The Spectacular Showing: Houdini and the Wonder of Ethnomethodology

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Abstract. This essay is about Houdini's escapes and ethnomethodology's studies.[1] By accomplishing what appears to be impossible, Houdini leaves his audience considering not only how did he manage to do *that,* but also *just what* is it that we consider to be possible. Magicians and escapologists warn us off an interest in the mechanics of their tricks that might spoil the thrill of what they dramatically present to us: a sense of the limits to what we can apprehend as an audience. While marking out the differences in their projects, this essay brings out the shared urge of escapologists and ethnomethodologists to question our senses, open members to particular phenomena, and awaken us to the wonder of the world. In reflecting on what happens when magicians reveal the devices that constitute their tricks, I ask whether the purpose of studying methodologies can only reside in revealing how they are practically produced as intelligible actions. What more might ethnomethodology's invitation be?

1.

For a couple of hours the bustle of Boston city center has come to a standstill[2]. A tall square office building forms the impassive, concrete and certain death backdrop to the fragile figure. Along the streets erratically parked cars, fire engines, crowds of any old un-ticketed people of the city collectively craning their necks and newspaper photographers clicking their shutters. So small and yet you can see him swinging slightly on his rope as he twists inside his straitjacket: *Houdini.*

   Let's switch scenes: think about Houdini somewhere else than suspended from an edifice, leaping manacled off a bridge or escaping from a high-security prison:

> On one occasion, I took him to a magicians' meeting in my car, which that season was a Ford Model T coupe with a front seat of only two-person width and with the door catches inconveniently placed behind a person's elbow. When he tried to twist around and work the catch, Houdini found it stuck and in all seriousness, he demanded, 'Say – how do you get out of this thing?' It wasn't until I had reached across and pulled the knob for him that he began laughing, because he of all people couldn't get out of a Ford coupe. . .(Gibson, 1953: xiv).

Figure 1. Above Boston.

It was not that Houdini was any different in his hands – on experience of a modern world daily provided with new mass-produced boxes to get stuck in. He was different in the shocks he administered to that world's expectations of boxes, locks, barrels, ropes and bags. As he toured the world he was challenged to get out of all kinds of otherwise sinister constraints: straitjackets for the mad in the USA, prisons in countries all over the world and deportation railway carriages to Siberia in the newly founded USSR:

> I think my escape from the Siberian Transport was my most difficult perfor-mance. I was placed in the great vault usually assigned to political prisoners, and when the great door was shut, I had the hardest time of my life, perhaps, in releasing myself. But nevertheless it took me eighteen minutes to walk out, and face the dazed officials. (Houdini quoted in an interview with the *Appleton Crescent Newspaper* in Feber, 1904.)

Watched over in cuffs by police officers, in straitjackets by psychiatrists, dangling from ropes by fire fighters, placed in submerged boxes by sailors and in cells by gaolers, he entertained the masses by getting them, in a life or death gamble upon his extraordinary skills, to question "will Houdini do it? How could he possibly do it?" And after each attempt to restrain him fails, the crowd thrills and the officials daze. The exceptional license Houdini is being given is to show, with professional witnesses and the populace present, how ineffective their technologies of restraint and confinement are. As Adam Philips adds:

> What Houdini shows, but doesn't tell, is that legitimating oneself, making one's name, is itself a curious game. If a criminal escapes from prison he is punished; if Houdini escapes from prison he is fulsomely rewarded. And

in celebrating Houdini's skill the audience is applauding a talent that is potentially a threat to society (Phillips, 2001: 42)

Is society so fragile, so easily threatened by an escape artist? Did prisoners learn from Houdini's techniques and escape en masse? Did Houdini ever steal wallets from his audience, and not give them back afterwards? For all of his exposure of the defeasibility of material restraints, Houdini was no social reformer nor direct critic of social constraints or conventions; in fact, his critical energies were devoted to exposing the seemingly harmless targets of mediums and the Spiritualist movement. Yet even if he did not directly attack Russian deportation or US penal policy we should still consider Houdini's talent for bringing technologies of constraint and restraint into the public gaze surreptitiously and altering his audience's way of looking at institutional scenes. As Phillips notes of his struggle to escape from a madman's shackles, Houdini closely resembles a madman: sweating, eyes bulging and his limbs thrashing as if he were having a fit. To the audience he makes it very clear that attempting to escape from a lunatic's shackles produces the appearance of madness. The desire to escape is understandable and in Houdini's case accepted as expected: what would it be if Houdini lay docile? When he finally escapes, his clothes are sweat-stained and in tatters. Free from constraint he returns to normal, but what if he were bound up again? And again? Well he is of course, but he is "Houdini" and he has been given the right to be confined and escape regularly, with reasonable rest breaks in between and a not insubstantial fee for his performance.

2.

"He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it." Wittgenstein. TLP.[3]

A student goes home after attending a university class where she has been told to go and do an "experiment" which will form the basis of the next lesson. The instructions are simple: go into a café during a quiet period when lots of the tables are empty, buy a coffee, look around and then select a table with someone else or a group already sitting at it with whom she is unacquainted. Without saying anything she should pull out a chair and sit at the table. She should not say why she is sitting at the table, though she can engage in conversation on whatever other topic. Whether she is invited to engage in conversation or not she should drink their coffee in a relaxed and friendly manner, as if she is an old acquaintances. She must not give up their seat at the table. Only when she is leaving should she explain that she is doing an exercise for a university course on social interaction in public places.
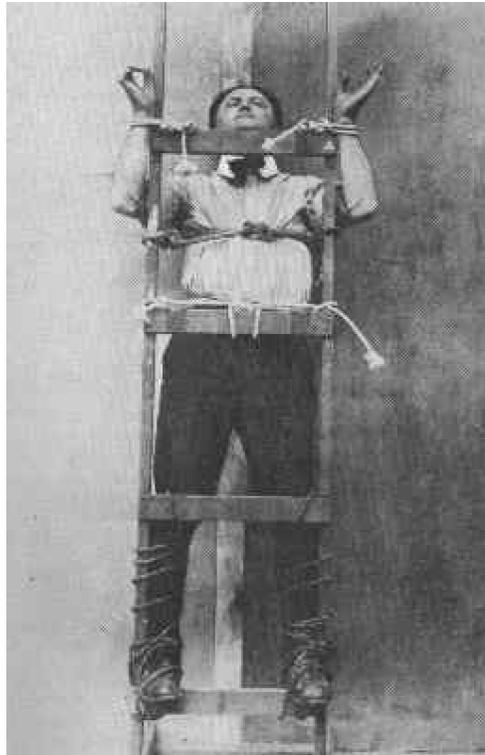
Figure 2. Spectacular Ladder.

