Magicians are performers who need audiences to help create magical entertainment. A magician and their audience are a double act where the performer reveals and conceals and the audience allows themselves to be led in the act. Magic is based on deception, but if a magician appears to be deceiving their audience they will seem like a second hand car salesman. In order to disguise deception, magicians use a variety of skills and draw on the everyday practices, values and beliefs of their audience, using such knowledge in their act. This research focuses on a specific type of magic, that of mentalism, which is a form of psychological entertainment. This type of magic is a good example of how the cultural practices of an audience that are associated with popular psychology are incorporated into the construction of live entertainment. In this way, psychological entertainment illuminates ambiguous cultural formations and our complex engagement with them.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

In a history of secular magic, Simon During notes «from about 1700 magic slowly became disconnected from supernature»\(^1\). Reasons why this transition occurred have more to do with major political, economic and social changes than attitudes to magic as such. As Peter Burke writes in his history of popular culture in the early modern period «changes do not always take place because someone wants them»\(^2\). Between 1500 and 1800 the major changes of population growth, and a commercial and communications revolution, altered European popular culture «in ways no one intended and in ways no contemporary could have foreseen»\(^3\). Popular culture was, and still is, closely related to its environment, and adapted accordingly.

By the nineteenth century, magic as illusion was a major part of the development of popular culture. During calls this «magic’s moment», where «conjuring was being integrated into a show business»\(^4\). This was a period of rapid invention where physical or mechanical conjuring was created alongside optical and cognitive illusions. Magicians such as Englishmen John Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant, or Americans Harry Kellar and Howard Thurston, were «practical men of the theatre who wrestled with

\(^3\) Ibidem.
their techniques to surprise their audiences with something new»5. These theatre men utilized new scientific discoveries to shape their stage acts. For example, Maskelyne established daily magic shows at the Egyptian Hall in London using automatons as part of the performance. «Psycho, the whist playing automaton, was a particular favourite and appeared in over 4000 consecutive performances»6. The secret of Psycho – air pressure – was guarded by Maskelyne throughout his lifetime by elaborate smokescreens and misleading patents.

According to Jim Steinmeyer «everything in magic changed with the ghosts, who quickly rapped and rattled apart the great traditions of Victorian conjuring»7. Significant inventions related to ghosts influenced Victorian magicians. The Corsican Trap was stagecraft that allowed audiences to see a ghost glide across the stage. This invention was joined by Pepper’s Ghost which used angled mirrors to create a misty moving figure. Pepper’s Ghost attracted crowds of up to a quarter of a million to see short plays like The Ghost of Hamlet at the Regent Street Polytechnic. Around the same time the Davenport Brothers toured with their live public séance. They claimed to communicate with spirits inside a wooden cabinet all the while apparently tied up with ropes on stage. Steinmeyer notes the Davenports «successfully painted a “grey area” between superstition and conjuring and deftly straddled it through their career»8. They created «a much rawer and more elemental magic, not the pleasant society conjuring which was then in fashion»9. The combination of these inventions meant «just as magicians found an entirely new type of presentation based on the Davenport séance, they were presented with an entirely new range of secrets based on Pepper’s Ghost»10.

Lamont and Bates11 point out the significance of Indian jugglers to the performances of nineteenth century magicians. In the early Victorian period Indian jugglers, called conjurors today, performed illusions that would be copied and adapted by European and American magicians. For example, Indian jugglers performed cup and ball conjuring, sword swallowing, fire ordeals such as walking across hot coals, and levitation illusions. The girl in a basket illusion included a sword which was thrust through the basket with bloody effect. Indian jugglers also performed extraordinary feats such as being buried alive. The nineteenth century «saw the appearance of a variety of past and contemporary accounts of extraordinary feats reportedly having taken place in India»12. These feats were attributed in the mainstream press as examples of manual dexterity and the deceptive skills of Indian jugglers. The press speculated about the impact of such skills on audiences and attributed their influence to mesmerism, mass hypnotism and Indian mysticism. Lamont and Bates note the significance of these discussions in nineteenth century society:

ambivalent associations with psychic and supernatural forces were to be reinforced with the emergence of modern spiritualism and the growing debate about the cause of the phenomena associated with it13.

6 Ibi, p. 110.
7 Ibi, p. 75.
8 Ibi, p. 66.
9 Ibidem.
10 Ibi, p. 75.
12 Ibi, p. 315.
13 Ibidem.
The spiritualist press referred to Indian occultism to explain séance phenomena as part of supernatural forces long practiced in the East. The celebrity medium Daniel Dunglas Home used levitation and fire ordeals as part of his séances. Lamont and Bates suggest celebrity mediums like the Davenports were probably inspired by Indian jugglers in their use of rope tricks, which would later influence Houdini and the development of escapology.

