

## **The Conjuror: Economy of Illusion, Ecology of Attention<sup>1</sup>**

By Aurélien Gamboni

*Attention is like water. It flows. It's liquid. You create channels to divert it, and you hope that it flows the right way.*  
Apollo Robbins

*A device activated by its victims in spite of themselves: that is the definition of a sorcery system!*  
Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre



Figure 1. Hieronymus Bosch and workshop, *The Conjuror*, c.1502, oil on wood, 53 x 65 cm

### **Inquiry**

“The artist, having then formed the circle afresh, placed before him a small table, on which he arranged three tin goblets, so well polished that they might have been taken for silver ... During a long series of tricks, the balls, at first invisible, appeared at the finger ends of the conjuror; then, they passed through the cups, under the table, into a spectator’s pockets, and finally emerged, to the general delight, from the nose of a young looker-on. The latter took the matter quite seriously, and half killed himself with sneezing, to see whether a few more balls might not be left in his brain.”<sup>2</sup>

We owe this elegant description of a street magic act to Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, one of the most famous illusionists of his time. Introduced within the first pages of his memoir as a defining memory of his youth, which inspired his vocation, it could almost be taken as a scene of our present day. If we replace the term “conjuror” with the term “trickster,” and introduce some variations into the game (with a ball and three

boxes, or three walnut shells, or even solely with three cards), as well as the possibility of placing bets: you get one of the most popular street scams to date.<sup>3</sup>

This passage could just as well be used to describe the central object of my inquiry over the last several years, namely: a small painting attributed to Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516) or a member of his workshop,<sup>4</sup> which is kept at the municipal Museum of Saint-Germain-en-Laye and called *The Conjurer* (1475–1505, fig. 1). The scene depicts a group of curious spectators from which the central character appears to be hypnotised and mesmerised by the skill of the conjurer practicing his tricks. All the while, an accomplice to the conjurer uses the diversion to rob the victim of his purse, under the amused gaze of a child who seems to have understood the stratagem.<sup>5</sup> Despite the similitude of the scene, we are no longer in the Blois of the 1820s alongside Robert-Houdin, but more than three centuries earlier in 's-Hertogenbosch. If in essence the dynamics of this act have remained the same, the status of magic in itself has evolved from a mostly marginalised practice in the Middle Ages (associated with evil forces and vagrants) to a sophisticated form of entertainment presented all the way up to the aristocratic courts.

Intrigued by the unique form of illusion—as a game of the senses—staged in this scene, I quickly grew very fond of this painting. In a way, I was not only interested in the actual little balls (and their circulation) per se, but in the ones that we suspect to be lingering *in our brains*, as Robert-Houdin so nicely puts it. One could say that these balls will have to be expectorated for centuries to come, considering the strong allegorical power of this painting and its capacity to represent underlying forms of manipulation permeating this petty-crime scene. My inquiry, therefore, consisted of a series of interplays with the scene, investigating both the composition of the painting and the reach of its echoes amidst its chequered history.

## Composition

A first aspect to emphasise when looking at *The Conjurer*, is the notable tensions in movements and gazes. As our attention hovers over the conjurer holding up the ball to the gullible spectator, we notice how his eyes and the ball are level. The spectator in question is quite literally spitting frogs onto the table<sup>6</sup> (I will come back to this detail later on) under the scrutiny of a crowd amongst which a child has noticed the accomplice stealing the purse. Describing this clever composition suggests the identification of its structure alongside the activation of its narrative. To quote the contemporary magician and pickpocket Apollo Robbins, “it’s all about the choreography of people’s attention.”<sup>7</sup>

