

# QUERYING MAGIC AS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITY:

## THEODOR ADORNO AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITARIAN IRRATIONALISM IN THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

ROBERT MCGRAY  
BROCK UNIVERSITY  
ST. CATHARINES, ONTARIO, CANADA

### *Abstract*

This essay investigates the resurgence of what the Western Culture Industry refers to as *magic* – a broad matrix of entertaining activities that range from card tricks, sleight of hand, and theatrical deception. Specifically, this research queries the possibility of these practices as they are aimed as critical educational tools: That is to say, the possibilities of these activities to engage us in activities that allow us to illuminate broader structures of power in our lives. By reading these activities through Theodor Adorno’s concerns about the occult and irrationalism, specifically in his treatise “The Stars Down to Earth,” I argue that it is the reliance on the ongoing tradition of authoritarian irrationalism in magic that poses significant obstacles for critical pedagogues. These obstacles revolve around the tradition of allowing someone (the magician), or something (the culture industry), to define problems to be solved.

*Keywords: Theodor Adorno, Magic, Critical Pedagogy, Authoritarian Irrationalism*

## INTRODUCTION

In Mark Wilson's (2002 [1975]) seminal overview of magic, he notes that in addition to the teaching of magic as a skill, "many professional teachers have added magic to their course curriculums to entertainingly deliver educational material, emphasize particular learning points, maintain their students' attention in the classroom, or establish attendance-building, extra-curricular after-school activities" (p. 15). Indeed, it is not only teachers that have attempted to harness magic as an educational tool, there is a whole industry developed to facilitate this process. One can easily find many books and resources that attempt to use magic to teach. But can it be so simple? Undoubtedly, any exercise can require participants to learn; it is the type of learning that becomes a matter of importance. For example, the classic Freirean (1970) concern is that while people may learn highly technical information in a setting where information is perceived to be deposited or banked inside their heads, the consequence is that participants have the capacity to name and address their own relevant problems depleted. With this concern at the front of mind, this paper queries how the practices of educational magic enable or constrain principles of critical pedagogy.

To accomplish this task, I turn to the work of a critical theorist associated with the German dialectical tradition of philosophy — Theodor Adorno (1973, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). The reason for this is twofold. First, Adorno's work inspired and built a trajectory for many contemporary critical theorists. Second, Adorno's own research attempted to understand the connection of broad social attractions to the mystical — his most explicit venture in this sociological vein is his essay "The Stars Down to Earth" (2002a). It is in "The Stars Down to Earth" (*TSDTE*) where Adorno attempts to deconstruct powerful social psychology of the popular astrology column of *The Los Angeles Times* in the 1950s. His argument was that the power of the column, and indeed of the genre, was that it leveraged a subtle, influential, and fun aspect of authoritarian irrationalism. The concept of authoritarian irrationalism is meant to describe the ways in which people grant the power of anti-rationality to guide their lives. While enjoyable, this irrationalism was a masterful social psychology that gave the illusion of autonomy,

but built dependency on the culture industry. With this in mind, I use this concept to investigate how magic, a fun and unserious activity sometimes used for teaching, is built on this tradition.

This essay is divided into three main sections. First, I review the work of Theodor Adorno as it relates to his critique of popular culture and irrationalism, specifically authoritarian irrationalism. In this review, I detail the philosophical trajectory in which Adorno is situated—as a provocative intercessional loadstar of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Second, I detail the scope of pedagogical activities classified as magic. To help with this classification of the field of magic, I also detail a few types of popular activities that comprise the current activities found in magic. Finally, in the third section I attempt to understand the ways in which magic, as a pedagogical tool, enables or constrains critical pedagogy. To conclude, I argue that while contemporary educational practices of magic are non-congruous from the examples of astrology that were the concrete examples in which Adorno based his research, there are still significant hurdles posed for the use of magic as a tool for critical education. Specifically, I note that there are three vestiges of authoritarian irrationalism which magic as an educational activity has yet to substantively address. These three vestiges revolve around the inherent properties of magic to build dependency on the culture industry to define educational problems.

