

Appendix: *Derren Brown and Pseudo-Reality*

Mentalist Derren Brown has deeply explored similar forms of kayfabe breaking pseudo-reality in his television and stage appearances. For instance, following many of Brown's televised demonstrations, the viewer is guided through a step-by-step exposé of how Brown allegedly accomplished the demonstration, typically through the use of subliminal influence or pseudo-psychological (ie., Neuro Linguistic Programming) tactics. The apparently kayfabe breaking explanations which are offered for the viewers, however, are not even remotely related to the actual techniques being covertly employed by Brown and his production team. As an example, I offer the following scenario from an intriguing 2008 special entitled, 'The System.'¹

In this program, Brown was apparently able to con one person out of her life savings by demonstrating an ability to apparently know the outcomes of horse races in advance. Brown accomplished this, it seems, by using an old scam. Unbeknownst to his victim, Brown began with a very broad pool of candidates. After each race, he advanced the group which had been texted the correct "prediction" and abandoned the members of the losing groups. This process was repeated until only a single candidate remained. That particular candidate – by that time – had witnessed a highly improbable run of six correct predictions. At that point she was approached by Brown, who persuaded her to trust him with her life savings.

In the program, Brown offered his viewers a simple example which he claimed would explain the entire scam. He showed a coin was fair – with heads on one side and tails on the other – and flipped the coin ten times consecutively into a glass bowl. All ten times, the coin landed heads up. Brown then goes on to show how that remarkable run of luck was possible. At this point a series of outtakes were played to reveal that the simple coinflip demonstration had required a full day of filming – hour after hour, attempt after attempt – before Brown was able to legitimately obtain those results. By chance, such an outcome would be expected to occur once within each 1,024 attempts (2 to the 10th power).

Brown's explanation was a fascinating one, and indeed, I have witnessed this clip being played in a university psychology course, as an example of anomalous statistics. But Brown's explanation

¹ Brown, Derren. 'Derren Brown: The System.' Simon Dinsell. *Channel 4*. 2008.

was – I believe – entirely fabricated. After the coin was shown to be fair, and flipped into the air, the camera captures the coin rotating in slow motion. Both sides of the coin are clearly seen. At that point, there is a single, deceptive edit, as the video cuts to an overhead camera which does not cut away from that point forward. That single edit enabled the producers of the program to switch to a different take in which a two-headed coin is used. The coin flipping demonstration – aside from outtakes created to lend credibility to the false explanation – was most likely accomplished in a single take.

Brown has provided similar pseudo-explanations in his stage shows. One clear example may be seen at the outstanding conclusion of Brown's 2005 touring production *Something Wicked this Way Comes*.^{*} During the finale of this show, Brown definitively proves that he knew in advance which word a randomly chosen spectator would select from a scrap of newspaper torn from a randomly chosen page of a randomly selected newspaper. This stunning finale is capped by Brown's explanation of how he accomplished the apparent act of precognition.

Brown cues the production team to roll video clips on the jumbo screen. Using these clips – which were captured from within that evening's performance – Brown points out the many subliminal messages which he scattered throughout the show. Indeed, the hidden messages are not particularly noticeable until after he points them out, at which point, his embedded messages become impossible to miss.

For instance, during his performance of the sideshow "blockhead" stunt – in which he legitimately drives a large nail into his nasal cavity – he appeared to slightly stumble on the line 'I don't hammer a 14 gauge nail everyday into my head...' In the reveal segment, Brown points out – and video playback makes this undeniably true – that he, in fact, delivered the perfectly clear line, 'I don't hammer a **Daily 14 Mail** into my head...' Page 14 of *The Daily Mail* was the page and newspaper which would later be "randomly" selected.

During the performance, Brown also discusses the experience of waiting for the mail to arrive. The video replay reveals that before saying the word "mail" he looks directly at the camera, says the word "daily," winks, and then carries on with his story. It is fascinating to witness this performance

^{*} Brown, Derren. 'Something Wicked This Way Comes.' 2005.

and realize how much of the performance was “missed” in the initial viewing due to inattentional blindness and other cognitive phenomena. However, it is also fascinating to know – as I do – that these subliminal messages (while masterfully executed) have nothing whatsoever to do with the apparently randomly chosen word, page, and newspaper. Brown used other psychological tactics to “force” those outcomes, but “revealed” to the audience a more complex and entirely false – but plausible – method.

