

LE300R

Dr. Potthast

06 May, 2017

### Core Assessment

Does magic parody reality? This question was brought about, first by the fact that I am a semi-professional magician, and second I noticed that people who were watching me perform would laugh at random at moments that weren't jokes. After learning about the theories of humor I started to wonder why do people laugh at odd times during magic performance, it cannot just be from the incongruity theory of humor, and there are times when people will be somber when things are designed to be funny. There is also the fact that children under the age of five years usually don't laugh at magic at all, this is not only from my own experience but from watching dozens of hours of magic while researching this paper.

So, does magic parody reality? This is a complex issue and is needing to be analyzed on every aspect of the question asked. What is reality, what constitutes a parody, does magic as an art form change how we react, and does this fit within the purview of any theory of humor, and if so or not then why?

To start off we have to question what is reality. This question has been asked repeatedly for hundreds if not thousands of years. For the sake of simplicity, I will be going over the works of a philosopher, one Immanuel Kant's, as well as psychology of physical reality. Kant claims human cognition involves the ability to "think the particular as contained under the universal."

And to generalize, lumping things into categories. We know this today as schemas. We categorize, think in abstract, and conceptualize. These mental acts in his works “A pure critique of reason” are imagination and understanding. These are the building blocks to his and by in large out understanding of how though works, but with that he also introduced a term “a priori conditions” arguing that experience doesn’t come first but second, or prior to the condition. Kants work on the Cognitive is very extensive, and to give it justice I believe it would be a good idea to quote it and then deconstruct it.

“In Kant’s theory, what he calls “the imagination” has the interpretive task of taking up received sensory material and arranging it in space and in time. Taking space first, the given sensory material—visual, tactile, and so forth— has to be organized or arranged into specific three-dimensional shapes and located at a specific location or place within the one unique, continuous space that we take all actual physical objects to occupy.”

(Palmer)

In other words, projecting that of mental capacity onto that of the world, giving it shape and form and then and then giving it space where all object is. This argument of how reality works goes not only from the perceived, or what you think you see, but also to the mental only projecting one’s reality on to the world

The rabbit hole that is the study of reality is far too deep to attempt to go into all of it here, but there is some validity to the act of one’s reality is being projected on to the world, for that is their reality. Yet other psychologist say that sensory perception is that of reality, and the intellect comes second. That is why illusions seem very real until they are analyzed and the intellect can take over. Kant’s argument has along with the generally perceived reality of others is why magicians like myself can be in this world, yet there are a few problems with either side.

Kant (even though he goes into much more) as a general overview, states that we receive sensory material and then arrange it in space time. Both of these are very valid approaches to what is reality, and much deeper than I have time to go into, so for the definition of reality that will be used for the rest of the analysis; reality is any physical state of being perceived or brought into the real world that is judged by experience, or through Kant's view of imagination.

Next question is what is a parody? Parody is a genre with in literature, film, and any other media that for all intents and purposes makes fun another genre through satire, that start with a comical over tone. Matthew Turner of the University of Ohio called a parody "comical imitation of a genre that uses its existing codes to examine the subject in a humorous way. Parody often exists simultaneously in conjunction with satire." Mr. Turner then starts to break down what is a parody by examining one sub-genre of that is parodied, the western. During his analysis the constancies of the western is shown such as the rules of a cowboy, and the very commonly used assumptions of what makes a western exactly that and then it is contracted with common parody's of western movies such as Mel Brook's Blazing Saddles. This also showed why people enjoy parodies of genres in the first place as I started to analyze the Simpsons, and Zombie Land is that a parody make the audience member think about what they like about the genre in the first place. This left a few rules of what make a parody of a genre an actually parody and what is just a satire. First a parody has to be well known but general to fit within the genre that it is satirizing. Second it must have a comical overtone, even if the subject matter is not by its-self comical (The movie Airplane is a good example) Third, if the audience knows the genre it should be apparent that the parody is a parody I.E. Blazing Saddles is a western parody and if you know western movies than it is apparent. Four there is a willing suspension of disbelieve about the subject

matter portrayed within the parody. If those four items are not met then any comedy attached to the genre is satirical but not a parody.

This brings us to what is magic. Magic used in this context is that of Illusion or trickery for entertainment. According to Jeff McBride, professional magician, author and owner and operator of the Magic and Mystery School in Las Vegas Nevada, the difference between a trick and an Illusion is that of context. "A trick is an intellectual problem between the audience member and the magician, if the audience figures out the trick then they have won... an illusion defuses that same trick into metaphor, storytelling and conjecture so it is more than the sum of its parts" Said McBride in an interview.

Magic has one other unique quality about it as told by Teller "Magic is a theatrical dramatization of impossible human action" "It is human nature to be skeptical and it is impossible to watch magic passively" Teller in the same interview for the documentary *Masters of Mystery* quoted magic as being an unusual condition, at people walking in to watch illusion don't suspend their disbelief willingly because of the skepticism they have. In other words people don't walk into a magic show, like other forms of entertainment disengaged, they are forcibly disengaged during the course of a magical show or effect. This disengagement is almost unique to magic, in the fact of people watching it to try to catch fooling them and then they cannot.

What does this mean within the confines of humor? The act of magic being funny is not because of it being a parody, because it does not follow the rules of a parody, in the willful suspension of disbelief. Audience members generally walk into a magic show and demand that their disbelief be suspended for them. Meaning that some of the humorous moments of magic are due to satire, but there is so much more than that going on. If we sit and look a little bit closer at magic and the skepticism that comes with it, and the jarring people into disengagement is a

possible and likely reason that people laugh at odd moment during the course of a magic show. This would fall under the brief preview of what relaxation theory of humor is saying, that there is tension built up by the magic effect and the releases of said tension is causing laughter, but that doesn't fit within it either. If we look at incongruity theory, the breaking of what is possible and what is impossible, and the finding of the way of looking at how something is done, thus laughter is a possible explanation except, during a trick of magic explained earlier the intellectual quandary between audience and magician, defuses the incongruity, yet if you take the same effect and change it into an illusion, it will become funny.

This is much to explore on why people laugh at magic, is it because of what is said during the patter? If so then why are some effect that are silent still funny? This is just scraping the surface of what is possible and what needs to be looked at, and while doing research for this paper I have been way too long and way too short on what needed to be said, and I think at the moment it's the latter. On Thursday May 4 2017 I presented this to the International Brotherhood of Magicians in Kansas City with a different group of questions being asked by magicians, and that led me to realize that the scope of does magic parody reality is a bit too limited and doesn't help anyone including myself. The one true thing that I have learned is that magic is unique within the theories of humor in the fact that it's based in incongruity theory but borrows elements of all of the other theories of humor, such as break of tension, and superiority theory, making the audience feel silly for not being able to figure out of a trick works which make the performer feel better. I could spend a lifetime looking at why we laugh at a ball underneath a cup, or a set of rings linking and unlinking, and I most likely will.

## Works Cited

John Morreall *Comic Relief*, Wiley Blackwell 2009

*Mysteries of Magic, Vol. 1: The Masters of Mystery* Mel Morpeth (Director) The Learning Channel, 1999, DVD

Palmer L. Kant and the brain: A new empirical hypothesis. *Review Of General Psychology* [serial online]. June 2008;12(2):105-117. Available from: PsycARTICLES, Ipswich, MA.

Accessed April 18, 2017

Turner M. Cowboys and comedy: the simultaneous deconstruction and reinforcement of generic conventions in the Western Parody. *Film & History* [serial online]. 2003;(2):48. Available from: Literature Resource Center, Ipswich, MA. Accessed April 18, 2017.