

An Art Method of Trickery: Illusion and Beyond-Human Teachers

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This essay describes an art method of trickery which employs feats of misdirection, mimicry, and suggestion to conjure illusion. These magical skills revive the body as the locus of semiotic exchange, in opposition to writing as the abstraction of meaning which has generated the postmodern conception of technological difference. This essay argues that postmodern difference has been recently appropriated by the posthuman movement as an expression of beyond-human sentience. This beyond-human sentience acknowledges the agency of more-than-human agents, which exceeds human knowing, and thereby produces an animate semiosis capable of hijacking anthropocentric worldviews during feats of misdirection and miracles of metamorphosis. This essay shows how this possibility has been exorcised from modern experience but can be recovered by apprenticeship to beyond-humans.

KEYWORDS: semiosis, Derrida, magic, posthumanism, postmodernism, posthuman, difference, beyond-human, performance magic, performance

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AN ART METHOD OF TRICKERY: ILLUSION AND BEYOND-HUMAN TEACHERS

Introduction

This essay is concerned with describing an art method of trickery modelled by the feats of illusion generated in nature, during courtship rituals or hunting and evasion strategies. It thereby argues that magical powers of reality reconstruction are derived from this artistic sensibility in nature. This context weaves together a magical ontology where the laws that construct modern subjectivity become pliable and porous, and are furthermore, performed as a form of cultural resistance to incorporation into the modern state.

Herein, trickery is understood as the play of appearances that constitute the art of illusion. Illusion is associated with semiosis as the movement of signs that construct and reconstruct experienced reality; resulting in an interpretive excess often described as difference. As such, this essay refers to the dominant theory of semiosis over the last decades, derived from Jacques Derrida's conception of *différance* as the technological trace which permeates our semiotically saturated environments to conjure a contagious negativity which reproduces itself, deconstructs meaning, and institutes postmodern time as the contemporary experience of disorientation and illusion. However, in complement to this, I also identify the recent transformation of philosophical notions of difference (*différance*) signalled by the appearance of the posthuman movement, which has defined the zone of the beyond-human inclusive of plant life, animals, and sentient systems; as well as their significance for the construction of social reality.

The posthuman acknowledgement of alternative forms of sentience deconstructs the anthropocentric centrality of the human being at the centre of all powers, and animates forms of beyond-human semiosis as the territory of negative affect and that which exceeds human knowing. Consequently, this essay argues that the zone of the negative enlivened by difference, has been animated by posthumanism as beyond-human agency participating in the construction of a more-than-human social reality. The play of illusion which Derrida identified, has thus been effectively appropriated by posthumanism as the voice of nature. I thus refer to Eduardo Kohn's posthuman conception of multinatural perspectivalism in *How Forests Think* (2013) throughout this essay, to demonstrate how signs are capable of signifying the perspective of beyond-humans, who are furthermore, capable of tricking human beings.

This essay subsequently examines the appearance of posthumanism and alludes to occult forms of knowledge and experience proximal to that which goes beyond-the-human. It thereby problematizes the modern transformation of cultural practices which have maintained our intimacy with the more-than-human world. By uncovering this transformation, we re-discover the fragmentation of community relations and commodification of folk cultural practices since the Industrial Revolution.

I consequently refer to Norman O. Brown's conception of the History of Prophecy in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991), which describes folk culture as an expression of cultural resistance against incorporation into the modern state. As such, the Ancient Greek deity and psychopomp Hermes appears throughout this essay as an archetypal magician and trickster who represents the confrontation between orders of reality associated with so-called primitivism and modern urbanization. Inscribed in Hermes' personality, is the magical intimacy between the natural order and the art of illusion. Recovering this intimacy revives a posthuman register of signs capable of signifying across orders of experience, identity, and temporality, and revives our artistic practices as threatening triggers. Among other magicians, I refer to the mentalist Enrique Enriquez, the

traditional healer Sonam, and the filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky, who model divinatory experience in the natural world as magical practice, described herein as *The Language of Birds*.

By situating magic in a posthuman ontology in this way, I also suggest the normal separation between the magical disciplines of divination and trickery, or mediumship and performance magic, is resolved by *The Language of Birds* as effectively, the animate voice of nature expressed through a beyond-human register of signs. Magic is positioned as an expression of our relationship with nature and is thereby practiced as cultural resistance in defense of this intimacy, rather than for the sake of conjuring singular spectacles in the guises of divination or trickery.

This essay historicizes the art and aesthetics of illusion in relation to contemporary philosophical movements. Indeed, it argues that the art and aesthetics of illusion is a central problem for philosophical discourse in terms of our contemporary understanding of semiosis and its capacity to weave together the fabric of reality as a magical practice. Whereas prevailing reality systems associated with the epistemological transformation provoked by the Industrial Revolution, has dismantled our understanding of this phenomena—which Federico Campagna describes as “reality reconstruction” (Campagna 2022, p. 54-55)—in order to institute a reality system conducive to the full exploitation of the labourer. By reappropriating our semiotic practices we thereby engage in a form of cultural resistance against the political homogenisation and abstraction of experience, which has produced an epidemic of neurosis (Campagna 2022, p. 43). This movement describes the posthuman reappropriation of difference, which is being re-conceptualised according to the occult systems of animism attributed to so-called primitives; and has until now, been exorcized from modern experience. I finally conclude that recovering semiotic practices of seduction and illusion, understood as magic, directs us to become apprentices with beyond-human teachers.

The Transformation of Différance Into Multinatural Perspectivalism

In his study *Hermes the Thief*, the American philosopher and mythopoet Norman O. Brown (2011) investigates the depiction of the trickster god Hermes of the Ancient Greek pantheon. Brown identifies Hermes as a lawless mediator inhabiting no man’s lands in the territories of pastoral Arcadia; shape-shifting between identities diverse as Shepherd, Craftsman, Herald, Musician, Athlete and Merchant (Brown 2011, p. 3). He functions as a psychopomp, traversing the shadowy lands between life and death, guiding the souls of the unborn and dead, and bringing messages from the afterlife. Through Brown’s etymological study of Hermes’ identities, we discover that “The words connoting magical action in the classical period are derived from roots whose original meaning is just as close to the notion of trickery as it is to that of magic” (Brown 2011, p. 18).

