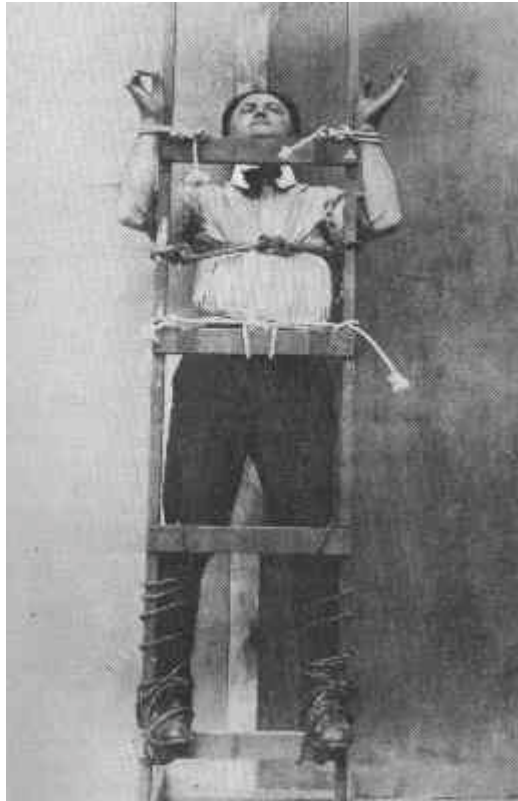


The spectacular showing : Houdini and the wonder of ethnomethodology.



“He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.” Wittgenstein. TLP.

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Intro:

This essay is *about* Houdini's escapes and ethnomethodology's studies. By accomplishing what appears to be impossible, Houdini leaves his audience considering not only: how did he manage to do *that*, but also: *just what* is it that we consider to be possible. For magicians and escapologists, we are uninterested in the mechanics of their tricks whilst thrilled by what they dramatically present to us : a sense of the limits to what we can apprehend as an audience. While marking out the differences in their projects the essay brings out the shared urge of escapologists and ethnomethodologist to show where others tell and to awaken us to the wonder of the world. In reflecting on what happens when magicians reveal the devices that constitute their tricks, I ask whether the purpose of studying phenomena can only reside in revealing how they are produced as intelligible acts.



1.

For a couple of hours the bustle of Boston city centre has come to a standstill. A tall square office building forms the impassive, concrete and certain death backdrop to the fragile figure. Along the streets erratically parked cars, fire engines, crowds of any old un-ticketed people of the city collectively craning their necks and newspaper photographers clicking their shutters. So small and yet you can see him swinging slightly on his rope as he twists inside his straitjacket: *Houdini*.

Let's switch scenes: think about Houdini somewhere else than suspended from an edifice, leaping manacled off a bridge or escaping from a high security prison:

On one occasion, I took him to a magicians' meeting in my car, which that season was a Ford Model T coupe with a front seat of only two-person width and with the door catches inconveniently placed behind a person's elbow. When he tried to twist around and work the catch, Houdini found it stuck and in all seriousness, he demanded, "Say – how do you get out of this thing?" It wasn't until I had reached across and pulled the knob for him that he began laughing, because he of all people couldn't get out of a Ford coupe. (pxiv Gibson 1953)

It was not that Houdini was any different in his hands-on experience of a modern world daily provided with new mass-produced boxes to get stuck in. He was different in the shocks he administered to that world's expectations of boxes, locks, barrels, ropes and bags. As he toured the world he was challenged to get out of all kinds of otherwise sinister constraints: straitjackets for the mad in the USA, prisons in countries all over the world and deportation railway carriages to Siberia in the newly founded USSR:

“I think my escape from the Siberian Transport was my most difficult performance. I was placed in the great vault usually assigned to political prisoners, and when the great door was shut, I had the hardest time of my life, perhaps, in releasing myself. But nevertheless it took me eighteen minutes to walk out, and face the dazed officials”
Houdini quoted in an interview with the Appleton Crescent Newspaper (Feber 1904)



Watched over in cuffs by police officers, in straitjackets by psychiatrists, dangling from ropes by fire fighters, in submerged boxes by sailors and in cells by gaolers, he entertained the masses by getting them, in a life or death gamble upon his extraordinary skills, to question ‘will Houdini do it? How could he possibly do it?’ And after each attempt to restrain him fails, the crowd thrills and the officials daze. The exceptional license Houdini is being given is to show, with professional witnesses and the populace present, how ineffective their technologies of restraint and confinement are. As Adam Phillips adds:

What Houdini shows, but doesn’t tell, is that legitimating oneself, making one’s name, is itself a curious game. If a criminal escapes from prison he is punished; if Houdini escapes from prison he is fulsomely rewarded. And in celebrating Houdini’s skill the audience is applauding a talent

that is potentially a threat to society p42 (Phillips 2001)

Is society so fragile, so easily threatened by an escape artist? Did prisoners learn from Houdini’s techniques and escape en masse? Did Houdini ever steal wallets from his audience, and not give them back afterwards? For all of his exposure of the defeasibility of material restraints, Houdini was no social reformer nor direct critic of social constraints or conventions, in fact his critical energies were devoted to exposing the seemingly harmless targets of mediums and the Spiritualist movement. Yet even if he did not directly attack Russian deportation or US penal policy we should still consider Houdini’s talent for bringing technologies of constraint and restraint into the public gaze surreptitiously. And once there, of altering his audience’s way of looking at institutional scenes. As Phillips notes of his struggle to escape from a madman’s shackles, Houdini closely resembles a madman: sweating, eyes bulging and his limbs thrashing as if he were having a fit. To the audience he makes it very clear that attempting to escape from a lunatic’s shackles produces the appearance of madness. The desire to escape is understandable and in Houdini’s case accepted as expected (what would it be if Houdini lay docile?) When he finally escapes, his clothes are sweat-stained and in tatters. Free from constraint he returns to normal, but what if he were bound up again. And again. Well he is of course, but he is ‘Houdini’ and he has been given the right to be confined and escape regularly, with reasonable rest breaks in between and a not insubstantial fee for his performance.