When the class finally gets back together the student relates her story of sitting down at a table with an old woman, who looked fairly harmless. Having sat at the table and put her coffee cup down, the elderly lady eyed her with suspicion and sat silent for a minute or two. The student feeling a little anxious, smiled, but kept quiet. "Are you going to ask me to come to a church service?" the lady finally asked. The class laughs loudly and sympathetically; they have various stories to tell about how their inappropriate behaviour was dealt with by café customers. Many were greeted with suspicion, some with irritation, and a surprising few were greeted with pleasure. People at the tables had asked what they were up to, or made assumptions that they were about to be chatted up, or sold something, or asked to church.

The lecturer begins to offer an instructive description to the class of what was going on during this experiment. The class was aware from the beginning that they were doing an "experiment," he points out, which was their license to disrupt common sense behaviour in cafés. They were thus aware, even though they were not enacting such a rule, that all other things being equal and plenty of tables being free, unacquainted customers should select tables so as to disperse themselves across the café. They were also aware, and maybe even

slightly nervous of the fact, that what they were doing could not be recognised by the customers as an "experiment" and since they could not reveal this, they would probably be treated as being up to something suspicious. Table selection, the lecturer argues, is not done by customers "at random," like bombs falling on London during the Blitz, nor is it seen to be done by other customers as randomly distributed. The key point, the lecturer emphasises, is that each and every act of table selection, every time it is done, does something; we do not treat what is happening as being produced by explanatory statistics nor as being analysable by the use of statistics. We share practices, or methods, for how to produce sitting together in cafes, he says, and we thus share methods for analysing what seating selection shows. Mildly watchful, the customers of the café watch to see what is being done by each arriving customer. Selecting a table with someone already sitting at it is not recognised by the customers of the café as "random" nor, of course, is it treated as an "experiment." What selecting "this table," "my table" initiates from the person at the table is an inquiry into what is being done to "me" by this person. For the other customers, if they are still watching, they start to look from "my table" and see whether they have categories that handle the customer who is joining the other customer at "their table," such as, "mother and daughter," "two friends" or "two colleagues" and so on. Clearly customers who you have joined, the lecturer goes on, are faced with quite a different sort of puzzle. They know you are not their daughter or colleague or friend or acquaintance and so they are pursuing what kind of person could just go and sit at "my table" like this. And lo and behold they produce some candidate persons you could be, like, someone from the church who is selecting "this table" in order to try and recruit any particular person to their church. The lecturer continues in this vein and a few of the students begin to be more struck with wonder by the gradual revealing in the lecturer's account of the endemic social ordering that is going on in the café than they were by their original antics in there.

This kind of "breaching experiment" will no doubt be familiar to those who have any knowledge of Garfinkel's (1963, 1964, 1967) early investigations on trust and the routine grounds of everyday activities. The breaching experiments serve several purposes for ethnomethodologists: they test out the Parsonian theory of rationality and mutual understanding (Parsons, 1951, 1968), they make "seen but un-noticed" features of everyday life visible, they show that social order is not as fragile as many social theories might claim it to be, and they initiate students into the study of societies' methodical procedures for the production of order, or, ethnomethods (Livingston, 1987). When students of ethnomethodology deliberately try to get an encounter in public to fail by behaving inappropriately (e.g. selecting a café table that is already [taken] when others are [free][4]) they barely make a dent in social order, let alone cause it to collapse. Yet:

In the face of the attempted breaches of trust and expectations, what Durkheim identified as the moral order of daily life exerts such a powerful presence that considerable lengths will be gone to in order to retain, if at all possible, the things-as-usual character of ordinary life (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986: 32).

What sense does it make to consider Houdini's magic tricks, impossible feats and great escapes beside ethnomethodology's study of everyday competences, ubiquitous devices and rule use? There is the danger of "perspective by incongruity" (Watson, 2000) where we may lose the essence of magic by equating it erroneously with ethnomethodological study.

Houdini's daring doing may be too mesmerising for a tradition in ethnomethodology[5] which has devoted a great deal of attention to "doing being ordinary," to conventionality as an *accomplishment* (Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 1986).[6] For those of us committed to studying ordinary action it is a struggle to set aside his grandiose gestures, proclamations and exclamations in favour of the routine aspects of what constitutes a performance of "Houdini!"[7] Let us try for a while to suspend what an audience makes of an amazing escape. Consider instead that for Houdini these spectacular stunts and ordeals had to become thoroughly routine. His picking of locks while submerged underwater had to become, through daily practice, as effortless as an ordinary member unlocking his or her front door on a rainy day. As a vernacular expert in producing spectacle Houdini was aware of and reliant on its *uses.*

Spectacular escapes

Strange as it may appear, I have found that the more spectacular the fastening to the eyes of the audience, the less difficult the escape really proves to be (Houdini, 1953: 45–46).

There is something about the spectacular fastening that fixates an audience and makes it easy for the artist to do his or her difficult hidden work without it being noticed: magicians call it "misdirecting." Houdini himself is agreeing here that what is spectacular may not be what is difficult: it may be the easiest thing to convince an audience with. Taking an ethnomethodological perspective and considering the production of [directing attention], it is the kind of fastener which holds the audience's attention on it when, if they wished to expose Houdini, they should be looking elsewhere. For the audience the fastening is where we expect to see the "escape" happen, it is by misdirecting our attention with this display that we ought and are expectedly, collectively involved in attending to that the technologies of the trick go un-noticed.