Nineteenth century magicians set out to debunk the elemental magic of pseudo-psychics and mediums. They recreated séances, with flying musical instruments, disappearing and reappearing people, in order to show these pseudo-psychics as charlatans. In doing so, they created a presentational style of magic that benefited from the supernatural elements used in a séance. Mind reading, levitation, fortune telling, invisibility, all became part of magic performances. Lamont and Bates claim «Western impressions were always safely framed as trickery (by performers who publicly claimed that spiritualist mediums were nothing more than tricksters)»14. At the same time these magicians borrowed from jugglers, using Indian symbolism to construct an idea of enchantment and supernatural powers. The performances of Western magicians as Indian Fakirs opened up other spaces for interpretation. As fake Fakirs, these performers introduced the latest illusions as examples of Eastern magic. As Lamont and Bates note, the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875, which combined aspects of spiritualism with Buddhism and Indian occultism, added to this construction of India as the land of magic and the idea of a mystical East.

Such a mix of magic as trickery and ambiguous associations with paranormal and mystical matters would influence contemporary magicians. The key point from this short history of magical entertainment in popular culture is that during the nineteenth century ambiguity became central to the construction of theatrical magical performances and audiences engagement with these cultural experiences. The mixture of rational and irrational were integrated into these acts. There was the skill of an illusionist and also at the same time the possibility of supernatural forces. In particular those acts by mentalists who specialized in psychological entertainment established a cultural form that had ambiguous associations with psychology and the power of the mind and magic and a sense of wonder. It is this mix that helps to explain modern mentalism and its success in popular culture today.

2. DERREN BROWN

According to Brown he is «Europe’s most controversial Ming-bearded mind-botherer»15. He explains:

The type of performance I upsettingly force on you has its roots in a craft called mentalism, which in turn is rooted in magic and conjuring. Many mentalists (such as me, though I never use the term) started out as magicians before turning, as it almost amusingly were, mental. However while most magicians are fairly recognizable and conform to a limited set of types, mentalists are fewer and further between and can be radically different. The skills are harder to acquire, and personality is paramount. Many cross what to me is an ethical line

14 Ibi, p. 321.
and become tarot readers and ‘psychics’. Some talk to the dead. Some work in churches, both Spiritualist and mainstream. Some remain entertainers but routinely claim real psychic abilities. Some debunk those that do.

Brown’s performance is deliberately ambiguous, mixing magic and mentalism with a charismatic personality. TV critic Charlie Brooker wrote Brown is «either a balls-out con artist or the scariest man in Britain»\(^{17}\). The ambiguity of his approach is what makes him so popular with audiences. One person said: «he plays with what you are thinking» (33 year old female analyst). Another commented «he is a genius. I think he is just very clever… I don’t think I’d like to meet him because I just don’t know what he’s capable of doing – stealing your mind» (26 year old male vision mixer).

In the stage show *An Evening of Wonders* (2008), Brown performed conjuring acts that exposed mind readers and psychics as charlatans. The advertisement for the show depicted Brown as a mind reader wearing a turban. This image playfully references Indian jugglers and Victorian magicians who helped to construct an image of magic as part

\(^{16}\) *Ibi*, pp. 18-19.

of Eastern mysticism\textsuperscript{18}. The evening included a séance act. «The Guardian» newspaper critic wrote:

«That is clearly some sort of conjuring trick», says Derren Brown. But we are not listening. We are busy gibbering at the sight of the wooden table, which he has just used for a séance, now floating freely around the stage. It is part of Brown’s sh*tck to pooh-pooh psychic explanations for his tricks. But that just twists the knife into the dumbfounded onlookers—because, for such feats, metaphysical explanations actually seem more credible than physical ones\textsuperscript{19}.

Brown’s performances blur boundaries between rational explanation and amazement at the illusion itself. Another act included mind reading amongst the audience. Again the critic commented:

My gobsmack fatigue reared up; popular US mindbender Marc Salem has been doing the Oracle trick for years. But Brown, who never stintst on showmanship, added several new dimensions to this routine. Blindfolded, feigning mental distress and accompanied by eerie music, he divines biographical details seemingly from audience members’ voices alone. Stella, he guesses, wants to know if she should live in Greece again. Lucy is the owner of 36 gerbils. «Your dog’s name is Gizmo, and your phobia is tinned peas». Some sort of conjuring trick, maybe. But to pull it off this convincingly, and with such flair, is as freaky as telepathy\textsuperscript{20}.

