

Appendix: David Blaine the Urban Shaman

In 2014, performance artist Marina Abramović expressed to *The Guardian* that she was apprehensive about an upcoming durational performance in London, suggested that Abramović ‘was perhaps remembering what happened to David Blaine when he suspended himself in a Perspex box above the Thames all those years ago and was rewarded with jeers and people chucking bottles.’¹ Brockes continues, ‘But Abramović does not belong in [Blaine’s] corny showbiz category. There is no illusion in what she does; when she cuts herself, it’s real. The whole point is it’s real.’²

Conjurer and endurance artist David Blaine has – among many other impressive feats – spent seven days “buried alive” in a Perspex coffin in New York City; spent 63 hours standing “frozen” in a large block of ice in Times Square; and spent 44 days in a Perspex box suspended over the river Thames. In all three cases, Blaine subsisted on only water for the duration of the events. Brockes’ description of Blaine’s stunts as ‘corny showbiz,’³ however, is extremely naïve. Blaine, who is known for a unique style of performance often described as *urban shamanism*, has never been detected in any form of fraud in his endurance challenges. Further, he has frequently swallowed and regurgitated large volumes of liquids (keeping them separated, apparently, in different parts of his stomach); swallowed and regurgitated live frogs; eaten glass, and apparently created pathways through his forearm and hand large enough for ice-picks and large needles to pass through.

There is, naturally, some debate about the precise nature of Blaine’s stunts. This ambiguity is perhaps best captured by an attempted exposé of his endurance feats in *The Telegraph*. I say *attempted*, because there seems to be very little to expose. After acknowledging that Blaine is probably is telling the truth about creating an extended area of scar tissue and a fistula through his flesh, one particularly telling passage astutely observes: ‘while the magician is known for his endurance stunts – he certainly seems like the sort of person who would deliberately create a fistula

¹ Brockes, Emma. ‘Performance artist Marina Abramović: “I was ready to die”.’ *The Guardian*. May 12, 2014.

² Brockes, Emma. ‘Performance artist Marina Abramović: “I was ready to die”.’ *The Guardian*. May 12, 2014.

³ Brockes, Emma. ‘Performance artist Marina Abramović: “I was ready to die”.’ *The Guardian*. May 12, 2014.

in his hand solely for the purpose of pulling off a trick – he may have been pulling off a double bluff, and using some kind of mechanical trickery instead.’⁴

This passage, I feel, perfectly captures the essence of Blaine’s endurance stunts. They seem – even to me – to be legitimate. But since Blaine’s other passion is deception, it’s hard to be sure. This liminality, boundary blurring, frame erasing, and ambiguity, has invited criticism and scepticism, as well as controversy and acclaim. For instance, in an article in *The Guardian* entitled, ‘Blaine emerges from his 44-day “fast”’, Oliver Burkeman writes, ‘Nobody seemed to know whether he was cheating, though theories abounded – involving everything from glucose and sodium supplements [hidden in his water or bedding] to complex body-double schemes and holograms. But then again, the 30-year-old illusionist is an illusionist. Many in the crowd of at least 1,000 didn’t care where truth ended and illusion began.’⁵

Conjurer Penn Jillette – to examine another example – has spoken highly of David Blaine, stating that his early TV specials were ‘the biggest [magic] break through done in our lifetime,’⁶ yet ridicules Blaine’s endurance stunts. Jillette quips, for instance, regarding the “frozen” stunt, that ‘pumping hot air into a phone booth and putting ice around it, and standing around without a thought in your head isn’t a trick... The hardest part of this trick is being in there and looking good without a shirt on.’⁷ Jillette further jokes, ‘Give me a Barcalounger and a copy of *Moby Dick*, and I’ll stay in there two weeks.’⁸ And as for the 44 day fast over the Thames, Jillette mockingly claims that he doesn’t know how to classify the ‘I’m really not kidding, honestly I’m not going to eat, swear to God I’m not eating, no really I’m not eating, no it’s not a trick I’m really not eating’⁹ stunts.

