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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy
University of Fribourg
Avenue de l'Europe 20
1700 Fribourg
Switzerland

Internet: http://www.eurosa.org
Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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Art and Magic, or,
The Affective Power of Images

Mark Windsor[*]
University of Kent

Abstract. Art and magic are often associated with one another in people's minds, when people talk about, for example, the power that art has to 'conjure' our emotions, or of being put under the 'spell' of an artwork. By examining the way in which we regularly emotionally respond to images of people we love, I will explore in this paper one way in which art and magic can be understood as sharing an important connection. First, I will introduce the notion of sympathetic magic and the 'law of similarity', according to which, "the image equals the object itself". Second, drawing on psychological studies conducted by Paul Rozin and his colleagues, I will show how the way we regularly respond to images of loved ones is consistent with the law of similarity. Third, I will use Tamar Szabó Gendler's recent account of 'alief' in order to help understand the mental processes involved in this 'magical-affective' (as I call it) level of response. And finally, with reference to Wittgenstein, I will draw out some implications of this in terms of our understanding both of the magical practices of tradition cultures, and of the function of images in contemporary Western societies, drawing parallels between the two.

1. Introduction

Art and magic are often associated with each other in people's minds. Often people use the language of magic and ritual—if only metaphorically—when talking about art: when talking about, for example, the power that art has to 'conjure' the emotions, of being put under the 'spell' of an artwork, of works in the genre of 'magical realism', or of the 'magical' illusory qualities of certain representational media, such as the 'magic' of cinema.

In this paper I want to explore one way in which art and magic can be understood as sharing an important connection. I am not interested

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[*] Email: mw426@kent.ac.uk

here so much in artworks that engage magic in either style or content. Rather, I want to explore a deeper sense in which magic can be found in art—a sense in which magic can be found *hidden* in our engagement with and appreciation of art objects, whether or not those objects appear, on the surface at least, to have anything to do with magic. The central claim that I want to explore in this paper is that magic constitutes an important aspect of the way in which we, as humans, regularly engage with visual representations.

Before I go any further, I need to clarify a couple of things; namely, what I mean when I say 'art' and what I mean when I say 'magic'. This is especially pressing given the diversity of uses to which each of the two terms may be put. I can skip over the question about art fairly quickly: for the purposes of this paper, I use the term 'art' liberally to include vernacular images drawn from visual culture which need not have been produced by someone who we would typically call an 'artist'. Indeed, I will take as my primary case study photographs of the kind that may be found in a family album. If you find this use of the term 'art' too inclusive, then feel free to substitute it for something like depiction or visual representation instead. In contrast, the question about the use of the term 'magic' requires significantly more attention.

2. Sympathetic Magic and the Law of Similarity

First of all, I am not interested in magic in the sense that it might pertain to popular entertainers who perform stunts or illusions. The kind of magic I am interested in here is of the sort that pertains to the ritual practices of traditional cultures, and which typically involves belief in some supernatural or spiritual agency. Our modern, Western understanding of this kind of magic can largely be traced back to the work of several key anthropologists working in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; notably, Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Marcel Mauss. Not all of these figures, however, saw magic in the same way. The first major works on the subject, those of Tylor and Frazer, took an intellectualist approach which denigrated magic as a failed science. As Tylor vehemently put it, "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind" (Tylor, 1871, p. 101).

Tylor and Frazer both saw magic as originating from a misapplication of a mental faculty common to humans, that of the association of ideas. The misapplication involves seeing entities or events that are associated in the mind as sharing a causal connection in reality, such that they have the power to act upon each other at a distance. The possibility that objects or events have this power to act upon each other, beyond the laws of physical causality, presupposes two things. Frist, some kind of imperceptible energy, power, or shared essence, often called 'manna', which is capable of transferring between the separate entities. And second, a route along which this energy, essence, or 'manna' can pass, and which binds the separate entities together in what is called a 'secret sympathy'. Frazer proposed two 'laws of sympathetic magic' to explain how objects or events may be connected in this way: the *law of similarity* and the *law of contagion* (Frazer, 1985). For the purposes of this paper, I am only interested in the first of these, the law of similarity, so I will simply put the law of contagion aside.