Hermes is interesting for this essay as the archetypal magician, and trickster, from whom we have derived our modern iterations. Derrida thus celebrates Hermes as “neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play” (Derrida 1981, p. 93). Furthermore, for Derrida, “He is the god of magic formulas that calm the sea, of secret accounts, of hidden texts: an archetype of Hermes, god of cryptography no less than of every other -graphy” (Derrida 1981, p. 93).

Derrida’s interest in Hermes is a signpost for his theory of *différance*, which has permeated critical theory since it came to attention in 1967 with the publication of *Writing and Difference* (Derrida 1978). Derrida coined the term *différance* to describe the negative force that haunts every text as its opposite; exacerbated by the technological proliferation of semiosis, this negativity gains contagious life and animates the presence of the unspoken, to finally introduce postmodern time as the experience of dislocation, disorientation, and illusion. It is a process which is exponentially multiplied by the effervescent semiosis of our technological existence which surrounds us in signs,

as well as the difference which deconstructs it and prevents this semiosis from generating any integral meaning. Derrida thereby adopts Hermes as his patron saint; the trickster god of interpretation, generative of a plurality of perspectives and forces that become electric as difference, gaining its own psychic and imaginative life. This tricky notion of difference, upon which Derrida developed his hugely influential deconstructive methodology, operates as the machinery of Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1984) definition of postmodernism as the rejection of metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition*, which has dominated intellectual discourse in continental philosophy for decades.

However, following the publication of Donna Haraway's (1991) *A Cyborg Manifesto*, postmodernism has been succeeded by its prodigy and anti-thesis, posthumanism. Arguably conceived by the postmodern rejection of metanarratives, including the anthropological myth of human nature, the recent posthuman turn in philosophy attributes agency to beyond-human forms of sentience. This rescaling of the field of sentience is an attempt to dismantle the cosmological centrality of mankind which has oriented intellectual history thus far. In effect, posthumanism is a sort of delayed awakening to Copernicus' discovery that the universe does not revolve around the earth; in the same vein posthumanism argues that the universe does not revolve around mankind. Rather, it is constructed by the experiences of a plethora of beyond-human participants including plants, animals, and others.

Conversely, in *Animal Philosophy* Calarco and Atterton (2004) point out the astonishing absence of animal theorising in the Western philosophical tradition, whereby Derrida "stands out as one who has perhaps gone the farthest in thinking through the place of animals" (Calarco; Atterton 2004, xxii). This is clearest in his essay *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Derrida in Calarco; Atterton 2004, p. 113-128), where Derrida coined the signifier *animaux* to identify the plurality of life forms that exceed human beings. Generally identified as the originator of the posthuman movement, Haraway expands on this possibility by identifying the heterogeneous form of subjectivity it describes; "'Our' relations with 'nature' might be imagined as a social engagement with a being who is neither 'it', 'you', 'thou', 'he', 'she' nor 'they' in relation to 'us'" (Haraway 1991, p. 3). These attempts to express nature as a subject which exceeds the human being, produced the ecologist-philosopher David Abram's (1996) conception of the "more-than-human" in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, and later, Kohn's (2013) anthropological conception of the "beyond-human" in *How Forests Think* which this essay also employs.

In posthuman discourse, nature thus becomes expressive of an alternative form of subjectivity expressing itself through a more-than-human semiosis representative of what Kohn describes as multinatural perspectivalism. Kohn's views are premised on the truism that,

Significance is not the exclusive province of humans because we are not the only ones who interpret signs. That other kinds of beings use signs is one example of the ways in which representation exists in the world beyond human minds and human systems of meaning. (Kohn 2013, p. 31)

Consequently, multinatural perspectivalism poses the possibility that a multiplicity of perspectives including that which goes beyond-the-human can be expressed by an animate semiosis, which exceeds the limit of human knowing. On merit of its descent from Derrida's theorising, this semiosis is imbued with the capacity of *différance* to animate the negative, but as a form of meaning-making rather than the deconstruction of the project of meaning-making altogether. While it does deconstruct the centrality of the human being as the locus of meaning, it simultaneously animates the agency of beyond-humans as well as their investment in how social

reality is constructed as a beyond-human feat. The ecological animist Bayo Akomolafe (2023) thereby contends, “The ingredients of the going-ons around us are not reducible to the choices and consequences of human actors and human sociality”. So, while postmodern *différance* describes the negative trace produced by technological semiosis, in posthumanism this negativity is taken up as the animate and ecstatic expression of beyond-human agency, including plants, animals, and others.

The possibility of beyond-human forms of semiosis becoming animate, thereby poses the problem of beyond-human agents capable of engaging in trans-species communication through sign-making, understood as magic, illusion, and experienced as trickery. Purged of philosophical jargon, this is simply a commonsensical description of the trickery employed during hunting games, as both predator and prey engage in signifiatory feats of illusion to capture or elude capture. This transspecies terrain induces forms of semiosis produced by multinatural perspectivalism, insofar as it requires both predator and prey to empathise with the conceptual apparatus of the other to engage in convincing trickery (through signs) across species and thus, ontological systems.

In his fascinating documentation of the feats of trickery employed by fungi, plants and animals in the natural world, in *The Liars of Nature and the Nature of Liars*, the biologist Lixing Sun (2023) describes this behavior—by which organisms interpret the sign codes of other species in order to trick them—as eavesdropping. The prevalence of eavesdropping in nature undermines relativist views of the world which reject any central locus of meaning that can orient organisms in the same species, nevermind across species. In this essay I argue that these games of eavesdropping and the fatal illusions of survival they generate is the sensibility that lies at the heart of art practice as a magical discipline concerned with trickery and illusion. Extensively, writers like Sun (2023), as well as the art historian John Gage (2024), and the cognitive scientists Jordi Camí and Luis M. Martinez (2022) emphasize the tricks of optical illusion which lie at the heart of art and indeed, magical practice. This reading poses some unhappy questions for the commodification of art in our hyper-socialised modernity. It asks, what survival skills are we losing as a species by failing to attend to art as a practice concerned with illusion and trickery, or in other words, magic?