## THEODOR ADORNO, FRANKFURT SCHOOL CRITICAL THEORY, AND “THE STARS DOWN TO EARTH”

Theodor Adorno remains one of the most influential and controversial theorists of the Frankfurt School, a group of intellectuals committed to Neo-Marxist thought.<sup>1</sup> Adorno, through the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, helped to guide a new generation of Critical Theory in Europe. While his work is notable for his advances in musicology (Adorno, 2002b), he also inspired a new wave of dialectical philosophy (Adorno, 1973). In addition, Adorno (1991) along with Max Horkheimer (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997) developed an intricate argument about the nature in which capitalism simultaneously creates and feeds desire—a process driven by what they refer to

as the culture industry.

While much of Adorno's work inspired many different intellectual trajectories, the concept that I focus on in this essay is the aspect of authoritarian irrationalism; it is a reoccurring concept in the work of Adorno, and indeed the Frankfurt School in general. What, then, is authoritarian irrationalism? Stephen Crook, the editor of Routledge's publication of *TSDTE*—a small collection of Adorno's essays on the irrational and culture which include the essay of the same name—aids in piecing together Adorno's thoughts on the subject. He notes that irrationalism, in Adorno's time as is the case now, is not non-rational belief but, more properly, anti-rationalism, which he characterises as “a curious intertwining of dependence upon and hostility to science and technology” (Crook, 2002, p. 2). Irrational communities, such as religious fundamentalists, he notes, “develop alongside and make use of the latest communications technologies and the latest findings in science” (p. 2) to further a project of anti-rationalism. Adorno himself notes that “Irrationality is not necessarily a force operating outside the range of rationality: it may result from the processes of rational self preservation ‘run amuck’” (2002a, p. 47). In this way, irrationalism maintains a grasp upon society as it manifests as a way to ensure a group identity through a critique of reason, rationality, and science using these very tools. He further describes the cultural condition of irrationality as a type of “twilight zone between reason and unconscious urges” (p. 53). As such, irrationalism can have wide spread implications for concepts like science education. This discussion draws to mind films such as *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006), a film about the Christian fundamental home schooling movement which philosophers of education, such as David Waddington, use in introductory classes to highlight the antinomy of using a conception of science for fundamental religious justification.

The workings of irrationalism prove to be a complex system with many rewards and sacrifices needed to exist. Adorno is keen to focus on the aspect of self-preservation as it relates to beliefs and identity needs. Surely, though, one of the more intriguing aspects of contemporary irrationalism is that the balancing act is maintained between rational thought and anti-rationalism. Adorno describes this complex-

ity when detailing the nature of the astrology column in his study:

the implicit irrationality of the column's claim to be inspired by the stars cannot be dismissed in as much as it sets the stage for its effects and fulfils a highly significant function in dealing with the anxieties and difficulties of those at whom the column is directed. (p. 57)

And, later,

The aid and comfort given by the merciless stars is tantamount to the idea that only he who behaves rationally, i.e., achieves complete control over his inner and outer life, has any chance of doing justice to the irrational contradictory requirements of the existent by adjustment. Thus, the discrepancy between the rational and irrational aspects of the column is expressive of a tension inherent in social reality itself. 'To be rational' means not questioning irrational conditions, but to make the best of them from the viewpoint of one's private interests. (p. 58)

The complex relationship between irrationalism and related rationalism is key to not only understanding how contemporary agents are lured to cultural products, such as astrology columns: Irrationalism sells itself as an escape from rigid and de-humanizing rationalism. Adorno, however, was quick to highlight that there is not as much difference as what is sold to us.

The *authoritarian* aspect of authoritarian irrationalism is a bit more straightforward. This part of the term refers to the ways in which irrationalism is implicated in forming of hegemony—leadership and power. As such, in authoritarian irrationalism, the conditions of power are met through a drive to hostility of rationality and science. The ends and manifestations of the authoritarian aspect in authoritarian irrationalism vary in different historical and political circumstances. It is, in fact, worthwhile repeating Adorno's previous phrase that irrationalism is heavily implicated in "self preservation 'run amuck'" (p. 47). Considering this, the authoritarian component can feed into the psychoses of self-preservation, be it in an individual or group, and offer the promise of stability. In cases such as these, science, technology, or reason need not be an actual threat that causes groups to be drawn to

authoritarian irrationalism, as it simply needs to be perceived—consciously or unconsciously—as one. To be clear, there are many diverse reasons and justifications for irrationalism in contemporary culture.