According to the law of similarity, entities share a secret sympathy with one another by means of resemblance. A magical rite which operates according to the law of similarity that aims at some practical end will typically involve an imitation of the end which is desired, hence why Frazer describes such practices as 'homeopathic' or 'imitative' magic. Adopting Frazer's schema, Mauss expressed the principles underpinning the law of similarity as such: "like produces like", "like acts upon like", "the image produces the object itself" (Mauss, 2001, p. 15, 84). Two examples drawn from Frazer will help clarify the way these principles may operate in practice. One example, doubtless familiar to us all, is of inflicting damage to an effigy of a person, such as a voodoo doll, as a means of inflicting corresponding harm to the person which it represents (Frazer, 1985, p. 14). Another example, this time one with a positive goal, involves a woman adopting a child by pushing the child through her clothes in an imitation of childbirth, after which the child becomes a legitimate heir (Frazer, 1985, p. 17).

By interpreting such rituals through the paradigm of science, Tylor and Frazer saw magical acts as founded on false beliefs: a spurious attempt to master the world around them. This approach has, however, come under attack from a number of prominent thinkers who have since aimed to reevaluate and come to a better understanding of magic as something more than just a "pernicious delusion". These thinkers have aimed to show that magic can serve positive functions both on an individual and societal level, and that magic has its roots in a shared commonality of human experience.

3. Feeling Towards Images

Before elaborating this alternative approach, however, I first want to lay out two case studies which will form the nucleus of this paper, the examination of which will help make sense of this alternative and, in my view, better understanding of magic. The first is drawn from the work of the psychologist Paul Rozin and his colleagues who, since the 1980s, have conducted a series of empirical studies exploring manifestations of magical thinking in educated, adult Westerners. Drawing on the work of the aforementioned anthropologists, Rozin and his colleague Carol Nemeroff summarise their working definition of magic in the following way:

> Magic is a cognitive intuition or belief in the existence of imperceptible forces or essences that transcend the usual boundary between the mental/symbolic and physical/material realities, in a way that (1) diverges from the received wisdom from the technocratic elite, (2) serves important functions, and (3) follows the principles of similarity and contagion (Nemeroff and Rozin, 2000, p. 5).

In light of the substantial body of evidence that has been amassed supporting the existence of magical thinking in educated, adult Westerners, Rozin and Nemeroff have come to the view that "magical thinking is universal in adults", and that "although the specific content is filled in by one's culture, the general forms are characteristic of the human mind" (Nemeroff and Rozin, 2000, p. 19). One experiment exploring the law of similarity—the one that provides the impetus for this paper—involved measuring the way subjects respond to and interact with photographs of people. When asked to throw darts at photographs of people's faces, aimed at a point marked between the eyes, subjects were consistently less accurate at throwing darts at an image of someone they liked than at an image of someone they either disliked or did not know (Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff, 1986, pp. 702-12). The comparison here to the use of a voodoo doll as part of a magical ritual is obvious. But before examining the implications of this comparison, I want you to consider, by way of a thought experiment, a scenario which will, I think, demonstrate the same kind of result as the dart experiment.

Imagine that I hand to you a photocopy of a photograph of someone you love, such as a family member or close friend; preferably a photograph which you know well and treasure. Now imagine that I ask you to tear it up and throw it away. Or simply that I ask you to throw it away. I expect that, although you may be willing—imaginatively—to throw out or even tear up the image, you will also have felt some level of aversion or reluctance to the thought of doing so. In one of their publications on magical thinking, Rozin and Nemeroff note that "it is common knowledge, which we have confirmed in unpublished studies in our laboratory, that people are reluctant to throw out or tear up duplicate photographs of loved ones" (Rozin and Nemeroff, 2002, p. 205). Notwithstanding individual differences, I take this to be a fact of shared human experience. If it seems fairly obvious to you, then all the better. If this is in fact the case, then the interesting question is: why do we feel this aversion?

Let us examine the photograph cases more closely in order to pick out what is interesting about the way subjects respond in the way they do. The salient aspects of the subject's response can be broken down in the following way. First, the subject sees the image and recognises the person depicted in it. Second, recognition of the depicted person elicits feelings for that person depicted. If, for example, the photograph depicts a loved one, then it triggers the subject's feelings of love for that person. So far, this probably all seems fairly trivial. But third—and this is, I think, what is crucial for establishing the connection to magic—the feelings elicited for the person depicted by the image are directed not only towards that person, but also, in part at least, towards the image itself. Upon seeing a photograph of a loved one, directing feelings of love towards the beloved is one thing, but directing feelings of love also towards the *image* of the beloved—even where the image is a worthless photocopy—is, from a purely rational perspective, much less to be expected. The fact that the subject's feelings are directed, at least in part, towards the image itself is evident in the felt aversion to damaging or throwing away the image. Moreover, these feelings manifest in subjects' behaviour. If, for example, you were imaginatively willing to throw out a duplicate photograph of a loved one, perhaps you would not be willing to throw darts at it. And even if you would be, then, as Rozin's experiments indicate, the chances are that you would, without consciously intending it, be less accurate throwing darts at an image of a loved one than you would at an image of someone you either dislike or do not know.

