.

6 *Ibid*.: 244. Emphasis in original.

7 For a discussion of these points, listen to Shezam. 2019, October 14. *Erik Tait on Publishing*. Magic Podcast 40. https://shezampod.com/podcast/40-erik-tait-on-publishing-magic/ as well as The Jerk. 2016. 'The Importance of Combining Methods'. http://www.thejerx.com/blog/2016/6/30/the-importance-of-combining-methods

8 As in, for instance, Maskelyne, Neil and Devant, David. 1911. *Our Magic*. London: George Routlege and Sons: Preface. For a theorization of magic along these lines, see Goto-Jones, Chris. 2016. *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism, and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

experience as a close-up entertainer and a consultant on crooked gambling methods. His extensive experience, even compared to other professional magicians, is repeatedly evoked as underpinning his authority to justify a 'meta-expertise'[9] in being able to judge other practitioners.

And yet, as indicated above, Ortiz offered several ways in which familiarity with magic can result in a kind of learnt incompetency. Consider some of these ways in more detail. As he argues, instead of prior familiarization with an individual effect resulting in a more refined eye, repetition can result in overexposure that means magicians 'become unable to appreciate just how strong the basic effect really is'.[10] Instead of knowledge of conjuring techniques resulting in magicians being more difficult to fool, the 'knowledge of magic serves only to ossify their thinking'.[11] Relatedly, without preconceived notions about how magic is done and 'because they're not overly concerned with the exact details of methodology, laypeople can more easily see the big picture, and often instinctively go directly to the correct solution'.[12]

My experience chimes with these concerns about learnt incompetency. One paradoxical outcome of practice was in how my development as a learner took me *away* from being able to appreciate the perspective of (lay) audiences. As recounted in Chapter 2, in undertaking my first trick, my situation was in line with that of a naïve spectator: I had no understanding of how the outcome previewed in the instructions would be possible. As I became conversant with the methods for tricks, though, I had to attempt to dissociate what I knew as a learner from what I would experience as a spectator. The result was a bind. The more I learnt, the more grounds I had for doubting the appropriateness of using my mind as an analogic basis for gauging the experiences of others.[13]

For Ortiz, the inability of magicians to judge what counts as strong magic is tied to a second form of learned incompetency. Instead of their extensive experience enabling magicians to judge what works,

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

10 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 224. See also Earl, Benjamin. 2018. *Roleplayer*. Sacramento, CA: Benjamin Earl & Vanishing Inc.

11 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 405.

12 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 405–406.

13 For a related discussion of the need and difficulty of re-appraising tricks, 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

Ortiz claims that experience reinforces a sense of what works best for magicians according to their particular style preferences. The recurring failure of conjurors to recognize this means they can offer poor counsel to colleagues.[14]

Similarly, contrasting arguments are put forward in *Strong Magic* regarding magicians' abilities to see from the audience's point of view. On the one hand, this is presented as a fairly straightforward task, since the audience can be led in various ways by a competent performer. Ortiz offers the instruction, which most readers of *Strong Magic* would likely already be familiar with, regarding how to direct the audience's attention: treat as important what you want the audience to treat as important, and disregard what you want the audience to disregard.[15]

On the other hand, seeing as another is said to be fraught. The kernel of the problem is that magicians scrutinize effects for how they *are* done. What they should instead do, is scrutinize effects for how the audience *guess* they are done.[16] To use an old term in the philosophy of aesthetics, the danger for magicians is that they become 'over-distanced' from their art; preoccupation with technique and stagecraft results in magicians tricking themselves into a form of inattention about what lay audiences perceive.[17] As Ortiz argues, the fascination with handling techniques means that conjurors are insensitive to what matters for lay audiences. Magicians can dismiss the power of effects that are not based on elaborate trickery (for instance, bending spoons with 'the mind'), and actions that magicians know are irrelevant to the performance of tricks (for instance, making sure one's sleeves are rolled up). In contrast, it is the ability to assume the perspective of a naïve spectator that marks Ortiz's expertise.

Furthermore, because of their knowledge and preoccupation with the secreted methods at play, for Ortiz conjurors can spend 'a great deal of time and effort to prove something that isn't even in contention in the audience's mind'.[18] Interjecting explanations and patter where none are needed undercuts the affective power of effects.[19]

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14 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 343.

15 *Ibid*.: 37.

16 *Ibid*.: 73.

17 Dawson, Sheila. 1961. '"Distancing" as an Aesthetic Principle', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 39): 155–174.

18 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 96.