The fear for Adorno was not solely irrationalism, but the ways in which irrationalism supports a political project of fascism. This, given the historical context of Adorno's work, is an important concern as it relates to manifestations of anti-Semitism. In Adorno's time his work was a political project to combat the powerful rise of Nazi Fascism, although his critique is not limited to the specific German-led political movement. Consider that when *TSDTE* was written, it was about the Astrology section of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1952-53. In this way, *TSDTE* illuminates the curious and disturbing connections shared by the cultural psychology of fascism and capitalist economies—both leveraging the aspect of *dependency* in authoritarian irrationalism. I will return to this point.

Stephen Crook (2002) elaborates by distinguishing three main characteristics of Adorno's conception of authoritarian irrationalism. First, he notes that it "is an integral part of enlightened modernity" (p. 3). By this he means that it is a consequence of modern life and not a "historical relic, unintended consequence or marginal other" (p. 3). Second, Crook notes that authoritarian irrationalism and its connection to modernity is found in the psychoanalytic "processes of cultural, economic, political and social modernization" (p. 3). That is to say, within these vast, but specific, processes, there nurtures a condition which gives rise to the phenomenon of authoritarian irrationalism. Finally, the third characteristic is most salient for the discussion I engage in concerning contemporary magic pedagogy. It is, as Crook comments, that "in their common manipulation of the dependency needs of typically late-modern personalities there is a direct continuity between authoritarian irrationalist propaganda and the everyday products of the 'culture industry'" (p. 3).

The three points described by Crook obviously build in complexity and specificity to the phenomenon. This is one reason that I will focus the discussion in the third part of this essay on the aspect of *dependency*, specifically as it relates to educational activities and the challenge this brings to critical pedagogy.

Also, one of the salient arguments that Adorno elaborates in *TS-DTE* is the way in which activities such as astrology, and I would argue magic as an educational activity, revel in their role as fun or unserious activities. That is to say, people often explain that while they read the astrological forecasts, or participate in magic, they know that it is not really magical or supernatural. These explanations distance the participant from beliefs that are no longer held to be true. Adorno, as a cultural critic, helped to develop the concepts in Cultural Studies and Psychoanalytic Theory that interrogated the way that unserious pleasurable activities (*jouissance*) actually have powerful consequences. As he notes,

a certain abstractness enveloping the whole realm of the commercialized occult may well be concomitant with a substratum of disbelief and skepticism, the suspicion of phoniness so deeply associated with modern big time irrationality. This, of course, has historical reasons. The modern occultist movements, including astrology, are more or less artificial rehashes of old and by-gone superstitions, susceptibility for which is kept awake by certain social and psychological conditions while the resuscitated creeds remain basically discordant with today's universal state of enlightenment. The absence of ultimate "seriousness" which, incidentally, makes such phenomena by no means less serious with regard to their social implications—is as significant of our time as the emergence of secondary occultism *per se*. (p. 49)

As such, it is important to note that authoritarian irrationalism only occurs in serious circumstances. In fact, Adorno's larger critique of the culture industry is that this irrationalism revels in the dependency of the ridiculous. This concept is articulated best by an inheritor of Adorno's intellectual tradition, Slavoj Žižek (1998, 2001, 2006). Žižek (1998) describes an interesting, but common, scenario to demonstrate how powerful unserious beliefs can be: he focuses on the myth-structure of Santa Claus. He states that the cultural belief and affects of the myth are not a direct result of children having a serious belief in the magical powers of Santa. Rather, the enduring power of the myth is that both parents and children know this is not a serious belief, but we maintain the myth because we do not want to disappoint the other. As

a result, we enable a complex and powerful capitalist economy around the myth structure.

