The Uses of Deception: Perspectives on Magic and Science (ANT 360)

While deception usually has negative connotations, scientists and performance magicians (i.e., illusionists) use it in service of truth, justice, and entertainment. For a magician’s trick to induce doubt and delight, an audience’s attention must be misdirected; likewise, biomedicine and many other fields use deception (e.g., the placebo) as a research tool. With deception as its unifying theme, this seminar explores a number of similarities and connections between magic and science (practices that are more often treated as opposites and even antagonists). Topics include: social fictions and lying in everyday life; objectivity as a social construct (or—the relationship between truth and trust); misdirection in performance magic; legitimate and illegitimate deceptions in the sciences; the tangled histories and present day alliances of science and magic; and generally, the social uses, ethics, and politics of practices that rely for their effectiveness and value on insider/outsider distinctions sustained by deliberate disconnections between “appearance” and “reality.”

Books (available for purchase at the UStore):

ASSIGNMENTS (See Appendix 2, p. 9 below, for details)

1. Informed participation: Everyone is expected to complete the readings on time, to think about them, and come to class ready to help identify their key themes and interconnections. Confusions and insights are equally valuable and welcome. Readings marked “optional” are optional ☺.

2. Oral class presentations: Students will make brief presentations related to the readings and to their own research projects.

3. Papers and other writing assignments:  
   (a) a 3-4 pp. oral presentation write-up due on your presentation date;  
   (b) a 2 pp. project proposal due Wednesday, April 3—no extensions;  
   (c) a 2 pp. project presentation write-up due during the last class meeting;  
   (d) weekly journal entries that connect readings and personal experiences: first half due mid-term week (3/15) and second half due on Dean’s Date (see Appendix 1, p. 7 below, for details)  
   (e) a 10 pp. (excluding references) final essay due on Dean’s Date.
Discussion Topics and Reading Assignments

**Week 1 (2/6): Introductory Meeting.** Overview of course themes and assignments. Initial discussion of anthropological approaches to meaning, comparison, and translation (always attentive to sociocultural contexts). Discussion of the everyday meanings of key words like “truth”, “reality”, “appearance”, “fiction”, “illusion”, and “deception” and how we know any of this. Come to class prepared to discuss your expectations and questions about the seminar.

*Magical movie showing: “The Science of Magic”*

**Week 2 (2/13): Ordinariness of deception.** While the word “deception” has negative connotations, deceptive words and deeds are pervasive and normal in everyday life cross-culturally. We survey this terrain broadly, glancing at familiar and unfamiliar cultural landscapes, and we open a discussion of some ethical and contextual ambiguities (e.g., who is to say when a fiction is a “lie” or a “kindness” or a “literary work”?). We consider how self presentation might be a kind of “performance” and how magical performance might be a model for everyday social life.


**Week 3 (2/20): Deception in/as entertainment and education.** In performance magic and related practices in film and television (from Candid Camera to today’s reality shows) deceptions are used to fool the players or the audience. How and why do these things work—and sell—as entertainment? How have they also been used as a non-academic form of public education? And what is the relationship between these two uses? These readings raise interesting questions about realist and aesthetic modes of evaluation, not to mention questions about ethical practice.

- Philip Zimbardo (1985) Laugh where we must, be candid where we can. *Psychology Today* 18 (June): 43-47

[optional] For more on the Milgram/Funt connection, see [http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/0407.tv.51104.27.html](http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/0407.tv.51104.27.html)

*Deceptive video showing: famous Candid Camera episodes*
**Week 4 (2/27): Performance magic: the art of misdirection.** As last week’s readings suggested, performance magic is a case in point of deception as entertainment. We focus in on contemporary stage magic, paying special attention to the dynamics of “misdirection”. As you read these articles, think more generally about the ways in which secrecy is used to establish and reinforce a distinction between outsiders (e.g., audiences), “apprentices”, and insiders (expert practitioners) in other domains as well.

A magical visitor, Graham Jones, will join us this week.