19 Similarly, some magicians have argued that others too often attempt using advanced card control sleights which require considerable skill, when simpler ones would be

Another area in which experience hampers the prospects for conjurors to gauge the affective power of performances relates to audience reaction. On the one hand, Ortiz looks to the audience reaction as a gauge for what works.[20] Readers are encouraged to review how audiences respond and to search out why they do so. Experience thereby buttresses expertise. And yet, Ortiz also recognizes that some spectators will be too polite to air critical thoughts, and instead engage in a form of counter-deception.[21] Equally, magicians are likely to be too self-absorbed to gauge accurately how audiences are actually reacting.[22]

In contending that experience leads to learnt incompetence,[23] the claims made above are not unique to magic. With time, teachers can lose sight of what is required to learn something new. With time, doctors can become desensitized to what it means to receive a serious diagnosis. With time, politicians can become divorced from the public they intended to serve. And so on. Such claims rely on a form of ironic contrast: what appears to be the case to professionals is really otherwise.[24] Students are not inspired; patients are not at ease; and voters are not stirred. As suggested by the survey in the section, for Ortiz, magic is a thoroughly ironic activity: by their very efforts to become more skillful, conjurors lose the apprehension of their audiences, their peers and themselves. The trick Ortiz needs to pull off given this irony is how to be a taken as authoritative, given the binds he himself sets out.

Another interesting feature of Ortiz's argument and other commentaries on the relationship between experience and expertise is which arguments are *not* made. Beginners—with one foot in the lay

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more effective due to appearing more natural and expected to audiences. As in Earl, Ben. 2020. *Deep Magic Seminar*. 16 July.

20 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 342.

21 *Ibid*.: 422. See, as well, Jon Armstrong. *Insider*. https://www.vanishingincmagic.com/insider-magic-podcast/

22 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 344–345.

23 Magicians have identified other forms of learnt incompetence. For instance, while developing tricks can require high levels of creativity, the willingness of some magicians to latch onto an initial working solution has been said to mean they can be uncreative. Pritchard, Matt. 2021, September 24. *Comments at SOMA Magic & Creativity Webinar*. https://scienceofmagicassoc.org/blog/2021/8/23/magic-creativity-webinar.

24 Schneider, Tanja and Woolgar, S. 2012. 'Technologies of Ironic Revelation', *Consumption Markets & Culture*, *15*(2):169–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2012.654959.

audience group and one foot in the inner world of conjuring—might be regarded as being in an ideal position for judging what counts as strong magic, what works and so on. However, such a tack has not been evident in my apprenticeship. I cannot recall a single instance in a magic convention, magazine article, online discussion group, 'how to' manual and so on in which beginners have been placed in an elevated or even potentially advantageous position for scrutinizing conjuring routines. Instead, it is only those at the extremes that are presented as able to really judge what is what: lay audiences and topflight professionals.

In the ways indicated in the last several paragraphs, *Strong Magic* offers seemingly contrasting, even directly opposing, claims regarding whether familiarization and experience aids or hinders discernment. This could be taken as presenting an incoherent message that is therefore problematic. However, the presence of opposing ways of thinking is arguably a pervasive feature of everyday and professional advice-giving. For instance, everyday common-sense maxims both suggest:

- 'You're never too old to learn' and 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks';
- 'Wise people think alike' and 'Fools seldom differ';
- 'Hold fast to the words of your elders' and 'Wise individuals make proverbs; fools repeat them'.

As psychologist Michael Billig and colleagues have argued, the existence of contrasting ways of approaching questions about how to act is widespread. More than this though, it is unavoidable.[25] It is unavoidable because the availability of opposing ways of thinking provides the very basis for individuals and groups to think through what should be done in a specific situation. In the case of assessing magic, for instance, the extensive experience of a conjuror might well justify confidence about how well they can scrutinize routines. However, such experience might well justify caution in a different case. For some effects, the adage 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' might be deemed to apply. At other times, the imperative for innovation might hold sway.

25 Billig, M. 1996. *Arguing and Thinking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Billig, M., S. Condo, D. Edwards, M. Gane, D. Middleton and A. Radley. 1989. *Ideological Dilemmas*. London: Sage.

At times, Ortiz himself notes the scope for his guidance to be countered. In offering evaluations of card effects, he also contends, 'I hasten to add that I know full well that for every statement I've made there is at least one really great card effect that contradicts it'.[26] Instead of his advice being fit for all, he goes on to say: 'However, the prejudices I've described above are right for *me*. Following these biases has helped give my performances a distinctive and consistent look…'.[27] With such qualifications basic on aesthetic judgements, the overall evaluation given is presented as stemming from a particular way of thinking about magic, one that readers might be wise to heed if they are aligned with Ortiz's style preferences…but one they might choose to ignore, too.

Science of Magic

Ortiz's ability to assess the perceptiveness and reliability of other magicians derives from his real-world experience and professional achievements. In this way, he assumes the status as a kind of connoisseur. His intensive and attentive immersion into card magic has enabled him to appreciate aspects of magic that pass other professionals by and to skirt around trap doors into which others keep falling.

