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Research article

The Pledge, the Turn, the Prestige: The Border Between Magic and Technology as Practices

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Abstract

In this paper I will try to show how magic and technology might be associated taking both into account as a cultural expression of contemporary society. I will argue that technology penetrates magic, creating a specific dynamic which raises ethical dilemmas. The underlying idea, following a long tradition of thought, is that technology represents a kind of “second human nature.” As Arnold Gehlen claims, the technical attitude (Technik) compensates for the structural deficiency of humans, allowing them a gradual opening to the world. But magic is also an expression of this attitude, insofar as it tends to mimic natural mechanisms. Magic expresses itself with instructions, rules, and purposes, as much as technology does. Precisely for this reason magic also involves the same rationality typical of the developmental mode of technology, sharing the same objective. I will argue that Christopher Nolan’s movie *The Prestige* (2006) shows an example of technological integration inside magic itself, highlighting two orders of problems: one ethical and the other intrinsic to the magical act and its nature.

Keywords: Magic; Technology; Anthropology; Prestige; Performance art

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Научная статья

Обещание, поворот, престиж: Граница между магией и технологией как практиками

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Аннотация

В данной статье я попытаюсь показать, как могут быть связаны магия и технология, как культурное выражение современного общества. Я утверждаю, что технология проникает в магию, создавая особую динамику, которая ставит этические дилеммы. Основная идея, следуя давней традиции мысли, заключается в том, что технология представляет собой своего рода “вторую природу” человека. Как утверждает Арнольд Гелен, техническое отношение (Technik) компенсирует структурный недостаток человека, позволяя ему постепенно открываться миру. Но магия также является выражением этого отношения, поскольку она имеет тенденцию имитировать естественные механизмы. Магия выражает себя инструкциями, правилами и целями так же, как и технология. Именно по этой причине магия также включает в себя ту же рациональность, типичную для способа развития технологии, разделяя ту же цель. Я утверждаю, что фильм Кристофера Нолана “Престиж” (2006) показывает пример технологической интеграции внутри самой магии, выдвигая на первый план два порядка проблем: одни этические, а другие свойственные самому магическому акту и его природе.

Ключевые слова: Магия; Технологии; Антропология; престиж; Исполнительское искусство

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Elon Musk published a tweet, stating that: “any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.” This sentence has an extraordinary significance and, indeed, it sounds familiar to us. In fact, Musk overturned Arthur C. Clarke's third law, which claims, as is well-known, that: “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” (Clarke, 1999). This reversal of subject in Musk's version uncovers new landscapes for the consideration of technology.

If it was magic that used to excel on the applicative side, by making the impossible and unrepresentable (Grigenti, 2018, p. 78)¹ tangible for us, it now appears that that primacy is fully in the hands of technology. Magic, in Clarke's sentence, represents the highest expression of human capacity faced with the natural world. Technology, through its development, becomes indistinguishable from magic in virtue of its techno-scientific progress. Musk, modifying the sentence, brings to light the idea that technological advancement has become so unbelievable that magic itself must also evolve to compete with technological wonder.

If we now turn to the second law of Clarke, we find that the: “the only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.” Regarding technology, the impossible is dissolved in an exponential eidetical advancement of technical design. What is impossible in technology remains impossible just momentarily, where in magic the impossible comes up each time as the same and it is its overcoming that, from time to time, happens only momentarily. We need only to look at the technological progress made over the past 30 years, in which inventions have followed one after another, always surpassing the features of the previous technology.

Raymond Kurzweil, emblematically, claims to have replaced his passion for magic by devoting himself to technological projects (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 23). For Kurzweil, magic allows us to experiment with the impossible transformations of reality, but in a different way from technology. The fact that the trick can be revealed makes its impact on the audience feel more attenuated. On the other side, technology keeps the entirety of its power even if the scientific procedure and the physical laws are disclosed.

Before I get to the reason for the title I have given this paper, a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between technology and magic is required.