Brown manages the impossible – a trick so convincing that it is beyond explanation. This kind of ambiguous association with psychic and mystical matters is part of the success of his illusions. Houdini was thought to possess a superhuman force and charged by some spiritualists in concealing his psychic abilities. Brown is also rumoured to be psychic. Journalist William Little asked Brown about this rumour, referring to amazing feats of telepathy:

It’s a tricky one… Debunking is usually witless and bitter and ends up being rather bloodless and negative. I try to avoid doing that. I want to incorporate the magic of what psychics do, but leave people guessing how I do it. I think it’s more entertaining. I don’t want to simply say I can show you how I do it, I don’t want to give viewers the safety of an easy answer. It’s more powerful. It appeals to the imagination, whereas straightforward debunking does not\textsuperscript{21}.

What is appealing to the imagination of his audience is the way he takes magic and transforms it into something else. As this person said:

I think that he moves beyond the concept of magic because he is talking about manipulation. It’s completely changing the way people think, changing their behaviour, so it’s not magic any more, it’s completely beyond that (30 year old female).

Although Brown is not psychic he is neither a magician in the eyes of his audience. One of the ways Derren Brown moves beyond the concept of magic is in differentiating

\textsuperscript{18} Lamont - C. Bates, 
Conjuring Images of India in Nineteenth Century Britain.

\textsuperscript{19} Logan, Derren Brown: Mind Reader.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibidem.

\textsuperscript{21} W. Little, 
himself from his contemporaries. His performances challenge audiences about their pre-
conceptions of what is magical entertainment. For example:

Derren Brown goes, «you are an intelligent person, you know this is magic and you can
work it out». Normally, with these things I think it’s rubbish, but actually I enjoy it… It’s a
different audience as well… I’ve seen others as idiots, and I watch them and laugh. But, I
watch Derren Brown and it’s really exciting and I’m scared like a child… But also I can still
see I am bit intelligent (28 year female volunteer manager).

He speaks to a generation of audiences that are not interested in older styles of magic,
their tastes are for a novel twist on magical entertainment. That Brown performs his
television events on Channel Four signals the kind of audiences he appeals to, mainly the
16-34 year old age group and looking for entertainment with a difference.

Significantly, Brown treats his audience as intelligent people. Steinmeyer comments on the difficulty magicians face if they focus on deception as the essence of their
skills: «it’s an attitude often re-enforced by audiences, who have learned to expect very
little from magic acts… With expectations set so low, most magicians are perfectly hap-
py to descend to them»22. Brown explains:

The issue of honesty ties in with an inherent problem with any form of magical enter-
tainment. Unless the performer is an out-and-out fraud, claiming to be absolutely for real,
there exists in the bulk of any audience an acceptance that some form of jiggery-pokery must
be at work. Now this experience of being fooled by a magician should be made pleasurable
and captivating by the performer, otherwise he has failed as an entertainer. However, he is
entering into an odd relationship with his audience: he is saying in effect, «I am going to act
as if this were all very real; but you know, and I know that you know that I know, that it’s
really a game»23.

Another person commented on the game of magic and lies:

The magic format is sort of old really, and for lots of people just not convincing, so it’s just a
next level of that… I know he entertains people like you and me because we understand that
things like that don’t just happen through magic, or things that we can’t explain. We want
to know what’s going on… He is not telling you exactly how he does all the stuff. The fact
that you don’t really know what’s going on, he does surprise stuff, makes it an illusion, a
kind of magic. It’s not like a rabbit out of a hat, that’s why it’s interesting (25 year old male
marketing assistant).

Audiences know there is no such thing as magic, but they know that he knows they want
‘a kind of magic.’ In the next section, the psychology of magic is explored in relation to
audience responses to Brown’s performances as psychological entertainment.

3. THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MAGIC

There is a strong connection between psychology and magic. Lamont and Wiseman in
Magic in Theory24 explain:

22 STEINMEYER, Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible, p. 93.
23 BROWN, Tricks of the Mind, p. 19.
24 P. LAMONT - R. WISEMAN, Magic in Theory, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hertfordshire 1999, p. IX.
Psychologists have long recognized that they may have much to learn from the techniques used by magicians to fool their audiences. Magicians are able to persuade an audience to look in a certain direction, misperceive actions and objects, misremember key aspects of performances. As such magic has proved of interest to psychologists researching attention, perception and memory, as well as those with a more general interest in deception.

The basic premise of a magic trick consists of an effect and a method. Within the construction of a trick there is a basic design where the audience sees the effect without realizing the method behind it. Magic relies on something happening which is outside a normal understanding of how the world works. «There are a range of physical and psychological ploys that the magician may use to help enhance the effect and conceal the method».