So how does all of this map onto the notion of magic? According to the law of similarity, entities share a secret sympathy with one another by means of their resemblance. What the photograph cases show is that, at the subject's affective level of response, this law holds true: the subject responds to and behaves towards the image *as if* it shared some such a 'secret sympathy' with the depicted person. At this affective level of engagement, "like produces like", "the image produces the object itself". Not only does the image elicit certain emotions in the subject, but the subject automatically *behaves towards* and *interacts with* the image in a way which is expressive of those emotions. In other words, the subject treats the image as something more than just a photocopy, as something that shares a deeper connection with its depicted content than that of its mere surface resemblance—a connection that may be described in terms of some shared energy, essence, or 'manna'. The mental association of the image and its depicted content spills over into what is experienced as a real connection between those two separate entities: at this purely subjective, experiential level, there is a meaningful sense in which the image *is* the person, and the person *is* the image.

What all of this points to is a discrepancy between two different levels of the subject's response. At one rational level, the subject knows that the image is just an image, and that damaging the image—throwing darts at it, tearing it up, or discarding it—will have no consequences in the real world beyond that of the immediate action done to the image. In other words, none of us would expect, having thrown darts at an image of someone, to then find that the depicted person had concurrently suffered some grievous facial injury. At another level, however, the level that I have been characterising which points towards magic, the subject responds to the image as if it were something more than just an image, as if it had some deeper connection with its depicted content. The obvious question now is: how to explain this discrepancy? Or, more specifically, at what level of the mind does the image acquire this deeper, magical connection with its depicted content beyond that that of its merely apparent resemblance?

4. Explaining the Two Levels of Response

Rozin and Nemeroff interpret their results in terms of belief. I quote:

> Magic is defined in terms of belief or a set of related beliefs, and... these beliefs may be held at different levels of explicitness, ranging from spontaneous, vague, "as if" feelings, all the way to explicit, culturally thought beliefs (Nemeroff and Rozin, 2000, p. 5).

According to this model, the subject simultaneously holds two separate, contradictory beliefs pertaining to the image. One explicit, rational belief which takes the form of a judgement that the image is just an image; and another, irrational belief, manifest as a vague 'as if' feeling, which determines the image to carry some deeper connection to its depicted content. Now, for many philosophers, such a broad notion of belief would be untenable. After all, none of the subjects would *say* that they believed damaging an image of someone might somehow inflict harm on that person. Moreover, if subjects held any kind of belief (at whatever level of 'explicitness') that damaging an image of a person would harm the depicted person, it would be reasonable to expect that most if not all would simply refuse to damage the image. The obvious answer to this difficulty is to distinguish between the two different mental states or processes which are each responsible for each of the subject's divergent responses. There are, in fact, a number of broadly compatible existing accounts which allow us to do exactly that. I will discuss just one of these here—one that is, I think, especially suited to explain the cases in question.

In order to help understand a range of different kinds of phenomena, including those that Rozin and his colleagues have studied under the rubric of magical thinking, the philosopher Tamar Szabó Gendler has recently proposed, as a counterpart to belief, a new category of mental state which she calls 'alief'. According to Gendler's account, an alief is "an innate or habitual propensity to respond to an apparent stimulus in a particular way" (Gendler, 2010, p. 284). Aliefs are so-called because they are "*a*ssociative, *a*utomatic, *a*rrational ... *a*ffect-laden and *a*ction-generating" (Gendler, 2010, p. 287). The category of alief serves to explain cases where a subject feels and behaves in a way that cannot readily be attributed to their beliefs. Unlike belief, alief does not require acceptance on the subject's part; in other words, alief does not imply the subject's commitment to the truth of something. As such, Gender describes alief as a mental *state* rather than a mental *attitude*. A consequence of this is that alief responds to the world as it appears, and not necessarily to how it really is; alief operates at a sub-rational level of the mind, to a large degree independently of what the subject knows. Although a subject's beliefs and aliefs often broadly coincide with one another, it is thus also possible—as with the cases I have outlined—that they can come apart. In such cases where there is a mismatch between what the subject believes and how the subject feels and behaves, the subject is said to have a "belief-discordant alief" (Gendler, 2010, p. 262).

