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978-1-107-07659-4 - Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism, and the Making of the Modern World

Chris Goto-Jones

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION: MAGIC IN THE WORLD

First of all, I promise not to fill this book with puns about magic being tricky, or with a long series of bad jokes about things happening ‘as if by magic’. But magic *is* a tricky business, and the extent to which this is true has become increasingly evident to me as I have worked on this project.

For one thing, it’s not very clear what magic actually is. Even leaving aside the deceptively difficult (and completely incoherent) question of the difference between ‘real magic’ and ‘fake magic’ (which will preoccupy us for much of the first two chapters as I search for some form of unifying theory), it’s even tough to know when a stage magician has just performed something that you recognize as magic. Of course, it’s always clear when they’ve failed. And their failure often has nothing whatsoever to do with the success of whatever feat they were trying to accomplish: a magician can successfully pull a rabbit from a hat or a coin from your ear without your really knowing how he did it, but such accomplishments can be cringe-worthily mundane in the hands of Uncle Geek while being transportingly magical in the hands of Professor Sparrowhawk.

So, magic is not an object, not a prop or a mechanism, not even a technique or an accomplishment. As least, not *per se*. Magic flows from the hands of a magician only when an audience feels magic happening. It is an interpersonal and intersubjective phenomenon. And that, more than anything else, is the secret to magic: *a magician is one who causes you to feel that magic has transpired*, no matter what has transpired.

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Yet, magic is more than a feeling; it's also a discipline, at least in so far as it includes an accepted canon of texts, techniques, and technologies aimed at the performance of impossibilities. Magic has methods and methodologies, theories, debates, and disagreements. It has history. It involves research and development and ideas about progress; it demands practice and performance. It has culture. Even while all of this learning seems to be targeted at enabling magicians to perform all kinds of secret techniques (which is also true), in the end, it is really all focussed on enabling a magician to make you *feel* that he (or she, but usually he) has done something magical. Magical knowledge concerns the ability to enchant somebody's senses, not necessarily the ability to ascertain their phone number or cut them in half.

Magic is a field of knowledge that is shrouded (and shrouds itself) in secrecy, constructing an epistemic community that is (at least to some extent) separate from the conventional world of the academy. It's no secret that the motto of the Magic Circle is *indocilis private loqui*, or that the first of Howard Thurston's inviolable rules of magic was: never reveal the secret. There are professors of prestidigitation, just as there are professors of nuclear physics. Yet they do not recognize each other; they rarely pass in the corridors of a university . . . Actually, they pass each other surprisingly often in universities, but they pass in silence, unrecognized, without knowing that it has happened. Magicians are no more invisible than physics professors, but you can walk past either on the street and not know who they are. These days, the magician is probably not wearing a pointy hat or even a top-hat, just as the professor is probably not wearing a mortar-board; although either might sport a symbolic tie or a pin that would identify them to someone who knew what to look for.

Magic has multiple communities of people who identify themselves as magicians, some of whom are professionals in various different ways. Membership of these communities can be jealously guarded, requiring initiations or examinations or performances. Or not. Some are open and welcoming, even while others maintain strict codes of secrecy and silence between magicians and muggles.

For myself, one of my challenges writing this book was to find ways to bridge between these communities and their respective bodies of knowledge. I don't profess to be especially magical, but I am an Associate of the Inner Magic Circle in London and a member of the Academy of Magical Arts in Hollywood. And I'm also a professor at an

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old, European university that has no place for magic in its curricular offerings. In this context, it's mildly embarrassing to write an academic book about magic; people point and laugh (really). One colleague asked me if I could perform at his niece's birthday party. I declined.

And this is what I mean when I say it's difficult to pin magic down. My sensitive, open-minded colleague was not wrong to link magic with balloon animals. Indeed, some of the most wonderful magic imaginable happens in the hearts and minds of children. But it's astonishing to think that this category might also include transforming a piece of paper into a butterfly, walking through the Great Wall of China, or speaking to the dead. Just about anything *can be* magic, but almost nothing *is*. In fact, a lot magic isn't even magic; it generates feelings of embarrassment rather than wonder. It does not enchant, it riles.