2.

A student goes home after attending a university class where she has been told to go and do an 'experiment' which will form the basis of the next lesson. Her instructions are simple: she is to go into a café during a quiet period, buy her coffee, look around and then select a table with someone else or a group already sitting at it with whom she is unacquainted. Without saying anything she should pull out a chair and sit at the table. She should not say why she is sitting at the table, though she can engage in conversation on whatever other topic. Whether she is engaged in conversation or not she should drink her coffee in a relaxed and friendly manner, as if they were old acquaintances. She must not give up her seat at the table. Only when she is leaving should she explain that is doing an exercise for a university course on social interaction in public places.

When the class finally get back together she relates her story of sitting down at a table with an old woman, who looked fairly harmless. Having sat at the table and put her coffee cup down, the elderly lady eyed her with suspicion and sat silent for a minute or two. The girl feeling a little anxious smiled but kept quiet. 'Are you going to ask me to come to a church service?' the lady finally asked. The class laugh loudly and sympathetically - they have various stories to tell about how their inappropriate behaviour was dealt with by café customers. Many were greeted with suspicion, some with irritation and a surprising few were greeted with pleasure. People at the tables had asked what they were up to, or made assumption that they were about to be chatted up, or sold something or asked to church. Her question, as posed by her studies is: 'how does anyone do what everyone clearly does without any great difficulty?'

This kind of 'breaching experiment' will no doubt be familiar to those who have any knowledge of Garfinkel's (1963; 1964; 1967) early investigations on trust and the routine grounds of everyday activities. The breaching experiments serve several purposes for ethnomethodologists: they test out the Parsonian theory of rationality and mutual understanding (Parsons 1951; Parsons 1968), they make 'seen but un-noticed' features of everyday life visible, they show that social order is not as fragile as many social theories might claim it to be, and they initiate students into the study of societies' methodical procedures for the production of order, or, ethnomethods (Livingston 1987). When students of ethnomethodology deliberately try to get an encounter in public to fail by behaving inappropriately (e.g. selecting a café table that is already [taken] when others are [free]¹) they barely make a dent in social order, let alone cause it to collapse. Yet:

'In the face of the attempted breaches of trust and expectations, what Durkheim identified as the moral order of daily life exerts such a powerful presence that considerable lengths will be gone to in order to retain, if at all possible, the things-as-usual character of ordinary life' p32 (Sharrock and Anderson 1986).

What sense does it make to consider Houdini's magic tricks, impossible feats and great escapes beside ethnomethodology's study of everyday competences, ubiquitous

¹ Square brackets are used by phenomenologists and Garfinkel as a rendering device for the field properties of a phenomenon.

devices and rule use? There is the danger of ‘perspective by incongruity’ (Watson 2000) where we may lose the essence of magic by equating it erroneously with ethnomethodological study.



Houdini’s daring doing may be too mesmerising for a tradition in ethnomethodology² which has devoted a great deal of attention to ‘doing being ordinary’, to conventionality as an *accomplishment* (Sacks 1984; Schegloff 1986). For those of us committed to studying ordinary action it is a struggle to set aside his grandiose gestures, proclamations and exclamations in favour of the routine aspects of what constitutes a performance of ‘Houdini!’³. Let us try for a while to suspend what an audience makes of an amazing escape. Consider instead that for Houdini these spectacular stunts and ordeals had to become thoroughly routine. His picking of locks while submerged underwater had to become through daily practice as effortless as an ordinary member

unlocking their front door on a rainy day. As a vernacular expert in producing spectacle Houdini was aware of and reliant on its *uses* :

Spectacular escapes

Strange as it may appear, I have found that the more spectacular the fastening to the eyes of the audience, the less difficult the escape really proves to be. pp45-46

There is something about the spectacular fastening that fixates an audience and makes it easy for the artist to do his difficult hidden work without it being noticed, magicians call it ‘misdirecting’. Houdini himself is agreeing here that what is spectacular may not be what is difficult, it may be the easiest thing to convince an audience with. Taking an ethnomethodological perspective and considering the production side to directing attention, it is the kind of fastener which holds the audience’s attention on it when, if they wished to expose Houdini, they should be looking elsewhere. David Blaine (2002) compares this to the way a chess master uses certain bold moves to attract their opponents attention while they are actually up to something else elsewhere on the board⁴. For the audience the fastening is where we expect to see the ‘escape’ happen, it is by misdirecting our attention on *this* that the technologies of the trick go un-noticed.

² F A Mesmer’s experiments in animal magnetism were the source for this word, indicating a hypnotic state of fascination.

³ Lynch and Bogen (1996) have carried out an exemplary study of situating the spectacle in the courtroom during the Iran-Contra trial and its relation to the historical record, truth-finding and more.