Yet, Blaine is not *necessarily* opposed to cheating in these stunts. For instance, in a TEDMED Talk, Blaine appears to speak candidly about preparations for his “drowned alive” stunt in which

⁴ Hawkes, Rebecca. ‘David Blaine: the gory secrets behind some of his most mind-boggling illusions.’ *The Telegraph*. Nov 16, 2016.

⁵ Burkeman, Oliver. ‘Blaine emerges from his 44-day “fast”.’ *The Guardian*. Oct 20, 2003.

⁶ Turner, Elizabeth. ‘“I Am Alive in Here”: Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine’s Body.’ *Journal of Performance Magic*. 4 (1). p. 12.

⁷ ‘Magician thaws after ice stunt.’ *BBC News*. news.bbc.co.uk. 30 Nov 2000.

⁸ *101 Damnations: The Humorists’ Tour of Personal Hells*. Ed. Michael Rosen. Thomas Dunne Books. 2002. Ch. 60.

⁹ Turner, Elizabeth. ‘“I Am Alive in Here”: Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine’s Body.’ *Journal of Performance Magic*. 4 (1). p. 12.

– after living for seven days in a water filled Perspex sphere – he attempted to break the world record for unassisted static apnea (holding his breath) underwater. Although he failed to break this record, he later successfully broke the world record for oxygen assisted static apnea, holding his breath underwater for over 17 minutes after super-oxygenating his body. In this talk, Blaine reveals that he initially explored the option of having a secret breathing tube surgically inserted down his throat, but he was not sufficiently able to overcome the gag reflex to execute this idea.¹⁰ This is, indeed, an impressive failure on Blaine’s part, since he has demonstrated tremendous abilities for swallowing and regurgitating foreign objects.

Nevertheless, the suggestion that Blaine’s stunts are ‘corny showbiz’¹¹ is missing the point completely. Although Blaine is well known for his sleight-of-hand and conjuring demonstrations, his endurance feats meet my definition of mentalism. To describe Blaine as a shaman, would not necessarily be overstating the case. Blaine himself, in a fascinating interview, discussed his own inner conflict regarding truth and fiction. In a discussion about his televised “buried alive” stunt, Blaine explains:

Bill [Kalush] showed me the picture of the fakir buried alive and I said ‘That’s it. That’s perfect.’ And Bill said, ‘So let’s bury you in Central Park. We’ll put you in there. Sneak you out. Then a month later we’ll bring you back. You’ll try to lose some weight.’ And I kind of thought that, like, that wouldn’t be that much fun. Because I’d feel like a – not that I don’t anyway – but I’d feel like a huge fake. So the idea of, like, completely faking it was not right to me. I felt like its not difficult to be buried alive for a week, for real, and just survive on almost nothing. So the idea was to make [the coffin] see through so everybody could see that it was real.¹²

It is fascinating, if not a little heart-breaking, to hear that Blaine – who has, by any standard, endured so much – should feel like ‘a huge fake.’¹³ Given Blaine’s conflicting passions of both being a master deceiver and also wanting to do things for real, it comes as no surprise that he references Harry Houdini as a primary influence. Houdini was a conjurer, but was best regarded by the public for his daring and physically demanding escapology “challenges” and stunts. These apparently impossible stunts and challenges often required unique and ingenious combinations of

¹⁰ Blaine, David. ‘How I held my breath for 17 minutes.’ *TEDMED.com*. 2009.

¹¹ Brookes, Emma. ‘Performance artist Marina Abramović: “I was ready to die”.’ *The Guardian*. May 12, 2014.

¹² Blaine, David. ‘David Blaine - The Concept Behind Street Magic - The Urban Shaman.’ *Essential Magic Conference. YouTube*. 2010.

¹³ Blaine, David. ‘David Blaine - The Concept Behind Street Magic - The Urban Shaman.’ *Essential Magic Conference. YouTube*. 2010.

deceptive tactics and brute strength, stamina, skill, and determination.* Somewhat more surprisingly, however, Blaine also claims Uri Geller as a primary influence. According to Blaine:

When I was a kid, I was always obsessed with Uri Geller. I didn't like part of what he was doing which was just pure – you know, that one thing – but what I did like is: He would go on stage and he'd do one simple thing. And he'd make it so believable. Because he believed in it himself. And to me it's not about the [physical] appearance necessarily. Really, to me, I think it has to be about the emotion you can pull out of yourself. Or, you know, the honesty, as ironic as that sounds.¹⁴