An audience often attempts to work out the method behind the effect and there are many ways magicians influence the reconstruction process. Lamont and Wiseman note «magic, properly performed, is a complex and skilful art, and is capable of deceiving anyone».

As a magician who focuses on the appearance of psychic powers Derren Brown uses a wide range of conjuring effects that can be traced through the history of Indian jugglers, magicians and mentalists. For example, Brown performs extraordinary feats such as walking across broken glass, or over hot coals, which come from Indian jugglers who influenced Victorian magicians. Lamont and Wiseman classify physical feats as «the appearance of extraordinary strength or invulnerability to ostensibly harmful effects». Other feats include «the appearance of extraordinary mental ability». In a recorded live show with a celebrity audience Brown managed to memorise the entire A-Z of London, whilst also performing rapid mathematical calculations using numbers selected by the audience. Another feat is telekinesis, «the apparent ability to control movement of objects without physical contact».

In An Evening of Wonders a floating table is a good example of this effect. The history of Victorian magicians and mentalists signals the crossovers between magical entertainment and pseudo psychics and mediums. This includes clairvoyance, defined by Lamont and Wiseman as «the acquirement of information not known to others apparently via extrasensory means», telepathy which is «the acquirement of information from others apparently via extrasensory means», and precognition which is «the apparent acquirement of information from the future». Brown’s Oracle act in An Evening of Wonders is an example of a mind reading effect. Another speciality is mental control, «the apparent control over another’s mind».

Many of his performances are based on this effect, with the title of his early TV series Mind Control (Channel 4, UK) signaling to the audience his distinctive style of magic.

Russian Roulette was a stunt televised live to the British public in 2003. The stunt involved a nationwide search for a member of the public who was asked to load a real gun with one bullet. Brown then worked out what chamber contained the live bullet.
whilst holding the gun to his head. The DVD back cover for this stunt included the question «Will his skills give him the power to dodge the bullet?». The magical effect is created from his extraordinary ability to ‘dodge the bullet’ through his prediction of the loaded chamber. Any number of methods could be used to achieve this effect, from the action of the gun influenced by unseen internal or external connections (mechanisms, lighting), to a way of discovering the loaded chamber of the gun through limited choice forcing, sound or lip reading, pumping for information, or straightforward guessing. Brown’s skill as a performer is in keeping the audience guessing as to the methods behind the effects. Two viewers described watching the stunt:

Susan: When he did the Russian roulette with a gun, one bullet was in there, and he had to fire it, that was just amazing. He’d actually done it. It’s not a trick, he’d actually done it, by whatever method he’d done it (23 year old female sales assistant).

Jamie: It is a trick (27 year old male games tester).

Susan: Of course it is a trick.

Jamie: It’s not a trick, in a sense. There is no fake trap, no bunch of flowers in sleeves like magic tricks. It’s so clever, not like the others. It’s just him. It’s just him.

Susan: The ability to read people and use people, if you like, and how they are going to think. That’s why it’s fascinating.

It was reported in the newspapers the day after the live stunt that Brown used rubber bullets rather than live ammunition. But, Russian Roulette doesn’t seem like a trick according to expectations of magic as a fake trap. Brown creates mind traps with his audience where he appears to go beyond the concept of magic – «it’s not a trick», «it’s just him».

From the beginning Brown established a psychological frame for conjuring effects. On the back cover of the DVD Inside Your Mind the advert claimed Brown «can seemingly predict and control human behaviour» by using «a mixture of psychology, misdirection and showmanship». The key word missing is magic. A quote from Empire magazine reinforced the mind control frame – «the closest our galaxy can boast to a Jedi Master». Lamont and Wiseman say «many magicians […] want to be seen as skilful manipulators and some deliberately promote this image. In doing so, of course, they offer the spectator a general explanation for what he sees». As part of his style Brown offers the audience various explanations for the methods behind conjuring effects. In his book Tricks of the Mind (2006) some of these methods are explained for the general reader. These include perception and suggestion. For example, ideomotor movement is where «if you focus on the idea of making a movement, you will likely end up making a similar tiny movement without realising it» Brown explains how use of an ouija board during his live shows relies on tricks with suggestion. Another is memory systems, like a linking system which places a visual link next to words. These are explanations to mental feats such as memorising the London A-Z. Hypnotic phenomena are connected to suggestive techniques rather than trance states. He explains the hypnotic experience «in terms of quite ordinary “task motivators” such as focused attention, role playing, imagination, response expectancy, social conformity, compliance, belief in the hypnotist, response to charisma, relaxation, rapport, suggestions» For Brown, this form of stage hypnosis is a co-performance between the hypnotist and members of the audience.