⁴ Rod Watson (ref.) makes a similar point on the operation of a gang of pickpockets in Nice .

Ethnomethodology urges that its practitioners should notice what is unseen because it is *so* obvious. A note of caution here, Houdini deliberately hides what he is really up to, and the danger is that when we notice something ‘hidden’ in everyday life it entails an intentional agent, similar to a Houdini, that hides things by pulling the wool over our eyes⁵. This is where ethnomethodology, in alerting us to un-noticed orderly features of social action, to our ‘trust in appearances’, might be misunderstood as revealing member’s ignorance of a massive con trick, whereas its concerns are that the massively orderly nature of our lives goes un-noticed and how it is that trustworthy appearances are routinely recognised and produced. Ethnomethodology proposes that we might be *amazed* by what we are doing in our everyday lives, rather than suspicious that if it is *so* organized then surely a spirit of the age, a form of capitalism, a genetic blueprint or a shared neural pattern must have done the organizing. That participants in a conversation can take turns at talking and so rapidly, economically, intelligibly is awe-inspiring for Sacks (1992). That players of tic-tac-toe cannot be stopped in their reasoning despite the greatest possible noncompliance with the game by their opponent amazes Garfinkel (ref).

Part of our natural attitude to the world is that we trust in its appearances and it is so ordinary, so humble, and so utterly obvious that we fail to see it (Schutz 1973). There are occasions when we reflect on what happens, for instance, when we trip up and the smooth flow of our conduct is interrupted, when we visit a foreign country, when we follow the joke made by Seinfeld⁶ doing ‘observational comedy, or, when we take up professional studies of human matters (of theorising, business, science, design, law, medicine). Are our everyday occasioned reflection on our practices, and ethnomethodology’s more rigorous investigations, so far from Houdini’s request for an audience to look closely at him and his spectacular bonds, his cells, his cuffs or his straitjackets? Already we may be able to guess that there are some reversals at work here that may reveal further shared principles. From Garfinkel (1967) and Wittgenstein (1953) we have the constant reminder : *everything is in plain sight*. The skill of the philosopher or ethnomethodologists is in revealing what is right before our eyes but we cannot see because we are blinded by its obviousness. From Houdini: we cannot see how he actually does what he does because we are blinded by the spectacle he has assembled as part of what he does. Ethnomethodology is not saying that ordinary members are magicians, since the magician knows how, in detail, their trick works, they can show us how it works and what it constitutes. The ordinary member is more or less uninterested in how they produce order, it is ethnomethodology that shows the methods that produce order. Houdini’s many escapades offered a lesson not all that far from ethnomethodology’s *raison d’etre*, as Gibson writes in his introduction to his collection of Houdini’s works:

In all, this book, with its abundance of Houdini’s own writings, shows how clearly magic, as practised by Houdini, was and is explainable by one faculty only: that of human accomplishment, pxv (Gibson 1953).

⁵ Incidentally pulling hats down over the eyes of pedestrians during a robbery is a trick mentioned by Houdini (1953) in ‘The Right Way to Do Wrong’.

⁶ A hugely popular US TV comedy show from the late 90s based on the principle of its characters doing nothing and obsessing on nothing much, or perhaps more accurately dwelling at great length on the obvious.

3.

Off duty, during his 'free time' Houdini lived life as usual like anyone else, struggling to find the lever or knob that opens the car door. He could not always live as the *exceptional* human he was during his challenges and magic tricks. Except of course for the witness to *Houdini* being unable to get out of a perfectly ordinary car, such an event becomes a storyable thing. While there is continuity there is clearly discontinuity too, it is *not* Houdini, when this person is off duty. If the car were to become part of [performing Houdini] he would have spent time in advance inspecting its interior, planning his escape, assessing what witnesses could and couldn't see through its windows and so on. To do *performing Houdini* requires careful planning, some fiddling with the setting and often some tiny hidden tools. Ethnomethodologists despite their acute attention to practical competence are during their 'free time' as incompetent as anyone else. This is sort of laughable and sort of intriguing at the same time. Like Wittgenstein's approach to language, ethnomethodology does not seek greater mastery of practice nor to correct practice. Its promises of leaving everything as it found it are refreshing compared to the reductive explanations, a priori politics or moral superiority of much critical theory. Yet isn't the expectation that we have of Houdini that his talents, his considerable reflection upon and skill with doors, locks and boxes might help him in his ordinary life? Can ethnomethodology help its practitioners live their lives, can it help members become anything else?

Phillips (2001) makes a distinction between Houdini's performances : the open struggle / the hidden escape. Neither of which seem *possible* on observing them as an ordinary member of the audience.



Houdini Submerged in Chinese Water Torture Cell

A. The escapes from strait jackets dangling from skyscrapers and their like: Look it can be done! It is practical, it is part of our everyday world, it is, however ... extraordinary. Only training like Houdini's will allow you to do as he has done. Only the exceptional, spectacular skill of Houdini could do this. This is not in any way what we expect ordinary people to be able to do or to endure. Nor would they want to do or endure it.

B. The Chinese Water Torture Cell, Walking Through a Brick Wall and their like: An amazement akin to the great struggles to escape which show Houdini's training, agility, athleticism and bravery at work. This time though with a focus on the equipment involved. How does this 'black box' work? Does it work like it appears to work.