For all of these reasons and more, the first part of this book, comprising the first three chapters, is largely concerned with trying to work out what magic is and how we can talk about it (analyse it and criticize it) in a clear and reasonably scholarly way. The first chapter focuses on the meaning and development of 'modern magic', which is often mistakenly understood as being different in nature from 'old magic'. One of the great lessons of modernity has been that the laws of nature are true at all times and in all places (with the possible exception of cosmological singularities), so old and new magic must (on some practical level) be the same, howsoever it is presented or performed. No matter how much we'd like to believe that the European Middle Ages were like Middle Earth, they were not.

The second chapter attempts to draw the outline of a theory of modern magic that will enable us to understand the approach adopted in the second half of this book. In particular, it is concerned with the historically, culturally, ethically, technically, and aesthetically slippery question: what is *good magic*? In these early chapters especially, but also later on, I make extensive use of texts written by and for magicians – texts that are usually not closely considered in the academy. My reason for doing this is simple: magicians are professional magic-makers (and often rather impressive scholars); they know more about how to make magic than anyone else, and so we should take them seriously (at least about this).

These first two chapters also explore the question of *modernity*. Unfortunately, the idea of the modern is almost as tricky as magic itself.

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In this book, I am not using the terms ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ in only their most everyday sense (to refer to a historical period proximal to the present). Indeed, the historical period I’m interested in is the so-called Golden Age of Magic, which extends roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth. As well as temporality, modernity also brings with it a constellation of cultural, technological, and ideological issues that are usually associated with the European Enlightenment Project. We might think about the development of social rights and democracy, more pervasive educational provision, advancements of (and confidence in) rationality and science as the best (and only) way to solve mankind’s problems and the riddles of the universe. These features are wrapped into a universal vision of history that emphasizes progress: mankind moves from barbaric to civilized, superstitious to rational, ritualistic to scientific, and so on. But we might also think about colonialism, empire, and the notion of the ‘white man’s burden’ to chaperone the peripheries into the arms of civilization.

It is in this context that the Golden Age gives birth to something we might meaningfully call *modern magic*. While the force of modernity and modernization seems to push cultures away from magical thinking and magical belief, *modern magic* represents an attempt to maintain the experience of enchantment and the magical in the world. Hence, modern magic enjoys a deeply conflicted relationship with both modernity and magic, investing in them both despite their apparently contradictory tendencies. What kind of process can transform magic into something modern? Is that process magical in itself? This period sees modern magic develop an ethical mission to confront and expose what it sees as illegitimate magic or charlatanism – the Spiritualist movement, Theosophy, and other forms of new occultism that emerged during the so-called mystic revival.

It is this problematic and complicated connection between modernity and magic that takes us into the last chapter of Part I. Chapter 3 considers one of the cultural strategies deployed in Europe and the United States to square the circle: if the ‘West’ had really progressed beyond magic, and if people still wanted (or even needed) magic in their lives, then perhaps magic could be found (and imported from) outside the ‘West’? In this context, Chapter 3 explores the various ways in which magicians constructed and exploited visions of the ‘Mystic East’ as the home of magic itself. This *Orientalism* was partially a genuine interest in India, China, and Japan, and partially

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an ideological and literary process of creating these distant lands as repositories of the West's magical fantasies.

Just as was the case with modern magic, magicians were deeply conflicted about the meaning and integrity of Oriental magic – they were torn between wanting to believe in a distant but still-living space of phantasmagoria and also wanting to assert the developmental superiority and universal consistency of (Western) modernity. Western magicians wanted to find lost secrets of magic in the vastness of rural India, *but* they also wanted to expose such secrets as fraudulent when subjected to modern tests and inquiry. They wanted Oriental magic to be everything modern magic was not, yet they needed modern magic to be universally valid. For some, the idea of Oriental magic became a kind of flourish, like pixie dust, that could be cast over performances in London, Paris, and New York to help audiences find that precious feeling of enchantment. Orientalism became a kind of magic in itself.