34 Ibi, pp. 16-24.
35 Ibi, p. 142.
36 D. BROWN, Tricks of the Mind, p. 45.
37 Ibi, pp. 142.
Various aspects of unconscious communication are used as explanations for his tricks, including psychological tests for deception and awareness of body language in communicative acts. Cognitive traps include misunderstandings regarding science, mathematics and probability reasoning, as well as the confirmation bias in strong belief systems.

It is significant that magicians rely on the way audiences think to create successful illusions. Steinmeyer writes: «great magicians don’t leave the audience thought patterns to chance; they depend on the audience’s bringing something to the table – preconceptions or assumptions that can be naturally exploited» 38. Magical entertainment is rooted in an understanding of contemporary cultural and social practices. Steinmeyer describes how many magic tricks of the past relied on everyday cultural practices. For example, paper cones used to store sugar or coffee in the greengrocers: «there were dozens of fascinating magic tricks from the start of the twentieth century, deceptions using specially prepared paper cones, which are virtually useless today because of the fashions in greengrocers’ shops» 39. Brown understands the way his audience thinks. What audiences bring to the table are preconceptions, misconceptions and assumptions about human behaviour, social psychology, and cognitive patterns. For example, the popularity of neurolinguistic programming in psychology books, self help guides and weekend training courses is apparent in some of the tricks Brown uses. Or the idea of the power of suggestion is another preconception utilized in his hypnotism act. That many people have used hypnotism to lose weight, stop smoking, or cope with stress is part of what audiences bring to the table during his performances. One viewer noted: «the techniques he uses are quite in fashion as well, like hypnotherapy. All things people do in the real world. Sometimes they go for treatment, they use it, so they can relate to it» (28 year old male civil servant). The popular idea of unconscious communication revealing the inner thoughts of others – spotting a cheat, lie detector tests, or successful dating techniques – is also used by Brown in explanations for his tricks. As a magician, Brown can rely on a majority of his audience knowing ideas within popular psychology. Indeed it is a sign of how prevalent psychology is in everyday cultural practices that Brown can perform so many tricks based on a general understanding and misunderstanding of psychology today.

On the front cover of his book *Tricks of the Mind* is a picture of Brown with a red devil, a classic image used by the American magician Harry Kellar in his stage advertisements. Brown explains «when I am working, I mix psychology with conjuring, either often masquerading as the other» 40. The psychological explanations are part of the performance, where there are elements of truth, but also elements of deceit in the claims he makes. According to Richard Wiseman, Derren Brown’s magic is a «mystery because there are several explanations you won’t be able to know because you weren’t there». In this sense «you are part of the illusion» 41. A blogger wrote of his stage shows:

One of Derren’s brilliant achievements is to feed just the right amount of psychology to the TV audience so that they forget that he is also a magician and so they always work from the starting point of it being a psychology trick and often miss any physical aspects of it at all! My favourite comment I overheard from one couple after the show whilst waiting at the stage door (they were talking about the Oracle act) was «There’s no way that you can

39 Ibi, p. 118.
41 Interview with author 17th June 2008.
tell that just from the way someone says ‘Yes’ – that’s convinced me that they must have all been paid stooges!». They were gutted that the whole thing had been ‘staged’, yet when the logistics of paying for thirty actors every night for a tour was pointed out to them by their partner the realisation sank in and they were fooled again. All thanks to the misdirection that everything is purely mental.

In the magic of Derren Brown psychology is part of the misdirection. Anomalistic psychologist Chris French says Brown is «misleading sceptics, misleading believers’ by claiming “this is all based on non verbal communication” which is “just tosh”»43. He notes Brown altered his performance after criticism on this issue in the press. Brown explains44: «I am often dishonest in my techniques, but always honest about my dishonesty».

Misdirection is «that which directs the audience towards the effect and away from the method»45. Physical misdirection is used to «direct what is seen and noticed» by the audience. Psychological misdirection is used to direct what the audience is thinking, shaping the interpretation of what they see in order to reduce and divert their suspicion and attention46. Techniques can include passive diversion such as movement or contrast, an active diversion through the use of eyes, voice and body language. Such skills can be seen in Brown’s live performances where his use of voice is very effective. Psychological misdirection includes reducing the suspicion of the audience by maximizing the naturalness of the magic act, or increasing the conviction of the audience in the effect. This kind of misdirection is apparent in the use of psychological explanations which appear convincing to his audience. Another technique is establishing charisma and authority through the performance of the magician, and reinforcing the beliefs of the audience. Brown is highly skilled in this regard. Misdirection is an art in itself and «effective misdirection can misdirect anyone»47.