Throughout the history of art, painters have exploited cognitive biases to produce optical illusions. Leonardo di Vinci was able to give the Mona Lisa a mobile gaze and smile, while Rembrandt discovered that we perceive things differently according to contrast with backgrounds. René Magritte’s masterful painting, *The Treachery of Images*, presents an image of a pipe with the phrase *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe), self-consciously revealing the deceit which operates at the heart of all forms of representation, as imitations and optical illusions.

However, beyond-the-canvas, these artistic tricks are also performed on the stage of nature. Sun (2023, p. 122) describes how the male bowerbird, whose courtship ritual involves the construction of elaborate bowers decorated with colourful objects, “can create a well-known artistic illusion called forced perspective to enhance the appeal of their bowers. This is a visual trick used in painting, where smaller objects appear farther away.” Sun (2023, p. 130) argues that these feats of trickery in the natural world have served “as a catalyst to trigger a cascade of evolutionary changes and innovations... [including] the emergence of such complex properties as social intelligence and art in animals and humans”. Cultural practice is expressive of our proximity to the natural world, as the origin of our aesthetic value systems or what biologists describe as innate cognitive preferences.

Magic renders optical illusions through feats of mimicry, misdirection, disguise, suggestion and other signifiatory strategies which are inherent to the natural world. This magical signification

operates on the fabric of reality by suggesting imaginative futures that appear to defy ordinary laws of physics. Sun thus describes the illusions conjured by animals and birds who sound false alarms or create decoys to distract their competitors; “Out of curiosity, I often watch gray squirrels hoarding acorns. However, when I got to check what they’ve been hiding, I often find empty holes—I’ve been fooled” (Sun 2023, p. 19). Importantly this register of trickery is inscribed with beyond-human difference, insofar as it is derived from an order that exceeds and thereby negates our own; and most specifically, our monopoly on privileged knowledge as human beings. This problem cuts to the heart of the emergence of posthumanism today, by posing the uncanny possibility that human beings can be tricked; seduced by a hall of mirrors conjured by beyond-human signs which weave the dynamic game of life and death into dizzying motion.

In *How Forests Think*, Kohn (2013, p. 32-35) describes the predicament of a monkey sitting on a branch in the forest, which begins to shake. This monkey interprets the shaking branch as an indicator or *indice* of possibility, in this case the approach of a predator. The shaking branch acts as a sign that crosses species boundaries as well as temporal ones. It is woven into a chain of semiosis which constructs the future of the forest, as well as the future of all its participants braced on the response of the monkey to this sign and the chain of reaction it sets into motion. This chain is woven as the web of semiosis that traces the forest’s proximity to life as well as death, as possibility. Possibility becomes animate as a difference expressive of the sentience of the forest as a beyond-human and indeed beyond-monkey, agent.

In this regard, posthumanism has led the horse which bolted from Derrida’s postmodern stable, into the forest. Difference has gained a thousand eyes and a thousand feet as the ecstatic trace of a sentient nature communicating across orders of experience, temporality, and consciousness. This offers a view of the sign as an interface across time, identity, and space. Furthermore, it offers a notion of magic as a methodology of trickery inherent to nature. In extension of this line of reasoning, the loss of cultural intimacy with the beyond-human world threatens the potency of our artistic and magical practices and their capacity to weave the fabric of reality.

In the next section I will show how this intimacy has been historically maintained as cultural resistance to incorporation into the state. However, the social transformations associated with modern Industrialisation threaten this legacy, and ultimately, our understanding of signification and semiosis. Finally, I argue that this problem is exemplified by the transformation of the meaning and practice of music.

Norman O. Brown’s (musical) History of Prophecy

As I have shown in the previous section, the locus of *différance* has been brought into debate as the reign of postmodernism is succeeded and problematized by its inheritor, posthumanism. Central to the posthuman critique of postmodernism, is the postmodern absence of any coherent theorizing around the ontological status of animals as beyond-human agents, which produced the inanimate conception of difference that has dominated philosophy for recent decades. Hiding behind this veil is the violent excesses of industrial agriculture, as well as the pharmaceutical and beauty industry. By comparison, the posthuman acknowledgement of beyond-human agents and their capacity to participate in symbolic exchange with human beings, is a posthuman commitment to the sentience of our natural environment. It demands a reality system which must be multinatural in perspective and inclusive of beyond-human others.

However, modern philosophy has largely neglected this possibility by constructing an anthropocentric view of reality oriented by mankind as a privileged caste. Our privilege is predicated on our position as alpha predators immune to the magical chains of predation which

order the food-chain. As the radical ecologist Val Plumwood (2012, p. 13) lamented, "We are victors and never victims, experiencing triumph but never tragedy." Plumwood was tricked, attacked, and death rolled three times by a crocodile. She survived this gruesome encounter, and thereafter formulated a worldview of philosophical animism which emphasises the position of the human being as a participant in the food-chain, as both predator and prey.

This participation generates the beyond-human skills of trickery and illusion Brown associates with Hermes as thief, magician, and trickster. They are representative of occult forms of knowledge and experience native to the barbaric realms outside civilization. Hermes' birthplace is thus located in Arcadia, "a land preeminently pastoral in its economy and rude in its manners" (Brown 2011, 3-4). Hermes subsequently becomes metaphoric of the urban encounter with magical barbarism during the appearance of the nascent Roman state, and ultimately personifies the barbarian legacy of cultural resistance to incorporation into the state. This resistance is associated with heterogeneous value systems and the cultural practices they generate, narrated in Brown's conception of the History of Prophecy:

Prophecy is a critical response to the "urban revolution," that irreversible commitment of the human race to the city and civilization which spread outward from the "Nile to Oxus" heartland beginning around 3000 B.C. Prophecy is the perception of the potentialities, both for "good" and for "evil," inherent in the new social structure. (1991, p. 46-47)