In practice for Houdini pulling off the two kinds of escapes, the techniques are shared and for the audience we are not ignorant of the device being a conjuror's 'black box'. Its [secret] mechanism can remain a secret mechanism. We are perplexed when the device makes a play of being open to inspection: the use of glass in the Chinese Water Torture Cell plays upon this awareness that there is still something we cannot see even when the 'black box' is apparently transparent. In one of his later tricks, Houdini walks through a brick wall on stage, and it *really* is a solid cemented brick wall which members of the audience can bang with their hands and kick with their feet. In his guide to his tricks, Houdini revealed it was done through the use of a pliable carpet which obscured a trapdoor (Houdini 1953). As the curtain closed around Houdini the trapdoor was opened, Houdini would stretch the carpet and squeeze through the small gap created underneath the wall.

What would ruin the show and make us ask for our money back is if Houdini fluffed using the machinery and we caught him wriggling in the gap under the wall. But wait, good magic is still more skilful than that since Houdini and other magicians will also use identifiable fluffs to make us think we have seen a mistake which turns out once again to be a distraction from the real trick. Or having been discovered they use one trick as the diversion from another one that they can initiate at that point. Discovery of how one trick is done does not preclude a good magic trick so long as there is another to follow that remains unexplained. Whenever Houdini's tricks were duplicated by someone else he would expose how the trick worked and then do another escape which could no longer use the same trick to make it work. At Glasgow Zoo he attracted crowds to watch one of his nailed coffin escapes and then read in the newspaper that another magician was doing the same trick. Houdini did a public demonstration of how the coffin trick worked, spoiling his competitor's performance and then proceeded to escape from a coffin now secured in a way that made the previous method of escape impossible. Houdini had to be impossible to imprison and equally impossible to work out how he did his current escapes. His show was ruined when anyone could know how the escape was done. To think about ethnomethodology for a moment, by catching members in the act, by catching mind-in-action, is the show ruined?

Houdini's most likely successor is David Blaine, a New York street magician who is currently redoing many of Houdini's most notorious feats including being buried in a coffin for a week. Blaine's live burial was a mixture of *endurance* and a magic 'black box' that Houdini had been working on when he died⁷. The trouble for the audience watching Blaine's feats of endurance is that they remain rightly suspicious that there is also trickery involved and that Blaine is not enduring what he claims to be. Endurance without the black boxes would not be magic though and moreover might be boring and ultimately trivialising (think of the Japanese game show 'Endurance' and how foolish its participants appeared).

In Blaine's most renowned performance so far he sealed himself in a block of ice for three days in the centre of a busy New York street, an endurance challenge that was a variant on an escape that Houdini patented but never worked out how to do

⁷ The customised coffin that had been on display during Houdini's final tour was rather macabrely used for burying him dead.

(Silverman 1996)⁸. The audience were left asking, could he survive that long or is it a trick? Blaine, like Houdini, is a voracious reader, an expert in not just the technicalities of magic tricks and escape artistry but also in the history of the art (Blaine 2002). In a recent interview (Colin 2002) when a journalist pushed him for a 'how to do a Blaine trick' :

... although his new book is filled with the details, he gets tetchy when you ask him how he did a particular trick.

"That's not why I do magic," he says. "If you're thinking that then you're not getting what I do. If you watch a great actor in a great movie then you enjoy the moment, you're not thinking about whom they're dating. Some people that overcomplicate their lives think that way" (p3)

Blaine's instruction to anyone who wishes to get the point of what he does is to look at what he does as it happens, in 'the moment'. His warning is that to try and think about the mechanisms, the devices and the training he must do, is to miss the phenomenon. You are not seeing 'magic' happen before your eyes, you are not seeing the whole because you are too busy searching for its parts. It is a curious demand since do we not naturally ask of spectacular phenomena like formation flying or skyscraper construction or making a million on the stockmarket – how do they do that? If Blaine is warning that we may lose the amazement that he has brought if we look into how he accomplished his trick does this mark a limit for awe as the beginning of ethnomethodological inquiry (Blum and McHugh 1984)? Blaine intends that his audience 'appreciate the sky or smell the air. Those moments are special to me...' (p3) His show offers us something so extra-ordinary that we will be woken to the wonder of the world. His dilemma is that his method for doing this inevitably arouses our curiosity too. And later in the same interview with Beatrice Colin, Blaine adds:

"I like when people watch," he says. "I like the attention. I like to provoke thought, any thought. And I'd like it if everyone walked away with the belief that everyone can do whatever they want."

It is key to what Houdini and Blaine do that they ask us to 'pay attention' and that we do pay attention, since if we're not paying attention then we are poor witnesses to what they are showing us. It would be too easy to fool someone who was distracted, though of course paying attention is just the distraction from our everyday troubles that Houdini and Blaine are also looking for. And yet Blaine wants, not that the world should be filled up with death defying stunts and impossible feats of survival or escape artists like himself or Houdini, but that everyone should appreciate afterwards what is there to be had by anyone (be it the evening sky or the aroma of coffee). Can we say that his is a plea to see something for what it is right now and not be thinking of something else? Is it the teacher's ambition that their class be riveted during their lesson? But Blaine when he performs is not giving a lesson on how he is offering a breach which might induce us to think things are not what they seem afterwards. Unlike the teacher he does not want to deliver 'thought' as if it were an object, as if it were 'stuff', a statistic or a proof to be carried away. He hopes that thinking might

⁸ Houdini's patented but never built trick was to be imprisoned in a large block of ice and then appear several minutes later on stage outside the block leaving the ice seemingly unmarked by his escape.

start in the space after they have witnessed what he is doing. There is no guarantee that the audience will realise their freedom having watched Blaine's astounding show of human capability, it is something that he hopes for, as he hopes that they will have a thought. Not about him. Not about taking up magic. Not 'let's explain magic', not for his audience to walk away and reduce its amazingness to mere technologies and a deception for the purposes of enlisting them into believing in the supernatural (always Houdini's worry). While Blaine is willing to bring an audience to a state of amazement through his spectacle, he is left with nothing to teach apart from how his magic is done, and that is not what he want to teach an audience, it is in what he would train only candidate magicians.

