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Stage magic isn't statecraft

[Stage magic isn't statecraft](#) — usually:

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.

Now researchers have begun to realize that magic represents something more than spectacle and entertainment — not statecraft, but [a deep and untapped store of knowledge about the human mind](#):

Misdirection is, in a sense, the conjurer's tool that is easiest to understand - we miss things simply because we aren't looking at them. Martinez-Conde is particularly interested in misdirection, and the question of what it is about certain movements that attract and hold our attention. Robbins, a performing pickpocket and another of the magicians to coauthor the Nature Neuroscience paper, has found, he says,

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that semi-circular gestures draw people's attention better than straight ones. "It engages them more," he says. "I use them when I'm actually coming out of the pocket."

Martinez-Conde is intrigued by this distinction, and has hypothesized that the particular magnetism of curved motions might spring from the fact that they don't map as easily onto the quick, straight movements, or saccades, that our eyes instinctively use to focus on objects. As a result, she suggests, curved motions might require more sustained attention and concentration to follow.

Other effects, though, are more befuddling. Often eye-tracking studies show that subjects can be looking right at an object without seeing it - car accident survivors report a similar paradox. Or, with just a little encouragement, a person can be made to see something where there's nothing.

The vanishing ball illusion is one of the most basic tricks a magician can learn: a ball is thrown repeatedly into the air and caught. Then, on the final throw, it disappears in midair. In fact, the magician has merely mimed the last throw, following the ball's imagined upward trajectory with his eyes while keeping it hidden in his hand.

But if the technique is easily explained, the phenomenon itself is not. If done right, the trick actually makes observers see the ball rising into the air on the last toss and vanishing at its apex. As Rensink points out, this is something more powerful than merely getting someone to look in the wrong direction - it's a demonstration of how easy it is to nudge the brain into the realm of actual hallucination. And cognitive scientists still don't know exactly what's causing it to happen.

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