In these terms, Brown (1991, p. 6) propounded a mythopoeic form of nature enthusiasm which described prophetic experience as "God in us: *entheos*: enthusiasm; this is the essence of the holy madness". Brown's enthusiastic view of possessive states was generative of rhapsody, as mythopoetic Dionysian derangement enacted as cultural resistance. His student and mentee, the ethno-botanist Dale Pendell practiced this mythopoeic method as the ritualised ingestion of plant entheogens, by which Pendell experienced psychotropic intoxication as divine or shamanic possession by beyond-human agents identified with plant spirits, "The plant spirit moves through our bodies, spreading through blood and nerves, lymph and synapse, until our identities are merged and we do their bidding" (Pendell 2010, p. 91). These enthusiastic views ultimately revive occult discourses in the history of Hermetic magic, exemplified by the work of the Renaissance humanist philosopher, Marsilio Ficino, whom Brown quotes in his penultimate work, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*:

The spirit of the god Dionysus was believed by the ancient theologians and Platonists to be the ecstasy and abandon of disencumbered minds, when partly by innate love, partly at the instigation of the god, they transgress the natural limits of intelligence and are miraculously transformed into the beloved god himself: where, inebriated by a certain new draft of nectar and by an immeasurable joy, they rage, as it were, in a bacchic frenzy. In the drunkenness of this Dionysian wine, our Dionysius (the Areopagite) expresses his exultation. He pours forth enigmas, he sings in dithyrambs. To penetrate the profundity of his meanings, to imitate his quasi-Orphic manner of speech, we too require the divine fury. (1991, p. 2-3)

This Dionysian fury is a form of poetic inspiration native to the mysteries, by which Brown (1991, p. 3) meant "secret and occult; therefore unpublishable; therefore outside the university as we know it; but not outside Plato's Academy or Ficino's." However, Brown's enthusiastic conception of Dionysian drunkenness is more simply understood according to Nietzsche, as music. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (2003) established the classic binary between the Apolline world of illusion

understood as the symbolic code most often mediated through writing, and the Dionysian world of intoxication understood as music. By positioning music in opposition to writing here, I do so in Nietzsche's legacy which has been meaningful for a number of the writers discussed in this essay, but particularly Brown's anarchist conception of the History of Prophecy.

Brown's History of Prophecy thereby politicizes the modern transformation of the meaning and practice of music—shorn of the prophetic qualities by which ancients once accessed occult realms. This is more broadly descriptive of the transformation of our semiotic practices. In this regard a sign can no longer be inscribed with prophetic, beyond-human significance; but is objectified as a signifier of identity within an anthropocentric order. This is clear in the function of the art industry today, by which artworks are shorn of their capacity to signify beyond-human forms of experience, and are defined by marketplace in an economic system.

Nevertheless, legendary artworks like those described by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, or by Patrick Süskind in *Perfume* maintain our memory of another conception of the animate artwork and its capacity to act in the world by triggering beyond-human forms of affect or hypnotic intoxication. However these legends function as exceptions that prove the rule. They are exceptional to the modern transformation of culture which has colluded in our anthropocentric crises, isolated from a beyond-human reality and in neglect of the nature of semiosis as an art of illusion capable of signifying across orders. Indeed, an anthropocentric worldview does not recognize the existence of other orders.

Whereas, a musical worldview dominated intellectual discourse until Enlightenment, concerned with universal harmony as The Great Theme. In the early seventeenth century the mathematician Johannes Kepler theorised on the music of the spheres, describing the cosmological harmony produced by planetary motion. Kepler's views were expressive of the preindustrial view of signification as capable of weaving alternative orders into harmony, even encompassing the musical frequency of colour. This harmonic cosmology was generative of a synchronous social reality susceptible to the divinatory games of hypnosis and trickery engendered by art practice.

This synchronous sociality allows for what the Spanish magician Arturo de Ascanio (Camí and Martínez 2022, p. 75) described as the "magical atmosphere attained only when all factors come together simultaneously in perfect harmony," during performance. This harmonic quality disguises undesirable contrasts, thereby blurring object boundaries to facilitate performances of metamorphosis. Similarly, in *The Illusionist Brain* Jordi Camí and Luis M. Martínez (2022) show how magicians avoid undesirable contrasts to facilitate the cognitive tricks that result in miraculous transformations during performance magic. This method is also utilised by zebras who group together to conjure a dazzling spectacle from their stripes, to confuse and disorientate predators by blurring object boundaries.

Richard Wiseman's colour changing card trick (Camí and Martínez 2022, p. 54-55) is a masterclass in this phenomena. By directing the audience's attention to the play of cards, Wiseman is able to disappear contrasts that unravel all around the performance; including changing clothes and a changing tablecloth. Whereas the magical trick is finally revealed as this very distraction from these undesirable contrasts. In the same vein, Kohn (2013, p. 122) describes a comparative hunting strategy employed by the anaconda, who hypnotizes its prey through a game of seduction that finally disorients the prey's sense of location altogether:

The anaconda captures its prey by a process of attraction and seduction. It causes animals and people alike to become lost in the forest. The victims, in a sort of hypnotic state, begin to wander

around in circles that spiral increasingly inward until they eventually end up at the spot where the anaconda is hiding, waiting to crush them with her embrace. The anaconda is the kind of predator that hunters would like to be: one that is not initially recognized as such.

These various magical techniques depend on the disruption of an objective sense of time and identity. They blur undesirable contrasts, obscure object and identity boundaries, and allow for the production of magical states comparable to the intoxicating quality of music. Musical states allow for the transfiguration and transformation of identity by which predators like the anaconda cast spells over their prey, or by which magicians entrance an audience.

This is the founding sensibility upon which we have constructed our magical arts, however their intimate relationship with the natural world is threatened by the commodification of art practice. Ultimately, this jeopardises our experience of reality as a malleable construct woven by a plethora of agents harmonising across orders. Instead, the institution of modern time intends to incorporate human agents into a labour order operated by the state. In this state of affairs we are disenchanted of imaginative sovereignty as human-animals engaged in magical struggles of survival and reality creation. Silvia Federici (2018) and Reginald Scot (1584) have both suggested this subjugation is epitomized by the modern witch hunt as an attack on matriarchal forms of social organisation that presented alternative sites of authority to the emerging industrial state, most often oriented by familial relationships.