Houdini would arm himself to amaze even the 'fault-finder' in the audience (Phillips 2001), the person who could say 'oh it's obvious how this trick is done.' Houdini was seeking to show even the most sceptical person in the room wonder. He wanted to convert sceptics, they were the acid test. And yet he wished still for them to exercise their critical faculties and hence his huge disappointment when his friend Conan Doyle was 'bewitched' by the methods of Spiritualists (Phillips 2001). The surprise surely is not in Doyle's wonder over magic but in his failure to grasp its technical details; since he is the creator of the detail-obsessed, uber-observer, Sherlock Holmes.

Ethnomethodology is misunderstood, even by some of its practitioners, as *only* being about the details, mechanics, the devices and technologies whereby, say, 'doing being ordinary' is accomplished. This however is only half the story, just as for a magician recognition of the techniques is only half of doing magic, the constituent parts without the whole.

It is ethnomethodological about EM studies that they show for ordinary society's substantive events, in material contents, just and only in any actual case, that and just how vulgarly competent members concert their activities to produce and show, exhibit and make observably the case*, demonstrate, and so on, coherence cogency, analysis, detail, structure, consistency, order, meaning, mistakes, errors, coincidence, facticity, reason, methods – locally, reflexively, naturally accountable phenomena- and as of the haecceities of their ordinary lives together.

We learn from the corpus of EM studies that its radical studies have begun to reveal immortal ordinary society as a *wondrous thing* [my emphasis]. Its members, be they "lay analysts" or professionals in the worldwide social science movement, with straightforward normal thoughtfulness are able to read it out of relevance, eyeless in Gaza, p202 (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992)

Garfinkel even as he pushes toward the myriad practices whereby phenomena are constituted wants us to waken to the wonder of each phenomenon, as Wittgenstein wishes us to do the same (Bearn 1997). There is an orderly world all around us, we make it happen and it is wonderful that it happens. The difference in examining, describing and analysing the unspectacular is that ethnomethodology (at least in places) offers back to us how anyone, every competent person makes the sense of this situation, showing members to be like Houdinis in that they have tricks to produce recognisable social objects. Houdini's spectacle contains itself, we are not all about to become escape artists, there should be only one amazing Houdini, one mysterious David Blaine! Always threatening to become hybridised out of existence with the

fields of practical action in which it situates its studies (Lynch 1993) traditional ethnomethodology begins from the principle that we are *all* using ethnomethods⁹ and yet it seems not to urge that we all become ethnomethodologists – or not any more than we already are. The question that Blaine's words raise is whether by becoming ethnomethodologists we will eventually lose our sense of wonder. Will we miss the spectacle by pursuing the tricks and lived work by which it is made.

4.

Ethnomethodology finds itself at home in work contexts helping with the redesign of user interfaces (Crabtree, Nichols, O'Brien, Rouncefield, and Twidale 2000), help systems (Suchman 1987), airports (Harper and Hughes 1993) and factories (Kawatoko 1999). Houdini assists the police in redesigning handcuffs, first world war soldiers on escaping from enemy and even uses his experience of underwater escapes to design a mechanism to release divers quickly from their suits. This is not part of the magic but it's a useful spin off of the concern with practical matters. Houdini's 'Handcuff Secrets' sold out within days as it was bought by would-be and actual criminals across the USA and its illustrations were banned in Germany (Phillips 2001). In his 'The Right Way to Wrong' Houdini writes:

The mob is a gang of expert pickpockets under the direction of a leader who has had experience and knows all the tricks. Their usual game is to frequent some crowded platform or a railway station and raise a row in which two men seem to engage in a scuffle or a quarrel and come to blows. Others rush in attempting to separate them, and the attention of the whole crowd of people is for the moment directed strongly that way. At the same moment, other single light fingered members of the same gang crowd in with the citizens who are being jostled and abstract their pocketbooks and watches without any trouble. (Houdini 1953) p275.

Like Goffman and like so many ethnomethodologists he is interested in criminal techniques – lock-picking, forgery, hidden messages, stealing from moving vehicles, pickpockets, con-artists and burglars (i.e. the chewing gum trick on p277 (Houdini 1953)). The pick-pocket, the con-artist and conjuror seek to hide what they are really up to. They do not seek to avoid being seen at all, they are attempting to evade detection of what they are really up to. What pick-pockets display of their actions to us are the appearances of something else: the guy clumsily bumping into you on the pavement, not the painstakingly crafted move that does a deliberate collision in a way that looks accidental whilst dipping a hand so lightly into your inside pocket you do not feel it or see it. Olympian acting skills are at work since they must not be seen as 'acting' in order that we see only a possibly incompetent pedestrian. We do not even say, until we have to report the incident to the police and other interested parties such

⁹ There is a periodisation to ethnomethodology between its early 'traditional' studies (Boden 1994; Garfinkel 1967) and the later more radical studies of astronomy (Garfinkel, Lynch, and Livingstone 1981), law (Lynch and McNally 1999) and mathematics, wherein the latter push away from any member's competence, to the situated practices of expert fields. In the later studies they are no longer collapsing the extra-ordinary down on to the ordinary, they are radicalising phenomenal intactness in that they are asking just what is it that makes a scientific discovery or scientific evidence in a court of law.

as our friends and colleagues, ‘he *appeared* just to be another guy walking along the street’. Until we discover the absence of our wallet he was just another guy walking along the street.