TECHNICAL ATTITUDE AS SECOND NATURE

Magic and technology would seem to have this in common: they are both cultural constructions derived from the human ability to manipulate nature.

¹ “Ultimately in magic we have to see the realization of the eidetical-virtual side of the technology, or we can say in a better way the ideal technology, which is the one that works producing the maximum transformation of the world with the lower energy consumption.” (“Nella magia, in definitiva, dobbiamo vedere il realizzarsi del lato eidetico-virtuale della tecnologia, o meglio, la *tecnologia ideale*, quella che opera producendo la massima trasformazione del mondo col minimo consumo di energia”.)



An example of this thought can be found in Gehlen's anthropology. Gehlen argues that humans, as such, stand in a condition of absolute inferiority when compared to the rest of the natural world. Humans lack those physical characteristics that would enable them to excel, while the animal is from birth specialized for its vital area. The defining characteristic of humans is actually deficiency itself, they are *Mängelwesen*, “deficient beings.” (Gehlen, 1980, pp. 13, 109). This sword of Damocles, this constitutive imperfection, forces humans to seek a remedy. Placed before the dangers of the natural world, for which they have no adequate endowment, they are therefore forced to replenish that deficiency.

The turning point in Gehlen's theory is represented by a sentence that remained unobserved, or at least not emphasized enough, by scholars. The central point of Gehlen's (1961) theory is not so much the constitutive deficiency, but what is introduced to make up for it: the capacity for self-observation and self-reference (pp. 44-54). This capacity of self-observation allows humans to find, retroactively, their own rationality as the real characterizing capacity.

Only at this point humans are able to confront the natural world. Reason enables them to adapt to circumstances, opens a world to them, and, through the integration of technology, enables them to inhabit nature (Gehlen, 1988, pp. 27-28).² Without technical integration, humans could not live in the natural world, and that is why it is configured as “second nature.”

There is thus a transition between the natural and the artificial in humans that is not so clear-cut. The need to adapt is inherent in their initial characteristics. If, for example, they had been born with the tusks of the lion, they would have no need to create spears. But here's the thing, that deficiency is original. Thus, the need for technology is equally original. In this way, we might say, human nature is, already from the very beginning, culture. Technical progress can then be seen as something that culturally expresses an underlying natural necessity. Gunther Anders (2009) reminds us how humans live as strangers in the world, lacking an a priori endowment that, for this very reason, they have to realize (pp. 279-280).

In this sense, the expression “new Prometheus” referring to humans, is significant in that it identifies the human need to have to resort to their own reason to plan their

² “Man's ,world,‘ in which the perceivable is clearly not limited to what is necessary for basic survival, may at first seem to be a disadvantage. To say that man is ,world-open‘ means that he foregoes an animal adaptation to a specific environment. Man's unusual receptivity to perceptions that do not have an innate function as signals definitely constitutes a great burden to him which he must overcome in special ways. The lack of physical specialization, his vulnerability, as well as his astonishing lack of true instincts together form a coherent whole which is manifested in his ,world-openness‘ (Scheler) or, what amounts to the same thing, in his lack of ties to a specific environment. In animals, organ specialization, the repertory of instincts, and the ties of the environment correspond to each other. This is an important point. We have now formulated a structural definition of man, which does not rely solely on the characteristic of reason or the mind. We can move beyond the alternatives mentioned above of assuming a gradual differentiation of man from the higher animals or of arguing that the basic difference lies with the mind. We have proposed that man is organically a deficient being and is for this reason world-open; in other words, his survival is not strictly dependent upon a specific environment. It is now clear in what sense man is ,undetermined‘ and a ,challenge‘ to himself. The survival of such a being is highly questionable; simply getting by poses great problems which he must face alone and solve through his own efforts. He is therefore an acting being.”



existence in the natural world. Maria Teresa Pansera, following Herder, says that: “man is able to compensate his biological lack exploiting his rational capacity” (“l’uomo è in grado di compensare la sua carenza biologica per mezzo della sua capacità razionale”) (Pansera, 2001, p. 60). Therefore, culture becomes the *compensation* for natural deficiency. But if culture means producing technological objects, capable of enabling what nature, by birthright, would not have afforded humans, is not magic also something like that?