In *Musicking* Christopher Small (1998, p. 40) contends that for the majority of human history “the musical performance was part of that larger dramatic enactment which we call ritual, where the members of the community acted out their relationships and their mutual responsibilities and the identity of the community as a whole was affirmed and celebrated”. This is in opposition to the Western performance of music today which generally segregates musical experts from audiences during concerts; “What we accept as the norm is, in fact, the exception among the human race as a whole” (Small 1998, p. 39). The commodification of music is symptomatic of the transformation of social organisation that both preceded and followed urbanisation and industrialisation. The unravelling of oral culture and its musical practices in the West are symptomatic of this transition, which unstitched community relations in order to isolate and condition the labourer

The cultural anthropologist Victor Turner has also argued this process incorporated the arts, initially practiced as a form of ritualised psychotherapy that confused the boundaries between work and play. Today these techniques have transformed into the monetizable vocations recognised “in the *entertainment* business, [such as] acting, dancing, singing, art, writing, composing, etc.” (Turner 1982, p. 39). According to Turner (1982, p. 39) this finally resulted “in the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth centuries [in] the notion of ‘art’ itself, in its various modalities, as a quasi-religious vocation, with its own asceticism and total dedication”. Conversely, Sun (2023, p. 172-174) has also shown how art’s psychotherapeutic origins are still performed in traditional healing practices like Chinese acupuncture, which employ the placebo effect for healing purposes and perform medicine as an art. Inherent to this traditional practice is the capacity for the patient to participate in their own psycho-somatic recovery, empowered by sophisticated methodologies of trickery that facilitate the placebo effect as a healing, magical practice.

However, the modern transformation of culture has largely obscured these possibilities and essentially describes the disappearance of a living folk culture from the West. While pockets surely remain, the mode of passing information, and producing and consuming art has been largely

commodified and shorn of its ritualistic roots in community identity. This has inevitably affected the nature of the arts and the signficatory practices denoted by it.

Whereas the ritual performance of music allows for travel through time and space, insofar as its repetitive media—understood as rhythm—collapses time and space (Chua; Rehding 2021, p. 24). Music thereby establishes what Campagna (2022, p. 9) describes as magic's reality system, "not a 'utopia', but rather a force that lives in *Nâ-Kojâ-Abâd*, 'the land of non-where', which Persian philosopher Suhrawardi describes as existing always alongside our material world, however invisibly". Similarly, the historian of shamanic rites Claude Lecouteux (2001, p. 38) reminds us "the voyage afar... is the result of a trance achieved through chant, dance, or a certain rhythmic music."

Abram (1996, p. 146) also refers to the Distant Times of indigenous Koyukon belief, when all living beings shared a common language and society, and "went through dreamlike transmutations from animals or plants to humans, and sometimes back again". However, Abram (1996, p. 146) contemplates "whether the Distant Time is more coherently understood as a unique dimension or *modality* of time, one that is more integral to the living present than it is to the historical past." Music is thus employed during ritual ceremony to collapse time and space, thereby inaugurating the presence of magical reality systems such as Distant Times or lands of non-where, as the ritualised experience of difference, which becomes animate with beyond-human voices in what Lecouteux (2001, p. 74) describes as "a reservoir of souls".

These magical reality systems are instituted by music's peculiar capacity to collapse time and space, facilitating intervention from a sentient ecology woven by beyond-human agents including the dead, unborn, plants, animals and others. However, musical practices which facilitate this experience through animist ritual, are no longer practiced in Western culture. At this point the knowledge of the so-called primitive, or barbarian in possession of occult understanding, becomes relevant as the posthuman object of interest. In the following I will suggest that this occult knowledge is the divinatory Language of Birds which animates our environments as sites of multinatural perspectivalism, expressing itself through animate signs and songs.

The Language of Birds

The term 'animism' was introduced by anthropological discourse in the 19th century to distinguish so-called primitive value systems from the modern self-image, including "the belief that everything within it had a soul" (Rose 2013, 96). However, the return to animist systems today is apparent in Emanuele Coccia's (2019) description of an astrological cosmology in *The Life of Plants*, and Akomolafe's (2024) ecological animism, which addresses the correspondence between "what colour of dress we chose to wear for an occasion to matters as apparently spellbinding as the choreography of an asteroid". These astrological constellations are musical, insofar as they describe a harmonic cosmology wherein disparate parts are synthesized and ultimately possessed with beyond-human sentience, or what literary historian Edward Wilson-Lee (2024, p. 27-221) has described as a superorganism in *On The Grammar of Angels*.

The possibility that different orders can come into sync also poses the possibility that signs can signify across these alternative orders, which furthermore, demands the agency of others and their capacity to express themselves, and finally, our own membership as human beings in this club of others. This renders an animist view of the sign as a magical or divinatory omen, inscribed with the posthuman difference I have defended in above sections. This divinatory possibility posits a view of symbolic exchange which transcends anthropocentric codes to enliven the astrological ontologies which are being reconsidered today.

In his history of early civilisation, *Against the Grain*, James C. Scott (2017, p. 141) argues writing appeared as a notational device during the development of the state, and was used “essentially for bookkeeping purposes for more than half a millennia before it even began to reflect the civilizational glories we associate with writing: literature, mythology, praise hymns, kings lists and genealogies, chronicles, and religious texts.” This administrative function is consistent with writing’s ability to disengage from context, where a written word from two thousand years ago can be discovered today; while its interpretation may change, it is nevertheless independent of context and can be translated across space and time. This is exemplified by the alphabet as a series of shapes that have no relationship to the sounds or words they represent. For Abram (1996, p.111) the ascendancy of writing has thus resulted in the dislocation of literate societies from a storied universe immanent in the landscape, ecology, and environment.

However, in *The Art of Not Being Governed* Scott (2009, p. 226) refers to another form of writing which he identifies among non-literate peoples; this writing operates as festish-systems that deploy scripts and signs “in much the same way as magical spells or incantations and are expected to “act on the world” as signs”. This magical writing is infused with posthuman difference as the voice of nature, insofar as it generates meaning through repetition within sentient systems that are not limited by anthropocentric codes. This magical script is ordered by synchronicity as a divinatory, posthuman language inscribed with harmonic states. Dubbed ‘The Language of Birds’ by both Pendell (2021) and Abram (1996), this divinatory script denotes an alternative and occult way of experiencing the world and producing meaning; one which is inherently magical insofar as it is open to the beyond-human, but as I have argued, has recently vanished from the West following the dismantling of community relations by which folk culture is practiced as the History of Prophecy.