Ethnomethodology urges that its practitioners should notice what is unseen because it is *so* obvious, like, selecting seats at a table or taking turns at talk

in conversation. A note of caution here: Houdini deliberately hides what he is really up to, and the danger is that when we notice something "hidden" in everyday life we might assume it entails an intentional agent, similar to a Houdini, that hides things by pulling the wool over our eyes.[8] This is where ethnomethodology, in alerting us to un-noticed orderly features of social action, to our "trust in appearances," might be misunderstood as revealing members' ignorance of a massive con trick perpetrated by a hidden agent, whereas its concerns are that the massively orderly nature of our lives goes un-noticed and how it is that trustworthy appearances are routinely recognised and produced. Ethnomethodology proposes that we might be *amazed* by what we are doing in our everyday lives, rather than suspicious that if it is *so* organised then surely a spirit of the age, a form of capitalism, a genetic blueprint or a shared neural pattern must have done the organising. That participants in a conversation can take turns at talking and do so rapidly, economically, intelligibly is awe-inspiring for Sacks (1992). That players of tic-tac-toe cannot be stopped in their reasoning despite the greatest possible non-compliance with the game by their opponent amazes Garfinkel (1963).

Part of our natural attitude to the world is that we trust in its appearances and it is so ordinary, so humble, and so utterly obvious that we fail to see it (Schutz, 1973). There are occasions when we reflect on what happens, for instance, when we trip up and the smooth flow of our conduct is interrupted, when we visit a foreign country, when we follow the joke made by Seinfeld[9] doing "observational comedy," or, when we take up professional studies of human matters (of theorising, business, science, design, law, medicine (Boden, 1994)). Are our everyday occasioned reflection on our practices, and ethnomethodology's more rigorous investigations, so far from Houdini's request for an audience to look closely at him and his spectacular bonds, his cells, his cuffs or his straitjackets? Already we may be able to guess that there are some reversals at work here that may reveal further shared principles. From Garfinkel (1967) and Wittgenstein (1953) we have the constant reminder : *everything is in plain sight*. The skill of the philosopher or ethnomethodologists is in revealing what is right before our eyes but we cannot see because we are blinded by its obviousness. From Houdini: we cannot see how he actually does what he does because we are blinded by the spectacle he has assembled as part of what he does. Ethnomethodology is not saying that ordinary members are magicians, since magicians know, in detail and as a professional concern, how their tricks are assembled from well practiced techniques. Magicians can show us how a trick is done and what it constitutes. Ordinary members are more or less uninterested in how they produce social order; it is ethnomethodology that shows the methods that produce order. Returning to the student exercises in breaching social order, what these exercises awaken the students to is the amazing concerted achievement of any ordinarily orderly place, be it a café, a queue in a shop or family home (Garfinkel, 1964). Houdini's many escapades offered

a lesson not all that far from students' first lessons in ethnomethodology, as W. B. Gibson writes in his introduction to his collection of Houdini's works:

> In all, this book, with its abundance of Houdini's own writings, shows how clearly magic, as practised by Houdini, was and is explainable by one faculty only: that of human accomplishment (Gibson, 1953: xv).

3.

Off duty, during his "free time" Houdini lived life as usual like anyone else, struggling to find the lever or knob that opens the car door. He could not always live as the *exceptional* human he was during his challenges and magic tricks. While there is continuity there is clearly discontinuity, too: it is *not* Houdini, when this person is off duty. If the car were to become part of [performing Houdini] he would have spent time in advance inspecting its interior, planning his escape, assessing what witnesses could and couldn't see through its windows and so on. To do *performing Houdini* requires careful planning, some fiddling with the setting and, usually, a selection of tiny hidden tools.

Ethnomethodologists, despite their acute attention to practical competence, are, during their "free time," as incompetent as anyone else. This is sort of laughable and sort of intriguing at the same time. Like Wittgenstein's approach to language, ethnomethodology does not seek greater mastery of practice nor to correct practice. Its promises of leaving everything as it found it may be refreshing compared to the reductive explanations, a priori politics, or moral superiority of much critical theory. Yet isn't the expectation that we have of Houdini that his talents, his considerable reflection upon and skill with doors, locks, and boxes has given him a clearer view of physical and social restraints; his extraordinary life might help him in his ordinary life? Can ethnomethodology help its practitioners live their lives? Can it help members become anything else?

Phillips (2001) makes this distinction between Houdini's performances: the open struggle/the hidden escape. Neither seems *possible* on observing them as an ordinary member of the audience.

A. The escapes from straitjackets dangling from skyscrapers and their like: Look it can be done! It is practical, it is part of our everyday world, it is, however, extra-ordinary. Only training like Houdini's will allow you to do as he has done. Only the exceptional, spectacular skill of Houdini could do this. This is not in any way what we expect ordinary people to be able to do or to endure. Nor would they want to do or endure it.

B. The Chinese Water Torture Cell, Walking Through a Brick Wall and their like: an amazement akin to the great struggles to escape which show Houdini's training, agility, athleticism and bravery at work. This time

though with a focus on the equipment involved. How does this "black box" work? Does it work like it appears to work?

In practice, for Houdini pulling off the two kinds of escapes, the techniques are shared and as the audience we are not ignorant of the device being a conjuror's "black box." Its [secret] mechanism can remain a secret mechanism. We are perplexed when the device makes a play of being open to inspection: the use of glass in the Chinese Water Torture Cell plays upon this awareness that there is still something we cannot see even when the "black box" is apparently transparent. In one of his later tricks, Houdini walks through a brick wall on stage, and it *really* is a solid cemented brick wall which members of the audience can bang with their hands and kick with their feet. In his guide to his tricks, Houdini revealed it was done through the use of a pliable carpet which obscured a trapdoor (Houdini, 1953). As the curtain closed around Houdini the trapdoor was opened, Houdini would stretch the carpet and squeeze through the small gap created underneath the wall.

