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## How magicians control your mind

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In September of 1856, in the face of a growing rebellion, Napoleon III dispatched Jean-Eugene Robert-Houdin to Algeria. Robert-Houdin was not a general, nor a diplomat. He was a magician – the father, by most accounts, of modern magic. (A promising young escape artist named Ehrich Weiss would, a few decades later, choose his stage name by adding an “i” to “Houdin.”) His mission was to counter the Algerian marabouts, conjurers whose artful wizardry had helped convince the Algerian populace of Allah’s displeasure with French rule.



A French colonial official assembled an audience of Arab chieftains, and Robert-Houdin put on a show that, in its broadest outlines, would be familiar to today’s audiences: he pulled cannonballs out of his hat, he plucked lit candelabra out of the air, he poured gallon upon gallon of coffee out of an empty silver bowl.

Then, as he recounted in his memoirs, Robert-Houdin launched into a piece of enchantment calculated to cow the chieftains. He had a small wooden chest with a metal handle brought onto the stage. He picked a well-muscled member of the audience and asked him to lift the box; the man did it easily. Then Robert-Houdin announced, with a menacing wave of his hand, that he had sapped the man’s strength. When the volunteer again took hold of the box, it would not budge – an assistant to Robert-Houdin had activated a powerful magnet in the floor of the stage. The volunteer heaved at the box, his frustration shading into desperation until Robert-Houdin’s assistant, at a second signal, sent an electric shock through the handle, driving the man screaming from the stage. The chieftains were duly impressed, and the rebellion quelled.

The story of Robert-Houdin’s diplomacy by legerdemain is well-established in magic lore, in large part because it is the only documented instance, at least since antiquity, in which a conjurer changed the course of world affairs. Stage magic, after all, isn’t statecraft, but spectacle and entertainment.

In the past year, though, a few researchers have begun to realize that magic represents something more: a deep and untapped store of knowledge about the human mind.

At a major conference last year in Las Vegas, in a scientific paper published last week and another due out this week, psychologists have argued that magicians, in their age-old quest for better ways to fool people, have been engaging in cutting-edge, if informal, research into how we see and comprehend the world around us. Just as studying the mechanisms of disease reveals the workings of our body’s defenses, these psychologists believe that studying the ways a talented magician can short-circuit our perceptual system will allow us to better grasp how the system is put together.

“I think magicians and cognitive neuroscientists are getting at similar questions, but while neuroscientists have been looking at this for a few decades, magicians have been looking at this for centuries, millennia probably,” says Susana Martinez-Conde, a neuroscientist at the Barrow Neurological Institute and coauthor of one of the studies, published online last week in Nature Reviews Neuroscience. “What magicians do is light-years ahead in terms of sophistication and the power of these techniques.”

As magicians have long known and neuroscientists are increasingly discovering, human perception is a jury-rigged apparatus, full of gaps and easily manipulated. The collaboration between science and magic is still young, and the findings preliminary, but interest among scholars is only growing: the New York Academy of Science has invited the magician Apollo Robbins to give a presentation in January on the science of vision, and a team of magicians is scheduled to speak at next year’s annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience, the world’s largest organization of brain researchers.

And in a world where concentration is a scarce resource, a better understanding of how to channel it would have myriad uses, from safer dashboard displays to more alluring advertisements – and even, perhaps, to better magic.



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