Hence, Part I of this book is very much focussed on magic in the so-called West. Indeed, as we'll see in Part II, there is an extremely close affinity between the idea of 'modern magic' and the idea of 'Western magic', not only in Europe and the United States but also (and perhaps especially) in Asia. Like various other forms of Western culture and structures of knowledge that were exported to Asia during the processes of Western imperialism and colonialism, such as modern medicine, modern magic was largely seen as something distinctly Western. This was not only (but also) because modern magic seemed to require magicians to dress as a Victorian gentleman, not only (but also) because modern magic seemed to involve a specific repertoire of technologically advanced 'tricks', but also because it brought with it a certain normative and ethical framework that often challenged the principles of local magical practices. Indeed, just as modern medicine and modern military technology came into conflict with local practices and technologies in Asia, so too modern magic strove to establish itself as superior to local traditions. Even today the idea of 'modern magic' retains the basic form of this Golden Age ideal, leading to all kinds of new questions about whether contemporary magic (like history and art and literature) should now be considered post-modern.

So, while India, China, and Japan all have lively and rich traditions of conjuring and magic that reach back for centuries, the first part of this book is mostly concerned with the formation and shape of something that we can meaningfully identify as *modern magic*,

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emerging out of a particular European tradition (including that tradition's interactions with Asia), engaging the particular conditions of industrial modernity at the turn of the twentieth century, and then being exported to Asia in gunboats and merchant ships. The rhetoric of modern magic is universal, but its history is particular and often imperial.

In this direction, the imperial history of magic draws stark attention to questions of racism and other forms of chauvinism (including sexism), from which magic is not miraculously free. Although there is significant resistance in the magical community to look back on the legacy of some of the great magicians of the period as racist, it is noticeable that very few white, European magicians today would even consider dressing in a silken kimono, speaking in pidgin English, and applying yellow make-up to make themselves appear 'Japanese'. While it's true that the parameters of acceptable behaviour are (at least partially) historically constructed, and so William Robinson or Theodore Bamberg (for example) probably didn't feel that they were being offensive when they presented themselves as Chung Ling Soo or Okito, it is also true that the cultural atmosphere and social practices of colonialism did all kinds of violence to people that is simply unacceptable. It would not be possible to write responsibly about these figures and practices today without taking such issues seriously. Hence, one of the things that this book explores in Part II is the way modern magic silenced the voices of magicians from Asia in the name of propagating the Western fantasy of Oriental magic. Indeed, this cultural strategy was so powerful that it even co-opted some of the most talented magicians from Asia into a form of self-Orientalism when they performed in the West. Just to be clear, it is not my intention to single out individual magicians as racist, but rather to understand the ways in which the culture of 'modern magic', as it developed in this colonialist historical context, incorporated and performed a kind of racism.

And so, Part II of this book, which includes Chapters 4 through 6, shifts the focus more directly towards the magic of the so-called Orient in this period. These chapters are rather more empirical than those of Part I and might be seen as a series of case studies that test out the theories and concepts developed earlier. For reasons discussed in Chapter 3, Part II interprets the 'Orient' to mean India, China, and Japan, and thus diverges somewhat from the usage of Edward Said (and others), who focussed mainly on the Middle East. For now, suffice