MAGIC AS A TECHNOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

Magic has often been seen as an archaic, sometimes naive, form of expression. Frazer defines magic as a pre-scientific stage of humanity: *an aborted art*. Claudio Tarditi points out that this consideration is part of a tradition that tends to consider non-modern, non-Western manifestations of rationality using a Western, modern point of view - that of the European anthropologist (see Tarditi, 2009, p. 29).

Magic needs to be contextualized and analyzed in the various societies which have been able to use it to meet their needs (Tarditi, 2009, p. 43).³ What emerges from the studies on magic is the complexity of its relationship with the other arts. Depending on the relationship one chooses to analyze, it is possible to find common characteristics that refer to the magical phenomenon.

For Malinowski (1948) there is no doubt that magic constitutes a character of human rationality: “magic is always found in the possession of man and through the knowledge of man” (p. 56). This definition almost seems to apply equally well to technical activities. Malinowski continues:

It is literally and actually enshrined in man and can be handed on only from man to man, according to very strict rules of magical filiation, initiation, and instruction. (Malinowski, 1948, p. 57)

Here we observe that the concept of magic is not at all naïve, but it appears as the results of reflection and adaptation of very specific rules, instructions, and procedures, all required for its application.

But then how do we distinguish magic from technology? A point of dissonance, as I have already mentioned, is the belief in its effectiveness, not only by outside spectators, but by the sorcerers themselves (Comba, 2019, p. 90). So, we can say that magic implies a kind of faith. But if we look at its external performance, at the techniques of the sorcerer, tracing a distinction appears much more complex. The sorcerer, as Grigenti notes, implements something like a technical procedure of gestures for the realization of magic (Grigenti, 2019, p. 73). If we add the statement mentioned just above from Malinowski, that magic is organized according to principles and norms as much as other disciplines, it will be undeniable that the dimension of rationality seems to be part of both technology and magic.

³ Tarditi: “Magic is functional to the human answer to times of crisis, during which science is impotent.” (“La magia è funzionale alla risposta umana di fronte a momenti di crisi, durante i quali nulla può la scienza.”)



Like the other arts and crafts, it is also governed by a theory, by a system of principles which dictate the manner in which the act has to be performed in order to be effective. (Malinowski, 1948, p. 66)

Malinowski was not the only anthropologist that associated technology and magic. Durkheim (1968) too speaks of a close relationship between the magical art and the technical attitude, adding utility as a characteristic as well. Under this dimension there seems to be greater affinity between technology and magic, rather than between religion and magic. Religion is concerned with faith alone, not with a result-oriented practice. But the idea that magic and technology belong to the same practical horizon, and even that magic is somehow part of natural science, we can already find in the *Conclusiones* of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Because of this, it gains value and dignity. (Busi & Ebgi, 2014, Intr. XXXIV, p.102)

It is curious to note that the relationship between magic and religion over the centuries was much more turbulent than that with technology. Those who tried to denigrate it could do nothing but to call magic a superstition, denying it the status of art, and associate it with a mere ignorant belief.

Canon Francesco Cattani defines it as a superstition of the *più vile plebe, et ignorante vulgo* (“the lowest and most ignorant people”). Prosperi notes that “from the bishop to the witch, the religious field of the age of the counter-reform appears as an integrated field, where the inner rivalry does not hide the filiation and the similitude” (“dal vescovo alla strega, il campo religioso dell’età della Controriforma appare come un campo integrato, dove le rivalità interne non nascondono filiazioni e somiglianze” (Prosperi, 2012, p. 373). So, this integrated field (*campo integrato*) ends up overlapping with the consideration of magic. Like religion, it is regarded by its opponents as superstition and ignorance. And, also like religion, magic must first and foremost attribute meaning to the natural world that can be ascribed to the sphere of human understanding. But as technology, it develops starting from an imitation of nature, not worship. As Malinowski had clearly seen:

the phonetic effects, imitations of natural sounds, such as the whistling of the wind, the growling of thunder, the roar of the sea, the voices of various animals. These sounds symbolize certain phenomena and thus are believed to produce them magically. Or else they express certain emotional states associated with the desire which is to be realized by means of the magic. (Malinowski, 1948, p. 54)