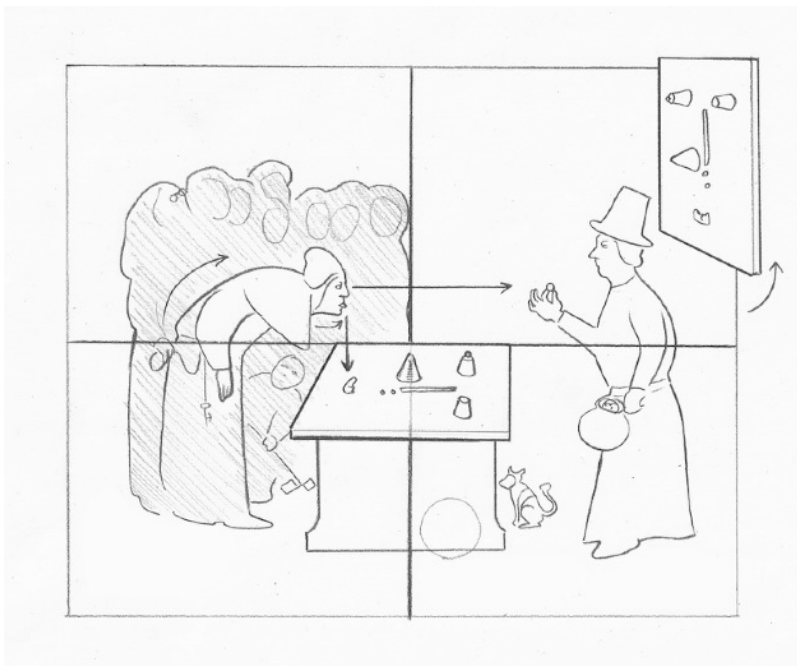


Figure 2. Aurélien Gamboni's sketch delineating the table face in *The Conjurer*

It is, moreover, interesting to observe the way the scene is formally structured. Vertically divided into two equal parts, the painting presents two distinctive blocks: on the right side, the conjurer alone occupies the space, a unique character that very clearly detaches itself from the background; whereas on the left, the gathering of diverse spectators, representing a sample of this contemporary society, forms at first sight a compact and unified group. The table, on which the objects needed to perform the magic tricks are placed, occupies a central position between the two blocks, thus operating—even if anachronistically—as an *interface* in this mechanism of manipulation. Hunched over the table, the victim is overlooking the arrangement of objects that captivate his attention. However, unable to anticipate the conjurer's movements, he is forced to look up and lock eyes with the small ball, blind to the wider set-up that ensnares him.

## Tipping Points

Situated precisely at the centre of the composition (and possessing similar proportions to the painting), the tabletop may be considered as an image within the image, creating a singular situation of *mise-en-abyme*. The analogy between painting and table is reinforced by the analogy that one can make between conjurer and painter (aren't both producing the illusionary effects sustaining our gaze?), which in itself forces us to consider our own position as a spectator, in association with the position of the victim. As amused as we can be at the gullibility of this character, in the end our position (facing the painting) is similar to his (facing the table): we are enthralled by an image whose dynamics we can perceive, but we too are blind to many aspects of the environment that conditions our attention.

If the first element attracting the player is the table's arrangement of objects, what does he see (or what does he not see) from his position? When shifting the table 90 degrees to the left, a previously hidden image appears to us, transforming the table into a face. This shift, emphasised by the posture of the player hunched over the table, implies another kind of shift, from one type of aesthetic register to another, from a figurative to a schematic mode of representation. It is most probably due to these multi-layered shifts that this hidden image—even if produced at a time in which visual riddles were common practice—went unnoticed by the Bosch specialists in their analyses.<sup>8</sup>

According to this observation we can consider the following scenario: the gullible player, hunched over the table is not only captivated by the magic props and their manipulation by the conjurer; he is also hypnotised (consciously or not) by the face reflected back at him as if through a mirror, comparing him to Narcissus, captivated by his own reflection. He must however straighten his head to follow *the eye* that the magician has stolen from him, since this is what the ball evokes amidst the arrangement of objects on the table: a pupil.<sup>9</sup> The composition thus quite literally stages a kind of *attention-grabbing device*, which is even more striking as it utilises our own positioning in regards to the painting. This formidable device opens the way for multiple practices (theft in this instance), taking advantage of the “available brains”<sup>10</sup> so cleverly captured, and can be considered an exemplary form of the *economy of illusion*.