## THE RESURGENCE OF MAGIC AS A PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITY

Allow me to begin this section on the resurgence of magic by describing a short trick. It is one that I have used with many classes to begin thinking about the possibility of critical thinking and our limits of imagination. The trick I detail here is found in Robert Mandelberg's (2005) book, but even he notes that the structure of the trick is common and can be found in many variations online.<sup>2</sup> This particular trick is referred to as a mind reading trick. Essentially, it evokes the illusion of free choice so that the participant is guided through a series of steps, which has a high probability of returning a standard answer. Mandelberg calls the trick "The Power of Nine" (p. 17) after a mathematical sequence in the trick that I will discuss later. He details eight steps in the trick in the following passage:

- *Step 1:* Pick a number between 1 and 10.
- *Step 2:* Multiply that number by 9.
- *Step 3:* Now you have a two-digit number. Add those numbers together.
- *Step 4:* From that total, subtract 5.

With me so far?

- *Step 5:* Take that number and find its corresponding letter. What do I mean by that? This is easy:
  - 1=A
  - 2=B
  - 3=C
  - 4=D
  - 5=E

And so forth. Hang in there; we're almost done.

- *Step 6:* Now think of a country that begins with that letter.



- *Step 7:* Think of the LAST letter of that country. Now think of an animal that starts with that letter.
- *Step 8:* Think of the LAST letter of that animal. Now think of a fruit that starts with that letter.

Got it?

Okay. Are you, perchance, possibly, perhaps thinking of...

*A kangaroo eating an orange in Denmark?* (Mandelberg, 2005, p. 18)

While this exercise is marketed as a mind-reading performance, the explanation reveals how it is likely that people will come up with *Denmark*, *Kangaroo*, and *Orange* as answers. While there is a chance that the person will perform the steps correctly and not return the three answers the same way, this is relatively small. In the description to the trick, Mandelberg describes the risk factor of the trick not working as low—he rates the risk as two out of five; five being high risk. So how does this work?

The first key point is step number three. Up until this point, people can choose any number they want; the magician does not know what this is. It is when they add the digits together, after they have multiplied by nine, that the first mathematical law takes place: the sum of the two digits which are the product of any number between one and ten multiplied by nine is, in fact, nine.<sup>3</sup> As Mandelberg points out, the possible products to add together in step number three are: 18, 27, 36, 45, 54, 63, 72, and 81 – all of which, when added together, give the sum of nine. As such, when we carry on with steps four and five, we always end up with “D” as our letter. The rest of the trick then revolves around the number of options we have linguistically, and cognitively, to name a forced sequence of objects. Now that everyone participating in the trick has settled, however unknowingly, upon the letter D, Mandelberg notes that of the options to name a country, there are four options: “Denmark, Dominican Republic, Dominica, Djibouti” (p. 19).<sup>4</sup> The fact that people are most likely to conjure Denmark in their minds is surely a consequence of many factors: country size, prominence, and, not unrelated, Eurocentric power.<sup>5</sup> The second step offers a similar choice in coming up with an animal that starts with the letter

“K.” Again, people can summon kangaroo quite easily with, as Mandelberg notes, a possible danger of an answer of a koala. Finally, if the participant has gotten this far, the chance they name a fruit that starts with O as an orange is quite high: the options here are quite limited, and oranges have a significant presence globally.

There are a number of intriguing aspects about this trick. If done in a group, it draws our attention to the limits of mental creativity. Even as many people figure out that all participants will end up with “D” as a letter, it is unsettling to witness the homogeneity of answers. Also, it is worth noting that many people who did not come up with the standard three answers will admit that they had to work hard to identify other answers.

While this trick provides an opportunity to interrogate the capacity of our minds, there are other ventures which make the connection between magic and pedagogy much more explicit. Former contributor to *Scientific American*, Martin Gardner (1956, 1997), does tremendous, and extensive, work to link the patterns and laws of math and science to magic. His many publications, which often stem from his periodical writing, attempt to provide the reader with an appetite for how the workings of certain tricks rely on science. Echoing the commitment to using magic as a tool for understanding science, Loris Bree’s (2003) *Kids’ Magic Secrets: Simple Magic Tricks & Why They Work*, notes upfront that the tricks in magic are not dependant on a magic wand, but work “because of a scientific or mathematical model” (p. 8).