Secondly, he added:

Magic is not only human in its embodiment, but also in its subject-matter: it refers principally to human activities and states, hunting, gardening, fishing, trading, love-making, disease, and death. It is not directed so much to nature as to man's relation to nature and to the human activities which affect it. (Malinowski, 1948, p. 56)

So, magic does not work by giving a purpose to nature itself, but rather by giving it to our practical relationship with it. The resort to magic has meaning when it is possible



to make his purpose coincide with the technical-instrumental purpose according to which humans conduct their activity. Magic's practical nature shows a radical difference with religion. As every human activity that aspires to the realization of an end, magic can also fail due to lack of sufficient knowledge or skill. This tendency toward purpose, the conception of an image that must be realized, and that can also not succeed, the planning, that is what the two practices, that of the magician and that of the technician, have in common: their effectiveness is not based on belief, but on *execution*.

THE EXECUTION OF MAGIC: THE PRESTIGE

An example that can clarify this interpolation between magic and technology, I believe can be found in Nolan's movie, *The Prestige* (2006), based on the homonymous novel written by Christopher Priest in 1995. I will argue that Nolan's work also shows us something else, that this relationship reaches a problematic peak at the point where it is necessary to introduce an entirely different kind of consideration into the purely performative dimension.

Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The first part is called “the Pledge.” The magician shows you something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course... it probably isn't. The second act is called “the Turn.” The magician takes the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary. Now you're looking for the secret... but you won't find it, because of course you're not really looking. You don't really want to know. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn't clap yet. Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act, the hardest part, the part we call “the Prestige.” (Nolan, 2006)

In this introductory dialogue, we learn that there are essentially three moments in a well-executed magic trick: *the pledge, the turn, and the prestige*. Those are the part that form a magic trick.

The pledge is the starting point, the moment in which the audience is prepared to assist to something extraordinary and unexpected. The audience is there exactly with this anticipation, they want to see the impossible, as a temporary escape from the limits of everyday possibility. In the same way as technology, we can see that the deficiency, the lack of something and the desire for a fulfilling addition, is the premise that renders both appealing. They both promise that, once again, nature will be submitted and its boundaries will be crossed.

The turn is the moment in which this overcoming happens, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. The expectations of daily life are exceeded. The audience sees the preparation for the magic trick and gets excited as it unfolds, ready to be transported towards what it was believed to be impossible. Then, the unthinkable happens and the amazement is generated. This phase of planning has the same evocative function as in technological development. An idea of something not yet possible comes to mind, it then



becomes a project, the image of something that must be realized. If the execution of the plan succeeds, once again the impossible will be brought into existence. That is what creates astonishment.

And then we have the last of the pieces, *the prestige* is the apex of the technical development, the landing point of the initial promise. What was just foretold is now achieved, the impossible has generated its own possibility inside reality. It is only this last part, the successful one, that gives meaning to the previous ones. Here there is a danger of failure, and the purpose of the whole preceding procedure is at stake. A failure means that the imaginative potential of the initial project would instead remain unexpressed, confirming the boundary already settled before.

The juxtaposition of magic and technology, both as cultural form of practice, allows us to understand the next passage. Of course, the two do differ in a lot of aspects, many of which did not find their space in this paper, but it is this rational background that touches both, this procedure of anticipation, planning and realizing that they share. It is this collision point where technology, in modern Western society, interpenetrates magic, and the movie shows this intersection in a masterful way

It tells the story of a hatred rivalry between Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) and Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman), both illusionists in London at the end of the 19th century. The two begin working together but are soon separated by the death of Julia (Piper Perabo), Angier's wife, a tragedy that happens right on stage, during the performance. Borden is held responsible by Angier, and so begins a no-holds-barred competition between the two. Each one begins to perform alone, and that rivalry slowly grows into an obsession, leading to criminal acts.