## Boniments

An element that is not conveyed in the painting, but which nonetheless plays a predominant role in the conjurer's practice, is speech. What is termed “boniment” in French (loosely translated as “coaxing” in English) is specific to the speech of the conjurer. As Robert-Houdin tells us, “there is no other equivalent in the French language. How can one translate into words what is said with a trick? It is not a speech, let alone a sermon, a narration, or a description.” Speech, however, whether captivating, leading, or diverting our attention, contributes strongly to this so-called *choreography of attention*, which is executed by the magician. Robert-Houdin goes as far as qualifying the “boniment” to be a “fable meant to give each trick the appearance of truth.”<sup>11</sup> The fable thus ascribes meaning to the effect of illusion that the magician creates by locating it within a narrative frame, which produces an affirmative feedback loop: the fable supports the illusion effects, which in turn reinforce the fable.

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In the case of *The Conjuror*, the missing speech is synthesised in one gesture, which has been best described by art historian Jeffrey Hamburger in his article on Bosch's work, published in 1984.<sup>12</sup> It is the gesture by which the conjurer reveals the ball to the spectators—between his index finger and thumb, while his middle and ring fingers are held together—evoking the Eucharistic ritual. The gesture of the priest giving the wafer to the congregation was already highly codified in Bosch's time. Yet, the ritual here is inverted, as the object is not displayed to be eaten (the wafer), but to be seen (the ball). This inversion can be observed again with the victim who, instead of eating the body of Christ, is spitting frogs onto the table—an animal that was considered satanic at the time. For Hamburger, the missing speech here is the sacred speech of the transubstantiation ritual: namely, the phrase “this is my body” pronounced by priests—in Latin, *Hoc est enim corpus meum*—which is often considered to be at the root of the magician's “Hocus Pocus.” Perfectly illustrated by Bosch in the scene, we witness yet another shift, between sacred and sacrilege.

Expanding on “Hocus Pocus” being at the origin of the English term *hoax*—meaning a spell and an enchantment, as well as a scam, or even in our current day, a political prank<sup>13</sup>—it is tempting to bridge the *economy of illusion* from *The Conjuror* to a “sorcery system.” In the words of Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre in their 2011 book *Capitalist Sorcery*,<sup>14</sup> we recognise once again a device “activated by the victims in spite of themselves,” and resulting in a “loss of agency” over matters of concern. The question implied is: how to undo the spell, how to avoid the systematic identification to the role of the victim, hypnotised, folded in half, spitting frogs onto a table?



Figure 3. Tim, caricature after Hieronimus Bosch's *The Conjuror*, published in L'Express, March 31, 1969

## Actualisations

These previous questions may have found different answers at different times. Amongst the many reproductions, either engraved or painted, which followed the original from Bosch's workshop, a number of details were added in order to emphasise their critical reach,<sup>15</sup> attesting to the success of this artwork. At the end of the 1960s, taking inspiration in their composition from *The Conjuror*, two fascinating caricatures were published in the press, interchanging political figures with the roles of the different characters. The first was drawn by Tim for *L'Express* shortly after the events of May 1968. As Charles De Gaulle was grappling to preserve his legitimacy by means of a referendum, he is depicted here in the role of the conjurer, ball in hand

representing the “O” of “Oui” as he pulls it out of the ballot box on the table. The second caricature, drawn by Piem for *Le Figaro* in 1972, represents the creation of the European currency, in which Valéry Giscard d’Estaing is seen pulling money from a sack of tricks to steal the purse of a mesmerised Uncle Sam. The trick questions the new attributed speculative value, resulting from an economic sleight of hand.

