

# The Simulation of Miracles [2001]

'Give up chasing this phantom, inspiration. Leave it to that miraculous fairy, nature.' - Constantin Stanislavski

## Introduction

For the magician engrossed in the worlds of technique, secrets, the latest book, convention, or lecture, not to mention performing, it is all too easy to overlook certain fundamental issues regarding the nature of magic itself, and in so doing miss the essential point of the art which lies so close, yet so far, from his or her heart.

One of the most important of such issues must be the way in which effects and methods are created, for whatever one puts into the creation of an effect will be reflected in its performance; whatever ingredient is added to the dish will ultimately be tasted.

If magic is, as defined by JN Maskelyne in *Our Magic*, 'the simulation of supernatural effects', then the task of the conjuror when creating an effect must be to keep this simulation as true or realistic as possible by keeping the disparity between the effect as it should be, if accomplished by real magic - what might be termed the Ideal Effect - and the effect as it actually is, as formed by the method - the Actual Effect - as narrow as possible. Increasing the disparity for whatever reasons - to make life easier for the magician in some way, or to introduce a favourite sleight, or whatever - will inevitably tarnish the effect, regardless of motive. To paraphrase Maskelyne, the magician, 'must try to forget the importance of things which appeal to him most strongly: the difficulty of his manipulations; the ingenuity and originality of his inventions; the refinements and improvements he has introduced; and, above all, the distinctive merits personal to himself; because, for all the public knows or cares, those things might as well be nonexistent;' and to concentrate solely on, 'the effect to be made upon his audience'.

While it may never be possible to absolutely unite the Ideal and the Actual - there will always be a disparity, to whatever degree, between a simulation and the real thing - 'we can all, at least, try to do so, and in proportion to our united efforts in this direction... raise the status of magic as an art.' It must be added, of course, that such terms as Ideal and Actual are wholly subjective; but the processes of creativity are so indeterminate, that one could probably never attempt to describe them in anything other than the most subjective, or impressionistic, of terms.

## The Ideal Effect

It is important not to confuse the Ideal Effect with the idea of an Ultimate Effect, although, as with anything else, there is no actual dividing line between them. The latter is really the same as the former but taken to the extreme. For example, take the standard effect where a card is peeked at by the spectator, the deck is shuffled, and the magician produces the card. The Ideal Effect would stipulate that the peek be made as cleanly as possible, that there is no apparent possibility of the magician glimpsing the card, that the shuffle be real or realistic, the revelation magical, and the overall procedure logical (or at least apparently logical). The Ultimate Effect, on the other hand, would dismiss this out of hand by stating that, 'If real magic or mind-reading were possible then the spectator would not peek at a card; they would simply think of one.' But would they? Even a cursory study of the occult or 'magical' sciences such as alchemy, astrology, or tarot divination, will reveal a myriad of incantations, procedures, potions, chants, spells, symbols, rituals, layouts, configurations, movements, props, and so on, used for bridging the gaps between the material dimensions and those of higher realms; in short, all the things the so-called purist magicians so often despise!

What the latter probably mean is that all effects should be dreamlike, and therefore anything less than dreamlike won't do. The problem with this is, how far do you go? If the spectator can simply think of a card then why can't they think of anything at all? Why can't you just walk into a room full of people and tell each person what they are thinking? David Blaine's first television show contains a sequence which illustrates clearly both the advantages and disadvantages of dreamlike magic. In the first segment Blaine places a coin on the back of a youth's hand, and makes it vanish in the twinkling of an eye. The youth is visibly stunned by the effect. In the next segment, however, when performing the effect for another young man, the reaction is quite different: the effect is so impossible that the spectator immediately grabs Blaine's clothing as if that is obviously where the coin went to (which it was). So it seems that dreamlike magic is as dependent upon context as any other, and that it cannot be the only legitimate form of magic. Sometimes only 'un-dreamlike' magic will do.