What would ruin the show and make us ask for our money back is if Houdini fluffed using the machinery and we caught him wriggling in the gap under the wall. But wait, good magic is still more skillful than that, since Houdini and other magicians will also use identifiable fluffs to make us think we have seen a mistake which turns out once again to be a distraction from the real trick. Or having been discovered they use one trick as the diversion from another one that they can initiate at that point. Discovery of how one trick is done does not preclude a good magic trick so long as there is another to follow that remains unexplained. Whenever Houdini's tricks were duplicated by someone else he would expose how the trick worked and then do another escape which could no longer use the same trick to make it work. At Glasgow Zoo he attracted crowds to watch one of his nailed coffin escapes and then read in the newspaper that another magician was doing the same trick. Enraged when he found his trick has been copied[10] Houdini did a public demonstration of how the coffin trick worked, spoiling his competitor's performance, and then proceeded to escape from a coffin now secured in a way that made the previous method of escape impossible. Houdini had to be impossible to imprison and it had to be equally impossible to work out how he did his current escapes. His show was ruined when anyone, even another professional magician, knew how the escape was done – although it was not really knowing how it was done; it was showing that anyone could know how it was done by reproducing the act. To think about ethnomethodology for a moment: by catching members in midst of their actions is their show ruined? Garfinkel and Sacks (1986) point toward the kind of annoyance such inquiries produce in members.

Houdini's most likely successor is David Blaine, a New York street magician who is currently redoing for a new generation of street spectators many of Houdini's most notorious feats including being buried in a coffin for a

week. Blaine's live burial was a mixture of *endurance* and a magic "black box" that Houdini had been working on when he died.[11] The trouble for the audience watching Blaine's feats of endurance is that they remain rightly suspicious that there is also trickery involved and that Blaine is not enduring what he claims to be. Endurance without the black boxes would not be magic though, and moreover might be boring and ultimately trivialising. Think of the Japanese game show "Endurance" and how foolish its participants appeared.

In one of Blaine's renowned performances he sealed himself in a block of ice for three days in the center of a busy New York street, an endurance challenge that was a variant on an escape that Houdini patented but never worked out how to do (Silverman, 1996).[12] The audience were left asking: could he survive that long or is it a trick? Blaine, like Houdini, is a voracious reader, an expert in not just the technicalities of magic tricks and escape artistry but also in the history of the art (Blaine, 2002). In a recent interview (Colin, 2002) a journalist pushed him to provide the details of "how to do a specific Blaine trick":

> although his new book is filled with the details, he gets tetchy when you ask him how he did a particular trick.
> 'That's not why I do magic,' he says. 'If you're thinking that then you're not getting what I do. If you watch a great actor in a great movie then you enjoy the moment, you're not thinking about whom they're dating. Some people that overcomplicate their lives think that way (Colin, 2002: 3).

Blaine's instruction to anyone who wishes to get the point of what he does is to look at what he does as it happens, in "the moment." His warning is that to try and think about the mechanisms, the devices, and the training he must do, is to miss the phenomenon. You are not seeing "magic" happen before your eyes, you are not seeing the whole because you are too busy searching for its parts. It is a curious demand since do we not naturally ask of spectacular phenomena like formation flying or skyscraper construction or making a million on the stock-market: how do they do that? If Blaine is warning that we may lose the amazement that he has brought if we look into how he accomplished his trick, does this mark a limit for awe as the beginning of ethnomethodological inquiry (Blum and McHugh, 1984)? Blaine intends that his audience "appreciate the sky or smell the air. Those moments are special to me..." (Colin, 2002: 3). His show offers us something so extra-ordinary that we will be awakened to the wonder of the world. In this urge to bring us closer to our senses, and perhaps our "natural environment," he reaches back to a longer standing tradition of magicians, as Abram and London (1999) put it, "of keeping the world alive and healthy, and keeping humans in a healthy connection with the rest of the natural world" (Abram and London, 1999: 3).[13] Blaine's dilemma is that his method for doing this inevitably also arouses our curiosity about

his methods for doing this. Abram and London (1999) point out that the common solution for village magicians, in places like Bali, is to live outside the village.

Unlike the ethnomethodologist who patiently, slowly and repetitively scrutinises the unremarkable for its tiny details and finds wonder there, good magic happens in a flash in front of an already attentive and expectant audience. In his delightful novel *Carter Beats the Devil* Glen David Gold puts it thus in a dialogue between the magician Carter and his assistant Ledocq:

> 'Watch this.' He [Ledocq] held the coin by its edge, and then placed it in his palm. He squeezed his palm shut, made a pass over it, and opened his hand again. Carter stared. In Ledocq's hand was a silver dollar.
> 'Have I missed something?'
> 'Yes.' Ledocq did it again. And a third time. Finally, Carter noticed: the date on the coin had changed from 1921 to 1923.
> 'That's a tedious sort of trick,' Carter sighed.
> 'That is true. But why?'
> 'If you do a trick that the audience doesn't notice.' (Gold, 2001: 231).

Even though magicians must make their trick visible, spectacularly so, it is essential to what magicians do that they ask us to "pay attention" and that we do pay attention, since if we're not paying attention then we can as easily be poor witnesses to what they are showing us. It would be too easy to fool someone who was distracted, though of course paying attention is just the distraction from our everyday troubles that magicians are also looking for. And yet Blaine wants, not that the world should be filled up with death-defying stunts and impossible feats of survival or escape artists like himself or Houdini, but that everyone should appreciate afterwards what is there to be had by anyone (be it the evening sky or the aroma of coffee). Can we say that his is a plea to see something for what it is right now and not be thinking of something else? Is it the teacher's ambition that his or her class be riveted during their lesson? But Blaine, when he performs, is not giving a lesson on how he is offering a breach which might induce us to think things are not what they seem afterwards. Unlike the teacher he does not want to deliver "thought" as if it were an object, as if it were "stuff," a statistic or a proof to be carried away. He hopes that thinking might start in the space after they have witnessed what he is doing. Not the kind of thinking of "let's explain magic," not for his audience to walk away and reduce amazement to mere technologies or as a deception for the purposes of enlisting them into believing in the supernatural (always Houdini's worry). While Blaine and Houdini are willing to bring an audience to a state of amazement through their spectacles, they are left with nothing to teach apart from how their magic is done, and that is not what they want to teach an audience. Methodological instruction is what they would train candidate magicians with.