**Week 5 (3/6): Rationality and relativism: magic and science in comparative perspective.** Anthropologists, historians, and philosophers have debated the existence and nature of differences between secular, scientific thinking—associated with modernity—and occult, magical thinking—associated with pre-modern or “traditional” cultures. These readings provide insights into this conventional opposition.


**Week 6 (3/13): Truth, trust, and performance in the history of science.** A historical perspective on the performative dimensions of science is offered in these readings. How does Steve Shapin’s account (that is, the author’s perspective and his substantive materials) relate to those offered in previous weeks? Then compare that with a canonical contemporary statement—from the native’s point of view—of what “science” is, thinking about your own experience in sciences courses.


**MIDTERM BREAK: no class March 20**

**Week 7 (3/27): Deceptions exposed.** Reading about and comparing questionable fiction (is it a “lie” or is it “literature”?) and questionable science (how do we distinguish the visionaries from the cranks?) enables us to think about assessment. Distinctions between facts and fictions of various sorts are negotiated in social (i.e., public) acts of evaluation—and—decisions and arguments over whether something is good or bad depend on agreements over what it is that’s being assessed. How are the ambiguities sorted out? How do distinguishing and evaluating fact, fiction, and fraud in literary practice compare with distinguishing real and fraudulent science? Recall earlier readings on experts and apprentices, and on trust, truth, and performance. In this context, consider the history of lie detection.

*A journalistic guest, Michael Lemonick, will expose deceptions today.*


[optional] To compare the Frey controversy with a case of journalistic fraud, see: [http://www.slate.com/id/2082741](http://www.slate.com/id/2082741)


[Please review ethical commentary:] National Academy of Science (2004) *On Being a Scientist*


A trustworthy visitor will join us this week.

**Week 8 (4/3): Science and entertainment magic (1).** Having teased apart some of the important threads, we consider the historical entanglement of science and performance magic—performance magicians as scientists, scientists as performers and magicians, and both as instrument innovators—from two points of view. This week, Fred Nadis blurs the boundary between secular and “real” magic and science by focusing on the historical staying power of a desire for “wonder”, ambivalently or enthusiastically embraced in popular science demonstrations.

Proposals due in class!

Fred Nadis (2005) *Wonder Shows*


Magical movie showing: “The Magic of Méliès” (part 1)
Week 9 (4/10): Science and entertainment magic (2). Continuing last week’s discussion of the entanglement of science and performance magic, we consider the somewhat different perspective of Jim Steinmeyer, a stage magic insider. With a focus on the lives and times of significant Golden Age innovators and performers, the emphasis this week is on secular magic as an agent of modernism and skepticism.

Jim Steinmeyer (2004) *Vanishing the Elephant*


Magical movie showing: “The Magic of Méliès” (part 2)

Week 10 (4/17): Deception as method in biomedical and behavioral science.

Deception is used as a method in biomedical and behavioral sciences, fields in which research subjects are embedded in researcher-controlled contexts. First, read several short articles on biomedical research: an influential general statement and others on the use of the placebo in clinical trials. Then read James Korn’s history of deception in the creation of a scientific social psychology. Pay special attention to his explication of experimental realism, and to the rationales and ethics of research deceptions, making connections both to today’s other readings and to earlier ones (e.g., McCarthy).


James H. Korn *Illusions of Reality: The History of Deception in Social Psychology*

Week 11 (4/24): Deception as method in ethnography.

In ethnographic fieldwork, researchers are embedded in subject-controlled settings where, on one hand, it is culturally appropriate (therefore ethical) for them to attempt to “fit in”. On the other hand, the better they do fit in, the more they may seem to vanish (as a “fly on the wall”), rendering informants unaware of their presence as observers even when researchers are up front about what they are doing. While their tradition of fieldwork in colonized and marginalized communities encourages anthropologists to disclose their identities and share their work with their interlocutors, a contrastive tradition of domestic social
criticism often authorizes ethnographic sociologists and investigative journalists to go undercover. In anthropological and sociological fieldwork, who are the relevant agents and how do their different interests shape their respective “fronts” (to use Goffman’s term)? Pulling together several course threads, what are readers/audiences/publics expected to know in/about different fields of specialized knowledge? How is expertise established and performed in these public contexts? How does the “realism” of ethnographic fieldwork compare with the sorts of realism enacted in Week 10 readings?


