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Music as Misdirection

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Magic and Vegas have a lot in common. Both have a reputation for bad taste and cheap thrills, and they've both generally been ignored—or at best ridiculed—by the art-critical establishment. It's fitting, then, that no city loves magic like Vegas loves magic. Today, more than one-third of its top-selling shows feature magic, and this means that no complete treatment of art and entertainment in Sin City can afford to ignore it.¹ But what's at risk here is more than theoretical completeness. Magic provides a distinctive—and distinctively powerful—form of aesthetic experience whose appeal spans very different cultures, age groups, and historical periods.² Recognizing this opens a variety of theoretical doors and raises a host of questions, among them the issue of the relationship between magic and other genres and art forms.³ Indeed, magic performances are often complex theatrical events that incorporate drama, humor, elements of horror, and—critically for present concern—music. While these are sometimes incidental accretions, mere presentational window dressing for the magic trick itself, they can also be tools in the magician's toolbox. For example, magicians widely appreciate that a joke can be good for more than a laugh: in virtue of how it shapes the audience's attention, it can directly contribute to the success of a trick.⁴

In this brief chapter, I'll argue that the same is true of music and that magicians employ it not only to set the mood and highlight dramatic moments, but also to facilitate the deception that's necessary for the experience of magic itself. As we will see, music can frame, stimulate, and illuminate, but it can simultaneously also block and blind. No wonder, then, that it's everywhere in Vegas, which, like magic, works only if we're receptive to the illusions it openly manufactures.

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The Nature and Experience of Magic

Magic tricks are, of course, meant to fool us. But the magician deceives her audience only as a means to an end. Her real aim is to create the illusion as of an impossible event—say, the transformation or vanishing of a playing card, unaided human flight, or an episode of mind reading. At the same time, however, she is open about her deception; she presents her illusions for what they are. This distinguishes the magician from the charlatan who uses the tools of magic performance to mislead his audience about the nature of reality. Both deceive their audiences; only the magician is honest about doing so.

The magician's honesty has ethical import, but it also has aesthetic significance. It's critical to magic's aesthetic goals that the audience have no illusions about the fact that they're witnessing illusions. Why? First, consider that, if the audience doesn't believe that what seems to be happening onstage is *impossible*—and so, something that *cannot* happen—then they will not experience the performance as magical. Second, if something impossible seems to happen, then we know it *must* be an illusion.⁵ Thus, the magician presents herself as an entertainer, not as a “real wizard.” This theatrical frame not only telegraphs respect for the audience (as if we'd believe she can really fly, or make coins disappear, or . . .), but also sets the stage for a complex game of intellectual cat-and-mouse: the magician promises an illusion as of an impossible event; implicitly, in so doing, she invites us to figure it out, to suss out her “method,” and her main job is to sustain the illusion by preventing us from doing so. Critically, however, a good performance should leave us not just ignorant of how the illusion was *actually* accomplished, but *entirely at a loss for any plausible explanation* for what we've seen. Only then will we experience it as impossible.⁶ In this respect, magic should leave us in the position of being unable to make sense of the experience it provides.⁷ We know it's a trick—that is, that it has an explanation—but absent any candidate account, we can't see how it *could* be a trick. *This* is what it means to have the experience of magic.⁸

In normal circumstances, to be unable to make sense of an experience might be quite unpleasant; or, if you're a scientist, it might prompt serious inquiry. However, in a magic show, it's safe to be baffled. You needn't worry about your grip on reality or if the laws of physics need revision. Still, there is a pressing question here: Why does anyone actually *enjoy* magic? Indeed, why do so *many* people love it? Relatedly, why does strong magic elicit such powerful emotional responses? After all, we all know it's just a trick!⁹ These are among the interesting psychological/philosophical questions that attention to magic raises. For present purposes, however, the central idea is that magic performances centrally involve a good-natured, playful attempt to deprive the audience of any way to explain what they've witnessed.

Understanding magic in this way reveals one reason it's such a good fit with Vegas, where promises of wealth, glamour, and easy sex are ubiquitous. As if it were a magic show, in Vegas, everyone knows it's a trick: the promises are hollow, and the house always wins in the end. At the same time, however, in the lavish setting of a big hotel, in a club filled with beautiful bodies, or on the floor of a casino with hundreds of thousands of dollars literally *right there on the table*, just a few bets away, it can be hard to see how it *could* be a trick. After all, *the opulence is real, those are real bodies, and that's real money*. Like a good magic performance, then, Vegas openly presents convincing illusions, and they are powerful enough to get us to play along, even against our better judgment.