Houdini would arm himself to amaze even the "fault-finder" in the audience (Phillips, 2001), the person who could say "oh it's obvious how this trick is done." Houdini was seeking to show even the most sceptical person in the room wonder. He wanted to convert sceptics; they were the acid test. And yet he wished still for them to exercise their critical faculties and hence his huge disappointment when his friend Conan Doyle was "bewitched" by the methods of Spiritualists (Phillips, 2001). The surprise surely is not in Doyle's wonder over magic but in his failure to grasp its technical details; since he is the creator of the detail-obsessed, super-observer, Sherlock Holmes.

Ethnomethodology is misunderstood, even by some of its practitioners, as *only* being about the details, mechanics, the devices and technologies whereby, say, "doing being ordinary" (Sacks, 1984) is accomplished. This, however, is only half the story, just as for a magician recognition of the techniques is only half of doing magic, the constituent parts without the whole.

> It is ethnomethodological about EM studies that they show for ordinary society's substantive events, in material contents, just and only in any actual case, that and just how vulgarly competent members concert their activities to produce and show, exhibit and make observably the case*, demonstrate, and so on, coherence, cogency, analysis, detail, structure, consistency, order, meaning, mistakes, errors, coincidence, facticity, reason, methods–locally, reflexively, naturally accountable phenomena–and as of the haecceities of their ordinary lives together.
>
> We learn from the corpus of EM studies that its radical studies have begun to reveal immortal ordinary society as a *wondrous thing* [my emphasis]. Its members, be they "lay analysts" or professionals in the worldwide social science movement, with straightforward normal thoughtfulness are able to read it out of relevance, eyeless in Gaza (Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992: 202).

Garfinkel, even as he pushes toward the myriad practices whereby phenomena are constituted, wants us to waken to the wonder of each phenomenon, as Wittgenstein wishes us to do the same (Bearn, 1997). There is an orderly world all around us; we make it happen and it is wonderful that it happens. The difference in examining, describing and analysing the unspectacular is that ethnomethodology (at least in places) offers back to us how anyone, every competent person makes sense of this situation, showing members to be like Houdinis in that they have tricks to produce recognisable social objects. Houdini's spectacle contains itself: we are not all about to become escape artists, there should be only one amazing Houdini, one mysterious David Blaine. Always threatening to become hybridised out of existence with in the fields of practical action in which it situates its studies (Lynch, 1993), traditional ethnomethodology begins from the principle that we are *all* using ethnomethods[14] and yet it seems not to urge that we all become ethnomethodologists, or not any more than we already are. The question that Blaine's words raise is whether by becoming

ethnomethodologists we will eventually lose our sense of wonder. Will we miss the spectacle by pursuing the tricks and lived work by which it is made?

4.

Ethnomethodology finds itself at home in work contexts helping with the redesign of user interfaces (Crabtree et al., 2000), help systems (Suchman, 1987), airports (Harper and Hughes, 1993) and factories (Kawatoko, 1999). Houdini assists the police in redesigning handcuffs, First World War soldiers in escaping from the enemy, and even uses his experience of underwater escapes to design a mechanism to release divers quickly from their suits. This is not part of the magic but it's a useful spin-off of the concern with practical matters. Houdini's "Handcuff Secrets" sold out within days as it was bought by would be and actual criminals across the USA and its illustrations were banned in Germany (Phillips, 2001). In his "The Right Way to Wrong" Houdini writes of their collective methods of misdirection:

> The mob is a gang of expert pickpockets under the direction of a leader who has had experience and knows all the tricks. Their usual game is to frequent some crowded platform or a railway station and raise a row in which two men seem to engage in a scuffle or a quarrel and come to blows. Others rush in attempting to separate them, and the attention of the whole crowd of people is for the moment directed strongly that way. At the same moment, other single light fingered members of the same gang crowd in with the citizens who are being jostled and abstract their pocketbooks and watches without any trouble (Houdini, 1953: 275).

Like Goffman (1970, 1971, 1974) and like so many ethnomethodologists, he is interested in criminal techniques: lock-picking, forgery, hidden messages, stealing from moving vehicles, pickpockets, con-artists and burglars [e.g. the chewing gum trick (Houdini, 1953: 277)]. The pick-pocket, the spy, the con-artist and conjuror are experts in our background assumptions about normal and abnormal appearances in public. They do not seek to avoid being seen at all by others; they are attempting to evade detection by ordinary members of what they are really up to. What pick-pockets display of their actions to us are the appearances of something else: the guy clumsily bumping into you on the pavement, not the painstakingly crafted move that does a deliberate collision in a way that looks accidental whilst dipping a hand so lightly into your inside pocket you do not feel it or see it. Olympian acting skills are at work since they must not be seen as "acting" in order that we see only a possibly incompetent pedestrian. We do not even say, until we have to report the incident to the police and other interested parties such as our friends and colleagues, "he *appeared* just to be another guy walking along the street." Until we discover the absence of our wallet he *was* just another guy walking along the street.

Houdini allows the possibility that we can be fooled, and that under certain circumstances we want to be fooled, though not by the state, not by the thief, not by our building society, not by our newspaper.[15] We want to be fooled when we are ready to be fooled, when we are expecting to be fooled and when everyone of us will be fooled at the same time.[16] Seeing the trick, like getting a dirty joke (Sacks, 1978), is a non-trivial exercise. Let us imagine for a moment a person lacking the capacity to see that he or she has been fooled (before we even consider *understanding how* you have been fooled). For instance we cannot do card tricks to amuse our cat, nor amaze it by escaping out of a locked trunk. Seeing a trick is already then a shared human accomplishment.[17]

Where a member of an audience joins with ethnomethodology's ethos is in awakening in them a sharpened curiosity to know how the magician does what he does. At one of Houdini's or Blaine's shows the audience *might* fully examine their own sense-making procedures to consider how they have be fooled; more likely they will accept the possibility and enjoy the show without needing to get to the bottom of the trick's lived work. We should be careful here as to how far we wish to equate ethnomethodology's awe at "commonplace action" (Blum and McHugh, 1984: 87) with the tricks of magicians. It is the ethnomethodologist who has a similar sense of awe at commonplace actions as an audience has for Houdini or Blaine's spectacular feats. And it is the ethnomethodologist who departs from the logic of an audience when they pursue the clarification of the particular devices which produced the magic. If, and when, ethnomethodologists pursue the *mis*directions of magicians or equally of "sincere liars" (Lynch and Bogen, 1996), while they are awed by them they might no longer be *affirming* convention.