The Language of Birds appears in mythological cycles across the world. Wilson-Lee (2025, p. 21) reminds us, “one of the magical powers given to Solomon in the Qur’an is to speak *mantik al-tayr*, the language of birds, and the Norse hero Sigurd also gains the ability to understand bird speech when he drinks blood from the heart of the dragon Fáfnir.” Bird speech is representative of divinatory traditions that have existed “For many millennia and across the whole Old World, from Eastern to Western Eurasia, and from the tip of southern Africa to the highlands of Britannia... On a scale whose breadth we have yet to fully appreciate” (Struck 2016, p. 4). In these traditions, birds are often metaphoric of angels as messengers associated with the ecstatic flight of the imagination, communicating through synchronicities and divinatory signs capable of signifying across orders.

The mentalist magician Enrique Enriquez, known as “the man who speaks like a bird”, has developed this possibility into the magical methodology he describes in *Birds and Oracles with Enrique Enriquez* (McGregor 2018). Enriquez deconstructs written words into hieroglyphic shapes that become pegs holding up a void wherein he locates the angel, as message. These messages beget a form of poetic reverie, which begin to influence his client’s dreams and finally, reconstruct their experience of reality in a reverse circulation which the historian Elliot R. Wolfson (2011, p. 226) compares to remembering the future; “The past is anticipated in the future that is recollected”. Both Wolfson and Enriquez refer to the philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s canonical work *Air and Dreams* (1999, p. 166) in support of this creative view of poetic reverie by which “The world is beautiful before being true.”

In his documentary *Tarology* (2011), Enriquez explicitly refers to the divinatory Language of Birds as he locates tarot signs in the urban landscape of New York, subsuming the city into the oneiric realm of divination. More radically, Enriquez poses the possibility, like both Nietzsche and Abram, that humans learned language from birdsong. The Austrian supreme fairy wren offers one

charming possibility for how *The Language of Birds* operates in nature, as music and divination. Sun (2023, p. 105) shows that the superb fairy wren outsmarts parasitic cuckoo chicks attempting to displace their own chicks, by singing a secret password to her nest before the eggs hatch; “After hatching, if there’s no password, there’s no food. The parasitic chicks will starve to death.” The superb fairy wren’s song operates as a sort of magical password which outwits parasitic cuckoos, remembers the future, and models a view of magical language derived from nature, exemplified by magical words like *Abracadabra*, or *Alakazam*.

The mystery surrounding these magical words, that apparently mean nothing but are nevertheless assumed to operate some magical force in the world, instantiate what Wilson-Lee (2025, p. 81) describes as *poppysma*, onomatopoeic words that pose “the worrying possibility that we are moved more by the sounds of words than what they’re actually saying.” This possibility is worrying as it triggers forms of affect associated with a beyond-human order, capable of turning “man from a rational judge of what he is being told into a powerless instrument at the mercy of patterns of sound” (Wilson-Lee 2025, p. 81) including the seductive songs of birds weaving us into their imaginations.

Predicated on the possibility of a Language of Birds, is the posthuman reevaluation of the nature of sentience, agency, and the semiotic locus of symbolic exchange or writing. Only by reviving the intimacy between our semiotic practices and nature, can our artistic and magical practices preserve their capacity to act on the world as powerful and indeed threatening triggers, with creational force. In the next section I will discuss how this possibility is predicated on the body as the site of trickery, illusion, and thus symbolic exchange. Such feats of misdirection conspire with a sentient environment to produce miracles of metamorphosis. These miracles are capable of undermining anthropocentricity and the reality order it institutes, and are expressive of an art method of trickery.

Trickery As An Art Method

In both his renowned works *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) and *Becoming Animal* (2011), as well as his podcast *How a Man Turned into a Raven* (2021), Abram introduces the traditional Nepalese healer and magician Sonam who he apprenticed to for a number of months. Abram (2011, p. 226-227) compares Sonam’s trickery to the magical practice of sleight-of-hand which “purposely confounds the conventional segregation of the senses, making use of a synaesthetic propensity much more prevalent than science assumes”. Abram describes how he witnessed Sonam metamorphose into a raven, through a convincing optical illusion conjured by sophisticated skills of mimicry, misdirection, and suggestion which animated the environment to assist in this performance. Abram’s description of the miraculous event is worth quoting at length:

As I approached that bend I heard the guttural squawk of a raven, loud, from somewhere nearby. After a moment I heard it again, and then as I rounded the bend I finally saw the raven, poised atop a boulder jutting out over the gorge, to the left of the trail. The bird was facing across the trail; as I watched, it hopped twice to angle itself more toward me, its eyes blinking like camera shutters as it cocked its head. It uttered another more subdued “squaaaark” and then hopped down onto the trail. Yet as it did so the raven suddenly seemed to swerve toward me, for it expanded rapidly in apparent size. My arms instinctively flew up to shield my face, but then the bird simply alighted in the middle of the trail. Still, there was something all wrong about the way the raven landed on the dirt—its shape was contorted somehow, and the landing much too loud, until I realized I was looking at Sonam, and not a raven at all. I blinked. And realized to my utter perplexity that Sonam was much farther from me

than where the bird had been. What the hell was happening? I took a few steps toward him, whereupon my eyes discovered that the boulder on which the raven had perched was itself much farther than I'd thought... and hence was a hell of a lot bigger than I'd perceived it to be... a man turned into a raven, and then back again. A man I knew. A perfectly impossible metamorphosis had just unfolded before my blinking eyes. (2011, p. 226-227)

Sonam's miraculous feat of misdirection inverted Abram's perspective to conjure an illusion of near and distant space and thereby transform himself into a convincing imitation of a raven. This imitation was furthermore derived from Sonam's long-term apprenticeship to ravens over his magical career. Both these skills of misdirection and mimicry assisted in his production of an illusion, and are furthermore, descriptive of the multinatural perspectivalism by which the agency or points of views of others are acknowledged and more strongly, empathetically understood.