Week 12 (5/1): Research Project Presentations
This week, members of the class will present their research-in-progress.

Presentation write-ups due in class!

Final papers and the second half of the journals are due at 5 pm on Dean’s Date, May 15, 2007
Appendix 1: Journal Ideas

Beginning with Week 2, part of each seminar meeting will be devoted to reading and discussing excerpts from your ethnographic journal. The following are just suggestions, some being more closely related to the weekly readings than others. You’re encouraged to come up with other ideas and to consult with one another as you develop your journaling skills. Follow up course readings/topics with everyday life observations or memory-based reflections; do an online search (collecting useful links and writing a synopsis of what you discovered); and view and discuss relevant performances, videos and other media.

1. Pay attention to how the people you know use the words “know” and “believe” (and their equivalents): ‘I believe you’, ‘if what you say is true, then…’, ‘To tell the truth…’, etc. Collect several examples of each and be sure to note/describe their relevant (institutional/situational) contexts as best you can.

2. Collect “funny stories” (‘did you hear any funny stories recently?’), rumors, or gossip—or follow up on an item of common knowledge that you used to think was ‘true’ but have since learned was only a campus ‘legend’. Try to track down sources of the accounts; see if you can find out what is ‘true’ and what is ‘fiction’ (or in some sense not true) about it. Feel free to discuss with your informants in what ways they consider their accounts true or not true and, beyond that, what their criteria are for evaluating the stories they hear and tell: to what extent is truth value relevant, and what are the other relevant standards?

3. Pay attention to everyday deceptions, misdirection, half-truths, and so on, developing an awareness of their contextual circumstances (that is, work to situate your descriptions rather than taking them out of context and rendering them, in that way, generic). In each case, discuss their social rationales, effects, and/or meanings and their ethics/politics.

4. As a subset of this exercise, think about your own “impression management”: the ways in which you alter your self presentation in different social situations, not always deliberately, to make an impression on other people. Develop a working typology of these qualified truths/untruths and/or an argument (with examples) about why such a typology would be misleading.

5. “Definition of the situation”: be alert to the ways in which the definitions of social situations are argued over or negotiated (in your own experience, or in stories your friends tell). Practice describing social “situations” in ways that highlight the extent to which (and how) they emerge in interaction (rather than being “givens” or facts already “out there” for people to encounter). Recognizing that some situations are more clearly negotiated while others are more clearly pre-structured, what patterns emerge in your investigation?
6. Chose a reality TV show (or the equivalent) to watch. Write a journal entry of about one page describing the kinds of deception employed; discuss their functions (and/or apparent aims) in making the show entertaining. Assess the “effectiveness” of deception in making the show entertaining; also discuss their politics and ethics. Follow this up by discussing “what’s entertaining (and why)?” about a relevant show that you and your friends have seen together.

7. Using an online database (e.g., ProQuest) or search engine, choose one major print media source like the *NYTimes* and a limited time period (e.g., one month), and search for some/all of the following key words: 1) magic, magical, magician (and related); 2) science, scientific, scientist (and related); 3) deception, deceptive, deceit, misdirection, decoy (and related: e.g., appearance) and their opposites (reality, real, actual). Analyze your results, paying attention to meanings in context, and providing examples and citations.

8. Watch recent movies with stage magic themes (e.g., *The Illusionist*, *The Prestige*). Review them, comparing how they represent illusionists and the “culture” (values, beliefs, practices) of modern magic. To push this further, find older films about or by stage magicians and review them comparatively with similar questions in mind.