As we move away from doing being an audience, to *doing* a magical trick we will run up against the training required and the effort involved to present what the audience should see and hide what they should not. There are times where, even with the best instructions, a trainee magician still cannot grasp how a certain trick works. Is this so different from the frustration we feel on not being able to follow a proof in mathematics? Our competence as ordinary actors relies on us being able to be see a trick and the *expert* skill of the magician is to be able to (re)produce a trick in a way that hides what should be hidden and shows what should be shown. In this way a magician is unlike a mathematician or a scientist. Hybridising ethnomethodology with escape artistry produces members with an interest in how background expectations can be purposefully manipulated to make a thing appear (when that thing may not be there). At such a point do we run up against the limit of members, since they should be disinterested in how they produce appearances?

Houdini does to members of an audience what phenomenologists do as part of their investigations of human experience of the world: he makes them suspend judgement on the objects and events under scrutiny. We should no longer assume that the brick wall is what we normally think of as a brick wall;

we should no longer assume that the straitjacket is what we think a straitjacket is. When we look at his show we will have to examine how our experience of brick walls or straitjackets constitutes their impassibility, restriction, their appearance. Moreover, he plays upon our secondary methods for checking on the appearance of a brick wall or straitjacket being suspicious. He has members of the audience come and tap the brick wall; he has asylum orderlies verify that his straitjacket is securely fastened. As members of the audience we are perplexed to see these investigations at work since we know they will only verify what Houdini wants verified; what does this say of power of experience to see things as they really are? And yet does the audience all suddenly become convinced that reality is inaccessible; that they should either become sceptical philosophers or social constructionists?

Even having been shown how "a woman being sawn in half in a box" works we can sit back and watch the show again and see the magical aspect to it. To watch and to produce magic tricks we, as a competent audience, have to be able to *see aspects* [not unlike the duck-rabbit diagram or the faces/candle-stick picture (Wittgenstein, 1953)]. For the amazing magic trick the other aspect to the trick remains hidden though we know it surely exists, while for the well known one, or the one we are taught, we can see both aspects: *that* it works and *how* it works.[18] Things take a strange turn at this point that does lead us into equating ordinary members with magicians: they know how to do a trick and they can recognise the illusion that a trick produces. Once again we have to make a distinction between the illusion which is the object of magic and, say, a turn at talk which is the object of conversation. If ethnomethodologists are the ones who are amazed by ordinary life then they are in some senses its audience.

> There is a familiar worry about whether wonder is a function of ignorance, so that the more knowledge we acquire the less room there is for wonder. But on my account, wonder is not under threat from knowledge, it is under threat from a certain way of looking at things [Anschauungswiese], a pun deaf way of looking at things. The enemy here is the voice of common sense, the defender of the obvious [Selbstverständlichkeit]. The enemy of wonder is a certain attitude to our epistemic practices, and wonder is made possible by a change in our attitude to those practices rather than by any failure of those epistemic practices on their own terms (Bearn, 1997: 196).

In a *reversal* of the skeleton keys, rejigged coffins, secret drawers, and altered shuffles of magic, Garfinkel had a box of special equipment that he used in the teaching of ethnomethodology. To make intelligibility anthropologically strange, students were given prism glasses that flipped their vision upside down, which Garfinkel asked them to wear while fetching a cup of water from a tap or being shown a spot to sit on a wall by another student (Garfinkel, 2002). Directions in these instances became impossible to follow by normal means. Chess games were also made deeply problematic by donning the inverting lenses. It made apprehensible the embodied rather than "mental" aspects of

playing a game with rules. Students were dazed, bemused and quite often amazed during these sessions. Students were also given headphones and a microphone with a delay loop that made their wearers hear their voice a second or so after they spoke. It made apprehensible that without noticing it you are listening to what you say as you say it, and with your hearing-what-is-being-said disrupted speaking at any length quickly becomes problematic. The equipment showed the potentially bewildering equipmentality of human practice: we do not think of seeing as something we have to learn with eyes as equipment. Much like the breaching experiments mentioned earlier, Garfinkel is pushing in a different practical way against a theoretical account of how we make things intelligible.

> Think of these as jobs of bodies – not anatomists' bodies, or biologists' bodies, but work's bodies. *The bodies of practices*. These bodies have eyes that are skills; eyes that are skills in the ways that eyes do looking's work. Where seeing is something more, other and different than formally analytically describable positioning the orbs to assure certain retinal registration of a perceptual field, let alone a visual field (Garfinkel, 2002: 210).

Beckoning experts and members of the audience, Houdini says "to the things themselves!" and you know it's a mistake to try and inspect the rope and chair he is showing you; his showing is a *misdirection*. He is showing you that he can show you "this is a brick wall" and confuse you with your own natural and ordinary sense of what a brick wall allows you do with it. He is showing that [showing an object] can be a diversion and that what is obviously, say, a rope restraint blinds us. Garfinkel with his inverting lenses brings us squarely up against what has become "embodiedly transparent" in following *honest non-deceptive* everyday directions in their details of looking with eyes, positioning fingers, and the orientational properties of furniture. We have to be careful not to overburden "showing," where clearly there are divergent uses of this term: Garfinkel [showing a person somewhere to sit] and Houdini showing (misdirecting) an audience (with) a coffin.

Houdini's refusal to reveal his current trick did not mean that there really was something inaccessible that he could not share, that there was a spirit hidden beneath the surface of things, that we could not *learn* how his trick was done. While Houdini is clear that you will *not* find out how Houdini's *current* amazing trick works, nevertheless magic can be taught,[19] since, yes, he does give away tricks once they are old (to the annoyance of other magicians) and, yes, he shares with his wife, and teaches his assistants how his tricks work so that they can help him. For example for "on the spot" challenges he'll need assistants to quickly adapt barrels, caskets, or canvas bags.