Gendler characterises alief as containing three associatively linked components which are typically co-activated—a representational, affective, and behavioural component (Gendler, 2010, p. 263). This cluster of contents neatly maps onto the photograph cases I have discussed. First, the visual representation of the person depicted; second, the elicitation of affect; and third, the activation of a behavioural repertoire preventing harm being done to the person/image. Note here that the behavioural repertoire need only be activated and need not be fulfilled. Crucially, the fact that the image *is not* the person depicted by the image—the belief of which the subject at no point ceases to maintain—does not prevent the activation of the alief which responds to the image *as if it were* the person depicted.

Gendler's notion of alief is especially apt for the present purposes because it provides a way of distinguishing the two different mental states or levels which give rise to the two different ways in which the subject responds to the image: what I will call the 'rational-doxastic' level, and the 'magical-affective' level; one attributed to belief, the other to alief. Moreover, it provides a way of neatly schematising the key components of the subject's magical-affective level of response: an associatively linked cluster of contents which are automatically co-activated and comprise a visual representation of the depicted person, elicitation of affect, and activation of a behavioural repertoire.

Although alief is especially useful for explaining not only the cases I am interested in here but a whole range of commonplace human and animal behaviours, Gendler's account is also controversial, and ultimately it remains to be seen whether or not it will find purchase in contemporary philosophy of mind. But whether or not we do accept Gendler's account of alief is, for the present purposes, less important than what it draws attention to and serves to explain; namely, the salient features of the subject's response which I have just outlined. There are, indeed, other accounts which are broadly compatible with Gendler's that might also be used to explain these features, such as the various dual-processing accounts developed by psychologists which describe cognitive heuristics and biases. Even if we just use folk-psychological terms such as intuition or feeling—rough-hewn as these are in comparison—they may, on a practical level, serve to pick out the same kind of subjective phenomena that I am dealing with here.

5. Art and Magic

At this point, I want to turn back to the question of magic; specifically, to the question about how we should best approach and understand the magical practices of traditional cultures described by anthropologists such as Tylor and Frazer. At the point of introducing Rozin's dart experiment earlier on, I noted the obvious comparison that may be drawn to the magical archetype of sticking needles into a voodoo doll. I am now in a better position to deal with the implications of this comparison. If we adopt Frazer and Tylor's intellectualist approach which sees magic as a failed science founded on a false belief system, then a fundamental difference arises between, on the one hand, Rozin's test subjects throwing darts at an image, and, on the other hand, someone who uses a voodoo doll as part of an 'authentic' magical practice. The difference being that the latter holds a belief that the former does not: unlike the former, the latter believes that damaging an image of a person will *actually* harm that person. From this perspective, it could easily be concluded that the use the term magic in the case of Rozin's test subjects is a misnomer. As we have seen, Rozin and his colleagues circumvented this challenge by attributing their test results to a level of belief in their subjects. But I have rejected using the category of belief in such a broad way. So how do I meet this objection? Is it right to apply the term magic to the cases I have outlined? The answer to this, I argue, is that the Tylor/Frazer approach to magic is largely misguided: that it is wrong to equate magic with science, and wrong to see magic as founded on a false belief system. In order to help elucidate and support this position, I will refer to the work of two influential figures: Malinowski, an anthropologist who I mentioned earlier; and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who left a body of notes detailing his response to Frazer's classic text, *The Golden Bough*.

Working from the early- to mid-twentieth century, several decades later than Tylor and Frazer, Malinowski pioneered a new, functionalist perspective in social anthropology which saw certain activities that might otherwise seem irrational as entirely reasonable and valuable to the extent that they serve either the psychological needs of the individual or the social needs of the group. Moreover, Malinowski sharply distinguished between magic and science, attributing these to two separate modes of engaging with reality, one sacred and the other profane (Tambiah, 2006, pp. 65-84). Separating these two modes of activity opened up the possibility of seeing magic, not as a failed attempt to master nature, but as a meaningful performance which serves to express and consolidate the emotions of the participants in beneficial ways.