Some people are aware of misdirection used by Brown in his performances. One person commented:

He was cast as psychological person which convinces me of the fact he is using tricks that all other illusionists would use, but it’s just a little package that nobody else is packaging that way. And if he says, ‘oh it’s all about the power of suggestion’ and, you know, tricks of mind or whatever. It’s not really. It’s the same as everyone else has done, but in a new way, packaging people to think ‘ah, so that’s how he does that, maybe I can learn how to control people’s minds’, you know. But actually, it is what it is (30 year old female library assistant).

Other viewers suggested:

He uses mind tricks and diversion and deceives. Basically, you have to accept some of things he is doing, being deceitful, is like street magic. You can’t be sure the subjects are entirely genuine because it’s an illusion. You accept that what you are watching is potentially stage craft… (27 year old male media producer).

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43 Interview with author 11th June 2008.
44 BROWN, Tricks of the Mind, p. 343.
45 LAMONT - WISEMAN, Magic in Theory, p. 31.
46 Ibid, pp. 80-81.
He’s an illusionist, I think he leads people on to believe that what he is doing has some sort of psychological basis, or some sort of mind control. But I think he is simply doing what illusionists have been doing forever. Making us believe what he is doing. But actually it’s simply trickery… (25 year old female teacher).

A magician’s job is to influence the reconstruction process. Lamont and Wiseman explain some of the techniques based on lack of knowledge. «First there is the lack of knowledge of magic, a profession famous for its secrecy. There are many complex methods used by magicians alongside psychological approaches. These include the use of “gimmicks” which are secret devices, and “fakes” which are secretly prepared props that simulate “normal objects” – these magic «secrets are almost unimaginable»48. Another technique is that of the psychology of multiple outs. This is an approach that «relies on the use of alternative endings to an effect, by the use of more than one potential method. Depending on how the effect proceeds, the appropriate ending is chosen and the necessary method is employed»49. Brown’s tricks rely on a high degree of audience participation. The use of multiple outs means he can shape the effects of his conjuring tricks through the choices made by his participants. This is why his charisma on stage is so important to the way he utilizes alternative endings, as people are rarely aware of such techniques during the performance. His audiences are baffled by the methodological diversity of his conjuring tricks and have great difficulty in the reconstruction process. There is no easy trap door, but rather a series of elaborate mind traps. Brown directs the reconstruction process to such an extent that people are confused in even recalling the trick itself. In a televised live show Brown informed his audience he would trick them into not remembering much of his act, and as promised at the end of the performance few could recall what they had witnessed on stage50. He keeps people guessing: «you just can’t work out what he is doing, so that’s good… it’s like thinking you did work it out, but you didn’t… I know it’s not magic. I like that, how he’s done that, I want to work it out» (32 year old female interpreter).

Brown also influences the reconstruction process through lack of scientific knowledge. Lamont and Wiseman explain:

Many physical feats rely on the audience being unaware of physiological or chemical processes […], mathematical magic tricks regularly rely on the spectator being unaware of certain mathematical procedures […]. Many mediums have relied on ideomotor actions to produce apparent spiritualistic phenomena with ouija boards and pendulums […]. Cold readers rely on population stereotypes in their readings, and on the fact that few people are aware of how common certain characteristics are51.

Brown appeals to people’s general sense of psychology whilst drawing on their misunderstanding of many aspects of clinical and social psychology and parapsychology. As this person said:

There are so many things I can’t explain, I don’t know about science and stopped studying it when I was sixteen. There are not many things I can explain in the world, if I am pressed on it. You know, what do I actually know? If I don’t think something is particularly believable,

48 *Ibi*, pp. 85.
49 *Ibi*, pp. 85-86.
50 See *Derren Brown: the Gathering*, endnote 3.
I couldn’t actually discredit it because I don’t know. I just don’t have the scientific skills and knowledge to really know whether it’s really true or not… (25 year old female student).

One of Brown’s conjuring tricks involves the appearance of table levitation, or table tipping, effects also used by pseudo psychics in séances. There is a picture of Brown amazing the scientist Dr Robert Smith with a three legged table levitating above them: Smith «sat quietly for a few moments afterwards and then said “Fuck me, I have no idea”»52. He directs the reconstruction process through drawing on belief systems. With a general audience Brown can mix lack of conjuring knowledge with preconceptions and misunderstandings of psychology. In the following example, a viewer commented on a trick that involved members of the audience apparently moving a table:

He knows that everything he does is based on the power of suggestion. That’s why people are moving the table but they aren’t aware that they are doing it. The way he talks to people, he puts things in their mind. What he was saying, word by word, slowly, there are messages in there – ‘you are going to push it.’ It’s all about psychology and the power of suggestion. I don’t believe the table is moving itself. To me, I found it even more fascinating that he could get people to do that without knowing that they were doing it (27 year old male games tester).