One of the best examples specifically linking pedagogy and magic is found in a book by Uwe Schenk and Michael Sondermeyer (2000). In this book, the authors devote an introductory chapter of their *Performing Magic for Children* to defining the relationship between magic and pedagogy. The chapter is somewhat rare in the level of introspection about the relationship between teaching and magic, while many resources only make the link between learning and magic, Schenk and Sondermeyer open their book by elaborating on the specific connection. Interestingly enough, Schenk and Sondermeyer also detail a brief history of the practice of magic for children. They note that while the first magic for children books appeared in 1928, “as early as 1919, Herbert M. Richmond’s *Magic as an Aid to Preaching to Children*

was published; as the title suggests, it gives advice on the use of magic tricks as an aid to worship for children” (p. 9). Incidentally, Schenk and Sondermeyer also note that the real beginning of publications on magic for children start to develop in the mid-Forties onward—roughly the same era Adorno based his study in *TSDTE*.

It is important to note that the second author of the book, Michael Sondermeyer, describes one of the few studies involving magic and education. Sondermeyer conducted some research as part of his academic study in Germany. They note that in 1977 he, “set a pedagogical goal of making children understand that I cannot do real magic, that everything I do has a rational explanation” (p. 11). To accomplish this task, he organized three groups of kindergarten-aged children. All three groups were asked to draw a magician, two of the groups then went on to see a magic show, and finally, one of those groups was also then taught a magic trick and talked about the three steps they went through. The next day, all three groups were asked, again, to draw what they felt a magician looked like and given a questionnaire.

The results confirmed Sondermeyer’s hypothesis that, “the children who attended both the performance and the extra session gave a more realistic assessment of a magician than the children in the two other groups” (p. 12). Significantly, it was the second group, the group that witnessed the magic show but did not go on to an extra session to learn a trick, who believed most strongly in magic—even more so than the control group which did not see the magic show with the magician’s explanation that magic is not real. Schenk and Sondermeyer claim that in this study “although the magician explains that he cannot really perform magic, that everything is trickery, his impressive, visible demonstration of the opposite refutes the explanation. Thus, we can readily conclude that a disclaimer—something that many performers include in their opening monolog—has no effect on preschool children” (p. 12). Considering the previous insights of Adorno and Žižek on the nature of ideology, I might suggest that these disclaimers might have broader implications in the propagation of ideology and power.

It is also important, however, to identify differences in the types of activities that comprise what is conceived and packaged as magic—not all, of course, are the same. Indeed, many of the tricks that are

aimed at children, or as educational tricks, fall into other related, but distinct categories of magic. In addition to tricks identified as mind-reading, such as the one described in the first of this section, there are, of course, a plethora of card tricks. While many of these can include tricks that utilize sleight of hand and misdirection in shuffling the cards, the tricks closest to educational tools are those known as *self-working* card tricks (see Fulves [1976, 2011] for extensive details on variations of self-working card tricks). The term self-working refers to the fact that once the deck has been organized in a certain manner, and certain rules about how the deck should be shuffled or handled are adhered to, the trick is organizational and needs no manipulation by the magician to make it work. As such, organizational, scientific, and mathematical principles allow these tricks to work. It is no accident, then, that these types of tricks are most seen as most eligible for educational purposes.

In addition, there are a whole bevy of magic-based educational products that fall into the realm of *prop tricks*. Prop tricks are those that require a specific prop for the trick to work. As such, they cannot be performed in an impromptu manner, but require a specific device to complete the trick. It is also important to note that these different types of tricks have significantly different relationships to the culture industry. Considering this, it should come as no surprise that there is no shortage of prop magic packages that can be purchased as educational tools. Prop magic will often retail at a significantly higher price than, say, books on magic. It is in the realm of prop magic sold in stores that merges four curious ideas: magic, experiential learning, science education, and capitalism. The link to science education is often made by the packaging of simple experiments designed to explain specific properties. Take, for example, the magic packages made by the company 4M Industrial Development Limited under their Kidz Labs Fun Science Products label. On one of the packages for their Science Magic products, they follow with the subtitle, “is it magic or is it science?” and eventually with the claim that “you will discover that MAGIC is all about science.” In another package, the John Adams line of Action Science products even names one of their packages as “Science is Magic.” It must be asked what difference, however subtle, discursive links

between science-as-magic, the magic of science, and even the premise of connecting science and magic together have? Surely the blurring of the discursive lines between science and magic are anything but accidental. Adorno's concerns for the ways in which authoritarian irrationalism utilizes science for a project of anti-rationalism should be reconsidered here: what are the consequences—other than profit—for linking magic and science?