There is a familiar worry about whether wonder is a function of ignorance, so that the more knowledge we acquire the less room there is for wonder. But on my account, wonder is not under threat from knowledge, it is under threat from a certain way of looking at things [Anschauungswiese], a pun deaf way of looking at things. The enemy here is the voice of common sense, the defender of the obvious [Selbstverständlichkeit]. The enemy of wonder is a certain attitude to our epistemic practices, and wonder is made possible by a change in our attitude to those practices rather than by any failure of those epistemic practices on their own terms. (Bearn 1997 p196)

Houdini allows the possibility that we can be fooled, and that under certain circumstances we want to be fooled, though not by the state, not by the thief, not by our building society, not by our newspaper¹⁰. We want to be fooled when we are ready to be fooled, when we are expecting to be fooled and when everyone of us will be fooled at the same time¹¹. Seeing the trick, like getting a dirty joke (Sacks 1978), is a non-trivial exercise since let us imagine for a moment a person lacking the capacity to see that they have been fooled (before we even consider *understanding how* you have been fooled). For instance we cannot do card tricks to amuse our cat, nor amaze it by escaping out of a locked trunk. Seeing a trick is already then a shared human accomplishment¹².

Where a member of an audience joins with ethnomethodology’s ethos is in awakening in them a sharpened curiosity to know how the magician does what he does. At one of Houdini’s or Blaine’s shows the audience *might fully* examine their own sense-making procedures to consider how they have been fooled, more likely they will accept the possibility and enjoy the show without needing to get to the bottom of the trick’s lived work. We should be careful here as to how far we wish to equate ethnomethodology’s awe at ‘commonplace action’ (p87 Blum and McHugh) with the tricks of magicians. It is the ethnomethodologist who has a similar sense of awe at commonplace actions as an audience has for Houdini or Blaine’s spectacular feats. And it is the ethnomethodologist who departs from the logic of an audience when they pursue the clarification of the particular devices which produced the magic. If, and when, ethnomethodologists pursue the *misdirections* of magicians or equally of ‘sincere liars’ (Lynch 1996), while they are awed by them they might no longer be *affirming* convention.

Moving away, from doing being an audience, to *doing* a magical trick we will run up against the training required and the effort involved to present what the audience should see and hide what they should not. There are times, where even with the best instructions, as a trainee magician still cannot grasp how a certain trick works. Is this

¹⁰ There are exceptional occasions when we will allow this – April 1st being the most obvious example.

¹¹ As also in Goffman’s (1974) later attempt to reformulate what he had come to see as a fundamental problem with his dramaturgical reductions in ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’. He realised that acting on stage involves special permissions from both actors and audience and is made sense of by its sense as theatre not as part of the flow of a pavement or talk around a family breakfast table.

¹² There are parallels here to Sack’s (1992 vol.2) consideration of the dirty joke as a technical object.

so different from the frustration we feel on not being able to follow a proof in mathematics? Our competence as ordinary actors relies on us being able to see a trick and the *expert* skill of the magician is to be able to (re)produce a trick in a way that hides what should be hidden and shows what should be shown. In this way a magician is unlike a mathematician or a scientist. Hybridising ethnomethodology with escape artistry produces members with an interest in how background expectations can be purposefully manipulated to make a thing appear (when that thing may not be there), at such a point do we run up against the limit of members since they should be disinterested in how they produce appearances?



Taken from Ladies Home Journal, June 1918 - Written by Harry Houdini

Houdini does to members of an audience what phenomenologists do as part of their investigations of human experience of the world – he makes them suspend judgement on the objects and events under scrutiny. We should no longer assume that the brick wall is what normally think of as a brick wall, we should no longer assume that the straitjacket is what we think a straitjacket is. When we look at his show we will have to examine how our experience of brick walls or straitjackets constitutes their impassibility, restriction, their appearance. Moreover he plays upon our secondary methods for checking on the appearance of a brick wall or straitjacket being suspicious. He has members of the audience come and tap the brick wall, he has asylum orderlies verify that his straitjacket is securely fastened. As members of the audience we are perplexed to see these investigations at work since we know they will only verify what Houdini wants verified and what does this say of power of experience to see things as they really are? And yet do the audience all suddenly

become convinced that reality is inaccessible, that they should either become sceptical philosophers or social constructionists?

Even having been shown how ‘a woman being sawn in half in a box’ works we can sit back and watch the show again and see the magical aspect to it. To watch and to produce magic tricks we, as a competent audience, have to be able to *see aspects* (not unlike the duck-rabbit diagram or the faces/candle-stick picture (Wittgenstein 1953)). For the amazing magic trick the other aspect to the trick remains hidden though we know it surely exists, while for the well known one, or the one we are taught, we can see both aspects – *that* it works and *how* it works¹³. Things take a strange turn at this point in that does this lead us into equating ordinary members with magicians: they know how to do a trick and they can recognise the illusion that a trick produces. Once again we have to make a distinction between the illusion which is the object of magic and say a turn at talk which is the object of conversation. If ethnomethodologists are the ones who are amazed by ordinary life then they are in some senses its audience.