In this segment of *Something Wicked this Way Comes*, Brown seems to break the kayfabe of the mentalist by apparently “revealing” how he psychologically “forced” an outcome, which under different circumstances might have appeared psychic. By breaking the psychic kayfabe, and by thoughtfully bolstering his claims with multimedia support, Brown spins a web of pseudo-reality. This pseudo-real web seems much more real – despite being no more real – than that which preceded it. These pseudo-reality segments are not anchored in ambiguity – as many of Brown’s performances are – rather, they are anchored in what Richard Schechner has described as *make-belief* performance. In make-belief performances, according to Schechner, ‘there is an intentional blurring of the boundary between what is fictionalized, constructed, made to order and what might be actually real.’² Pseudo-reality performances are constructed specifically in order to be consumed as reality.

Blurring the Frame

Before I could blur the frame of the performance, I put considerable effort toward uncovering that frame in the first place; and its borders are by no means clearly marked. Identifying the distinction between mentalism and conjuring was itself challenging. Creating an unambiguous definition of mentalism, seemed at times to be a nearly unachievable task. Ultimately, it became necessary to reject all previously offered definitions of mentalism on the grounds that each of these definitions failed to distinguish mentalism from either conjuring, psychic arts, or shamanism. I argued for a new definition of mentalism in a paper entitled ‘(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism’ published in the University of Huddersfield’s peer reviewed *Journal of Performance Magic* in

² Brady, Sara. ‘Performance, Politics, and the War on Terror: “Whatever it Takes.”’ 2012. p. 109.

2016 in which I define mentalism as: *a form of performance in which an actor purports to genuinely demonstrate extraordinary psychic, mental, or intuitive abilities.*³

This definition was, in fact, challenging to uncover. Within the conjuring community – with which I have been associated since I was eight years old – mentalism is widely considered a branch of conjuring. Purportedly genuine psychic demonstrations, on the other hand, are widely derided within this community as unethical and fraudulent endeavours. When I wrote the proposal for my doctoral research, I was almost unaware of the existence of alternate points of view regarding these issues. For instance, in the first of several draft proposals for this research project, despite noting the historical links with ‘fraudulent charlatanism and spiritualism,’ I described mentalism as ‘a sub-category of magic, dealing with such pseudo abilities as ESP, psychokinesis, and mind-reading.’

By the time I submitted the final draft of this proposal, I had already begun to discover cracks in my earlier definitions and assessments. It was particularly in the writings of mentalist Bob Cassidy previously referenced* that I found the beginning of an entirely different perspective. This upending of my categorical distinctions between conjuring and mentalism continued several months into my research when I read *Unreal*, a 2012 text on mentalism techniques and performance philosophy, written by another prominent member of the *Psychic Entertainers Association*, Bruce Bernstein.

In one particularly surprising essay, ‘Disclaiming Disclaimers,’ Bernstein furthered the shift of my perspective when he attacked the use of disclaimers by mentalists. Bernstein states that he finds the use of such disclaimers – which have been an industry standard since Dunninger achieved nationwide fame as a *master mentalist* in the 1940s – ‘as a “moral and/or ethical” procedure to be a sad state of affairs.’⁴ I had never come across such an argument which so bluntly challenged the status quo regarding disclaimers, and accordingly, I looked very closely at Bernstein’s reasoning. Because of the important role this essay played in changing and defining the direction of my research, I am quoting it at length, below. Bernstein writes:

³ Dean, Edward James. ‘(Re)Discovering the Body in Mentalism.’ *Journal of Performance Magic*. 2016. pp. 1-3.

* pages xxx

⁴ Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012. p. xxx?