Whilst practical experience has traditionally served as the chief grounding for claims to expertise in entertainment magic, it is not the only one. For many decades, fields of science have sought to explain why sleights and other forms of trickery prove so hard to detect.[28] In recent years, under the label 'The Science of Magic,[29] renewed interest has emerged in utilizing magic effects as experimental stimuli in efforts to characterize visual perception and cognitive heuristics.[30] One review summed up the principles identified through this latest phase of research as:

26 Ortiz, Darwin. 1994. *Strong Magic*. Washington, DC: Kaufman & Co.: 308.
27 *Ibid*. Emphasis in original.
28 Lamont, P. 2006. 'Magician as Conjuror', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, *4*(1): 21–33.
29 https://scienceofmagicassoc.org/home
30 Kuhn, G. 2019. *Experiencing the Impossible*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. ttps://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11227.001.0001; as well as Kuhn, G., Caffaratti, H., Teszka, R. and Rensink, R.A. 2016. 'A Psychologically-Based Taxonomy of Misdirection'. In: *The Psychology of Magic and the Magic of Psychology* (November), Raz, A., Olson, J. A. and Kuhn, G. (Eds). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01392.

> First, some things, though directly in a person's line of sight, are not perceptible at all. Second, people do not consciously perceive everything that can be perceived. Third, what is consciously perceived depends upon attention. Individuals will fail to see even what is in their direct line of sight or fail to feel an easily perceptible touch if their attention is elsewhere. Fourth, people sometimes misinterpret what they perceive. Fifth, individuals' memories fail in ways that permit changes to occur before their eyes that they do not consciously perceive. Sixth, these failures can be regularly and lawfully produced by specific manipulations of individuals' perceptual and sensory systems.[31]

In short, what is observable depends on the means of observing. As a result, how we believe we observe is often not how we observe in practice.

A further goal in The Science of Magic is to take the counterintuitive lessons learned to improve how magic is performed. One reason this is possible is because—despite being adept at harnessing perceptive and cognitive limitations—conjurors are often as susceptible to being fooled as anyone else. This is so, not least, because magic effects can rely on automatic visual and cognitive processes that are not directly noticeable.[32]

In *Experiencing the Impossible*, psychologist and magician Gustav Kuhn marshalled findings from The Science of Magic to propose how research could advance performances. Herein, even while magicians know how to exploit perceptual failures, he argued 'I do not think they fully appreciate their magnitude, nor do they fully understand why these changes occur.'[33] Take the example of change blindness—the perceptual phenomenon whereby modifications can be introduced in visual stimuli without observers noticing. As Kuhn argued, many professionals can be surprised by the scope for change blindness. As a result:

> Inasmuch as all of us (including magicians) intuitively overestimate the amount that we consciously perceive, magicians could be developing

31 Villalobos, J.G., Ogundimu, O.O., and Davis, D. 2014. 'Magic Tricks'. In: *Encyclopedia of Deception*, T. R. Levine (Ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage: 637. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483306902.

32 Ekroll, Vebjørn Bilge Sayim, and Wagemans, Johan. 2017. 'The Other Side of Magic', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(1): 91–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616654676.

33 Kuhn, G. 2019. *Experiencing the Impossible*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 220. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11227.001.0001.

> bolder and more daring techniques. Magicians typically assume that attention simply refers to where you look, but our work shows that people often miss seeing things that are right in front of their eyes.[34]

For instance, not only can spectators miss it when the color of playing cards is changed, because they are drawn to look at a magician's face, they are just as likely to miss the color change when looking at the cards.[35] The extent to which people can miss what is taking place in front of them means that even psychologists such as Kuhn are surprised by the scope of what can go undetected.

In The Science of Magic then, research data (rather than experience or status) is advanced as the ultimate gauge of perception. This is so because no one—lay spectator, veteran magician or experimental psychologist—can fully appreciate from their everyday experiences the fallibility of our senses.[36]

Accounting for Perception, Building Proficiency

In terms of my development, reading professional magicians like Ortiz, as well as research scientists like Kuhn, provided concepts and theories for interpreting my observations of conjuring and undertaking experimentations as part of shows.

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to engage with the themes of proficiency and perception in both professional and research literature, but with a particular starting concern. Following in the tradition of ethnomethodology-related analysis of sight by Michael Lynch, Charles Goodwin, Tia DeNora, and others,[37] my concern is with how

34 *Ibid*.: 221. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11227.001.0001.

35 A finding which Kuhn and others elaborate in Kuhn, Gustav, Teszka, Robert, Tenaw, Natalia and Kingstone, Alan. 2016. 'Don't Be Fooled! Attentional Responses to Social Cues in a Face-to-Face and Video Magic Trick Reveals Greater Top-Down Control for Overt than Covert Attention', *Cognition*, *146*: 136–142. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2015.08.005.

36 A conclusion that, while radical, is also in line with many past commonplace orientations to sight; see Clark, Stuart. 2007. *Vanities of the Eye*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.2752/175183409x12550007730345.