In a *reversal* of the skeleton keys, rejigged coffins, secret drawers, and altered



Inverting Lenses - from 'Ethnomethodology's Program', Harold Garfinkel, Rowman & Littlefield, NY, 2002.

shuffles of magic, Garfinkel had a box of special equipment that he used in the teaching of ethnomethodology. To make intelligibility anthropologically strange, students were given prism glasses that flipped their vision upside down which Garfinkel asked them to wear while fetching a cup of water from a tap or being shown a spot to sit on a wall by another student. Directions in these instances became impossible to follow by normal means. Chess games were also made deeply

problematic by donning the inverting lenses. It made apprehensible the embodied rather than ‘mental’ aspects of playing a game with rules. Students were dazed, bemused and quite often amazed during these sessions. Students were also given headphones and a microphone with a delay loop that made their wearer hear their voice a second or so after they spoke. It made apprehensible that without noticing it you are listening to what you say as you say it, and with your hearing-what-is-being-said disrupted speaking at any length quickly becomes problematic. The equipment showed the potentially bewildering equipmentality of human practice – we do not think of seeing as something we have to learn with eyes as equipment. Much like the breaching experiments mentioned earlier, Garfinkel is pushing in a different practical way against a theoretical account of how we make things intelligible.

Think of these as jobs of bodies – not anatomists’ bodies, or biologists’ bodies, but work’s bodies. *The bodies of practices*. These bodies have eyes that are skills; eyes that are skills in the ways that eyes do looking’s work. Where seeing is something more, other and different than formally analytically describable

¹³ Or are the incommensurate ways of seeing – to look in one way excludes looking in the other?

positioning the orbs to assure certain retinal registration of a perceptual field, let alone a visual field, p210 (Garfinkel 2002)

Beckoning experts and members of the audience Houdini says ‘to the things themselves!’ and you know it’s a mistake to try and inspect the rope and chair he is showing you, his showing is a *misdirection*. He is showing you that he can show you ‘this is a brick wall’ and confuse you with your own natural and ordinary sense of what a brick wall allows you do with it. He is showing that [showing an object] can be a diversion and that what is obviously, say, a rope restraint blinds us. Garfinkel with his inverting lenses brings us squarely up against what has become ‘embodiedly transparent’ in following *honest non-deceptive* everyday directions in their details of looking with eyes, positioning fingers and the orientational properties of furniture. We have to be careful not to overburden ‘showing’, where clearly there are divergent uses of this term. Garfinkel [showing a person somewhere to sit] and Houdini showing (misdirecting) an audience (with) a coffin.

Houdini’s refusal to reveal his current trick did not mean that there really was something inaccessible that he could not share, that there was a spirit hidden beneath the surface of things, that we could not *learn* how his trick was done. Houdini is clear that you will *not* find out how Houdini’s *current* amazing trick works¹⁴, since yes he does give away tricks once they are old to the annoyance of other magicians, and, yes, he shares with his wife, and teaches his assistants how his tricks work so that they can help him. Often he’ll need assistants to quickly adapt barrels, caskets or canvas bags for ‘on the spot’ challenges. So Houdini can show his assistants what to do to make the ‘show’ work.

Houdini and Blaine are offering us magic without hidden forces beyond their tricks, their human accomplishments. Magic is of great value to them and they guard against uses they see as immoral and misleading. In the later years of Houdini’s life he pursues spiritualists with missionary zeal (Houdini 1953; Phillips 2001; Silverman 1996). In his exposure of séances Houdini in fact shows that with the unmatched practical and historical expertise that he has in tricks, sleight of hand and conjuring, the devices used by mediums can easily be revealed. Whilst this kills their claims to the supernatural, it leaves his grounds for the wonder of magic untouched. However it’s clear from Houdini, the investigator untrained in magical tricks and sleight of hand, even if they are eminent professor of psychology will continue to mistake what is going on.

‘Men like Professor McDougall [a psychology professor at Harvard who questioned Houdini’s worth as an investigator of Spiritualists (EL’s addition)]... and Conan Doyle are menaces to mankind,’ he replied in kind to an interviewer, ‘because laymen believe them to be as intellectual in all fields as they are in their own particular one.’ They too, like the Spiritualists, gain

¹⁴ As we have noted already even on being shown how it works you may still not adequately grasp how it works, you sort of follow what is going on. Like you sort of follow when a software programmer tells you in detail how they wrote a piece of code that compresses a video image.

people's confidence to hoodwink them; there is a new clergy of respectable experts, and everyone else is a layman, p134 (Phillips 2001)

Houdini makes this still more blatant since he has used police officers, doctors and all manner of expert witnesses to try and spot his tricks and they have failed to detect how he did what he did. Spiritualists, he makes clear, have it easy by comparison with Houdini – they dim the lights, they sit with their legs hidden under the table. For their normal clients in fact would be improper to pursue scepticism over their acts and start trying pulling up the carpet to look for hidden wires. And even if they did something so confrontational, without Houdini's grasp of the practical arts of deception, they will not see how they were deceived and thus that deception at all happened.

Phillips, p46: Above all, he shows us, the audience wants to know that it can't see: wants to thrill to its own ignorance.