Houdini and Blaine are offering us magic without hidden forces beyond their tricks, their human accomplishments. Magic is of great value to them and they guard against uses they see as immoral and misleading. In the later

years of Houdini's life he pursued spiritualists with missionary zeal (Houdini, 1953; Phillips, 2001; Silverman, 1996). In his exposure of séances Houdini in fact shows that with the unmatched practical and historical expertise that he has in tricks, sleight of hand, and conjuring, the devices used by mediums can easily be revealed. Whilst this kills their claims to solicit the supernatural, it leaves his grounds for the summoning wonder of magic untouched. However, it's clear from Houdini's investigations that other investigators untrained in magical tricks and sleight of hand, even if they are eminent professors of psychology, will continue to mistake what is going on.

> 'Men like Professor McDougall [a psychology professor at Harvard who questioned Houdini's worth as an investigator of Spiritualists (EL's addition)]... and Conan Doyle are menaces to mankind,' he replied in kind to an interviewer, 'because laymen believe them to be as intellectual in all fields as they are in their own particular one.' They too, like the Spiritualists, gain people's confidence to hoodwink them; there is a new clergy of respectable experts, and everyone else is a layman (Phillips, 2001: 134).

Houdini makes this still more blatant since he has used police officers, doctors, and all manner of expert witnesses to try and spot his tricks and they have failed to detect how he did what he did. Spiritualists, he makes clear, have it easy by comparison with Houdini: they dim the lights, they sit with their legs hidden under the table. For their normal clients, in fact, it would be improper to pursue scepticism over their acts and start trying pulling up the carpet to look for hidden wires. And even if they did something so confrontational, without Houdini's grasp of the practical arts of deception, they will not see how they were deceived and thus that deception at all happened. "Above all, he shows us, the audience wants to know that it can't see: wants to thrill to its own ignorance" (Phillips, 2001: 46).

But wait, is it thrilling to ignorance or, is it as Blaine's quote suggested, that we are thrilling to a pre-critical, pre-interpretive appreciation of the world, a world where amazing things can happen and we don't know why (Abram, 1997)? In this case to "get" Houdini or Blaine, as an adequate audience we should not try and interrogate his act, though by Houdini's arguments we ought to let an expert check on their competitors (e.g. the Spiritualists) with more transcendental and supernatural claims.

Let us note only quickly in passing that ethnomethodologists have long pursued sociology and psychology for their improper uses of the resources which possession of ordinary language and a place in a shared world gives them (Coulter, 1979; McHugh et al., 1974; Watson, 1992). They criticise sociology and psychology for their appropriation of lay knowledge as their domain and one that they can judge for its lack or presence of reason, morality or immorality (Bogen, 1989, 1999; Lynch, 1999).

5.

> The best audience member was one who felt informed and baffled at the same time (Gold, 2001: 294).

What does it mean when Blaine says that if we obsess upon learning how such a trick works then we do not get what he is trying to do? Houdini is, likewise, not attempting to persuade everyone to be trained magicians, to instruct them into how to be magicians too, to find the explanation for each amazing escape. Houdini is not posing the question for us of: why would he want to be free of his restraint? Why would he try to get out of a packing case dropped off a pier? These are obvious matters, surely? There is no such thing as magic, Houdini is saying, but I am a magician capable of inexplicable feats; there is nothing concealed, you can see everything, but you still don't know (Phillips, 2001: 45).

Why are Blaine and Houdini so concerned that their magic, their escape artistry, should be looked at in a certain way and not another? It is not that they think magic skills should not be passed on to another generation of magicians; they most certainly do. They are concerned with the lineage of tricks, stunts, devices, and techniques and they are happy to write basic guides to get non-initiates started. That those who are its audience ought to look-on in a certain "natural" way is because the spectacle is not fashioned to show something to those who make it while they make it; in fact they cannot take of it, they give it to the audience. It is the audience that looks in *wonder,* not the magician or escape artist. Houdini is an expert at "look how amazing this is"; a member of the audience could not turn away, having seen him escape from a straitjacket dangling from a tower-block, and say "how obvious."

> Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from the outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with your own eyes, surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. But then we do this every day without it making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view [Wittgenstein, Culture and Value: 4, quoted in Bearn (1997: 197)].

In the ethnomethodological attitude, "this is obvious" will not be allowed and in its attention to "life itself" ethnomethodology is not just a demonstration, not just an exhibit, not just instruction in how to do a Pythagorean proof (Livingston, 1986), play jazz piano (Sudnow, 1978) or select a next speaker in conversation (Sacks et al., 1978). Sacks warns of the dangers of looking at someone as *a priori* amazing as Houdini, yet his purposes are shared in that by the end we should see something amazing happening in our world.

Where an audience needs the spectacular to show this, Sacks from "*that* point of view" finds amazement "at hand": finding order at all points, discovering how finely detailed the organisation of every interaction is and how quickly talking in turns works. Where Sacks and Garfinkel exceed being merely an audience is that their wonder returns from finding out how the trick is done, to what the trick is for theory. It is this voyage back to what we know already that they call respecifying.

> The ethnomethodologist is only technically different, so how could he be principled about *this* difference? In a way, she does not know what is correct any more than the member, any more than convention knows; convention can know itself, but when itself is correct, it is enforcably intelligible, and such concerted meaning is indifferent to good. Boldly put, the enforcably intelligible nature of convention limits it to power and clarity. In fact, we have seen that making convention problematic is only to give voice to convention as a way of saying how convention is, not what it is. Convention is shown to be trusted in and through the times and places where convention is made problematic. Ethnomethodology's aim is to speak for the ordinary, which is ordinarily speechless, through the trouble that finally gains the attention of the ordinary. . . ethnomethodology puts convention into question not to question convention but to affirm it, as a member would and does (Blum and McHugh, 1984: 88–89).