37 Lynch, Michael. 2013. 'Seeing Fish'. In: *Ethnomethodology at Play*, P. Tolmie and M. Rouncefield (Eds). London: Routledge: 89–104; Goodwin, C. 1994. 'Professional Vision', *American Anthropologist*, *96*(3): 606–633; DeNora, Tia. 2014. *Making Sense of Reality*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446288320; and Coulter, J. and Parsons, E.D. 1991. 'The Praxiology of Perception', *Inquiry*, *33*: 251–272.

determinations about who can perceive what are advanced as part of specific interactions. In Chapter 4, for instance, I examined how conjuring instructors marshalled distinctions between 'looking' and 'feeling' as a way of sensitizing learners about how to appear natural. This chapter extends that analysis by asking when and how the ability to perceive is made relevant within specific settings. In particular, I examine two types of interactional activities—performances and face-to-face instruction—for how the spoken word, gestures, gaze and other actions organize the place of perception and the abilities of those present.

Let me begin through a personal example.

In terms of the performances, Chapter 3 discussed the small group sessions I started in 2018. In total, 30 sessions were recorded. Particularly early on into running these events, I had little experience in conjuring. Although the self-working tricks in the first 13 sessions did not require sophisticated card sleights, one of the nine did require pushing a card out of the deck to glimpse it, and another entailed covertly turning over a deck. Almost all of the nine effects in the second set of ten sessions involved one or more physical sleights—false shuffles, lifting multiple cards, forcing participants to select a predetermined card, etc. On some occasions, too, when the cards were out of the required order, I needed to rearrange them at the table without arousing suspicion.

In their own way, these recorded sessions realized the call by Kuhn to devise bold occasions for testing perception. This was so not because of the technical sophistication of the methods for the effects, but because of my lack of experience. Due to my lack of abilities, I expected that the jiggery-pokery with the cards would be frequently detectable.

Repeatedly in our discussions, participants offered unprompted explanations for how the effects were accomplished. In addition, I deliberately asked them for their thoughts. And yet, rarely did participants forward (even partially) accurate identifications. While what counts as verbally recognizing a relevant element of the methods for a trick is open to interpretation,[38] I would put the number of such occasions across the first 23 sessions (so the initial three routines) somewhere in the high single digits. These experiences are in line with the overall claims made about perception and cognition within The Science of Magic.

38 For one breakdown of forms of explanation, see Smith, W. et al. (forthcoming). 'Explaining the Unexplainable: People's Response to Magical Technologies'.

Across all 30 sessions, another absence was of note. In only two sessions were suggestions voiced by participants that their perceptions could be significantly fallible. Neither were more general claims offered that what was observable significantly depended on the means of observing or reporting. Instead, participants made much more delimited claims, such as that sight can be misdirected (for instance, see Excerpt 3.4, Line 22).[39]

In brief, participants accounted for the unfolding scene through a realist language according to which a familiar world is out there, independent of our actions, and delivered to our consciousness (as we attend to it via our senses).

Through such accounting, the scene was rendered what Melvin Pollner called 'mundane'. In his classic study, Pollner identified 'mundane reasoning' as a ubiquitous form of constructing the world wherein individuals 'experience and describe themselves as 'reacting to' or 'reflecting' an essentially objective domain or world'.[40] Within the traffic court proceedings he examined, for instance, witnesses to an incident could offer radically divergent accounts of what took place. Judges seeking to adjudicate 'what happened' were thus in a position of striving to determine the facts while also being reliant on conflicting observations.[41] Pollner detailed how courtroom judges could both determine the 'facts of the matter' based on divergent accounts, as well as preserve the starting presumption that there was an essentially out-there, ordinary and objective world to be found that could be taken to exist independently of anyone.

Participants in my sessions accounted for the unfolding scene through similar realist conventions. Instead of calling into question the determinacy of perception, participants proposed stock explanations for how effects were accomplished. These echoed popular understandings of the methods of magic and were overwhelmingly incorrect or, at best, referring to highly general principles. Erroneous explanations included:

39 In this case, the contention was made that it is possible to fail to see what is in one's direct line of sight.

40 Pollner, M. 1987. *Mundane Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: xv.

41 For a historical analysis of how conflicting observations have been alternatively dealt within judicial settings, see Saltzman, Benjamin A. 2019. *Bonds of Secrecy*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press. https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812296846.

psychological priming, the placement of cards up sleeves, the use of hidden mirrors and (in the case of the self-working tricks) physical sleight dexterity.[42]

An important facet of this attribution is what it meant for our identities. Relating to the self-working tricks, the belief that I was engaging in (and even that I could engage at all in) covert sleight-of-hand movements invested in me technical abilities I did not possess (for instance, see Excerpt 3.4, Lines 16, 20). More generally, in the absence of accounting for magic through reference to our shared limited human perceptual and cognitive capabilities, attempts to explain what was taking place repeatedly evoked *my* skills, *my* plans, *my* doings, and so on.[43] When I was rendered as possessing extraordinary skills, the ordinary status of the world did not come under scrutiny. Almost without exception, across the 30 recorded sessions, participants did *not* voice any concerns about the fallibility of perception and cognition.