The power of suggestion is one of several explanations for the method behind the effect. His audience ends up exactly where he wants them in the reconstruction process.

Steinmeyer writes: «when magicians are good at their jobs, it is because they anticipate the way an audience thinks»53. An audience with Derren Brown is one familiar with debates about paranormal beliefs and fakery scandals. They are familiar with the practices of hypnotists, fortune tellers, or psychics because they have direct or second hand experience. Brown includes himself with his audience, using an avowal of prior belief – ‘coming out of Christianity’ – to re-enforce his approach of questioning belief systems54. Although he relies on lack of knowledge to create magical entertainment, he doesn’t treat his audience as stupid. For example, one viewer commented on his ability to understand the way an audience thinks: «he is just an incredibly intelligent man… he is not making them feel stupid if they believe. “This is a trick, this is what I’ve done, you know, it is possible to do it, but I am not marking you as stupid by believing in them”» (24 year old female online marketer). Or as another viewer explained: «I think he chooses audiences, he does appeal to certain types… when he is doing his show live, the way he does it he is not patronising people, he is cool. People go “wow”!» (35 year old female administrator). A good understanding of his audience includes an awareness of their intelligence, their contemporary practices, and their pleasure in participating in psychological entertainment.

4. RE-ENCHANTMENT

In The Re-Enchantment of the World there are examples taken from philosophy, nineteenth century magic and spiritualism, and contemporary sporting events, as evidence

52 Brown, Tricks of the Mind, centre insert.
53 Steinmeyer, Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible, p. 117.
of secular and conscious strategies for re-enchantment\textsuperscript{55}. Enchantment refers to a sense of wonder whilst disenchantment refers to rational and scientific explanations. Traditionally it has been common to separate the two in theories of modernity. There is now an «emergent view that modernity is as enchanted as it is disenchanted»\textsuperscript{56}. Saler explains «mass culture is not simply an irrational form of escapism from the rational responsibilities of adulthood» as early theories of modernity expressed by Max Weber and others suggested; nor is mass culture «a dangerous threat to critical thought» as argued by later critics such as Adorno and Horkheimer. Rather, Saler claims «disenchanted reason coexists with an enchanted imagination; wonders have become interiorized and are enjoyed with a certain ironic distance». Re-enchantment therefore includes «distinctly modern forms of enchantment compatible with modern rationality, secularism, psychologism, and commercial culture».

The role of imagination is significant to modern enchantments. Simon During argues in an historical analysis of secular magic that imagination and illusion are part of modern society and its image of itself\textsuperscript{57}. Saler suggests strategies for modern enchantment include ironic detachment. For example, when audiences watch magical entertainment they know that the magician knows that they know there is no such thing as magic. Such an understanding of modern enchantments as both about reason and imagination refer to the romantic view of a suspension of disbelief. But, an audience with a magician does not temporarily switch off their scepticism as is implied by a suspension of disbelief\textsuperscript{58}. Nor does a magician mesmerise their audience, tricking them into a momentary and false belief in magic, as is implied by critiques of cultural industries. Magical entertainment is based on a complex understanding of the cultural practices of an audience. A relationship exists between the professional magician and their audience where they do not deceive but rather directly invite an audience to play their part. A magician and audience are in it together, collectively shaping a sense of wonder that is the defining feature of magical entertainment.

In Simon During’s discussion of magic and modern enchantments, the imagination and by extension illusion are crucial to modern society’s construction of itself\textsuperscript{59}. For During, enchantment continues as a feature of the development of modernity as both enchanted and disenchanted at the same time. Psychology also has an impact on this argument about the imagination and modern enchantments. In the magic of Derren Brown and audience responses to his performances, psychology is an explanation for both rational interpretations of unusual experiences and intuitive accounts of extraordinary feats. Conjuring and illusion are not the primary features of this performance of magic. Instead, there is an emphasis on multiple truths to human experiences which depend on the context within which they are framed.

The power dynamics of an audience with a magician like Derren Brown indicates people draw from a repertoire of responses when they are given the opportunity to do so by others. This is not the solitary performer playing alone. Nor is it the professional as puppet master. Rather it is the kind of relationship where professionals and audiences

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\textsuperscript{57} DURING, \textit{Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic}.

\textsuperscript{58} My thanks to Peter Lamont for his views on a suspension of disbelief as an inadequate explanation for magic entertainment.

\textsuperscript{59} DURING, \textit{Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic}. 
acknowledge the role of the other in shaping an ambiguous cultural experience. There are positives and negatives to this relationship. There are areas of tension with a set of unresolved problems to do with the unequal power dynamics between industries and audiences. And yet, the people in this study are queuing up to be part of a Derren Brown show. Professional magicians thrive on the contemporary cultural practices of their audience, finding various ways to capture this excitement and engagement with the idea of magic and turn it into cultural experiences people pay to participate in.