Misdirection

In magic, *misdirection* is the generic term for any technique that manipulates the audience's attention to better conceal the method by which a trick is accomplished. Unsurprisingly, misdirection is generally effective only when it's not obvious. For example, to use an explosion on one side of the stage as cover for vanishing a dove on the other side of the stage is the worst sort of misdirection. Rightly or wrongly, the audience will sense that, had they not looked away, they might have seen how the dove was vanished; so, they will hardly experience its disappearance as an impossibility. The key to effective misdirection is therefore that the audience should have the impression that the magician never actually manipulated their attention. The best misdirection is invisible *as* misdirection.

Here is an example. In sleight-of-hand close-up magic, which is generally performed with spectators within normal conversational range (such as standing together in a group or seated together at a table), magicians make sophisticated use of everyday social cues and behaviors as misdirection. Normally, when you look someone in the eye in a conversational setting, they involuntarily return the favor—at least for an instant. This is regular human behavior, and we hardly ever register it. So, when the magician glances at us, we will generally briefly shift our attention to her face, and, so, away from her hands. This alone can make the difference between noticing and failing to notice a piece of sleight of hand. Indeed, her hands may never actually go out of view, and we may later (incorrectly) report that we never took our eyes off of them. The fact is that we are blissfully unaware of how we allocate our attention in normal social interaction, and we are very bad at assessing how blind this makes us to what's going on around us. Just a glance in your direction—which you'd almost never experience as misdirection—can weaken your attentional focus enough to make you effectively blind to the magician's method. In expert sleight-of-hand magic, a performance may include dozens of such moments, some highly choreographed,

some improvised according to the situation.¹⁰ The question, then, is how can music be used in this way?

Music as Misdirection

Historically, the dominant form of magic in Las Vegas is “stage magic,” in which the performer works from the stage and is widely separated from most of the audience. Volunteers may be called up to participate in the act, but the show is designed to be witnessed from a distance. Stage acts therefore typically involve large-scale illusions or sleight of hand with highly visible objects such as doves, large candles, and bright scarves. Canonical Vegas stage acts of this sort include Lance Burton, Johnny Thompson, Siegfried and Roy, David Copperfield, Mac King, and Penn and Teller. But thanks in part to the rise in popularity of sleight of hand and “street magic” performers such as David Blaine, as well as the refinement of camera and projection technology that allows large audiences to have intimate experiences of tricks performed onstage with small objects, it was only a matter of time before close-up magic would come play an important role in the Vegas magic scene. The key catalyst here was *America’s Got Talent*. Two recent winners—Mat Franco (2014) and Shin Lim (2018)—are primarily close-up card magicians, and both now have successful residencies at Vegas hotels. And while almost all Vegas magic acts make some use of music, arguably no contemporary magician makes better use of it than Shin Lim.¹¹

Close-up magic is typically conversational and doesn’t often feature music. By contrast, Lim’s signature close-up sleight-of-hand performances involve minimal conversation and are carefully choreographed to dramatic, mostly instrumental musical tracks. In this respect, Lim’s act resembles the otherwise very different Vegas act of the late Siegfried and Roy, which, instead of sleight of hand, featured exotic cats, big-box illusions, and scantily clad assistants. Despite their differences in style, both acts use music their audiences would recognize as contemporary. Lim’s musical choices range from sparsely punctuated atmospheric ambient sound to drum-heavy post-rock. By contrast, Siegfried and Roy deployed electronic music with a decidedly twentieth-century character—often using popular tracks—as well as grandiose orchestral pieces of the sort readers might associate with the schmaltzy theatrics of David Copperfield’s TV specials. The fact is that Vegas magicians have relied on a wide variety of (mostly) instrumental music. For instance, Lance Burton performed his classically elegant sleight-of-hand dove act to the opening movement of Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*. And while at least some of what follows applies to any magic act that makes use of music, Lim’s act makes especially rich use of music as misdirection.

There are arguably three basic ways in which music can misdirect. First, most innocuously, by its very presence, it would seem that music reduces the amount of attention we have available to parse what we see. Our attentional resources are finite. So, other things being equal, adding another object of attention to the performance—especially one that surreptitiously weakens our visual-attentional capacities—should make it easier for the magician to deceive us. Admittedly, this is an empirical hypothesis, and one that deserves testing. As always, however, everything will depend on how the music is used. Painfully loud music at a critical moment in the show might easily be experienced as a crude diversion. By contrast, the instrumental tracks in Lim’s work come across as innocuous emotion-heightening accompaniment. As such, they’re perfectly pitched to function as misdirection.