But wait, is it thrilling to ignorance or is as Blaine's quote suggested that we are thrilling to a pre-critical, pre-interpretive appreciation of the world, a world where amazing things can happen and we don't know why? In this case to 'get' Houdini or Blaine, as an adequate audience we should not try and interrogate his act, though by Houdini's arguments we ought to let an expert check on their competitors (e.g. the Spiritualists) with more transcendental and supernatural claims.

Let us note only quickly in passing that ethnomethodologists have long pursued sociology and psychology for their improper uses of the resources which possession of ordinary language and a place in a shared world gives them (Coulter 1979; McHugh, Raffel, Foss, and Blum 1974; Watson 1992). They criticise sociology and psychology for their appropriation of lay knowledge as their domain and one that they can judge for its lack or presence of reason, morality or immorality (Bogen 1989; Bogen 1999; Lynch 1999).

5.

What does it mean that Blaine says that if we obsess upon learning how such a trick works then we do not get what he is trying to do? Houdini is likewise not attempting to get everyone to be trained magicians, to instruct them into how to be magicians too, to find the explanation for each amazing escape. Houdini is not posing the question for us of why would he want to be free of his restraint? Why would he try to get out of a packing case dropped off a pier? These are obvious matters surely?

There is no such as magic, Houdini is saying, but I am a magician capable of inexplicable feats; there is nothing concealed, you can see everything, but you still don't know, p45 (Phillips 2001)

Why are Blaine and Houdini so concerned that their magic, their escape artistry should be looked at in a certain way and not another. It is not that they think magic skills should not be passed on to another generation of magicians, this they most certainly do. They are concerned with the lineage of tricks, stunts, devices and techniques and they are happy to write basic guides to get non-initiates started. That those who are its audience ought to look-on in a certain 'natural' way is because the

spectacle is not fashioned to show something to those who make it while they make it, in fact they cannot take of it, they give it to the audience. It is the audience that looks in *wonder* not the magician or escape artist. Houdini is an expert at 'look how amazing this is'; a member of the audience could not turn away having seen him escape from a strait jacket dangling from a towerblock and say 'how obvious'.

Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from the outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with your own eyes, -- surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. --But then we do this every day without it making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view. (Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, p4, quoted in Bearn (1997 p197))

In the ethnomethodological attitude, 'this is obvious' will not be allowed and in its attention to 'life itself' ethnomethodology is not just a demonstration, not just an exhibit, not just instruction in how to do a Pythagorean proof (Livingston 1986), play jazz piano (Sudnow 1978) or select a next speaker in conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1978). Sacks warns of the dangers of looking at someone as a priori amazing as Houdini, yet his purposes are shared in that by the end we should see something amazing happening in our world. Where an audience needs the spectacular to show this, Sacks from '*that* point of view' finds amazement '*at hand*': finding order at all points, discovering how finely detailed the organisation of every interaction is and how quickly talking in turns works. Where Sacks and Garfinkel exceed being merely an audience is that their wonder returns from finding out how the trick is done to what the trick is for theory. It is this voyage back to what we know already that they call respecifying.

The ethnomethodologist is only technically different, so how could he be principled about *this* difference? In a way, she does not know what is correct any more than the member, any more than convention knows; convention can know itself, but when itself is correct, it is enforceably intelligible, and such concerted meaning is indifferent to good. Boldly put, the enforceably intelligible nature of convention limits it to power and clarity. In fact, we have seen that making convention problematic is only to give voice to convention as a way of saying how convention is, not what it is. Convention is shown to be trusted in and through the times and places where convention is made problematic. Ethnomethodology's aim is to speak for the ordinary, which is ordinarily speechless, through the trouble that finally gains the attention of the ordinary ... ethnomethodology puts convention into question not to question convention but to affirm it, as a member would and does... p88-89 (Blum and McHugh 1984)

We do not all want to be escape artists, magicians nor do we all want to be ethnomethodologists, yet they do promise us, at the very least, a show of something quite amazing. We would want to *become* magicians to make an audience enter a state of wonder at what they are watching. Some part of a magician's show is also an

invite for some of the audience to take on the arduous, dull and technical training that will be required to further learn how magic is made with the skilful handling of card plants, stage screws and loose fitting shoes. With patience, a willingness to repeat actions to see how they work and an eye for the details from time to time a world of wonders is conjured. Might in ethnomethodology's ultimate affirmation of ordinary practices, their clarification of conceptual matters, a world of wonders start to be worn away? Do they become an impoverished audience or an audience with an alternate way of looking at things and in that sense no longer an ordinary audience?

Coulter (2001) and Lynch (2001) emphasize that ethnomethodology can offer therapeutics to the maladies of foundational enterprises in social theory in the same way that Wittgenstein's investigations help cure explanatory philosophy's peculiar problems. An ethnomethodologist might be someone who stages (shows in this sense) ordinary language, or the situatedness of all inquiries, for an audience of theorists to get *that* audience back on firm ground. The dangling Houdini never made us more sure of the ground upon which we stand as we look up at him and feel that he might fall. And yet it is in the essence of *what* Houdini is that an audience should *not* know how the trick works. Competent magicians can teach their tricks to anyone, and they are using anyone's tricks but Houdini or Blaine would be ruined, would disappoint us if they gave away what we are amazed by. The spectacular showing cannot be reduced to an ordinary showing lest we lose our sense of wonder.

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