Two of the 30 recorded sessions proved to be the exceptions. Within these sessions, reference to the limits of perception related to 'perceptual' or 'inattentional' blindness. This blindness refers to the way an object in plain sight can be rendered hidden because attention is focused on other objects in our field of vision. In both sessions, the iconic example of the 'invisible gorilla' psychological experiment was cited by participants.[44] While this experiment was only mentioned in passing during one session, in the other it figured as a recurring reference point. This latter audience consisted of three philosophers of mind, all versed in the science of human perception. One trick entailed a participant signing a selected card. Later, that card was selected again, and this time I signed it as well and then returned it to the deck. Several minutes later, the card

42 As such, participants' prior familiarization with magic in general served to bolster specious interpretations of what was taking place in a specific instance. In this way, with more familiarity with the methods in magic came scope for participants to entangle themselves with their own explanations.

43 To distinguish these interactions from other historical periods, no claims were made about the illusionary qualities of nature nor the possibility that demonic forces were manipulating perception of the kind discussed in Clark, Stuart. 1997. *Thinking with Demons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Clark, Stuart. 2007. *Vanities of the Eye*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

44 As recounted in Simons, Daniel J. and Chabris, Christopher F. 1999. 'Gorillas in Our Midst: Sustained Inattentional Blindness for Dynamic Events', *Perception*, *28*: 1059–1074. If you are reading this because you don't know the gorilla experiment, then you must visit: http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/gorilla_experiment.html

signed by both of us appeared inside a capped water bottle on the table. The following exchange ensued after P2 discussed recently rewatching a version of the gorilla experiment:

Excerpt 5.1—Session 3

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
1	P1: But that kind of a trick, if you focus on that maybe you are a little, but with this kind of thing it makes me feel, oh crazy, because, it, there is a lot of time you have to, it takes	
2	P1: [to]	*P1: gestures toward bottle; then makes opening bottle gestures.*
3	P3: [Yeah]	
4	P1: do this, to open.	
5	P3: Yeah, yeah	
6	P1: So you have to	
7	P3: Yeah, yeah.	
8	((multiple voices talking over each other))	
9	P2: That's how inattentive we were. That's how inattentive we were.	
10	((laughter, multiple voices))	
11	P3: I mean it is good that he pulls the card and then signs.	
12	P1: Maybe it was since, it	
13	P1: [was there since]	
14	P3: [NO, NO, I don't know.]	
15	P1: When we started	
16	P2: But he could have easily taken the bottle down like from the side.	*P2: Gestures with right hand moving down over the edge of the table*
17	P1: No, NO, NO	

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
18	BR: I did it right here in the middle of the table. Was this your card?	*Brian: Energetic simulation of twisting a bottle cap open at the center of the table*
19	P2: REALLY. REALLY. If you like played the tape and that is what happened I won't, I would not be surprised.	
20	((Group laughter))	
21	BR: I push the card down.	*Brian: Simulates pushing card into a bottle at the center of the table*
22	P2: I was, I was so inattentive. I was like so into like shuffling	
23	P2: ((laughter))	
24	P2: You could have put on a gorilla costume.	
25	P3: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Who would have noticed? ((laughter)) He is naked.	
26	((Group laughter))	

In this unfolding interaction, a sense of what happened was reconstructed. Inattentional blindness became an explanation that not only provided a sense of how the card-in-the-bottle feat was accomplished, but also a sense of participants' flawed perceptual capabilities, as well as my practiced abilities.

However, interestingly, this effect did *not* rely on inattentional blindness. I should say it did not in any significant sense. The card-in-the-bottle was only readily visible on the table to the participants for several seconds before I directed their attention to it. Even if they had seen it at the start of this period, the intended goal would have been achieved.[45]

45 Funnily enough, the 'Card in Bottle' instructions I'd learnt *had* suggested making use of inattentional blindness by prescribing the card-in-the-bottle be placed in view for a lengthy period. I did not take this path, though. As a relative beginner, I

In making the concept of 'inattentional blindness' relevant to our moment-to-moment interactions, these participants thereby created a sense of what was going on and the identities and capabilities of those involved. Through mobilizing their existing knowledge about the psychology of perception, they came to reinforce a sense that they were perceptually flawed and that I, as a performer, skillfully harnessed this incapability. In other words, unlike the other recorded sessions, in this, the notion that the world was *not* 'out there' as a given phenomenon provided that basis for making magic and attributing heightened competencies.

Schooling Perception

Relating to how perceptual limits were made relevant to interactions, the previous section focused on how participants in routines co-performed and inflated my capabilities as a novice. This section turns to a different kind of activity in which perceptual abilities were at stake, namely face-to-face tutorials.[46] I will consider how the limits of perception were made witnessable.