...The current state of affairs appears to have gained official status when Houdini began his “crusade” against spirit mediums...From then until now, with the particular encouragement of James Randi during more recent times, the common reaction by the magic community toward anything mediumistic or psychic is that it must be denounced as fraud and attacked. Of course, this type of “exposure” is often less an altruistic act designed to safeguard a gullible public, and is usually an act of opportunistic marketing. [...] Because the tradition of adding disclaimers to your act has become integral to the “magician’s creed,” most performers – many of whom were magicians first and mentalists later – add a disclaimer because they don’t want to buck the trend and to calm their own fears. I mean, who wants to upset the “powers that be,” or other members of the “brotherhood?”⁵

These writings of Cassidy and Bernstein brought an entirely new understanding of mentalism to my attention. Further, since I had been ensconced in the magician’s worldview since my early childhood, these essays also gave me a new perspective on my entire life. Later in the essay, Bernstein surprised me by once again setting himself strongly against the magical establishment, and arguing, on ethical grounds, in favour of the “psychic” framework over the “super psychological” one. He writes:

Another framework I find potentially troubling is the new gambit, “I’m a master psychologist...body language expert... student of NLP...anyone can do this with training...don’t worry, I’m not claiming to be psychic, although that’s exactly how I’m going to come across” ...Somehow it’s become “morally permissible” to make these claims without the ethics police lashing out at you. But if you think about it, these claims are just as outrageous and, to my mind, perhaps even dangerous.

Personally, I’d much rather have a performer tell an audience that he fell off of a ladder at age nine, bumped his head, was in a coma for two months and, upon waking, somehow “knew” what would happen, then have him tell people that “anyone can do what I do if they just were to study a little.” ...And from a theatrical point of view, it’s my personal opinion that it’s much “sexier” and theatrical to be “a bump on the head Psychic” than a lecturer on things psychological.⁶

This is, indeed, a contrarian position. In 1998, for example, Banachek* released a small book entitled *Psychological Subtleties*, which quickly became a bestselling modern classic amongst mentalists. The book contains numerous ideas for performing genuine psychological experiments, ranging from simple (when asked to quickly name a vegetable, most people choose carrot) to more

⁵ Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012. pp. 154-155.

⁶ Bernstein, Bruce. *Unreal*. 2012. pp. 154-155.

* Banachek is the stage name of Steven Shaw, one of two young Mentalists to fool scientists at Washington University, as part of Project Alpha, a hoax orchestrated by James Randi from 1979 to 1981.

complex. However, this book is also full of pseudo-psychological presentations for many traditional or old-fashioned methods of deception. In other words, by shifting from psychic *presentations* to psychological *presentations*, the field was revolutionized for an increasingly skeptical age. Banachek writes:

There is a new breed of mentalist that tells his audience that what he does is not psychic in nature but simply non-verbal communication and psychological directing of people (manipulation)...I tell my audience that every breath they take, every move they make, the way their eyes dilate, the way they blink, all tell me things about them. The way I move, speak, and communicate causes them to react in certain ways.... If one adopts this type of presentation, then one will find all types of ways to present old effects in a new guise.”⁷

In 2000, British mentalist Derren Brown debuted on Britain’s *Chanel 5* with a special entitled, *Mind Control*. Brown – who began as a hypnotist in college, rose quickly through the ranks of close-up magicians, and later mentalists – is certified in NLP, although he publicly criticizes the field and has never *actually* claimed to use it in his work.⁸ Brown – collaborating behind the scenes with contemporary mentalist Andy Nyman – was positively convincing as a pure psychological mind-reader and mind controller, and created a sensation among the public as well as among mentalists and would-be mentalists.

Ethics of Frame Blurring

Derren Brown – like Uri Geller, decades earlier – managed to blur the frame completely between fantasy and reality as it pertained to powers of the mind. He was described, for instance, in *The Guardian* as, ‘either a balls-out con artist or the scariest man in Britain.’⁹ Yet, unlike Geller, Brown managed to do this without ever directly claiming any form of paranormal ability. In the words of Decca Aitkenhead, a journalist for *The Guardian*:

[Brown’s] genius has been to reinvent stage magic as a form of advanced psychology, in which he can just about plausibly claim to be drawing on genuine psychological techniques – the study of body language, the power of suggestion –

⁷ Banachek. *Psychological Subtleties*. 1998.

