How magicians control your mind

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In September of 1895, in the face of a growing rebellion, Stephen III deposed his rival Robert-Houdin to Algeria. Robert-Houdin was a general, not a diplomat. He was a magician - the father, by most accounts of modern magic. A promising young monk escaped from Martin Vaux when, a few decades later, chose his stage name by adding an "O" to "Houdin." His ambition was to become the Algerian Aladdin, magicians whose artful manipulation had helped convince the Algerian population of Napoleon's beneficence with French rule.

A French colonial official assembled an audience of Arab chieftains, and Robert-Houdin put on a show that, in his brutal rhetoric, would be familiar to today's audience. He pulled men out of his hat, he picked up children out of the air, he poured gallons of coffee out of an empty silver bowl.

Then, as he recounted in his memoir, Robert-Houdin launched into a piece of enchantment calculated to show the chieftains how small would be the cost of bringing the Algerian tribes into the fold. He picked a well-regarded member of the audience and asked him to lift the lid of the cauldron of red wine which he had placed on top of a table.

The volunteer, a tall man with thinning dark hair and a somewhat nervous build, moved forward and lifted the lid. To everyone's amazement, wine poured out in a steady stream.

Then Robert-Houdin took another cauldron, a smaller one, measuring a man's height, and filled it to the brim with wine. Then, to everyone's surprise, the man filled another cauldron, larger than the first one.

"This means," Robert-Houdin said, "that we could make as much wine as we want." The chieftains were impressed, and the rebellion quelled.

The story of Robert-Houdin's diplomacy by means of well-disguised magic lives large in the legend because it is the only documented occasion, at least since antiquity, in which a sorcerer changed the course of world affairs. Stage magic, after all, is an entertainment, 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 reviews 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, informal, research into how we see and comprehend the world around us. Just as studying the mechanics of kites reveals the workings of our body's balance, these psychologists believe that studying the ways a talented magician can short-circuit our perceptual system will allow us to better group how the system is put together.

"I think magicians and intuitive 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," explains Philip Quinn, a experimental psychologist at the University of Washington.

In magicians have long known and neuroscientists are increasingly discovering, human perception is a carefully managed process. All of your everyday experiences, your interactions with the world, are actively manipulated brodered by collaboration between magic and art is still very much a possibility, and the neural underpinnings are clearly growing.

The New York Academy of Sciences has called the performance Alireza Shahbazi to give a presentation on the science of magic, and a team of magicians is scheduled to speak at an 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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