As we have seen in this section, there are a number of attempts to merge the realms of pedagogy and magic. It should be noted that it is not in question that many children find magic an intriguing and engaging way to learn. As such, examples of magic as pedagogy such as described by Gardner or Schenk and Sondermeyer in providing education patterns of math and science behind certain tricks are not in question about using magic as a method to learn certain facts or patterns. What is in question, however, is the possibility for magic to disavow the historical trajectory of authoritarian irrationalism and engage children in critical pedagogy—an act that breaks the dependency of the culture industry to define the problems we scurry to find solutions to. Notwithstanding Schenk and Sondermeyer and Gardner's uses of magic in engaging specific science principals, in the next section I posit three specific hurdles between magic and critical pedagogy that arise from the tradition of authoritarian irrationalism.

## THE POSSIBILITY OF MAGIC AS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITARIAN IRRATIONALISM

I have attempted to illustrate some of the interesting and entertaining examples of using magic for education in the last section. There are, however, three vestiges in contemporary practices of magic that still manifest from the historical connections to authoritarian irrationalism. I highlight these three aspects as they summon the spectres of Adorno's critique of astrological practices enabled by the culture industry of the last century and continuing on today. As such, they should not only be read as a barrier to using magic as critical pedagogy, but also for their broad social implications of the culture industry. At best, these characteristics are lingering ghosts of irrationalism that

can actualize into unintended results. At worst, they remain as beguiling barriers to critical pedagogy that feed anti-intellectualism and authoritarian irrationalist thought. Either way, I highlight these vestiges as dependency-instilling barriers. They are:

- A Secretive Epistemology of Magic and the Gendered Implications

Consider the passage from Marc Lemezma's (2011) book called *Mind Magic: Extraordinary Tricks to Mystify, Baffle and Entertain* where three rules for magicians approaching the text are described. The first two rules are: (a) to practice, and (b) to never to repeat a trick to an audience. The third rule is to "never reveal your methods to anyone other than other magicians" (p. 93). Interestingly, he continues to note that the reader might find this odd, as he is revealing methods in his own book. Lemezma writes that he does not violate this rule as "to fully understand these tricks and their working requires you to read the book and pay it some significant attention. This means you are interested enough to qualify as a magician" (p. 93). Lemezma is not alone in this secretive aspect of magic. In fact, it is not uncommon for magic books and products to stress the secretive nature of the subject. Some, like Lemezma's, even come with rules about maintaining the secrets. Undoubtedly, these types of discourse convey the mystery and intrigue of traditional magic shows.

One of the specific concerns for education is that the ideology of secret knowledge, I would argue, is in the realm of the epistemic, and not, say, metaphysical or ontological as magic would be conceived of in the past. That is to say, most would think of magic as a manifestation of power of knowledge, rather than a mystical power of being. This is not to suggest that the categories of epistemology, metaphysics, and ontology are mutually exclusive, but that they do have distinct properties. As such, it is important to ask what consequences—serious or not—the secret knowledge of magic has for a field concerned with the epistemological, such as education.

To trouble this point further, this secretive epistemology not only posits that certain knowledge is exclusive and subject to passing certain tests—however silly—but it cannot be ignored that magic has

a gendered history. By this I refer to the fact that the realm of magic performers, authors, and practitioners has largely been male. Given the tightly bound community of practice which police magic and group norms, there are ongoing implications about for whom it is appropriate to access knowledge.

The potential to share certain knowledge of magic is certainly a powerful opportunity; at the same time, the formulation of what is magic, and how a magician is to act around protecting this knowledge, is a significant obstacle. The culture industry has sold a very powerful archetype of the mysterious protector of knowledge and it is a product and idea we readily consume. It is also important to note that there is often a backlash in professional magician circles when it is felt that someone has stepped too far in sharing the knowledge of magic.

- The Illusion of the Autonomous Subject

A second characteristic of magic that troubles the ability to be used to develop critical pedagogy is a major theme in Adorno's oeuvre. It is one that is sometimes referred to as the illusion of the autonomous subject. The term has been used by other scholars (Topolski, 2014, for example) to highlight a common modern illusion. The illusion's premise is simple: you are in control of your life, actions, and decisions. As such, any misfortunes are also the result of your own agency. The consequence of this illusion is that there is a constant over-privileging of agency (see Margaret Archer's [2001, 2003] work for the spectrum of theoretical debate on the nature of structure and agency).