## The Spectrum of Magic

Also, this idea has possibly missed one of the most important points of magic, which is that there is a whole spectrum of possible effects. Just as there are different styles of music, art, or architecture - classical, modern, post-modern, popular, etc. - so there are different styles of magic, and different types of effect within or without those styles. Some are like puzzles, some are funny, some are dreamlike, some appeal to the intellect, some are visual, some are impromptu, some use weird-looking props, and so on. Some are direct, some are surreal, some are impressionistic. The 'X-ing the Cut' Force is an example of an impressionistic effect (i.e., not a magical effect, but an occurrence which has an effect on the spectator). The effect on the spectator is that they cut the deck, the place where they have cut to is marked off, and some moments later the card which they have cut to is removed. The spectator is left, not with a direct perception of what happened, but an indirect conception, which they recreate into their own idea of what occurred. Such effects are greatly dependent upon presentation and its ulterior motive, misdirection, the latter stemming from principles known to any psychologist, such as:

1. Focussed and Divided Attention, or the difficulty of accurately perceiving all the inputs contained in any given moment, especially when one is experiencing something for the first time (which, of course, one is always doing, even when 'seeing something again', no two situations ever being identical);
2. Memory Modification, where 'holes in the memory' caused by Focussed and Divided Attention are filled with imagined 'memories'; and
3. Cognitive Dissonance, where conflicting elements are excused or overlooked - or a supposed illogicality on the part of the magician given the benefit of the doubt, especially if 'unnoticed' or rationalised by the magician - by the audience through a desire not to impede their supposed understanding or enjoyment of the performance, particularly where the magician's personality has created a favourable impression on them.

It should be added that just because an effect may be considered direct or impressionistic by the magician doesn't mean that the spectator will necessarily perceive the effect in this way<sup>3</sup>. Also, as with any other categorisation, the present one is tentative to say the least. There are certainly no dividing lines between direct and impressionistic effects, but an overall spectrum of forms; and because the spectrum is not fixed in any way, but organic and constantly changing, it might be regarded, not so much a spectrum, but more a kaleidoscope.

There is currently an article on the internet by John Granrose called 'The Archetype of the Magician'<sup>4</sup> which seems to put all of this into perspective. He lists four magicians as projecting archetypal images of what people generally regard as magicians: Hermes, the Tarot magician, Merlin, and Houdini. These individuals or images are all quite different, and yet they are all archetypal magicians. On a narrower scale, Paul Daniels, David Blaine, and Uri Geller are all very different performers, and yet they are all magicians. As the essay shows, there is no one archetype which defines a magician, or what a magician should and shouldn't do; which colour or shade of the spectrum - dreamlike, impressionistic, funny, serious - is right and which is wrong; just as one could never, for example, point at a specific tree and say, 'Now that is the most tree-ish of all trees.'

## Importance of Archetypes

Another important point concerning the Ideal Effect is that it should really contain archetypal elements if one wishes to make as clear an impact on the audience as possible. For example, take the classic Four-Ace effect. The 'four Aces' is an archetypal unit because decks are comprised of four-of-a-kind units, and the Aces is the highest of these. Anyone who has used cards or played Poker or Rummy will know this and feel comfortable with the inherent logic of using such a four-of-a-kind in certain effects. Even those unfamiliar with cards will, as soon as they understand how the deck is made up, recognise this logic.

The Aces magically gathering together after having been separated among other cards is also archetypal in form. And there are several archetypal ways in which the assembly can take place: all at once or one at a time, or progressively from pile to pile; and there are a number of archetypal ways in which each of these effects could be carried out, such as using 'T' formations, squares, rows, face up, face down, etc. The sudden reversion of the Aces to their original packets at the end is also archetypal in nature. All of these effects reflect or symbolise phenomena which take place throughout life and existence.

This may all seem fairly obvious, but there are many effects where such archetypal qualities or procedures are missing. A classic effect which suffers from this is the 'Three Jack Deal', where three Jacks are placed onto the deck, two hands of three cards are dealt, and the dealer shown to have the three Jacks. While the spectators may not consciously question the use of only three Jacks, there may be an unconscious query as to why a more archetypal unit such as four Jacks (or Aces, which are higher in value) is not used. Even if the use of three Jacks is excused through presentation, is this really the best way of going about things: devising an effect around a method and then disguising weaknesses with patter? Other effects which suffer from a similar weakness include the original, three-card version of the 'Collectors', and the 'All-Backs' routine in Don England's Technical Knockouts.

As another example, there are numerous 'twisting' effects which involve a multiple-change climax ('Maxi-Twist', 'Four, the Hard Way', etc.). One form of these effects starts with the Ace through Four of a suit and ends with the four Aces. (There is a 'monte' effect in Mendoza's *The Book of John* which follows a similar pattern.) The climax is good because a sequence of cards, which, although logical enough, doesn't actually mean much to the spectator, changes into an archetypal unit, something which is instantly recognisable; so the ending is not only magical and surprising, but it has meaning, because the Aces are 'the best hand to have at cards', etc. Another form of this effect, however, starts with four Aces and ends with the Ace through Four of a suit<sup>5</sup>. Again, the ending is magical and surprising, but the difference is that one has started with something meaningful and ended up with something less meaningful (in this context), even if the numerical sequence may be aesthetically pleasing<sup>6</sup>. Such an ending might seem almost incongruous, even if one has a clever patter line which appears, on the surface, to justify it.