Second, it would seem that music can misdirect precisely by intensifying the emotions we experience during a performance, whether serious (as in Lim’s work) or playful (as in, say, Mac King’s). When caught up in the sort of emotionally charged atmosphere that only music can create, it would seem to be more difficult to deploy our cognitive and attentional resources to divine the method behind the trick. Critically, once again, this is a subtle sort of misdirection, one we experience merely as part of what makes the performance entertaining. We do not generally experience the music in Lim’s show as a tool that facilitates deception by manipulating us emotionally, but there is good reason to think that it is.¹²

Finally, probably the most important form of musical misdirection involves the use of music to direct attention to particular moments in the show. This sort of misdirection comes in two types, and both are instances of what magicians call “temporal misdirection,” which involves creating a temporal gap between the magician’s execution of the method by which a trick is accomplished and the audience’s awareness of the magical effect that method is used to produce.¹³

First, a piece of music can be used to *circumscribe* a performance, and so to direct attention away from moments before or after the music begins. For example, suppose a performer walks onstage to introduce a trick that she will perform to music. First, however, she invites the audience to inspect the props that she will use. Then, she takes her position, the music starts, and the performance officially begins. The audience will tend to look for secrets only in what happens during the musically accompanied “official” performance. In truth, however, important secrets may in large part lie in things the magician does before the music starts. Yet thanks in part to the musical frame, the audience is unlikely to consider (or even remember) anything outside of this frame when reflecting on how the trick might have been done.¹⁴

Second, in a performance accompanied by a piece of music, musical accents can be used to highlight particular moments within the official performance

itself. The most obvious examples involve using musical climaxes to establish “magic moments”—moments when, from the audience’s perspective, particular magical effects happen. Lim’s carefully choreographed close-up performances make regular and masterful use of this technique. The idea is that audiences will tend to treat the magic moment as the moment the magician “does” the trick. But, as always in magic, appearance and reality may diverge, and the magician often executes the secret method to accomplish her trick long before she presents it theatrically to her audience. For example, Lim may have ditched a playing card in his pocket (method) long before he pretends to make it vanish from his hand (magic moment).¹⁵ If that magic moment is established by, say, a crescendo in the music, then this is a case of musically driven temporal misdirection. Influenced by the music, the audience will tend to think—erroneously—that the secret to the trick must be in action at the moment the magic seems to happen. So misled, they will find it impossible to explain what they have witnessed.

Knowing how music can function as misdirection opens the door to a richer experience of magic performance. Next time you watch a piece of magic accompanied by music, reflect on how the music works on you and ask yourself how the magician might use it as an ingredient in creating her illusions. Notice whether and how the music frames the performance, highlights moments within it, and diffuses your attention, and consider whether all of this contributes to directing your thinking about the methods employed. Finally, attuned to music’s misdirectional power, look for places where it might be less innocuous, domains where deception aims, not merely at entertainment, but also at exploitation—which brings us full circle right back to Las Vegas.

Conclusion

The core idea in this chapter is that magic performances make distinctive use of music as an object of attention. Of course, theatrical performances of all kinds use music to shape how audiences allocate their attention, foregrounding some elements, backgrounding others. An opera or musical may highlight the entrance of an important character with a change in the music, so directing our attention to the new arrival at the expense of whatever else is happening onstage. However, merely provoking such a shift in the “figure-ground” relationships in a perceived scene does not constitute misdirection. Misdirection aims at *blindness*, not mere backgrounding. This is why misdirection’s proper theatrical home is magic, which, unlike other forms of theater, depends constitutively on the fact that some elements relegated to the attentional shadows should *vanish completely from view*. In the world of theater, then, only in magic is there music as misdirection.

One way to resist this claim is to reject the idea that magic is essentially different from conventional theater (or even cinema). You might think that *all* of them typically aim at “illusions” of reality, and so, on one level or another, at deception. This idea is quite common, but I think it’s badly mistaken.¹⁶ Unlike magic, neither conventional theater nor cinema standardly aims at (much less achieves) the illusion that the events it depicts are genuinely happening before the audience.¹⁷ And this is precisely why Vegas is more like magic than conventional theater. As I suggested above, we all know—and Vegas itself admits—that its promises of wealth, glamour, and sex are hollow. At the same time, those promises can certainly feel genuine. In this respect, like magic, Vegas openly traffics in illusions. Importantly, however, this doesn’t mean that Vegas is just a big magic show. Magic’s openness renders it essentially playful and saves it from deteriorating into base charlatanry. But Vegas’s openness is insidious. Magic aims at entertainment and perhaps edification (we might learn something about how easily we’re hoodwinked), but Vegas wants our money—all of it—and deploys its illusions to this end. In this context, its openness is a ruse: it allows a highly exploitative business model to avoid being caught in a lie (“We never told you you’d get rich!”) while, at the same time, posing as an adult playground that offers only harmless—if hardly wholesome—good fun. So, we let our guard down and play along, and the house cashes in.