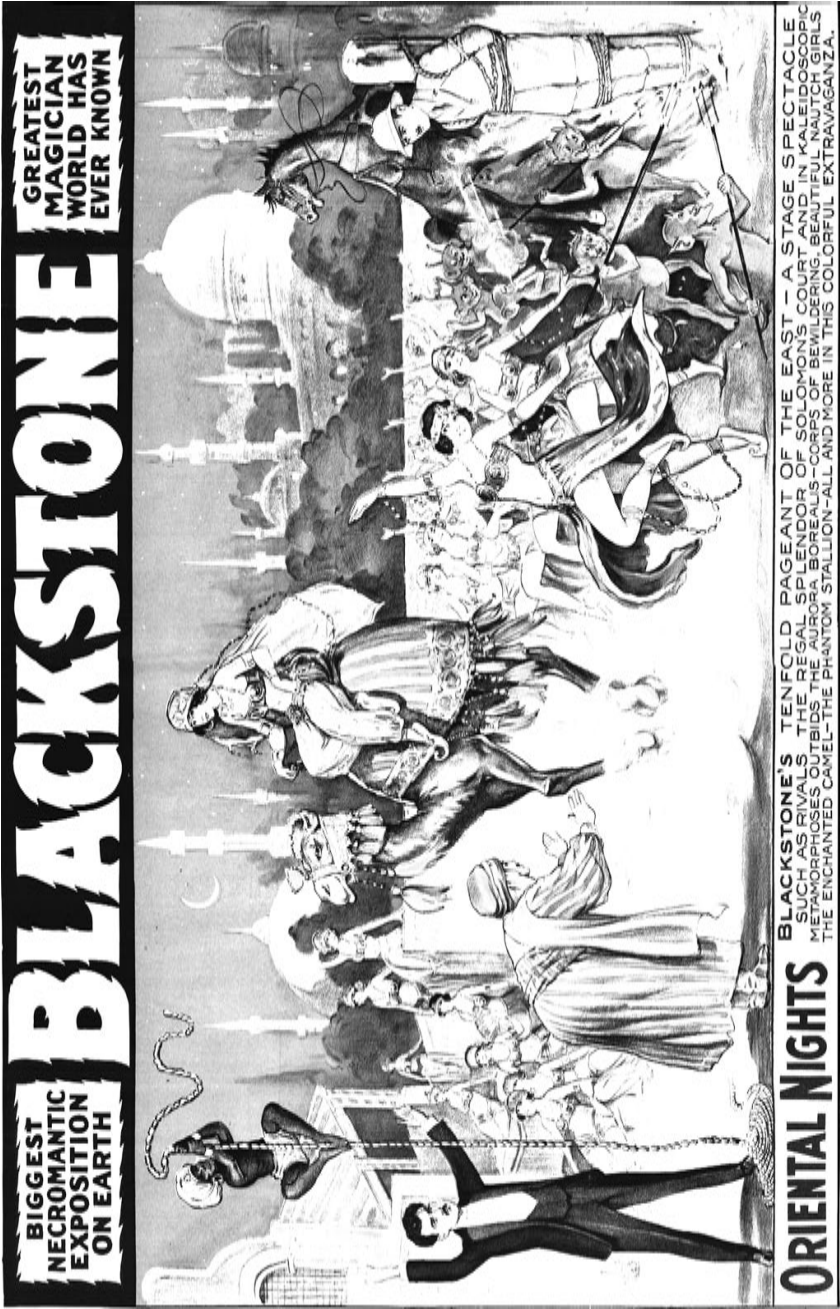


Figure 0.1 Blackstone, 'Oriental Nights', c. 1920. Courtesy of Nielsen Magic Collection. Blackstone's show included possibly the first vanishing camel in modern magic.

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it to say that this triumvirate of Asian nations were the preeminent representatives of magical fantasies during the Golden Age. Each chapter of Part II considers one of these nations, exploring both how its magic was represented in the West (e.g., Indian magic) and then how magic was actually experienced and performed in that country (e.g., magic in India). In each case, special attention is given to the ‘tricks’ held to be most representative of that particular magical tradition, as well as to the personalities who enlivened that magic, and the interaction between all of these and the regime of modern magic.

I think it’s important at the start to confess that this book makes no claims to being an ethnography or even a comprehensive history. This is especially important in the context of the intimidating, meticulous documentary historical work that is done within the magic community about the lives of magicians and the origins of particular tricks. Magicians are, as a group, deeply concerned about revealing who invented which trick and when it was first performed. The great Houdini set the tone for this by naming himself in testament to ‘the father of modern magic’, Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, and then devoting himself to exposing Robert-Houdin for making false claims of originality.

In any case, it is not my primary purpose to expose anyone in this way, although my arguments sometimes require that I do this kind of documentary work. However, in some cases, I’ll need to beg a little indulgence from these (rightfully) demanding readers, since it is quite often the case that my arguments are about the perception and misperception of magical history itself. Where I have omitted to mention some of the more esoteric or tortuous historical details that have been uncovered within the magic community, I apologize.

Indeed, I find myself full of sincere admiration for the historians of magic (who are often seen as ‘amateur historians’ in the academy) who have done astonishingly intricate work in this field. The quality of some of that work is second to none, and it really does emphasize the way that expertise in magic and in the university have tended to develop in parallel rather than in partnership over the years. Secret libraries and then balloon animals have contributed to making this so, but the situation is changing rapidly as magic societies and research centres go through the process of digitizing their assets in the age of the internet. I have benefitted immeasurably from the generous support of a number of such institutions as well as individual magicians in North America, Europe, and Asia.