During a bullet-catching number, Angier (stage name: The Great Danton) manages to sabotage the trick of Borden (The Professor), causing him to lose two fingers. This is the first example of technology applied to magic. The sabotaged gun, normally loaded with blanks, is instead loaded with real bullets. This intromission of reality makes the magic vanish, it becomes dominated by the reality of the plain technical tool.

The turning point of the movie happens when The Professor brings a new routine to the stage: human teletransportation. In the eyes of the spectator, what happens during the act is that the magician is teleported from one side of the scene to the other. This is a complete novelty. The Great Danton is almost driven insane while trying to understand the workings of that act, its procedure of repeatability. Here we enter, from a movie about illusionism into genuine science fiction, because Danton, looking for an answer, turns to an unexpected Nikola Tesla (David Bowie). We discover that Tesla himself had developed a prototype to accomplish this impossible form of human transport. But what Tesla actually manages to do is quite different (and has nothing to do with the professor's trick): it is not teleportation, but cloning or duplication.

In the eyes of the scientist, this is a failure and a danger. To avoid the duplication, his advice would be to destroy his own invention. But not only does Danton refuse to do so, instead he uses the cloning machine for his human transport act. Uncannily, what happens behind the scenes of the trick is that Danton disappears from the stage through a trapdoor, while his duplicate, a second Danton, appears moments later on the balcony of the theater, accomplishing the impossible before the eyes of the audience. But in a



macabre twist, the disappearing Danton drops into a large tank of water in order to be drowned (significantly, it is the same cause of death as his wife's). At the end of the number, it is only one of the Dantons who remains alive. The Professor, also frenzied in trying to discover his rival's make-up, is set up by Danton. Having managed to infiltrate backstage, the professor is left alone before a drowning Danton. The police, alerted by Danton himself, arrive moments later and arrest him.

But where was the trick really? The kind of magic we are used to disappears in face of the technological inventions. But in this case, is magic that becomes technology or, as one can also say the reverse, technology that becomes magic. The prestige shows in a clear way how magic is no longer enough. The professor could stage such an act for a “natural” reason, as we find out only at the end. He had an identical twin. Without this condition, his act is unfeasible, and unlike the others, it is not repeatable while Danton's is. It appears that magic, too, needs to be compensated for the shortcomings of its constitution. In fact, it is technology that must be involved in the improvement needed to amaze the audience once again. The movie allows us to understand the huge gap created between the effective human capacity of realization and the will of ideation and realization.

It is interesting to note that the ethical dimension of the film emerges only at this point. The viewer does not question himself before, but only when Danton kills his other self. Ethic appears to manifest only in the moment in which magic becomes technology, as if there is no ethical problem in magic alone. Nikola Tesla clearly represents the voice of science. He is the personified symbol of the modern progress of technical capacity. “Nothing is impossible,” he says while talking to Danton, “what you want is simply expensive.” Magic is clearly extraneous to certain social dynamics such as money. The ethical doubts at the end of the movie are innumerable (which is the real Danton? The one who falls or the one who resurfaces?). It is clear, however, that in the rivalry between the two illusionists there is an obsession with the overcoming of limits, and with magic alone this possibility is no longer that powerful. Instead, it is now technology that is able to implant the impossible within the real.

If we follow a bit more the dialogue between Danton and Tesla, we hear that the former argues, in fact, that no one really believes in the magic performed on stage, no one asks ethical questions: nobody is truly convinced that a man is trapped in a box, or that he really disappeared, or that a woman has just been cut in half. But Danton still thinks in a magical perspective, he does not understand the change that will occur when magic and technology are mixed. The cloning machine assumes a different symbolic meaning, despite its use for on-stage purposes:

Tesla: Mr. Angier, have you considered the cost of such a machine?