⁸ Brown, Derren. *Tricks of the Mind*. 2007. p. xxx

⁹ Brooker, Charlie. ‘Scarefest.’ *The Guardian*. 25 Sep 2004.

rather than relying entirely on tricks, leaving the audience to try to work out which is which.¹⁰

Despite the absence of paranormal claims, Brown's pseudo-psychological approach has opened up its own ethical can of worms. These ethical considerations were alluded to earlier in Bernstein's 2012 essay arguing in favour of the psychic framework over the pseudo-psychological one. Bernstein however, was not the first to make this argument. In 2003, science writer Simon Singh also publicly attacked the pseudo-scientific framework, harshly criticizing Brown's use of pseudo-scientific presentations for standard magic tricks in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* entitled, 'I'll bet £1,000 that Derren Can't Read My Mind.' In this article, Singh writes:

Derren could tell that Philip Schofield was thinking about the death of his childhood pet hamster because he could see, 'How you're responding and how you're agreeing and disagreeing and pupil dilation and so on.' Presumably if Schofield had been thinking about the death of a goldfish then the pupil dilation would have been different...

...Derren's performance is just magic tricks dressed up as science. Nevertheless, he was allowed to persuade millions of people that one can use psychology to read minds.... In conclusion, Derren Brown annoys me because he so often presents false explanations for his magic tricks, thereby misleading the public and making a joke of serious psychology.... Please do not misunderstand me. I do love magic. I merely hate it when magicians pretend to be psychologists...¹¹

Brown addressed this criticism in a 2010 interview in *The Guardian*, entitled, "Derren Brown: 'I'm Being Honest About My Dishonesty'" in which he explained, 'I did find [Singh's article] a little bit of a joyless response at the time. He focused on the stuff that was tricks, but there was plenty of other stuff in the area of suggestion and hypnosis, and it would be wrong to say that was just a conjuring trick.'¹² Brown went on to state:

But I think, though, that when I started off my TV career I was overstating the case, overstating my skills. I thought there'll only be one show, there'll never be a repeat, so I might as well go for it. But as I became better-known, I felt there were two things really. One is a moral responsibility to the public to be honest, and to find out what level of honesty is right for me as an entertainer, when I'm kind of a magician, so there's a licence to deceive but at the same time – well, it's complicated.¹³

¹⁰ Aitkenhead, Decca. "Derren Brown: 'I'm being honest about my dishonesty.'" *The Guardian*. 17 Oct 2010.

¹¹ Singh, Simon. "I'll bet £1,000 that Derren can't read my mind." *The Daily Telegraph*. 10 Jun 2003.

¹² Aitkenhead, Decca. "Derren Brown: 'I'm being honest about my dishonesty.'" *The Guardian*. 17 Oct 2010.

¹³ Aitkenhead, Decca. "Derren Brown: 'I'm being honest about my dishonesty.'" *The Guardian*. 17 Oct 2010.

Today, Brown is quite honest about his use of trickery and deception in addition to his psychological manipulation, suggestion, and body reading. In his 2007 book, *Tricks of the Mind*, in a statement reminiscent of that found on the website of the *Psychic Entertainers Association*, Brown writes:

I am often dishonest in my techniques, but always honest about my dishonesty. As I say in each show, 'I mix magic, suggestion, psychology, misdirection and showmanship.' I happily admit cheating, as it's all part of the game. I hope some of the fun for the viewer comes from not knowing what's real and what isn't. I am an entertainer first and foremost, and I am careful not to cross any moral line that would take me into manipulating people's real-life decisions or belief systems.¹⁴

Brown is also aware of the contradictory nature of this position. He states in the interview with *The Guardian* that 'part of what keeps it fresh and interesting to me is finding new ways to have your cake and eat it at times.' He also makes a comment which is particularly relevant to early discoveries of my praxis. 'If I was utterly honest about everything,' Brown said, 'then it wouldn't be very entertaining.' *The Guardian's* Aitkenhead, asked a very direct question. 'could [Brown]... have created a successful TV career deploying no trickery at all, relying on psychological skills alone?' According to Aitkenhead, Brown paused for a moment, then smiled, and then said, 'Er, I think it would be just less entertaining.'¹⁵

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¹⁴ Brown, Derren. *Tricks of the Mind*. 2007. p. xxx

¹⁵ Aitkenhead, Decca. "Derren Brown: 'I'm being honest about my dishonesty.'" *The Guardian*. 17 Oct 2010.