9. Nose around online and elsewhere for sources illustrating how performance magic is used as a contemporary means of science advocacy, and/or as a means of unmasking fraudulent paranormal claims (e.g., children’s books like Freidhoffer, *Magic Tricks, Science Facts*; events and publications associated with *The Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer*; shows available online and off, like *Magic: The Science of Illusion*). Develop journal entries reporting on and evaluating what you find: for example, how do contemporary skeptics handle the kinds of science/magic ambiguities discussed by our readings? Pushing deeper, investigate directly the sources being unmasked. This is the tip of a very large iceberg: something like ‘contemporary public science literacy’ and ‘the sociocultural contexts of science in America’ to which Nadis, During, and others of our readings allude.

10. Explore the often blurry distinction between fraudulent (unethical) work vs. incompetent (poor quality) work: how do professionals of different kinds (journalists, scientists, etc) tell the difference? Consider making an appointment with a professor with whom you are already familiar to discuss how the distinction is made in their field.

11. Volunteer for a psychology experiment, which may or may not involve deception. Write about your experience afterwards paying special attention to how the experiment was explained to you beforehand and to the post-experiment explanation or “debriefing” (if any). Or, see if any of your friends are taking an introductory psych course or are majoring in psychology: if they are willing, ask them to describe their experimental experiences. If they cannot do that, respect that restriction while inquiring into its rationale.
12. How common is performance magic as a hobby among Princeton students? What about faculty? What about family members? See if your friends, or friends of friends are magicians or have dabbled in magical illusionism. Develop brief oral histories of the folks you discover: how did they get interested? How and with whom did they develop their skills? See if you can explore other 360 course themes in these discussions.

Appendix 2: ASSIGNMENTS

Grading in ANT 360 is on a point system. “Participation” is worth 25 points: 18 points based simply on attendance (11-12 meetings) plus a 7 point evaluation of the quality of your contribution to cooperative, substantive discussion. Written components of the course are worth 75 points (as indicated below).

1. Presentations

A. Readings presentation: During class, students initiate class discussions of the readings: each of you will make two presentations but only one of them need be written up (see 2a below). Presentations ought to be 5 minutes long (you can read your write-up, or just talk from your notes). Your presentations ought to (1) orient the discussion by means of a brief summary of the main points raised by the readings’ authors, and (2) set up a question or issue for the class to discuss together. Set up an issue by drawing connections between the current week’s readings (or between those readings and a previous week’s selection) and then taking a stand, articulating a confusion or frustration, or exploring an implication. Whatever you do, be specific and focus on something that interested you. You are welcome to develop handouts or to use the chalkboard.

B. Project presentation (last week of classes): This will be an opportunity to give and receive commentary and advice concerning your final paper project, and to make connections among the class projects. You are welcome to use all or part of your presentation in your final paper.

2. Written assignments (No email attachments: hard copies of your written assignments can be submitted in class or in the Ant 360 drop off box in the anthropology department, 116 Aaron Burr.)

A. Readings presentation write-up (10 point evaluation): A 3-4 double-spaced pp. commentary on the readings related to one of your oral presentation is due on the presentation day. You may use subsequent journal entries as media for incorporating what you learned from the general discussion that day: clarifying, modifying, or elaborating the issues and questions you raised in class. You are not expected to do
additional research beyond the class readings for that day. But you are certainly welcome
to draw on your journaling to make sense of the readings and vice versa.

B. Project proposal (5 points: full credit for being on time): A 2 double-spaced pp.
proposal for your final project research is due in class (or before) Wednesday, April
3, 2007 (no extensions): please consult me if you’d like suggestions or if you’d like to
run your ideas by me first. Provide a 1-2 double-spaced pp. description of your proposed
topic together with a 1 page list of sources (library, internet, and other).

If you hope to do interviewing or fieldwork, please first see me!

C. Project presentation write-up (5 point evaluation): A 2 double-spaced pp. write-
up, presented during the last class meeting, describing the project you are working on
both substantively (“what?”) and methodologically (“how?”), aimed to elicit constructive
criticism and advice.