We do not all want to be escape artists or magicians, nor do we all want to be ethnomethodologists, yet they do promise us, at the very least, a show of something quite amazing that we are all already in the midst of making. Even as ethnomethodologists affirm convention they disaffirm social scientists' potentially cynical or ironic views of members as dopes. For the ethnomethodologist members are only a few steps away from being magicians. If we do want to *become* magicians it is to make an audience enter a state of wonder at what they are watching. Some part of a magician's show is also the invitation that offers this possibility to us. Every once and a while one of the audience will accept this invitation and take on the arduous, dull, and technical training that will be required to further learn how magic is made with the skillful handling of card plants, stage screws, and loose fitting shoes. With patience, a willingness to repeat actions to see how they work, and an eye for the details, from time to time a world of wonders is conjured. Might in ethnomethodology's ultimate affirmation of ordinary practices, their clarification of conceptual matters, a world of wonders start to be worn away? Do ethnomethodologists become an impoverished audience or an audience with an alternate way of looking at things and, in that sense, no longer proper members of an audience?

There is an invitation beyond affirmation Coulter (2001) and Lynch (2001) emphasise that ethnomethodology can offer therapeutics to the maladies of foundational enterprises in social theory in the same way that Wittgenstein's

investigations help cure explanatory philosophy's peculiar problems. An ethnomethodologist can be someone who stages (shows in this sense) ordinary language, or the situatedness of all inquiries, for an audience of theorists to get *that* audience back on firm ground. The dangling Houdini never made us more sure of the ground upon which we stand as we look up at him and feel that he might fall. And yet it is in the essence of *what* Houdini is that an audience should *not* know how the trick works. Competent magicians can teach their tricks to anyone, and they are using anyone's tricks; but Houdini, Blaine, Carter or any other great magician would be ruined, would disappoint us if they gave away what we are amazed by. The spectacular showing cannot be reduced to an ordinary showing lest we lose our sense of wonder; at the same time our attention to ordinary life can be transformed when we realise there is magic at work already.

Notes

1. This article arises out of conceptual material related to the research project "Cappuccino Community: Cafes and Civic Life in the Contemporary City," ESRC grant (R000239797). Reflections, sharpenings and clarifications came from Stanley Raffel. Two books on Houdini from Kathryn Boddy. Encouragement and criticism from Barry Brown, Jon Hindmarsh, Julia Lossau, Paul Routledge, Jeff Coulter and the two anonymous referees. Lenore Langsdorf for style assistance. Magic tricks from Su & Pablo. Sofa from Karen.
2. Accompanying photo by kind permission of Bob King.
3. Accompanying photo by kind permission of Walt Donohue.
4. Square brackets are used by phenomenologists and Garfinkel as a rendering device for the field properties of a phenomenon.
5. F. A. Mesmer's experiments in animal magnetism were the source for this word, indicating a hypnotic state of fascination.
6. There are interesting overlaps with the work of ethnomethodologists and Judith Butler (1993) in their unusual approach to gender as a performance. In both cases, those outside of straightforward male/female binaries are used to trouble what sexual identity is. Garfinkel, through Agnes' painful struggle, takes on those who would see gender as theatrical for "normally sexed persons" by showing that it *only* becomes theatrical and deeply troublesome for those who having been originally sexed as the other try passing as male or female. Butler has more critical ambitions toward mainstream identity politics in feminist and queer theory in reminding theorists that their discourse also require performing. Gender, for Butler (1993, p. 234), is neither being something "inside," such as an ego-core, nor "outside," such as a "presentation" (a la Goffman).
7. Lynch and Bogen (1996) have carried out an exemplary study of situating the spectacle in the courtroom during the Iran-Contra trial and its relation to the historical record, truth-finding and more.
8. Incidentally pulling hats down over the eyes of pedestrians during a robbery is a trick mention by Houdini ... (1953) in "The Right Way to Do Wrong."
9. A hugely popular US TV comedy show from the late 90s based on the principle of its characters doing nothing and obsessing on nothing much, or perhaps more accurately dwelling at great length on the obvious.

10. Gold's (2001) meticulously researched novel on magic in the era of Houdini details the attempts to copyright tricks, deal with plagiarism (such as the Glasgow Zoo incident), and the buying and selling of spectacular stunts. Houdini is depicted in the novel as being one of the first to arrive to purchase cutting edge tricks from up and coming new magicians.

11. The customised coffin that had been on display during Houdini's final tour was rather macabrely used for burying him dead.

12. Houdini's patented but never built trick was to be imprisoned in a large block of ice and then appear several minutes later on stage outside the block leaving the ice seemingly unmarked by his escape.

13. Abram pursues a promising line of inquiry as to the differing role of "Western" and "non-Western" magicians. The former have to entertain us, whereas for the latter he uncovers, through his time with Balinese, Nepalese and Indonesian magicians & sorcerers, a sense of the magician as a person with a special connection to nature, akin to an ecologist. Indeed Abram is keen to bring insights about shamans' connections to non-human subjectivities into the ecology, which suffers from treating animals as objects or distant, unfathomable subjects.

14. There is a periodisation to ethnomethodology between its early 'traditional' studies (Boden, 1994; Garfinkel, 1967) and the later more radical studies of astronomy (Garfinkel et al., 1981), law (Lynch and McNally, 1999), and mathematics, wherein the latter push away from any member's competence, to the situated practices of expert fields. In the later studies they are no longer collapsing the extra-ordinary down on to the ordinary; they are radicalising phenomenal intactness in that they are asking just what is it that makes a scientific discovery or scientific evidence in a court of law.

15. There are exceptional occasions when we will allow this – April 1st being the most obvious example.

16. As also in Goffman's (1974) later attempt to reformulate what he had come to see as a fundamental problem with his dramaturgical reductions in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He realised that acting on stage involves special permissions from both actors and audience and is made sense of by its sense as theatre, not as part of the flow of a pavement or talk around a family breakfast table.

17. There are parallels here to Sacks' (1992, vol. 2) consideration of the dirty joke as a technical object.

18. Or are these incommensurate ways of seeing, so that to look in one way excludes looking in the other?

19. As we have noted already, even on being shown how it works you may still not adequately grasp how it works; you sort of follow what is going on. Like you "sort of follow" when software programmers tell you in detail how they wrote a piece of code that compresses a video image.

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