This isn't to say that such an effect might not be appreciated by fellow magicians or 'experienced' lay audiences, especially if the method is particularly clean, or anyone else for that matter. There are plenty of situations where 'surprise for the sake of surprise', such as is often (but not always) the case where a jumbo coin is produced at the end of a one-coin routine, is appreciated, especially if accompanied by a logical witticism. Again, there is a place on the spectrum for these things.

The purpose of such generalisations is more to broach the subject than actually pick holes in specific tricks, or suggest that such holes will always exist regardless of context. I am certainly not trying to establish a fixed set of rules, or suggest that these are universal principles which must be applied indiscriminately. They may apply in certain contexts and not in others. It does not mean that the archetype should come before the effect (i.e., that the incorporation of archetypal elements becomes the underlying objective rather than a clear effect, the effect then being designed around these elements), or that one must try and force the issue. Nor does it mean that effects which lack archetypal elements are not necessarily magical, the flow and clarity which may result if their methods are easy possibly making up for any archetypal weaknesses. There is nothing inherently 'wrong' with using the Ace through Four of a suit, or three Jacks, or any other number of cards. A magician, by the nature of the art, is fully justified in using items which may not be immediately understood by the spectators (something which purist magicians who dislike special props seem to forget), patter and presentation existing (partially) for the purpose of explaining or justifying these things.

But what I do believe is that certain effects may be even more magical, or at least clearer, if they naturally contain both archetypal and magical elements working in harmony with one another. Because archetypal forms and procedures are so easily recognised and understood, they allow the spectators to concentrate solely upon the magic. As Maskelyne points out, the more things the spectator has to understand and remember, the less clear the effect (although, an interesting point to consider is how unusual forms and procedures may be used for purposes of misdirection - as long as they aren't potentially confusing). But as always, the secret is to look at the end result. If it works, fine, but if not, then that is the answer to the problem of whether or not to modify archetypal, or any other, elements. One certainly shouldn't compromise the overall picture for the sake of theoretically improving details.

By 'archetypes' I must stress that I am not necessarily referring to them on an ultimate, objective level - what Plato or Jung may have understood by the such things - but simply that there are straightforward, logical forms and procedures which will be universally, or at least locally, recognisable, and that the underlying effect will ideally contain such forms if the magic is to be communicated clearly; unless, of course, one is purposely creating something surreal or bizarre (as in certain effects by Hamman, Harris, et al). For example, the now-standard ESP or Zener cards are probably no more archetypal on an objective level than a Royal Flush - if Rhine-Zener had developed a six-card set, or any other number, then that would be our 'archetypal unit' in magic - but it is the locally-recognisable level of archetype, not any 'ultimate' level, which is probably the most relevant in the everyday performance of magic.

#### The Actual Effect

The Actual Effect, as mentioned at the beginning, is the one which actually arises from the form of method used. Change the method even slightly and the effect upon the audience is altered, even if unconsciously. The Actual Effect can be divided into two: the effect as conceived by the magician, and the effect as perceived by each member of the audience. As a magician with almost any performing experience will know (or should know), the two are very often not the same thing at all; one can imagine, and plan accordingly, that the tricks will go a certain way, the audience reacting in the same ideal way as those faceless spectators referred to in magic books. However, even with this area of uncertainty there is still much that can be planned successfully, any further alterations possibly being improvised in performance.

#### The Basic Effect

In order to try and create magic where there is only a minimum of disparity between the Ideal and the Actual, certain important elements must be ascertained. First of all, what is the basic, underlying effect, or the Ideal Effect stripped down to its simplest form? A list of underlying effects would include animation, appearance, distortion, levitation, magnetism (both positive and negative), restoration, penetration, suspension, transition, transformation, transposition, and vanish. Psychic effects would include clairvoyance, prediction, psychokinesis, psychometry, telekinesis, telepathy, and so on.

