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Comment on Rappert & Kuhn: Toward a Theory of Exposure

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The comment addresses the article 'Toward a Theory of Exposure' by Rappert & Kuhn in the Journal of Performance Magic 7(1). The results of the survey published there are compared to two contributions that were recently published in magic magazines. In those, exposures were mostly viewed uncritically. Examples are used to demonstrate that a general question of "for or against exposures" is too broad and that it depends on the specifics of the trick secrets being explained.

KEYWORDS: exposure, comment

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COMMENT ON RAPPERT & KUHN: TOWARD A THEORY OF EXPOSURE

In their article “Toward a Theory of Exposure,” Rappert & Kuhn (2024) discussed the concept of “exposure,” which has accompanied magic since its beginnings. In a survey of 197 magicians, for example, “exposing a trick that has been invented by another magician who died” was deemed “unacceptable” by the majority.

Interestingly, two recent contributions in magic magazines also addressed this topic and are worth examining more closely. In the Belgian *Escamoteur* (Guinée et al., 2024) and the German *Magische Welt* (Thun et al., 2024), prominent magicians were asked for comments on exposure videos on YouTube (or similar platforms). Of the 14 magicians, 3 expressed the opinion that they find such explanatory videos annoying, but this was mostly because the videos focus on the trick itself and do not show any artistic quality. Seven of the magicians said that such videos don’t bother them. In the German magazine, it was also asked whether such videos are harmful to magic. Of the five respondents, only one said clearly “yes,” a second one described such videos as “superfluous,” while other opinions included “can’t generalise” and “by such videos, I rediscovered my enthusiasm for magic” (this statement came from a magician who has won seven first prizes at German magic championships) and “take it relatively easy” (from the Ehrlich Brothers, Germany’s most successful magicians). Similar comments were made when the topic of “exposure” was discussed in 2020 in *Magie* (Severin et al., 2020), the magazine of the German Magic Circle. Four authors held the opinion that these exposures are harmful to magic, while 11 rather disagreed.

Exploring why the results obtained by Rappert & Kuhn in their survey differ at first glance from these opinions—admittedly based on a small number of responses—is an interesting question. The author of this commentary considers it likely that there are significant differences when examining the survey participants by age groups. In Rappert & Kuhn’s article, it is noted: “197 magicians completed the survey. The average age of the magicians was 46.8 (SD = 15.8).” It would be interesting to see if attitudes change with the age of the respondents – particularly whether younger survey participants express a more relaxed view. The younger generation is accustomed to searching for answers online first and often finding them.

Rappert & Kuhn identify open research questions such as: “When and how does knowledge of hidden methods affect an individual’s appreciation of magic?” and “Does the acceptability of a given act of exposure depend on what is artful (or not), well intended (or not), and so on?” Pursuing these questions could help delve further into the heart of the matter. The focus groups conducted by Rappert were a good start in this direction.

Four examples are intended to illustrate that general considerations of what is permissible/ethical/appropriate are hardly helpful. Let us assume that the secret of the trick is revealed to the audience for four different presentations:

- a) The audience learns that the person who picked a card was a stooge.
- b) The audience learns that a performer who claims to be able to read body language is actually using electronic aids to gather information.
- c) Before a performance by Omar Pasha (Pasha, 2007), the audience is informed about the black art principle. This is comparable to a “making of” for a film, and most likely it does not negatively impact the audience’s artistic enjoyment or their respect for the art of magic (perhaps even positively).

d) Participants in a mathematics seminar are analysing Fitch Cheney's Five Card Trick, discussed in various mathematical papers (Do, 2005; Kleber & Vakil, 2002; Mulcahy, 2003; Simpson & Holm, 2003). The analysis of the mathematical principle is likely to evoke admiration for the clever thinking of the trick's inventors rather than disappointment.

These examples further support Rappert & Kuhn's observation: "Assessments about the appropriateness of the disclosure of magic methods are often bound up with notions of what is artful (or not), well-intended (or not), and so on." General regulations, as found in the statutes of magical societies, are not suitable for reflecting these complex considerations.

Two thoughts frequently mentioned in the responses in *Escamoteur* and *Magische Welt* deserve special attention. The first thought does not concern the act of explaining itself, but rather the manner of explanation. Steven Delaere wrote: "What bothers me most about explanation videos...: A trick is explained in a few seconds, as if it were all very simple. This often lends a banal character because the focus is so heavily on the secret. This gives young people a one-sided view of magic, and it creates the impression that, once you know the secret, everything is quite unspectacular." Somewhat harshly expressed, one might say: Ironically, those who could make sophisticated videos with trick explanations and present magic as an art form, namely the magicians usually organized in clubs, are prohibited from doing so due to club regulations—so it is done by people less beneficial to the art. And a second thought (quoted from Gunther Guinée): "So they should not ask themselves: 'How do we stop these revelations?'. Because that will happen anyway. The question should be: 'How can we rise to a level where revelations do not harm us?'"

For the art of magic, it would be desirable if we have come closer to what Nevil Maskelyne & David Devant described in their book *Our Magic* (Maskelyne & Devant, 1911) as a vision for the future: "The average man is so firmly impressed with the notion that magic consists merely in puzzles offered for solution, challenges to the spectator's acuteness, that many years must elapse before that erroneous idea can be dispelled. Some day, however, we hope that even the man in the street will have learned the fact that so-called 'secrets' are to the magician little more than are, to the actor, the wigs, grease-paints and other 'make-up' with which he prepares himself for appearance before the public."

The scientific discussion, initiated by Rappert & Kuhn's contribution, could make a modest contribution towards this goal.

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