Danton: Price is not an object.

Tesla: Perhaps not, but have you considered the *cost*?

Danton: I'm not sure I follow.

Tesla: Go home. Forget this thing. I can recognize an obsession, no good will come of it.



It is important to not forget what the cost of introducing technology into magic really is. Magic is being drowned in ethical issues and social implications that did not belong to it before. Furthermore, now it is technology that may even amaze more than magic itself. One may nowadays wonder what the real difference between magic and technology is if magic has become exclusively technology.

David Copperfield, in one of his most famous tricks, “flies” above stage through rings, demonstrating the absence of wires or tricks that lift him off the ground (“The Magic of David Copperfield XIV: F·L·Y·I·N·G - Live the Dream”). The number is made possible with the use of sophisticated machineries, previously tested, and researched in-depth (US Patent No. 5.354.238A Levitation apparatus). This sophisticated technology needs lots of patents involving theories that have been applied and studied by NASA. So, at this point, does magic becomes merely ignorance of how the technology works behind the magical trick?

By revealing the technology, the mystery disappears. But we still have to consider that it is not so simply to apply such a reductionism to magic, because there are other components that needs to be evaluated. One of them is the wonder of the magical. We do not have the same astonishment in the face of a simple magic act and in the use of our smartphone, a much more sophisticated and incredible object, which is nevertheless so embedded in our daily lives that it is incapable of surprising us.

CONCLUSION

Technology in the current state of things seems to be in a privileged social position, it progresses continuously, it does not struggle, on the contrary it builds new social horizons. Magic, on the other hand, seems to find itself at a cultural impasse. The integration of technology in other disciplines and mundane activities extends in an all-encompassing way, and now it seems impossible to avoid this trend. And yet, something seems to be missing. The developments of new technologies such as augmented reality and artificial intelligence may open a horizon of greater social and emotional turmoil. But the exponential evolution of technology has anesthetized mankind in front of novelties that up to 50 years ago would have been perceived as extraordinary. Let us think about how the order of magnitude of data storage has changed over the last 15 years. Measured in bytes and kilobytes, when they appeared on the market, there were already extraordinary data containers (being able to contain dozens of books and texts on just a simple floppy disk). Today, this order of magnitude of data storage is considered so small that these measures are barely mentioned. We have hard disks that contain terabytes of data available for a relatively cheap price in a common supermarket. It becomes essential, then, that magic, if it is to survive in such a world, continues to employ technological progress creatively, harnessing it to recover that dimension of wonder that technology, in itself, struggles to maintain.

In the 21st century, magic can still survive as a form of artistic expression. The graphic novel writer and occultist Alan Moore has stated that art is magic with the contemporary artist acting as a replacement for the shaman (see Benjamin, 2020). The artist becomes a shaman precisely because magic is considered an expression of a



technical attitude. The way of making art using the experience of altered perception, illusionism, and similar practices, is inextricably linked to that technological knowledge that also started to permeate magic. After all, it is already possible to use AI and algorithms to produce elaborate illustrations in place of the human hand. Creativity will be left with the task of employing them effectively to generate wonder.

The practices of artists can therefore be associated with those of the magician, clearly staging acts of concealing in order to reveal, providing a method of analyzing specific artists' work in using altered perception to create new experiences of knowledge with technology. (Benjamin, 2020, p. 511)

Ultimately, I would like to conclude by leaving an extraordinary and meaningful quote from the British writer C.S. Lewis. Questioning should never be self-referential. On the contrary, only when the disciplines interpenetrate one another, there will be something to reflect on.

It is like the famous Irishman who found that a certain kind of stove reduced his fuel bill by half and thence concluded that two stoves of the same kind would enable him to warm his house with no fuel at all. It is the magician's bargain: give up our soul, get power in return. But once our souls, that is, ourselves, have been given up, the power thus conferred will not belong to us. (Lewis, 1979, p. 36)

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