At the same time that Malinowski was working, we also have a record of the notes that Wittgenstein made upon reading Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. At the core of Wittgenstein's response to the text is a rejection of Frazer's intellectualist approach which interpreted magical rites on a level of belief. "I believe", Wittgenstein wrote, "that the characteristic feature of primitive man is that he does not act from *opinions* (contrary to Frazer)" (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 137). "An error only arises", he noted, "when magic is interpreted scientifically" (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 125). To support this position, Wittgenstein highlighted the dual modes of activity identified by Malinowski. As he put it:

> The same savage, who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his

> arrow skilfully and not in effigy (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 125).

The point here, of course, is that if Frazer is correct and magic represents a failed attempt to understand and master the laws of nature, then how can it be that so-called primitive peoples demonstrate relatively sophisticated understanding of these laws in some arenas, such a building huts or hunting, but also be so naively mistaken about the same laws in other arenas, such as those involved in magical rites?

Rather than interpret magic as a failed and naive attempt to master the world around them, Wittgenstein suggested that we approach magic in relation to the capacities that we, as humans, all share. I quote:

> Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of one's beloved. That is obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and also obtains it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 123).

"Such actions", Wittgenstein explained, "may be called Instinct-actions" (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 137).

The use of the word 'instinct' here is significant, for it picks out the kind of cognitive state or level which I elucidated earlier using Gendler's account of alief: a sub-rational cognitive state that operates in parallel with, and to a large degree independently of, belief, and which guides our emotions and behaviours in ways which are automatic and often nonconscious.

Tylor and Frazer's approach saw magic, religion, and science existing on a linear, evolutionary plane, such that religion supersedes magic, and science supersedes religion in the development of human civilisation. Counter to this, Malinowski drew a distinction between two different, coexistent modes of engaging with reality—one scientific, the other magical. This is also compatible with Wittgenstein's suggestion that unlike certain practical activities such as hunting or building huts which take place on a rational level, magical practices should be understood as taking place on an instinctual level. The cases I have examined in this paper point to the way these two parallel modes of engaging with reality coexist in the mind, and not, that is, just in the mind of so-called primitive humans—that two cognitive states or levels operate in the mind to co-determine the way we respond to and engage with the world around us. Moreover, what the cases of the photographs show is that the magical, instinctual, or intuitive level of the mind—however you want to characterise it—gives rise to something valuable and important. For without this mode of engaging with reality, we simply would not cherish the photographs of people we love in the same way: they would not carry the same meaning and emotional import in our lives.

Malinowski and Wittgenstein's perspectives on magic provide, I think, compared to those of Tylor and Frazer, a much better understanding of magic as practiced in traditional cultures. Doubtless there have been, and probably still are, cases of magical rites being practiced with a firm belief in the practical efficacy of those rites. (Indeed, the theoretical account I have applied here can be used to explain the existence of such beliefs.) But in a sense, that is beside the point. Rather, what is at stake here is a deeper understanding—or misunderstanding—of magic as a whole. If we are really to understand magic, we must understand the basic human conditions of which it is an expression. As Wittgenstein put it:

> the principle according to which these practices are arranged is a much more general one than in Frazer's explanation and it is present in our own minds, so we ourselves could think up all the possibilities (Wittgenstein, 1993, p. 127).

The best way to approach and understand magic, I contend, is to do exactly that. And that is what I have aimed to do in this paper by examining a simple aspect of human experience that we can all share in—the way we feel and behave towards an image of a person we love. In doing so, I have aimed both a deeper understanding of magic, and a deeper understanding of the way we regularly engage with and respond to images.

In this paper, I have chosen, for the sake of argument, to focus on a very limited subset of images. By no means, however, do I think that the mental processes which I have been describing are restricted to these examples. By way of closing, I will suggest some related examples where the analysis I have applied here might also be especially illuminating.

It is, in fact, not hard to identify instances in visual culture where an image of a person acquires a kind of power which is not explicable in rational terms, and which clearly serves important psychological or social functions. The use of religious icons as part of worship is one obvious example. But the same processes can be seen in secular contexts as well. Iconic images of political leaders can become either powerful agents of oppression and social control, or of hope and change. Moreover, the defacing of those images can become powerful acts of resistance and liberation.

To conclude, unless we understand the capacity that we have as humans have to respond to aspects of the world around us in ways which are not explicable in terms of rationality or belief, unless, that is, we recognise and embrace magic as an important part of our lives, neither will we properly understand the magical practices of traditional cultures, nor will we properly understand the power that images have of affecting us, and the meaning and value that we attach to them.

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