From a sociological perspective, the illusion of the autonomous subject has serious ramifications. How do we consider structural causes of inequality when our minds perceive the world only as existing as forms of agency? Here magic has an intriguing relationship. Magic is based on a long history of this illusion. In fact, the traditional magic show is an excellent example of this illusion. Were you fooled

by the trick? Did the magician control the world around them and produce amazing results through their will, mind, or powers of persuasion? Even from a young age, magic is posited as a powerful mechanism as the magician is someone trained to exert their exceptional agency to control the world around them. Sometimes the world that is controlled is comprised of simple objects while other times it can be the very minds of those watching. In any case, the magician and magic act are performances in uber-agency. How could magic not be intriguing when it offers us such an illusion to exert calming and stabilizing affects on an unstable world?

One of the issues with the illusion of the autonomous subject is that the story it narrates is one of individual power on a world to be manipulated by an enlightened subject. Herbert Kohl (2007), elaborating on the work of George Orwell, touches on this point in his critique of the way that children's literature feeds the myth of the autonomous individual. In challenging this illusion, Kohl asks what a radical story might look like. The discussion is intriguing as I feel it is a relevant question to ask of magic: can magic exist by using a radical story? Kohl notes that radical stories stand in contrast to traditional narratives for children in six key ways: (a) they focus on a group of people rather than a few individuals; (b) the conflict in the story affects a large group of people and not "love triangles, personal jealousies, struggles over hidden treasures, (nor) quests for riches..." (p. 47); (c) the agency in the story comes from "collective action" (p. 48); (d) the antagonists are a complex "person or group of people, not an abstract force or mysterious and unknowable entity" (p. 48); (e) inter-personal unity is involved; and, (f) "there is no compulsory happy ending or resolution of the problem" (p. 49).

Another important factor to note here is how the illusion of the autonomous subject also plays into the discussion hinted at previously—whether people *really* believe in magic. Here, again, we return to the ways in which the unserious or fun aspects of activities are deemed to be innocuous or unimportant. As Crook (2002) comments,

people may not 'believe in' astrology, but then they are not required to 'believe in' anything much in late modern society. The fact that people do not 'believe in' astrology no more prevents them from



attending to Righter's (the author of the LA Times astrology column in *TSDTE*) column than the fact that they do not 'believe in' advertising prevents them from functioning as consumers. (p. 21)

- Problem Posing Dependency and the Culture Industry

Non-Adornoians might respond to these critiques provided here by noting that the information provided by magic activities can be seen as valuable activities which can deliver information about systems, logic, or thought patterns. But is it enough that magic activities can be defended by such argument? Can critical pedagogy be achieved by a redeeming feature of information of systems, logic, and mental patterns? I would suggest that a close reading of Adorno would highlight that the possibility of providing insight into specific patterns of math and card organization misses the point: contemporary critical pedagogy is built on a Freirean tradition of developing problems to be solved out of people's lives and struggles. It is the very act of the magician formulating a false problem that may or may not fool the audience, or inspire people to understand the organization of the trick, which decreases resiliency and builds dependency. Crook quotes Adorno to add to this point and provide a rebuttal to Non-Adornians: A rebuttal, I might add, which is fitting given the use of the image of exhibition and carnival which was so closely equated with magic.

If mass culture has already become one great exhibition, then everyone who stumbles into it feels as lonely as a stranger on an exhibition site. This is where information leaps in. The endless exhibition is also the endless bureau of information, which forces itself on the hapless visitor and regales him with leaflets, guides and radio recommendations, sparing each individual from disgrace of appearing as stupid as everyone else. (as cited in Crook, 2002, p. 35)

