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 paleoanthropology, genetics, and evolution



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Mind control

We've been watching this show on the SciFi channel, *Mind Control*, in which British "psychological illusionist" **Derren Brown**. Brown is sort of like a much less skeezy **Criss Angel**. Not *that* much less skeezy -- Brown is best-known for playing Russian roulette on TV. And like every aspiring mentalist, he's mastered that eyes-focused-somewhere-inside-your-skin look.

To tell you the truth, the show comes on after *Flash Gordon*, and, well, I'm a committed Flash Gordon nut.

Anyway, the beauty of the show is that Brown lets you in on the trick, at least some of the time, since the "trick" is really just the power of suggestion. With a highly rehearsed script including repeated cues, he can make people forget what they were thinking before, and to think what he wants instead.

I'm *totally* going to try this on my classes! Look out, students. Especially on evaluation day....

So in today's science section, the *NY Times* has [a story](#) by George Johnson, who got to sit in on Magic Day at the Consciousness meetings. It sounds pretty cool:

After two days of presentations by scientists and philosophers speculating on how the mind construes, and misconstrues, reality, we were hearing from the pros: James (The Amazing) Randi, Johnny Thompson (The Great Tomsoni), Mac King and Teller -- magicians who had intuitively mastered some of the lessons being learned in the laboratory about the limits of cognition and attention.

"This wasn't just a group of world-class performers," said Susana Martinez-Conde, a scientist at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix who studies optical illusions and what they say about the brain. "They were hand-picked because of their specific interest in the cognitive principles underlying the magic."

Page 2 of the story gums its way into the confusing topic of qualia. Now, Qualia Day in my biology of mind course would be a good one to try out the mind control -- that is, on the students who *really can't* be convinced that *philosophy is fun*.

This is a problem that's big and little at the same time -- from a certain perspective, nothing seems more central than qualia, and yet that centrality seems to have no observable effect on anything else. It's hard to avoid though -- because if you're going to discuss the mind from an evolutionary perspective, you have to lay out what kinds of things evolutionary biology is well-placed to explain.

"Qualia" are among the few things that aren't (necessarily) on that



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Quanta are among the few things that aren't (necessarily) on that list.

So stick to the front page if you're not interested -- and the last half of page 3, where the Amazing Randi gets a few words:

"Allow people to make assumptions and they will come away absolutely convinced that assumption was correct and that it represents fact," Mr. Randi said. "It's not necessarily so."

That's one of the reasons we used to love *Jonathan Creek* -- at least, until they got rid of Maddie. If your perception can be snookered by assumptions, then your logic can easily go with it.

The beauty of magic is that you *know* it's not possible, and yet *your senses believe it anyway*.

[Teller] left us with his definition of magic: "The theatrical linking of a cause with an effect that has no basis in physical reality, but that -- in our hearts -- ought to."

What's more amazing? That these scientists got a show from some of the best non-skeevy magicians in Vegas? Or that **Teller talks?**

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