Kohn (2013, p. 97-99) generated the "shamanistic perspective" of multinatural perspectivalism following field work among the indigenous Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon who "take great pleasure in finding a viewpoint that encompasses multiple perspectives". Multinatural perspectivalism animates the perspectives of beyond-humans, and is derived from the space which "allows one to linger in that space where, like a shaman, one can be simultaneously aware of both viewpoints as well as how they are connected by something greater than, like a trap springing shut, suddenly encompasses them" (Kohn 2013, p. 97).

Such traps are sprung by magicians like Sonam and are experienced as the miraculous collision of narratives that presence occult knowledge inclusive of the point of view of the beyond-human other; and are often experienced as miracles of metamorphosis. Such miracles undertake a meta-surgery on anthropocentric pathologies, undermining worldviews which forbid such possibilities. In this regard, the negative force representative of that which transcends knowledge, familiar to intellectual discourse as difference, is made animate by the magician to undermine a pathological worldview constructed on the assumption of privileged knowledge. This kind of difference is meaningful, and furthermore, capable of ensnaring the human observer as the presumed locus of meaning production.

In *Psychomagic* Alejandro Jodorowsky (2010) refers to a similar conception of 'sacred traps', which he developed following his own apprenticeship with traditional healers and magicians in Mexico. Much like Sun's acupuncturists, Jodorowsky observed how such witch-doctors practice medicine as an artform, and perform feats of suggestion and misdirection to trick patients into participating in their own psycho-somatic feats of healing. They are thus capable of performing "miracles using the honorable tricks of a skilled magician" (Jodorowsky 2010, viii). Jodorowsky subsequently describes his creative practice with panic-theatre and film-making as a psychotherapeutic form of psychomagic which performs the unconscious to trigger symbolic crises and thereby hijack pathological reality systems that ultimately produce illness. In effect, this method performs illusionary reality systems in order to transform them into a reality which is subsequently falsified and thereby revealed as an illusion. This revelation liberates the patient from oppressive over-identification with systems which abstract experience and pathologize anthropocentric identity.

Multinatural perspectivalism problematizes the sovereignty of beyond-human agents that until the appearance of posthumanism, have not been acknowledged as participants in our reality-system, or capable of informing them. Magical practice is still capable of animating these others through the feats of misdirection which redirect the perspective. In its capacity to institute the negative as the land of non-where, the body thus threatens symbolic orders predicated on the objectification

of experience and identity. It does this by instituting an animate semiosis which is being recovered by the posthuman revival of nature enthusiasm. This semiosis is employed in an art method of trickery to generate the sacred traps most often associated with healing.

Like both Jodorowsky and the Amazonian Runa, the Spanish magician Miguel Ángel Gea (Camí and Martínez 2022, p. 68) also employs the language of entrapment when describing magical techniques as “traps that only work in the hands of a certain type of magician, they may even only work for one magician”. It is precisely this language of entrapment that bellies the convergence between the art of illusion, magic, art practice, and the fatal games of signification utilized in the natural world. This convergence is predicated on the imaginative sovereignty of the human-animal, capable of setting sacred traps that reconstruct the experience of reality. Recovering this sovereignty is precisely the experience of magic, which furthermore, enacts cultural resistance to incorporation into the state and its prescriptive reality order.

Divination and Order

The art method of trickery is thereby situated in Brown’s conception of The History of Prophecy. This essay has been interested in demonstrating that it functions as a form of cultural resistance insofar as it maintains the human-animal as imaginative sovereign, included in a society of beyond-human others who collaboratively weave nature into the harmonic state conducive to miracles of transformation enacted by magical games of predation and courtship. This recovers an anarchist conception of art practice which frames magic as a form of reality reconstruction, that ultimately deconstructs the possibility of a one true order instituted by a centralized authority identified with the state. While this ‘rejection of metanarratives’ has been narrated through postmodernism as a disintegrative and indeed chaotic experience, through a posthuman perspective it facilitates the possibility of beyond-human forms of agency and their stakes in our reality. In *Technic and Magic*, Campagna (2022, p. 114) reminds us “The very origin of the word magic, points towards a form of ‘otherness’ that is constructed purely through a negative relation to what is already known and familiar.” This otherness is expressive of a notion of semiosis inscribed with beyond-human significance, and capable of signifying meaning across identity, time, and space; or more powerfully, triggering the threatening states Brown theorized as prophetic, Dionysian derangement.

As such, in this essay I have referred to various examples in the natural world to show how this posthuman register of signs described as The Language of Birds, are generative of magical feats of illusion, and have also posited that this is the originating matrix for performance magic and art practice today. Recovering this intimacy gives us the tools to revive the potency of our artistic practices, properly understood as magic.

In *Technic and Magic*, Campagna (2022, p. 117) thereby argues “a magician can be understood as a reality-therapist, acting not merely on the symptoms of an individual’s illness, but also on the reality-conditions that allowed the state of illness to take place.” While the legendary magicians Nevil Maskelyne and Harlan Tarbell “used the word “misdirection” long before anyone had heard of the term “psychology”” (Camí and Martínez 2022, p. 79). Magical techniques are implicitly psychological in nature; scientists like Camí and Martínez subsequently emphasize the experience of psychological tricks or cognitive dissonance during magical experience, while in this essay I have made a sort of reverse argument. I have psychologized performance magic as the sublimation of hunting (and courting) techniques concerned with setting sacred traps. Illusion is thus presented as a signifiatory technique which is inherent to nature.

This possibility conjures *The Language of Birds* as a divinatory system expressive of multinatural perspectivalism, and capable of producing tricky signs that can signify over orders. This animate system is capable of personifying itself as a beyond-human agent, deified in animist cosmologies as the “pattern which connects” (Small 1998, p. 103); “The Polynesian god Tane, for example, is—not represents or symbolizes but *is*—the proper relationship between humanity and the life of plants and the forest”. For thinkers like Kohn, this results in beyond-human agency as “a way of understanding a vast and incomprehensibly complex set of relationships” (Small 1998, p. 103). This complex set of relationships is traced by the beyond-human signs that weave us into the deity’s becoming in both the present, past, and the future. It is thereby generative of divinatory experience, insofar as this future is remembered as an immanent tapestry of living signs woven by organisms signifying across orders of temporality and identity.