Herein lies an unseen danger in magic as it defines the structure of an activity: As we clamour to solve the logic or working of the trick, the capacity to question the importance of the problem is hidden away. In this way, whether we figure out the trick or not, magic as a cultural activity not only saves us from, as Adorno puts it, "appearing as stupid as everyone else," but, in doing so, has implemented an activity to

demarcate stupidity. Because of the contemporary unseriousness of magic, whether we *get* the trick or not, magic implements a litmus test of stupidity, and then saves us all from failing the test. This, as a form of authoritarian irrationality, has serious implications of our reliance on the Culture Industry to define not only the grounds of stupidity, but what constitutes a problem for pedagogical action. To be more specific, it is the aspect of authoritarianism – the dominance of the autonomous subject – that is implicated in providing the risk here. Magic activities become accepted as a mystical power in the ability to posit problems – not in the trick itself, as was sometimes traditionally believed. People become dependent on this manifestation of authoritarianism to define the problems. If I can repeat, and make a connection back to Crook’s third characteristic of authoritarian irrationalism, he notes it is in the “common manipulation of the dependency needs of typically late-modern personalities there is a direct continuity between authoritarian irrationalist propaganda and the everyday products of the ‘culture industry’” (p. 3).

## CONCLUSION

So... pick a number between one and ten. Is it a harmless and mundane activity? Even if we see it as an unserious activity? Even if we use it to think about systems of logic, performance, or social psychology? The critique that stands from Adorno’s work, though, is that it is, at the same time as performing the above mentioned tasks, a certain dress rehearsal for people to depend on an industry to define the problems of their life, or, at the very least, their education. In this way, Adorno demands that we at least consider that magic activities, while they can indeed provide powerful learning opportunities, do constitute a dependency. This dependency, when paired with education, ties pedagogy to the powerful problem posing industry of entertainment and the culture industry.

My argument here has been that while Adorno pointed out the dangers of authoritarian irrationalism in occult and astrology, there are still vestiges of this in contemporary magic practices. The three vestiges that I have articulated here still pose significant hurdles in using magic as a critical pedagogical tool. It is the aspect of dependency mani-

fested through authoritarian irrationalism that resonates in a reading of Adorno's work against the educational goals. Notwithstanding some interesting approaches to science education through magic, the industry is challenged to develop, as Kohl notes, a radical retelling of magic if it is to enable critical pedagogical engagement. This retelling is more than a discursive turn, however. It should also be highlighted that the performance pedagogy such as the work of Augusto Boal (1979), specifically his commitment to breaking the dichotomy of spectators and actors, might help to inform such a retelling. If we imagine Boal's contributions to thinking about agents as actors, and Kohl's (2007) contributions to "group(s) of people, not an abstract force or mysterious and unknowable entity" (p. 48), we may develop pedagogy that can utilize participatory problem based approaches. The opportunity here is not only to make connections to problems from science or math, as often emphasised in magic, but sociological issues central to the history of critical pedagogy.

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## (ENDNOTES)

- 1 Martin Jay (2003), a prominent historian of Critical Theory, recounts two separate amusing anecdotes of Adorno's relationships with both he and Hannah Arendt gone awry. One does not need to look very far to reveal Adorno's prickly personality and the interpersonal tensions as a result.
- 2 Attributing credit to magic tricks is an ever-volatile practice, as most tricks operate with common structures passed on through communities of magic practitioners. For the purposes of this paper, I have referenced the tricks as I have found them. This is not to

suggest that the people mentioned have devised the structure of the trick, as more often than not these tricks are modifications of individual performers.

- 3 It is interesting to note that patterns involving the number nine are quite fruitful areas for magicians. The number nine is used in many tricks and routines to different extents. Helaine Becker (2010), for example, reproduces a commonly reproduced prediction trick involving guessing a randomly selected three digit numbers based on patterns of nine. Gardner (1956) notes, that as early as 1904, people realized that the number nine was rife for idiosyncrasies, not because of mystical properties, but because it is the last digit in a base ten system of counting. Gardner goes on to demonstrate that in many of the tricks utilizing the powers of nine, “in a system of notation based on 8 instead of 10, the number 7 would acquire the same curious properties” (p. 168).
- 4 Admittedly, it is not quite this simple. There are some answers that may challenge conceptions of what defines a name or country status. See, for example, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Also troubling the trick is the nature of the status of places such as the Emirate of Dubai.
- 5 I have used every opportunity to try this trick both with participants not from Canada and with people that do not have English as a first language. It is, as of yet, unclear if there is a correlation between these variables and returning the answers predicted in the trick.