Another event to be considered here is the theft of the painting itself, which was stolen in December 1978 by Jean-Marc Rouillan and other far-left members of the future group Action Directe, who later became infamous for a series of political assassinations. Intrigued by the resonance of this action with the very topic of the painting, and eager to understand whether this gesture was aiming for a symbolic (and political) impact, I met Rouillan, who had recently been granted a part-release from prison. Considering the far greater crimes for which he had done time, nobody had ever asked him about this robbery. As it turned out, the theft of the painting was mostly motivated by money: the painting was meant to be exchanged against liquidities to finance their political stance. Yet the singular attraction that Bosch generated in a large number of the radical left supporters at that time—and for Rouillan in particular—was not completely unrelated to their choice of “target.” It is this particular respect for the work that inspired the thieves to negotiate a ransom directly with the police, rather than dealing with a clandestine network, which would have been ‘safer’ for them, but would have permanently removed it from the public sphere. Eventually, according to Rouillan, it all ended as “another fool’s bargain.” The policemen, who had set up a trap during the exchange, managed to seize the painting, though did not catch the thieves. Indeed, they escaped the police without ever retrieving the ransom, and the museum, whose poor security system had been painfully exposed, recovered the painting, yet nonetheless remained close to the public for over forty years.<sup>16</sup>

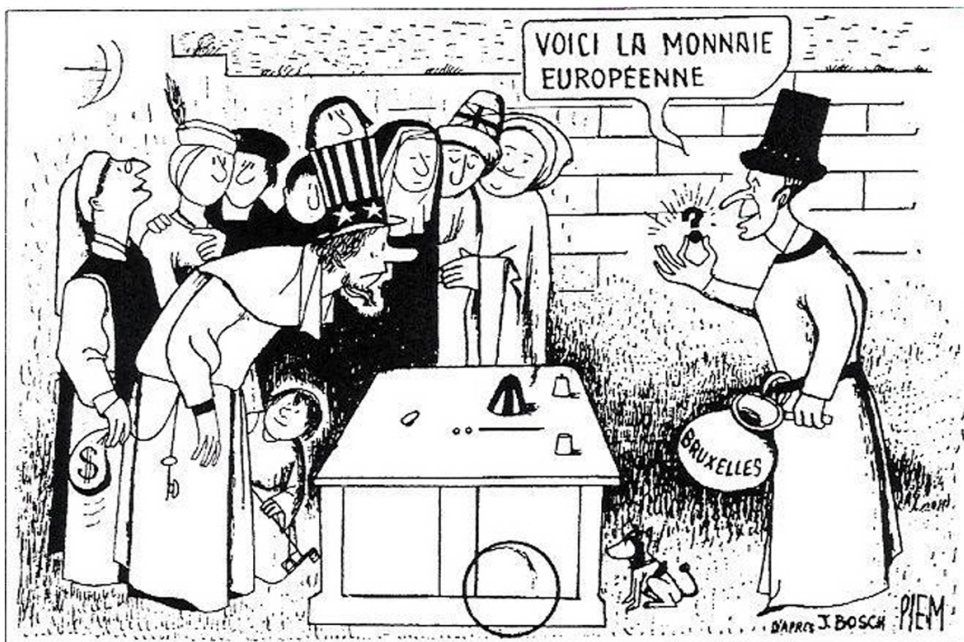


Figure 4. Piem, *Here is the European currency*, caricature after Hieronimus Bosch's *The Conjurer*, published in *Le Figaro*, March 6, 1972

## Manipulations

My inquiry finally brought me to meet with Eve Ramboz, an experimental filmmaker, who in 1991 directed a short animation film inspired by the painting.<sup>17</sup> While I knew about the existence of the film and its very personal interpretations of the scene—“poetic derivation,” as the director nicely calls it—nonetheless it took me a long time to acquire a copy. I was quite surprised to witness in the last scene of the film the table bursting into laughter, suddenly activating a face I thought only I had ever noticed. In a sense, it was revealing that the first person to have deciphered this enigma was not a Bosch specialist, but a person who

had to *animate* the scene, in turn producing new effects of illusion, starting precisely with the animation of the characters and objects to which she granted, by her very own method, a greater autonomy.