5. CONCLUSION

The social history of magic highlights how magical entertainment combined rational explanation with ambiguous associations of metaphysical thinking, mysticism and psychic phenomena. For example, magicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century created illusions based on levitation, mind reading, or spirit communication which promised to expose the tricks of the trade amongst pseudo psychics and mediums. At the same time, these magicians borrowed from Indian jugglers in constructing illusions that referenced India as a land of magic and drew on Eastern mysticism. In this way, magicians exploited the practices of their audience in the creation and performance of entertainment.

Derren Brown is a type of magician that has the appearance of psychic powers. His conjuring tricks are based on extraordinary feats, such as walking across broken glass, table levitation and mind reading. His audience believes he is more than a magician. Playfully referred to as a Jedi Master, audiences see him as skilled in mind control. In the construction of his entertainment Brown uses a range of methods to make it difficult for audiences to work out how he does it. He offers explanations such as hypnotism, unconscious communication, or memory systems, but these explanations whilst partly true are also deceptive. Brown uses multiple conjuring methods and a wide range of physical and psychological misdirection to make it difficult for people to detect the truth behind the effects of the tricks. His style of entertainment highlights the framing of popular psychology as both a rational explanation for human behaviour and the mysteries of the mind. It indicates the dominance of cultural practices associated with self help, self empowerment, human potential and alternative health and well being. In the same way that nineteenth century magicians used a myth of the East to suggest ambiguous associations with magic and mysticism, so too does Brown use the myth of psychology as all powerful to great effect.

Psychological entertainment is an excellent example of how the individual as both rational and irrational is centre stage in modern Western societies. It is another element in the debates around enchantment and re-enchantment. Imagination is a part of enchantment but so too is psychology in today’s popular culture. As such, psychological entertainment is an ambiguous cultural form that gives people «a joy of the mystery of playing with minds» (28 year old female public relations person).

RESEARCH NOTE

This project used a combination of a deductive and inductive approach to the sociology of magical entertainment in popular culture. Theoretical and empirical studies from a range of areas in media audiences, cultural history, social psychology, cultural geography, anomalous psychology, worked alongside the data design, collection and analysis of cultural practices. The fieldwork included individual and group interviews, semi-structured focus groups, household in depth interviews, and participant observation in Britain. The sam-
ple included audiences of magic entertainment. Over a hundred men and women aged 18-65+ took part in focus group interviews, 15 individual and expert interviews were conducted, 27 households interviews took place with 70 participants, and there was participant observation of events with approximately 70 participants. This article focuses on the data relating to magical entertainment which is part of a larger project also on the paranormal in popular culture. See Paranormal Media (Annette Hill, Routledge, 2011) for full details. Parts of this article are reproduced in Chapters 7 and 9 in that book.

RÉSUMÉ

La psychologie de la magie joue sur la façon dont le public pense, en anticipant leurs pensées, leurs sentiments et leurs actions et les intégrant dans l’acte magique lui-même. Le magicien Derren Brown est un artiste qui se spécialise dans l’apparition de pouvoirs psychiques, telles que la lecture de l’esprit. Sa magie est un mélange de spectacle, psychologie et prestidigitation. Il anticipe la façon dont le public pense sur la psychologie populaire, en l’utilisant comme base de la prestidigitation et source de distraction. Une audience avec Derren Brown agit selon ses propres conceptions et malentendus sur la psychologie et de la magie, comme le pouvoir de l’esprit. Ces pratiques culturelles mettent en évidence la psychologie populaire à la fois comme explication rationnelle du comportement humain et des mystères de l’esprit. Il suggère également que la notion de ré-enchantment échange de sens avec le contexte contemporain de la culture populaire où l’interprète et le public produire ensemble le sens d’émouvoirment qui est le divertissement magique.

SUMMARY

The psychology of magic plays on the way an audience thinks, anticipating their thoughts, feelings and actions and incorporating these into the magic act itself. The magician Derren Brown is a performer who specialises in the appearance of psychic abilities, such as mind reading. His magic is a mix of showmanship, psychology and conjuring. He anticipates the way an audience thinks about popular psychology, using it as a basis for conjuring and a source of misdirection. An audience with Derren Brown responds to their own understandings and misunderstandings about psychology and magic, such as the power of the mind. Such cultural practices highlight popular psychology as both a rational explanation for human behaviour and the mysteries of the mind. It also suggests that the notion of re-enchantment shifts meaning within the contemporary contexts of popular culture where performer and audience co-produce the sense of wonder that is magical entertainment.