Framing Performance Magic: The Role of Contract, Discourse and Effect


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Abstract

A wide continuum of genres in performance magic has developed since the Victorian period, including stage magic, street magic, close-up magic, comedy magic, mentalism, bizarre and mystery entertainment. Each of these genres frames its performance on a different contract between the performer and the audience, the discourse used during performance and the effect on the audience both in terms of its perception of what has transpired and the personal meaning attached to the effect. This article examines this interplay between contract, discourse and effect in theory and practice. The article constructs a typology of performance magic which is then explored through an examination of audience perception and feedback from a drama workshop and focus group conducted at the University of Huddersfield in October 2012. The group experienced three performances framed around the idea of the magician, the mentalist, and the mystic, and the ensuing discussion revealed a wide range of insights into these different framings of performance. The reactions and ensuing discussions involved different understandings of trust, plausibility, explanation, authority, and dynamic interaction.

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As discourse structures, therefore, genres are characterized in part by the types of story grammars or schemata they call for; they specify situation models that characterize a given literary text and enable us to make predictions about how the text is likely to unfold. In this respect, genre theory provides a potentially rich resource for more precise empirical studies of literary reading, enabling us to build on the research (which so far is not specific to literary reading) on how readers construct and monitor situation models (Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998). This controversy has been framed as a contrast between conventionalist and traditionalist approaches (Hanauer, 1996; cf. Zwaan, 1993). Whereas the conventionalist examines reading for the effects of prior cognitive. -326