#### The Specific Effect

Then one establishes the specific effect. In the case of the 'Collectors' (the now-standard version), if the Basic Effect is the production of three selected cards, the specific effect would be that three face-down selections magically appear interlaced, simultaneously, among four face-up Aces which have been placed on top of the deck. This identification of the specific effect is of the utmost importance. If the basic and/or specific effect is vague then no amount of finesses, convincers, and the like, or clever routining, will improve things. Likewise, because of restrictions which may arise when devising the method, one may end up altering the effect, such as, in this case, counting the Aces onto the deck singly, or placing them into the middle of the deck. One must always refer back to the original intention of both the basic and specific effect, and be aware of how far one may be straying from this intention.

#### The Effect-Procedure

Once the effect has been established, a straightforward, archetypal, and logical procedure can then be worked out to accomplish the effect. By straightforward I do not necessarily mean devoid of anything unusual, or 'complying with card-table procedure' (whatever that means), but simply nothing convoluted, confusing, or illogical (unless purposely designed as part of the effect, not as a result of unclear thinking). The Spin Cut, ATFUS, or Braue Addition are all unusual but straightforward, a magician, as mentioned previously, being fully justified in employing the unusual.

#### Designing the Method

The effect-procedure provides a framework within which the method can be designed, and as long as the method doesn't unreasonably alter or distort the framework then the Actual Effect won't be too far away from the Ideal. However, the framework is not made of stone. There can be a tremendous amount of leeway without actually destroying the framework. It is interesting to note that in the original four-card version of 'Collectors', where the Aces are tabled, a card is peeked at, and then the Aces are displayed, followed by being tabled again and the next two selections being made, etc., although the effect has been compromised somewhat to fit the method, the excuse of 'forgetting to have shown the Aces' implies an undistorted framework, even though the actual framework has been altered beyond the Ideal - so the Actual Effect still follows the Ideal, albeit indirectly. Admittedly, the patter is used to disguise the weakness in the method, but as long as the procedure which is implied is itself logical then the disparity will still be narrow enough for the overall illusion to remain intact. It is when the procedure, implied or otherwise, is illogical, that the disparity may become too wide to sustain the illusion.

Another clear example of where the Actual Effect is compromised by the method is the original version of 'Out of This World'. The Ideal Effect, if one is being stringent, would state that the spectator deal through the entire deck then turn the two piles over cleanly to reveal the colour separation. The Actual Effect, of course, does not achieve this but again, the weakness can, with the right presentation, even be turned into a strength. As the original patter goes, 'To show you that I have perfect control over you, we shall change over the indicator cards, and I will still cause you to deal them correctly.'

As far as the actual process of designing a method is concerned, this can involve both the incorporation of standard 'blocks of method' - already-established moves and sequences which fit the effect-framework - and/or new moves and sequences which are tailor-made for the framework at hand. There are two points here which are important to consider: firstly, one shouldn't use familiar moves which may stretch the framework further than the use of tailor-made moves and sequences; but on the other hand, one shouldn't try and come up with something new if something already established will do the job.

It must be emphasised, at this point, that none of this is meant as any kind of 'formula for inventing' ('It is impossible to give recipes whereby the creation of...effects may be assured' - Maskelyne). It isn't being suggested that one should try and puzzle things out in an a-b-c fashion, thinking, 'Now let me see if I can come up with a basic, archetypal effect, and then construct a framework for it', etc.; that the process of creation is linear rather than circular; or that the ideas presented here are meant to be applied in some scientific way.

#### A Scientific System of 'Creating'

As an example of a scientific system, one could list all the properties of an object and then list all the possible effects which involve the transformation of, or other strange phenomena involving, those properties. One then chooses the best of these effects and develops possible methods for them.

For example, in the case of a paper clip, it is:

1. usually made from metal 2. usually silver in colour 3. a piece of wire, folded into shape 4. magnetic (if metal) 5. generally small 6. used for clipping papers together 7. not edible 8. a conductor of heat 9. easily linked with other paper clips; etc.

Possible effects could therefore include:

1. turning the silver-coloured metal into gold 2. causing the clip to visibly or invisibly unfold into a straight piece of wire 3. causing it to defy the attraction of an examined magnet 4. stretching or enlarging 5. being eaten by the performer 6. causing it to heat up in the spectator's hand 7. a number of them placed singly into the performer's mouth, a chain of linked clips being drawn therefrom (a la the needles or razor blades effect), etc.