During a phone conversation, Eve Ramboz confirmed that it was indeed by manipulating the elements of the composition that she was able to notice this detail. I was struck by the expression she used to describe the feeling that was sparked from this discovery: “it’s funny how I never looked at the picture as I now see it, because I had forgotten such a considerable detail!” I want to underline here the mention of this “omission,” which deserves our full attention because of the paradox it brings about. How can we consider having forgotten something that we have only just discovered? This detail might suggest that we are not dealing with a sudden comprehension but a more gradual process, slowly leading an initial, still unconscious, or unstable perception to only later be *re-cognised*; hence the feeling of forgetting. An exercise of recognition as such, might proceed not so much from the irrefutable ascertainment of a transcendental revelation (the unmasked illusion, the exposed truth), as it does from the gradual movement by which a new interpretation becomes not only highly plausible, but also—and quite simply—productive.

Interestingly, this gradual movement appeals to another form of *manipulation*, neither the perspective of control nor deception, but of *handling with care*, *handling with attention*, handling matters that can be toxic, explosive, or simply fragile. It is a manipulation necessitating a process of familiarisation through practice, experimentation, and play. To get back to the interpretative potential of *The Conjuror*, this perspective opens up new fields of possibilities. In particular, it allows us, as viewers, to avoid being systematically associated with the character of the victim, as I had first concluded, but instead with the figure of the child; the child manipulating a toy (a windmill), a child who, through play, navigates his environment in a different manner: the child who *sees things at a different level*.

To finish on a last compositional trick: if we limit our perception to the elements detaching themselves from the background, and divide the picture this time into two equal horizontal parts; in the upper part we notice that all of the adult’s gazes are gathered—that is, all members of the public, as well as the conjurer—whereas the lower part is associated with the animal gaze (the dog and the owl), the gaze of the objects (the table), and the gaze of the child. This suggests another type of gaze, casting light on the particular “ecosystem of attention” in the scene. A new lead to follow, if we want to move beyond the limiting perspective of an *economy of illusion*, considering that we are doomed to be deceived, towards the perspective of an *ecology of attention*, allowing us to reclaim these processes in an emancipatory impulse. Then, we get to see in the illusion not only the perversion of our essential experience, but also its expansion.

Aurélien Gamboni, March 2013

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## Notes

1. This article was originally published in *Technologies de l'enchantement. Pour une histoire multidisciplinaire de l'illusion* (Technologies of Enchantment: For a Multidisciplinary History of Illusion), eds. Yves Citton and Angela Braitto (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2014). It results from a period of long-term artistic research carried out by the author, which has also given way to installations and lecture-performances. For further information see the author’s website: [www.ag-archives.net](http://www.ag-archives.net) (accessed September 22, 2021).
2. See J.-E. Robert-Houdin and Robert Shelton Mackenzie, *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin: Ambassador, Author, and Conjuror* (Philadelphia: Geo. G. Evans, 1859).
3. I have observed this type of scene on several occasions, in cities such as Paris, Berlin, and Geneva. One of the reasons for the success of the trick is the extreme simplicity of the scheme and its ability to circumvent the framework of legitimacy, since it is ultimately difficult to prove that it is a scam and not a game of skill or chance.
4. Although Bosch is cited as the original creator of this composition, there is nonetheless still some doubt as to the attribution of the painting. Is it a copy of a lost original? Was it painted according to the master’s instructions by one of his disciples, such as Gielis Panhedel (1490–1557)? See the article by Frédéric Elsig in *Jérôme Bosch et L'Escamoteur*, exh. cat. *Secrets d'escamoteur*, Manège Royal, Saint-Germain-en-Laye (2002).
5. Even if there is no evidence in the painting that the child perceives the whole scheme, the fact that he moves in the scene at the level of the victim’s purse, smiles, and looks towards the accomplice, seems to suggest that he has at least taken notice of the thief’s role.
6. Some interpretations of the scene (notably Agnès Virole, in her introduction to the book *Jérôme Bosch et L'Escamoteur*, 2002, op. cit.) suggest, on the contrary, that the character swallows a frog, relating this action to the popular French proverb “swallowing snakes” as a sign of gullibility. There are many clues that stopped me from accepting this hypothesis. The fact that the first frog (in the mouth), although difficult to see, is clearly pointing its head out of the character’s mouth, the fact that this character is drooling