By situating magical practice in a posthuman cosmology, I am thereby able to resolve the discursive separation between magical practices of performance trickery and divination. Indeed, both of these strategies are inherent to folk ritual like tarot card reading, whereby magical games of trickery become divinatory insofar as they condition the future. Nevertheless, disagreement between diviners (mediums) and magicians (tricksters) has festered since the late 1800s during “times of tension between magicians and mediums. In seeking to discredit the mediums, who were presumed to possess supernatural powers, magicians began to support scientists interested in the mechanisms of magic” (Camí and Martínez 2022, p. 57). This mechanical strategy has generated the various cognitive or psychological theories of magic this essay touches on, in extension of the scientific episteme we occupy. Conversely, I have argued magic operates in resistance to this very kind of incorporation as a living History of Prophecy

However, the classicist Peter Struck (2016, p. 7) follows the disagreement between mediums and magicians to the days of Plato. It becomes apparent that in ancient times divination was more respectable than magic, bolstered by the celebrated powers of “The most famous diviners and oracles—Teiresias, the Pythia, the priestesses of Dodona, and the Sibyl, for example—[who] have no reputation as magicians”. However, as opposed to the occult practices associated with magic, Struck (2016, p. 27) argues that divination for the ancient Greeks was associated more mundanely with intuition; indeed “when medieval theologians coin the term *intuitus* they use it to speak about a nondiscursive knowing that particularly characterizes the divine cognition of angels.” For the medievals this angelic cognition, understood as divination, is intuitive in nature.

In *Divination and Human Nature*, Struck (2016, p. 2) consequently argues that divination is a method for accounting for the surplus knowledge he associates with intuition; however, surplus knowledge is ultimately derived from “an understanding of oneself as a member of the order of things.” In this regard, divinatory experience is derived from the natural order and one’s position within its “web of living thoughts” (Kohn 2013, p. 78). Divinatory knowledge of the future is thus knowledge of one’s place in an ecosystem and how this informs the future. This is the same requirement for engaging in the magical feats of illusion conjured by a multinatural perspective, by which organisms in the natural world intuitively hunt and trick one another according to their understanding of their place within the order of things, or more simply, the food-chain. This place is furthermore, a literal location in a sentient environment rife with possibilities of trickery; of conjuring optical illusions, disguises, feats of misdirection, and suggestion.

Effectively, both magical disciplines of divination and trickery are derived from intimacy with nature. Arguably, preservation of this intimacy is practised as *The Language of Birds*. Fluency in this magical script supersedes singular spectacles of divination or magic, insofar as it expresses something (threatening) about our relationship to a sentient nature. In this essay, I have argued

this is the function of cultural resistance, which enacts magical practices in defense of our capacity to construct an imaginative future in collaboration with our beyond-human ecology, as furthermore, the art of illusion. I will now conclude by showing how this prompts magicians to apprentice with beyond-human teachers.

Concluding Remarks: Beyond-Human Teachers

This essay has suggested that our artistic practices, including performance magic, are derived from magical techniques that are employed in nature. It has also posed the possibility of an animate semiosis which is capable of operating on reality systems by setting sacred traps. These traps presence the perspective of the other, revealing the limit of anthropocentric knowledge, and initiating us into the reality of a sentient nature. An art method of trickery thus describes the production of illusions capable of falsifying anthropocentric reality systems, through feats of misdirection that animate an environment. This process is expressive of a multinatural perspectivalism capable of acknowledging the multiplicity of human and beyond-human agents which collaborate in the construction of social reality. On these grounds, Sonam apprenticed with ravens to develop his magical skills, and was ultimately able to trick Abram through a magical feat of misdirection and imitation.

However, I have also suggested that this method of trickery is no longer intuitive to the West, following the modern commodification of art practice and dismantling of folk relations. I have referred to indigenous value systems to suggest that conversely, the forms of trickery which aid in the reconstruction of reality are practiced as resistance to state incorporation. These problems have led to the posthuman revival of animist value systems, in search of the rejected knowledge which has been exiled from modern experience. This exiled knowledge includes the view of semiosis described in these pages, as the trickery by which predators conjure illusions and stage sacred traps to abduct their victims into a more beautiful imagination. In conclusion, it is perhaps from the beyond-humans that surround us that we can regain our semiotic practices as seductive expressions of a sentient nature.

I experienced this viscerally one day during a walk in a field, when I observed a buzzard flying nearby into a forest and then out over a hill. Mesmerised, I followed the bird's line of flight, which led me to the discovery of its nest in a gathering of trees, and finally to the top of the hill. As I stood peering through an opening in the trees, the buzzard flew over the canopy, calling loudly. I had the surreal feeling that I had somehow been led to this position in some sort of whirl-wind the bird had crafted around me, weaving a surreal disturbance of time. If I had been smaller surely it would have eaten me, for it felt that it had hunted me. Of course, from its perspective I was much smaller.

The buzzard had crafted a surreal reality around me through feats of seduction and misdirection, whereby I came into contact with a beyond-human being, the buzzard. This experience of an animate semiosis woven by the bird of prey, is a masterclass in the art and aesthetics of illusion. So, perhaps we can take inspiration from the example of the native hunter who, like Sonam, "must *apprentice* himself to those animals that he would kill. Through long and careful observation, enhanced at times by ritual identification and mimesis, the hunter gradually develops an instinctive knowledge of the habits of his prey, of its fears and its pleasures, its preferred foods and favoured haunts. Nothing is more integral to this practice than learning the communicative signs, gestures, and cries of the local animals" (Abram 1996, p. 140).

This practice generates the possibility of reviving an animate semiosis derived from our intimate relationship with sentient nature, capable of undermining anthropocentric pathologies including the modern rejection of magic, and returning to us the musical possibility of “God in us: *entheos*: enthusiasm; this is the essence of the holy madness” (Brown 1991, p. 6). This conjures a magical praxis or art method of trickery which is simply founded on the observation and imitation of nature.

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