An Inspirational 'System' of Creating

Such a system would work in its own way, but the only problem is that there is no element of inspiration involved, and therefore you could easily miss out on many of the ingenious, sophisticated, and subtle effects - 'things you would never normally think of' - which arise from this important element. Such effects might include:

1. a 'Twentieth-Century Clips' effect, where a gold clip is caused to vanish and reappear linked between two previously linked silver clips, held in the spectator's cupped hands 2. a number revelation, where the clip magically assumes the shape of a spectator's thought-of, or otherwise selected, number (similar to a marketed effect involving a piece of wire and hot liquid) 3. a 'Clipped Ambitious Card', where the clipped card visibly jumps (via a Riffle Pass, say) from the middle of the deck to the top.

As you can see, these effects, unlike the former, are not just based around the straightforward properties of the paper clip, but contain extra elements not normally associated with this object. Of course, one cannot prove through any logical argument that the latter effects are any more inspired or sophisticated than the former, and again there are no clear dividing lines between them; but I think one can tell the difference on an intuitive level. There is often a spark of originality - something delightful and refreshing - which touches one inside when the approach is truly creative rather than scientific, every true creation starting with an inspired idea: a nugget of potential form stemming from a realisation that something is possible, or that a void needs filling; not from a blank desire to invent something. There is no guarantee that such ideas will always be good or original, just as a lack of inspiration does not guarantee bad or unoriginal ideas. But the majority of truly great ideas are probably all inspired in some way.

Conclusion

The creation of effects often involves the occurrence of several ideas, often in quick succession. The problem lies in assessing, assembling, altering, and discarding ideas so as to produce workable results. And because the effect and method often occur together as a 'packaged idea', one must be even more rigorous in separating the two and identifying them clearly, even if this means wrenching them away from aspects which are highly appealing but do not serve any objective purpose. This is what I mean when I suggest identifying the basic and specific effects. One may have this idea, this beautiful form, a packaged effect/method which works in its own way. Or one may have read someone else's creation somewhere, and although it works up to a certain point, something is not quite right. But once the two strands of effect and method have been separated, then one can more easily identify inherent weaknesses and make alterations to either or both.

Always, one has to come back to the essential point of what one is trying to do. What effect is one trying to create? The mind loves to divert and entertain itself by throwing up smokescreens of ideas, inspired or otherwise, which mislead one away from the task at hand. The production of all these ideas, of course, is not, in itself, the problem. This is the essential part of the mechanism of creativity, and without it we would create nothing. The problem is whether one becomes lost among, or misled by, these ideas, or takes control of them. For example, magicians love trying to find 'artistic-looking' ways of handling double cards, and fitting these techniques into routines, when it might be more artistic, depending on context, to eliminate the use of doubles altogether.

If people enjoy entertaining themselves and fellow enthusiasts in this manner then what harm does it do? Well, I shouldn't think it's going to do anyone any harm. Like those Heath Robinson contraptions, some of these things can be quite wonderful and clever in their own way. But, like said contraptions, they may not really work in anything more than the most limited of contexts. Not that there is anything wrong with this - there is a time and place for everything - but I doubt whether the original purpose of magic is to bemuse people with bizarre or ludicrous inventions!

Whether or not one is trying to fulfill any original purpose, however, if there is such a thing, is another matter. But as mentioned previously, although there may not be any 'right' way, there can surely be no harm in attempting to cast some light over the spectrum in general in the hope of gaining a clearer understanding of it; so that one may make a more conscious decision about which way to follow, whatever direction that may be, rather than randomly and unknowingly taking this route or that. Whether one prefers the former or latter approach, of course, is up to the individual.

1. See notes on Cognitive Dissonance, p.3.

2. 'Some tricks, by virtue of their perfection, become imperfect. Conversely, some tricks, by virtue of their imperfection, become perfect.' Rick Johnson, 'The 'Too-Perfect' Theory' (Racherbaumer, Hierophant 5 & 6.) Also, presentation and misdirection can make imperfect or 'un-dreamlike' magic, such as the bluff removal of a coin from a handful of change and its subsequent vanish, almost as dreamlike as any 'perfect' effect.

3. See later explanation of two types of Actual Effect, p. 6.

4. [granrose.com/thesis.htm](http://granrose.com/thesis.htm)

5. See page 29.

6. And, in its own way, archetypal. Kevin Baker pointed out that the sequence 1-2-3-4 is something learned from childhood and is therefore meaningful and recognisable. [But in the context of playing-cards, it is not a significant unit like the four Aces.]

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