In conclusion, when illusions are at play, there may be more to music than meets the ear. This leaves us with a pressing question: Beyond the magician’s theater, how does music function to sustain the illusions on which Vegas depends, to render invisible the methods by which those illusions work? Of course, similar questions might be asked about consumer culture more generally, though I’m inclined to think that they’ll be less interesting in part because, unlike Vegas, consumer culture is hardly open about its illusioning. Being honest about this allows Vegas, like the magician, to present itself as playful. By contrast, consumer culture, like charlatanry, asks us to take it seriously, and so depends on our not seeing its illusions for what they are.

Notes

1. “Las Vegas Shows,” <https://www.vegas.com/shows/>.
2. See Jason Leddington, “The Experience of Magic,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 3 (2016): 253–64; and Jason Leddington, “The Enjoyment of Negative Emotions in the Experience of Magic,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 40 (2017): 34–35.
3. For example, see Jason Leddington, “Comic Impossibilities,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78, no. 4 (2020): 547–58, where I argue that magic performance deserves to be considered a limit case of stand-up comedy.
4. See Gustav Kuhn, *Experiencing the Impossible* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 41.

5. Compare performing a “mentalism” show (with illusions of mind-reading, telekinesis, and so on) for an audience that believes in psychic phenomena; at best, they will experience it as a series of demonstrations of unusual abilities. But the point of magic is to present the audience with an event that seems to transcend any possible ability. It should seem *entirely* impossible.

6. “No way!” is an exclamation common in the face of good magic. We should take this literally: the spectator sees *no way* for *that* to be done.

7. Another common audience exclamation: “That makes no sense!”

8. In previous writing, I argue that the experience of magic is therefore an *aporetic* experience that is structurally isomorphic to the sort of experience that Socrates produces in his interlocutors in Plato’s early “Socratic” dialogues. See Leddington, “The Experience of Magic”; and Jason Leddington, “Magic: The Art of the Impossible,” in *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, edited by David Goldblatt, Lee B. Brown, and Stephanie Patridge, 373–79, 4th ed. (New York : Routledge, 2017).

9. For some examples of strong candid emotional responses to magic, see David Blaine’s recent appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*, or, even better, his 1997 TV special, *David Blaine: Street Magic*, produced before he was a household name. For one approach to explaining our enjoyment of magic, see Leddington, “Enjoyment of Negative Emotions.” Note, however, that my ideas on this have evolved, and I plan to publish a more complete approach to our enjoyment of magic in an essay tentatively titled “Savoring the Impossible.”

10. For a rich discussion of misdirection and the psychological mechanisms involved, see Kuhn’s *Experiencing the Impossible*. Though Kuhn does not discuss the use of music for misdirection, he does offer some hints as to how auditory stimuli might have unexpected and unconscious effects on visual experience (98). For a deeper and far-ranging discussion of such sensory cross-over effects, see Casey O’Callaghan, *A Multisensory Philosophy of Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

11. Shin Lim’s signature close-up performances are widely available on YouTube. I particularly recommend his appearances on *America’s Got Talent* and *Penn & Teller: Fool Us*. Many of these same tricks are performed in his Vegas show.

12. Once again, though, this is an empirical hypothesis worth testing.

13. Kuhn, *Experiencing the Impossible*, 41.

14. A classic piece of magic often performed in this way is the “Linking Rings.”

15. I’m not saying that this is how he accomplishes *any* of the many playing card vanishes he performs! I’ll leave it to you to puzzle over them.

16. See, for example, Bernard Beckerman, *Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience, and Act*, edited by Gloria Brim Beckerman and William Coco (New York: Routledge, 1990).

17. For discussion, see Jason Leddington, “Review of ‘The Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and the Arts,’” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2018), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/the-aesthetic-illusion-in-literature-and-the-arts/>; and Robert Hopkins, “Moving Because Pictures? Illusion and the Emotional Power of Film,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 200–218.