profusely (it is difficult to swallow anything when drooling that much!), and, finally, the fact that the two frogs are facing the same direction. Everything seems to indicate that the first frog is ready to come out of the mouth to join the second one on the table. Moreover, the hypothetical reference to this proverb does not prevent the painter from referring to it by reversing the movement, especially since the composition of this painting is, as we shall see later, built in particular on inversions and oppositions.

7. Emblematic figure among contemporary magicians, Apollo Robbins has developed an empirical knowledge of the dynamics of attention that is now contributing to neuroscience research on these issues. In an article in *The New Yorker*, he states, "It's all about the choreography of people's attention ... Attention is like water. It flows. It's liquid. You create channels to divert it, and you hope that it flows the right way." Adam Green, "A Pickpocket's Tale," *The New Yorker* (January 7, 2013), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/07/a-pickpockets-tale> (accessed September 22, 2021).
8. Although I have to this day not yet found any literature supporting the existence of this hidden image, I was able to have its feasibility verified by two art historians who specialise in these matters: Michel Weemans, who has studied the "anthropomorphic landscapes" in the work of Herri Met de Bles (1510–1550), and my own father, Dario Gamboni, with his studies on "potential images." See in particular: Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002); Michel Weemans, 'Herri met de Bles's Sleeping Peddler: An Exegetical and Anthropomorphic Landscape,' *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 2006). As for Agnès Virole, the curator of the Musée municipal de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which owns *L'Escamoteur*, she confirmed that she considered this interpretation to be strictly "esoteric."
9. On the table/face, a second ball laying atop a cup takes the appearance of a pupil, which reinforces the impression that the conjurer has just stolen the other one.
10. This famous expression is from Patrick Le Lay, former director of TF1 television, who stated in 2004 that the role of his TV channel was "to sell available brain time to advertisers." (*Les Dirigeants français et le changement*, éditions Huitième Jour, June 2004.)
11. Robert-Houdin and Shelton. op. cit.
12. J. Hamburger, *Bosch's "Conjuror": An Attack on Magic and Sacramental Heresy*, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* (1984).
13. See André Gattolin, "Prelude to a Hoax Theory and Its Subversive Use," *Multitudes*, Volume 25, Issue 2 (summer 2006).
14. Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre, *La Sorcellerie capitaliste: Pratiques de désenchantement* (Capitalist Sorcery: Disenchantment Practices) (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).
15. In a reproduction of the scene engraved by Balthasar van den Bos (1518–1580), half a century later, one can read the following instruction: "Oh how many tricks are there in this world? Those who perform wonders with the bag of tricks, with their deceitful ruses make people spit curious things on the table. This is how they succeed at it. So never trust them, for if you also lost your purse, you would regret it."
16. The reopening of the Musée municipal de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, announced for 2014 in the first version of this article, apparently is still yet to happen. With the exception of occasional loans, since 1979 *The Conjuror* has only been visible a couple of days a year, during the special annual event *Journées du Patrimoine*.
17. The artwork by Eve Rambos (*L'Escamoteur*, 1991, video, 13 minutes), has been acquired for the video collection of the Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.
18. The notion of the "ecology of attention" also resonates with theories on the "economy of attention," which are not directly discussed here. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between these two concepts, see Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017 [2014]).