D. Ethnographic journal (25 point evaluation): During the semester you will keep an
ethnographic journal, to be turned in during class on Tuesday, March 13 and on
Dean’s Date: your journal may be handwritten or word processed. The aim of journaling
is to connect readings and project research with everyday experiences of diverse sorts.
Sociocultural anthropology takes “life” seriously as an ethnographic object: something
worthy of interpretation, comparative analysis, and critical reflection. Journaling is one
way to develop your “ethnographic attentiveness”; but it isn’t easy to do well. It will take
some practice to apply what you are learning from the readings and classroom discussion
to your wider experience and, conversely, to bring “real life” experience to bear on your
“book-learning”. The challenge is to make implicit connections and gut-feelings about
relevance explicit and conscious: and therefore available for analysis. Memories,
conversations, observations, media encounters—even schoolwork itself, viewed in fresh
ways—are all potentially grist for journal writing. Each weekly seminar meeting will
include a discussion of seminar members’ journal entries for that week.

E. Final paper (30 points): The final paper for this course is due on Dean’s Date
(Tuesday, May 15). It ought to be 10 pages, double-spaced (standard font size;
excluding images and references cited): for citation format, check pp. 7-14 of the
American Anthropological Association style guide available on the ANT 360 Blackboard
site and at http://www.aaanet.org/pubs/style_guide.pdf As noted above, you should feel
free to use all or part of your final week presentation in the final essay.

All final essays are required to engage a sampling of the semester’s themes and
readings explicitly: please treat class meetings as a series of working-group discussions
that will support your individual research. You are also welcome, but not required, to
incorporate examples and insights from your ethnographic journal. Your paper—in any
of the following formats (or another of your own design)—may be oriented around or
incorporate interviewing and other forms of fieldwork (beyond the ethnographic
attentiveness recorded in your ANT 360 journal writing); it may also be oriented around
the analysis of media sources (that is, you may draw on print media and theater,
television, and film). Whatever sources you use and format you adopt, **your final paper is required to engage a sampling of the syllabus readings in a substantive manner.** Please consult me in developing your ideas and your sources!

**Final Paper Topic/Format Suggestions**

1. **Review a literature:** Explore and discover a “literature” (that is, a set of writings that develop or criticize one another’s case materials, insights, and arguments)—within or outside of anthropology—relating to the readings and issues discussed over the course of the semester. Write an essay describing and evaluating this literature, drawing out its implications for course readings and themes. (You are also welcome to consider literatures that engage other media—e.g., film, television, or performance; you aren’t restricted simply to academic sources.)

   To discover a “literature”, you might begin with one interesting, provocative book or article, moving outwards by 1) exploring key works engaged by the author(s) (using the initial source’s bibliography selectively, and 2) by investigating works that cite and discuss your initial source (using, for example, the Social Science Citation Index). To uncover connections, ask yourself to what conversations is this work a response (and vice versa: how was this work responded to)? Insofar as the sources you discover belong to different disciplinary traditions—e.g., anthropology; science or performance studies; social psychology; historiography, etc.—think about how the styles of research that different authors employ shape what they are able or unable to say.

2. **Redesign the syllabus:** an argument for the inclusion of set(s) of readings (or other media) not yet on the syllabus. If you would like to write an essay redesigning the syllabus, you would need to come up with one or more topical units with specific readings: discuss the key themes of each reading, how those readings (through their themes and emphases) might work together—what issues they pose for discussion as a result of their contrasts and partial overlaps, etc.—and the challenges an instructor might face in helping students to make sense of them.

   The essay would also need to address questions like: what would be removed to make space for the new additions and why? How would you arrange or sequence the new material and why? What kinds of difference would the new readings make for our understanding of other key issues raised in the course as a whole? That is, thinking about your new unit(s) in relation to the larger context, make as explicit as you can the rationale behind your new emphases (your sense of what is important and how these things are connected).

3. **Synthesize and critically reflect on an important course theme:** use syllabus topics and headnotes as springboards for your essay. Please consult me before the April 3 proposal deadline if you would like suggestions.

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**The final paper is due on Dean’s Date (May 15) along with the second half of your journal; please place a hard copy (no emails!) in the course box located in the main Anthropology office, 116 Aaron Burr Hall. Please note: Dean’s Date extensions require your dean’s official approval as well as mine, so plan ahead!**