Previous research across diverse fields of art and craft suggests that face-to-face teachings of bodily skills are often characterized by embodied forms of epistemic and charismatic authority in which expertise is shared through gesture, repetition and sensory apprehension.[47] For instance, in the case of operatic masterclasses, teachers engage in varied forms of hands-on instruction so as to demonstrate how students should comport themselves. That can mean gesturing to highlight precise movements necessary to breathe properly. It can mean teachers more or less subtly

adopted a far more cautious strategy for getting the card in the bottle. This meant the card in the bottle was only able to be seen by the participants for a short time.

46 Jones, Graham. 2011. *Trade of the Tricks*. London: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520270466.001.0001.

47 E.g., Evans, J., Davis, B. and Rich, E. 2009. 'The Body Made Flesh: Embodied Learning and the Corporeal Device', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *30*(4): 391–406. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690902954588; Ivinson, G. 2012. 'The Body and Pedagogy: Beyond Absent, Moving Bodies in Pedagogic Practice', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *33*(4): 489–506. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.662822; Marchand, T.H.J. 2008. 'Muscles, Morals and Mind: Craft Apprenticeship and the Formation of Person', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *56*(3): 245–271. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2008.00407.x.

re-positioning students' bodies.[48] Or it can mean teachers undertaking and describing actions with their own bodies that students are meant to mimic. In such instructions, showing and telling are intertwined. It is through such acts of showing and telling that teachers affirm their proficiency.

The previous argument set out in *Performing Deception* suggests displaying proficiency in magic is likely to be a tricky endeavor. Learning magic requires utilizing perceptions to discern what is shown and told, but learning magic also involves coming into an appreciation of the limits of our perceptions. How, then, are the senses explained, honed and disregarded as part of face-to-face student-teacher training? How are appeals to perceptions used to evidence, demonstrate and challenge notions of who can appreciate what is taking place? How do teachers establish their authority to speak for others' experiences?

The remainder of this chapter addresses these questions by revisiting the masterclass I attended with renowned magician Dani DaOrtiz (see Chapter 4). I want to draw out how the instructions cultivated sensitivities for moving between varied orientations to our perceptions.

As background comments, the instructional sessions as part of the masterclass largely consisted of us (a group of seven students) sitting around a table physically orientated toward DaOrtiz (see Figure 5). As an instance of masterclass training, this event differed from many others in that we as students were not asked to perform so that DaOrtiz could offer appraisals.[49] Instead, he performed a copious number of effects, worked through the mechanics for many of those effects with us as students, and we listened to and asked questions about the wider psychological theorizing that informed his chaotic style. Through such activities in which Dani held sway over the floor, we were invited to witness his performance skills, the quality of which we gauged individually. As well, the bedazzled reactions of other students, the applauses we mutually created, as well as the collective laughter that abound reinforced a sense of his skills in producing magic. As another

48 Atkinson, Paul, Watermeyer, Richard and Delamont, Sara. 2013. 'Expertise, Authority and Embodied Pedagogy: Operatic Masterclasses', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *34*(4): 487–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.723868

49 As in 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.

measure of the authority he achieved, we as students rarely verbally queried his contentions.

Fig. 5 — A Chaotic Practice Table[50]

One recurring theme was his invocation of the need to distinguish between the magician's and the spectator's point of view. In line with other practitioners already surveyed in this book, developing an appreciation for the latter was presented as vital. By way of understanding how experiencing magic from the spectator's point of view related to proficiency and perception, below I want to attend to how the masterclass combined notions of:

- what was directly perceptually accessible and what required refined acumen;
- the relevance (or not) of prior familiarity with magic;
- demonstrating and telling.

The masterclass began with a display of competency and charisma. Our first session together consisted of over two hours of DaOrtiz performing seemingly effortless table-based card effects in his characteristic chaotic style. Again and again, such effects led to expressions of bafflement,

50 Photo: Brian Rappert (28 July 2019).

statements of 'Wow', and looks of incredulity. As instances of modern conjuring, these effects repeatedly traded on the notion that we as spectators were being shown what we needed to see regarding how the cards were being handled. And yet, through the improbable feats undertaken, it was also made clear, too, that much was hidden

At times, DaOrtiz used repetition to illustrate that our conjuring know-how as students in a masterclass did not prevent us from being fooled. For instance, the masterclass included a variety of 'situational effects' that were meant to function as part of the build-up to major effects. Among those effects included a playing card that repeatedly appeared in a seemingly empty box. The masterclass also included the recurrent use of some sleights. We were repeatedly invited to freely select any card from a deck, but DaOrtiz ensured we selected the one he wanted us to pick by using a technique called 'forcing'. Again and again. Through the process of repetition, we were invited to consider the limits of what we could discern even with our pre-existing knowledge of card sleights in general and our knowledge that DaOrtiz was performing sleights in these instances.

The masterclass also varied in the types of verbal statements that accompanied effects. As instances of modern conjuring, DaOrtiz's performances regularly incorporated patter that acted to purposefully direct attention. For example, he offered statements such as 'You remember you shuffled the deck'. Many such contentions were false and intended to mislead (see below). At other times though, DaOrtiz's statements functioned to highlight what was taking place so that the chaotic happenings could later be (partially) reconstructed from memory. In such instances, instead of us as an audience simply being able to take everything in, we needed assistance from him to properly attend to the scene at hand.