Like Geller, Blaine has chosen to focus on what I described in 'The End of Mind-reading' as the archetype of the "real" magician. Blaine connects this approach to his unique style which he describes as *anti-presentation*; a style for which Blaine has attracted countless fans as well as detractors. He connects that approach, in turn, to a visceral approach, which his collaborator Paul Harris described as *Urban Shamanism*. According to Blaine:

My big dilemma was: Is it okay to just do really simple things? Because I always thought that if a real magician existed, a real magician wouldn't have a big patter. I kind of felt like a real magician would just pick something up, like a rock, and say 'look' and he'd squeeze it and it would become sand. And so, I kind of felt that the anti-presentation would be more believable in a way... What were the simplest things we could do that would affect people on a guttural level? Paul [Harris] called it *Urban Shaman*. You enter somebody's life. You try to affect them for a moment. And then you wander away.¹⁵

Blaine's unique mixture of performance art, conjuring, and mentalism, is immediately reminiscent of the style of the Indian fakirs and Hindu mystics of various sorts, of which Kuda Bux is a noteworthy example. In this regard, relevant issues of cultural appropriation, assimilation, and the othering, animalizing, and feminizing of the body are examined in '(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism.'

But Blaine has also reinvented this form for a contemporary mediatized age, and in doing so, he has not escaped the attention of academics such as Elizabeth Turner, who in an article entitled, 'I

* The story of the *Mirror Cuffs* as researched by Sloman and Kalush in their 2006 book *The Secret Life of Houdini* would serve as an excellent example.

¹⁴ Blaine, David. 'David Blaine - The Concept Behind Street Magic - The Urban Shaman.' *Essential Magic Conference. YouTube*. 2010.

¹⁵ Blaine, David. 'David Blaine - The Concept Behind Street Magic - The Urban Shaman.' *Essential Magic Conference. YouTube*. 2010.

Am Alive in Here': Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine's Body,' discusses the ground-breaking boundary blurring techniques applied by Blaine in his performances. According to Turner, Blaine's 'acknowledged turn away from narrative and towards deliberate ambiguity is not without its vexations.'¹⁶ Turner notes, for instance, that Michael Billington, a theatre critic for the *Guardian*, 'struggled to interpret the live event as a spectator' and 'to place the work in terms of performance.'¹⁷ Billington asked, 'What are we really watching? A piece of performance art? A 44-day play? A theatrical illusion?'¹⁸ Turner summarizes Billington's damning conclusion that 'the spectacle lacks both the drama of being able to know what Blaine is thinking, and the "vulgar excitement of trickery", thus failing to entertain on either a high or popular culture basis.'¹⁹ Turner further observes that 'this category anxiety appears to hinge upon the apparent lack of illusion in the narrative – that if Blaine really is doing what he appears to be doing, in what sense can we consider this magic?'²⁰

It is a rather important question that Turner asks. Given the culture of secrecy and deception within which Blaine operates, there is really little way of knowing for certain whether Blaine is, or isn't, doing precisely what he claims. I would therefore, suggest that Turner's question might be rephrased as: *Since Blaine really does appear to be doing what he claims, in what sense can we consider this magic?* It is precisely this ambiguity which differentiates Blaine from his contemporaries, and aligns his endurance "stunts" more closely with mentalism, shamanism, and performance art.

¹⁶ Turner, Elizabeth. "'I Am Alive in Here": Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine's Body.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 4 (1). p. 12.

¹⁷ Turner, Elizabeth. "'I Am Alive in Here": Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine's Body.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 4 (1). p. 12.

¹⁸ Billington, Michael. 'After 22 days of turning starvation into a stunt, the puzzle of David Blaine's ordeal remains - why?' *The Guardian*. Sep 27, 2003.

¹⁹ Billington, Michael. 'After 22 days of turning starvation into a stunt, the puzzle of David Blaine's ordeal remains - why?' *The Guardian*. Sep 27, 2003.

²⁰ Turner, Elizabeth. "'I Am Alive in Here": Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine's Body.' *Journal of Performance Magic*. 4 (1). p. 12.

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