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Just to push this a little further, the place of the study of magic in the university is controversial and difficult. Of course, I'm not even talking about the controversies associated with the study of esotericism or the paranormal in university contexts, since these are only tangentially related to the magic discussed in this book. In general, the study of magic falls into cultural history or perhaps theatre studies. There has been work recently in psychology. Television shows attempt to convince us that magic could be studied in school as part of the science curriculum; tricks can be used to illustrate scientific principles. The admixture of Orientalism suggests that magic could be a topic in critical area studies, and work is beginning in this field. And I was gratified that the anonymous reviewers of this book also recognized the significance of this story of magic for global history, especially the history of knowledge and the formation of the great binaries of modern thought (East-West, reason-passion, old-new, etc.).

In recent years, we have also seen the development and recognition of a new field of knowledge called 'performance philosophy', which is allied to 'performance politics'. Given the conceptually radical nature of magic as well as its inextricable relationship with performance, it seems to me that this is a most fruitful and productive context from which to study magic. And, indeed, I have received great support from scholars in these fields, at conferences and elsewhere.

Before I finally step aside, I'd like to offer a couple of titbits of advice about how to proceed. First of all, the adventure of writing this book has required some juggling in its own right because it seems likely that readers from different backgrounds will come with different expectations. It is partly for this reason that the book is structured into two parts. While I hope many readers might want to read the whole thing, I'm conscious that the two parts meet rather different needs. It seems conceivable, then, that some readers looking primarily for Asia in these pages might prefer to skip the first part. With that possibility in the back of my mind, I think Part II can stand up on its own. It won't be altogether stable, but it should be at least teetering upright.

A second note regards notes. In the early stages of this project, I was encouraged to write with only minimal footnotes so that the book would appear as accessible as possible to non-academic readers. However, it quickly became apparent to me that, at least to the extent that these 'non-academic' readers are magicians, this is a false assumption. Indeed, as I've

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already intimated, if there is a single group of readers anywhere in the world that is more interested than academics in meticulous footnotes and curious tangents, it's magicians. So, I have not omitted notes, and I was delighted to be supported in this choice by the anonymous readers and my editor in Cambridge. However, taking my cue from Susanna Clarke, I have endeavoured to write in a way that does not make reading these notes essential or even important for all readers, but also not too painful. If chasing the white rabbit back into the hat sounds like fun to you, the notes are there. In a wonderfully generous turn of phrase, one of the anonymous reviewers suggested that readers might 'dip into them like humming birds seeking sweetness'. I hope you find some nourishment, at least.

And finally, this book includes a number of 'scenes', which are descriptions of performances of magic that I have found especially important or powerful in various ways. They are not all drawn from the Golden Age – indeed many of them are rather contemporary – but I hope they serve to illustrate some of the general points and arguments being made. They usually appear without much interpretation in the hope that they will resonate by themselves and serve as points of reference throughout. For slightly theatrical reasons (such as the need to perform some of the magic in question for readers who may not have been lucky enough to have witnessed it before reading), these scenes are more prevalent in Part I than Part II. The scenes are based upon historical accounts, interviews, and recollections, but they have been narrativized by me; their purpose is more performative than historical, so I take full responsibility for any oddities.

It is also in a slightly theatrical mode that I have adopted the convention of addressing the generic magician as 'she' (rather than 'he') in this book. The issue of gender is both powerful and important in the history of magic, and it is discussed in various places herein. With a number of important exceptions, the history of modern stage magic has been dominated by men, while the history of modern Spiritualism and occult magic has featured women very centrally. Rather than defaulting to the male pronoun (as is the usual practice in work about secular magic), to the grammatically clumsy 'they', or to the tiresomely cumbersome 'he/she', I have chosen to flag this issue with a consistent 'she'. I immediately accept that this fails to achieve gender-neutrality, but I'm not of the opinion that reality is gender-neutral.

Tokyo, 2015