Just as the performances entailed a play between the achievement of public visibility and need for discriminating attention, DaOrtiz's explanations for effects could employ nuanced plays. For instance, a recurring teaching technique he used was to perform an effect and then critique that performance from an imaginary spectator's point of view. In this way, even while the students present were spectators to the magic, we were not regarded as being able to judge the displayed effects properly. Instead, DaOrtiz's teachings pointed us towards what

might well not be adequately appreciated. To recount one instance, in the masterclass the power of direct tricks that do not require spectators to process significant amounts of information was underscored. To illustrate what counted as 'too much information', DaOrtiz devised the following display, in which a card inexplicably moves between two piles on the table:

Excerpt 5.2—Masterclass

Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
If the spectator do two piles and the card appear in this pile, don't divide the focus. Because if I do that.	*Cuts the deck into two piles. Points to one pile. Puts piles together and picks up combined deck.*
	Places deck back on table.
Cut	*Student cuts deck into two piles, right (#1) and left (#2).*
OK	
Ah, take any card.	*DaOrtiz picks up right pile (#1) and spreads it in his hands. Student takes a card.*
Alright	*DaOrtiz moves left pile (#2) further to the left of the table.*
Ah, put the card here	*Splits pile initially on the right (#1) in hands. Student puts card in the middle gap.*
Do you remember your card? OK	*DaOrtiz shuffles pile in hand (#1), places it back on the right side of the table.*
Now, pa, pa, pa, pa	*Turns left to pick up the initial left side pile (#2).*
Now I do here. Tagata, tagata, tagata, tagata, tagata, tagata, tagata, tagata, tagata	*Shuffles pile #2*
Ahhhm can you take the packet please.	*Turns back right. Gives pile #2 to student.*

Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
And now look, I try, try to travel. It is not here.	*DaOrtiz Rubs hands together. Gestures above pile #1 on table. Spreads pile #1 face up.*
And now one card is, uh, here.	*Takes pile #2 from student and spreads cards to identify chosen card in pile #2.*
This is a s*#t because one pack is here before there, now here. I don't, what is happening here?	*Hand arms open.* *Points in multiple directions using both hands.* *Waves with both arms. Open arms.*
I don't understand. Look, you like a magician say, wow, look, my transfer, my palm, were unbelievable. The spectator say, understand nothing.	*Places hands on chest. Performs hand movements simulating sleights. Right palm opens.*

Herein, through his uttered words and visible movements, DaOrtiz sought to perform an effect. We, as students, looked on. More than this, he sought to make visible and felt certain aspects of what was performed that we might not have adequately noticed. In other words, how the actions of the magician can be 's*#t'. He did so by drawing our attention to how spectators' attention can be divided. As he contended, a magician might well not appreciate the problems of the performance because of their preoccupation with the execution of physical techniques. As a student-spectator, I took this display as both inviting us to experience that the trick was flawed but indirectly cautioning us how we—as magicians—might well be oblivious to its faults because of our inability to recognize what is in front of us. At conferences, lectures and in training instructions, I have experienced many such fraught demonstrations that both invite and question attention.

While the instructions above entailed crafting a trick in such a way that we could experience what was being pointed toward, there were many occasions in the masterclass that did not involve any *direct* acts of showing. In addressing how to deal with audiences' unexpected actions, in evoking a sense of the contingencies of live performances, in proposing how we would later recall the effects he performed and in other

respects, there was no straightforward way DaOrtiz could demonstrate his claims to us there and then on the table. Instead, we as students were asked to imagine, simulate or otherwise speculate. In doing so, we also took on various roles. This included naïve, discerning and belligerent spectators, as well as the role of skilled and novice magicians. Consider one example. After a query from me about how he was using words to affect the actions of spectators, this exchange followed:

Excerpt 5.3—Masterclass

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
1	DD: For example. Ay, yeah, yeah. Is difficult when you are not in context, because I need to be in a trick.	
2	BR: Yeah,	
3	BR: [yeah	
4	DD: [But it does not matter. OK. I tell you, ahhhh, we shuffle the deck. OK. Cut and complete.	*BR: Cuts deck and then brings pile on top of each other*.
5	DD: And square. Very good?	*BR: Squares deck*.
6	BR: Yes.	
7	DD: You remember, shuffled the deck. And you cut and complete, right? OK.	*BR: Says nothing*.
8	DD: And what the people listen and the people feel is he shuffled the deck. He cut and complete. But he never shuffled. I shuffled. Why? Because he say yes. But why he say yes? Because he say yes to the last part of my question.	
9	BR: Ah, huh, huh, huh	

No	Direct transcript	Non-verbal actions
10	DD: I, if I say, you shuffled and compete and you shuffled cut and complete, right? He say, no because he feel, the two things, shuffle and cut, is in the same sentence. You shuffled the deck and cut and complete, right? And he say, NO. I shuffle but, I cut but I do not shuffle. But what happen if I say, you shuffled, and now I put exclamation. You shuffled the deck and you cut and complete, right?	*DD turns to face a different student*.
11	BR: Hmm.	
12	DD: He tell me YES but in the last part. Not in the beginning.	

In this passage, DaOrtiz addresses how to get audience members to state and even feel for themselves that a deck has been both cut and shuffled by a spectator. Securing such a conviction is advantageous because it undermines the prospect that the audience will believe that an effect could be the result of the conjuror's dexterity with the cards. Within this description, DaOrtiz calls for a complex set of perspectival movements on our part as students, in which what is perceived is the outcome of our interactions together around the table. To give my interpretation of what he called for:

- In Lines 1 DaOrtiz began by offering meta-commentary that qualified what was about to be displayed. This suggested the actions that followed could not simply be taken on their own but need to be somehow contextualized within the doings of a trick. However, in Line 4 he went on to state that the de-rooted status of what was to follow did not matter, a qualification that placed a further question mark over what was about to be shown.
- Line 7 posed a question to me about whether I remembered the deck had been shuffled and cut. However, no affirmative response was given. Owing to the artificial conditions under

which this question was posed, it seems unlikely that one was expected by DaOrtiz. Rather than focusing on what I or others thought about the manipulations to the deck, Line 8 shift to evoke a sense of what a generic audience would hear and feel. We as students were asked to move from our appreciations of the situation at hand to put ourselves in the place of such generic spectators. As such, the elaboration in Line 8 provides a way of making retrospective sense of the question in Lines 7.

- In Line 8 DaOrtiz carried on under the assumption that an affirmative response was given. Herein it was suggested that audiences will be influenced by the positive response of the questioned spectator. Then the explanation for why the spectator says 'yes' is provided toward the end of Line 8: the spectator is responding to the last part of the two-part question posed in Line 7. At this moment we as students were asked to speculate how this might be the case and why it might matter. Doing so called for us to remember back to the specifics of what was said, even as those specifics were meant to lead us astray.
- In Lines 10, the meaning of the 'last part of my question' became clearer because the previous articulation of the question (Line 7) is described as including both propositions (you shuffled and you cut and complete) in the same breath. As DaOrtiz contended, when taken as spoken together, the truth status of both claims was interpreted as relevant for the spectator. As such, DaOrtiz suggested that a spectator will decline the suggestion that they shuffled because they did not. Line 10 repeated the bundling of the two propositions together. However, at the end of Line 10 the second proposition of cutting the deck was verbally emphasized. Now being clearly drawn to the contrast provided by the emphasis, we as students were asked to recognize how the two propositions would be interpreted differently (even if my response in Line 11 did not offer a clear affirmation to the question posed at the end of Line 10).

In this segment, as elsewhere in the masterclass, we as a group of students and a teacher interacted in ways that sought to provide retrospective meaning to what had already taken place that thereby also conditioned how meaning was meant to be made of subsequent events.

After a further exercise in the power of purposefully sequencing and delivering questions to spectators than what is given in 5.3, DaOrtiz would argue that with such techniques you could do 'anything you want'.[51] Despite what might be taken as the speculative and counterfactual status of the demonstration, the contentions forwarded were as persuasive to me during the masterclass as they remained so in relistening to the recordings many months afterward.

To return to the wider theme of what was made visible in the masterclass, at other times, DaOrtiz simply told us what we would experience without seeking to demonstrate his claims. He compared the aesthetic merits of different ways of lifting cards, he contrasted the affective potential of similar effects, he suggested what cannot be visually perceived in a particular situation, and so on. In doing so, DaOrtiz told us what we needed to appreciate rather than leaving it to us to derive our own conclusions or rather than explicitly seeking confirmation (see, for example, Chapter 4 regarding the 'feel' of a double-lift, pages 93–95).

The previous paragraphs speak to some of the ways perception was positioned in the masterclass. Within our moment-to-moment interactions, a sense of experience as shared and diverse was conveyed through verbal and non-verbal actions. As I have come to understand it, part of the demand of learning magic is to be able to move between varied orientations to sensorial experiences. Those orientations entail recognizing what is readily accessible, appreciating what requires refined judgement, perceiving with foreknowledge, disregarding foreknowledge, watching what is demonstrated, disregarding what is shown and imagining what is not shown. The ability to move between such orientations is a crucial form of competency.

As I have come to understand it, too, part of the complex and contradictory demand of being regarded as an authority figure like

51 For an analysis of verbal misdirection in teaching magic, see Jones, Graham and Shweder, Lauren. 2003. 'The Performance of Illusion and Illusionary Performatives: Learning the Language of Theatrical Magic', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, 13*(1): 51–70. https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2003.13.1.51.

Dani DaOrtiz is to be able to account for what takes place, what does not take place, what is real and what is imaginary.