

Magic in the Brain: what visual illusions and magic tricks can reveal about how we see and about the human brain



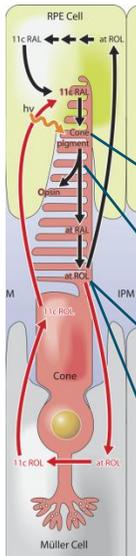
Introduction

- Over the centuries magicians have learned to perform acts that defy the laws of nature by using completely natural means, such as **visual illusions** and **cognitive illusions**.
- Visual illusions are phenomena in which the subjective **perception** of a stimulus does **not** match the physical **reality** of it.
- Cognitive illusions, on the other hand, involve higher level cognitive functions, such as attention and expectation.
- The **aims** of this study are to **present a visual illusion and a magic trick** to approach the workings of the human visual system and brain and to **discuss** the **tools** that **magic** and visual illusions can provide in the future to study attention, awareness and the human consciousness.

Methods

- Literature research on PubMed:** selection of 20 out of 50 original articles and reviews according to their novelty and to the quality of the journal and authors.
- Design of The Color Switch Illusion:** selection of a personal picture, creation of a symmetrical copy using an image editing program and drawing of a green and a red squares. Assembly of the components to create *The Color Switch Illusion* (Fig.2)
- Learning of The Vanishing Ball Illusion:** meeting with the magician Mag Rovi, learning of the trick and experimentation with volunteers to know their reactions. Recording and footage editing of *The Vanishing Ball Illusion* (Fig.3)

How we see

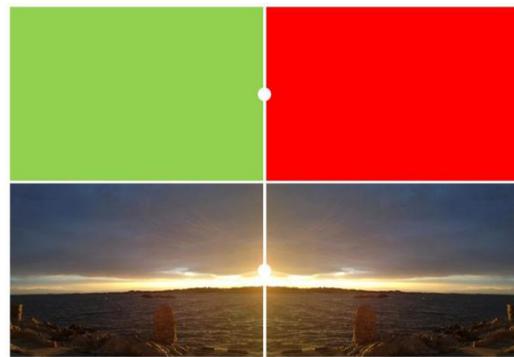


Cone pigment

- Cone opsin:** glycoprotein with seven transmembrane alpha helices coupled with a G-protein.
 - 11-cis retinal (11c RAL):** compound derived from vitamin A.
- A photon absorbed by its specific opsin interacts with the **11c RAL**, turning it into **all-trans retinal (at RAL)**.
 - This change **activates** the opsin, initiating the **signal transduction cascade** that will convert a light stimulus into an electric signal.
 - The transformation into at RAL turns the **complex opsin-retinal** unstable, and they **separate**.
 - To respond to new stimuli, the at RAL must be **recycled** to 11c RAL, through previous conversion to all-trans retinol (at ROL) and 11-cis retinol (11c ROL), and reunited with the opsin.
 - Under a **persistent stimulus** there is not enough time to recycle all the at RAL into 11c RAL to keep up with the entrance of new information.
 - This will lead to a decrease in the sensitivity to this stimulus a phenomenon known as **visual adaptation**.

Fig.1. Visual cycle in the vertebrate eye. IPM, interphotoreceptor matrix. hv, photon of light. RPE, retinal pigmented epithelium. Adapted from Kefalov et al.

The Color Switch Illusion



Instructions

- Check that the two inferior pictures are the same but symmetrical images.
- Then fix your eyes on the superior white dot between the two colored squares during 30 seconds.
- Finally, fix your eyes in the inferior white dot between the two symmetrical photographs.

Fig.2. The Color Switch Illusion. Ideas adapted from Beau Lotto.

- By staring 30 seconds at the white dot between the two colored squares you have **run out of 11c RAL** in your right-eye red cones and in your left-eye green cones.
- As it takes time to recycle the at RAL back to 11c RAL, when you switch your gaze from the superior to the inferior white dot after these 30 seconds your **right eye** has suffered **visual adaptation** to the **red color** wavelength and your **left eye** to the **green** one.
- This is why you see the right picture as if the red color had been wiped out (or as if you were using a red filter) and the left picture as if the green color did not exist (green filter).

The Vanishing Ball Illusion

- Social cues**, represented by the direction of the magician's head and eyes, **draw** the spectator **attention** to where the magician wants it to be: following the trajectory of the ball.

- In the final toss the spectator is **expecting** a ball to be thrown up and caught just like the previous attempts. His **attentional** levels are **lower** than at the beginning because of the **repetition**.

- Misdirection:** using his gaze the magician draw the **attention** of the audience to the **effect** (the ball disappearing) and away from the **method** (the ball being hidden in the palm).

- Magic:** the spectator saw a ball going upwards that does not come down. The brain checked that everything was like the previous attempts: thus, the last plausible explanation is that the **ball has magically vanished**.

Despite knowing that the **ball is hidden** in the palm, each time you experience the illusion you **"see"** the ball going upwards. In that way, your brain is tricked every single time.

- The spectator is **primed** to see how it is like to throw a ball and catch it, and thus he knows what to **expect**.

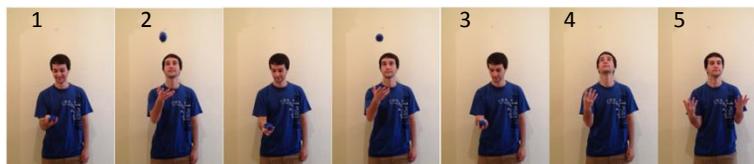


Fig. 3. Footage from The Vanishing Ball Illusion. Full recording available at: <http://youtu.be/41YppduaESw>

Summary

- Priming
- Repetition
- Expectation
- Misdirection
- Magic

Conclusions

- Visual illusions **reveal** and exemplify the **underpinnings of human vision**.
- The **design of new illusions** could become a **line of research** to shed light on some concepts about vision that remain unknown.
- Magicians' techniques can provide **powerful methods** to manipulate attention and awareness in the laboratory, in order to design more robust experiments to **study the human consciousness**.
- These new techniques can lead to **diagnostic** and **treatment** methods for patients suffering from brain trauma derived **attention deficits**, **autism** and **attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder**.
- Despite the benefits that a science of magic would entail, it is necessary to remember that magic is one of the oldest forms of art and relies on people's ignorance of its methods. **Care has to be taken** in using these techniques to **investigate the human mind without destroying the mysteries** that give us so much joy.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mag Rovi for introducing me to the world of magic and for sharing the foundations of incredible tricks.

Contact information

In case you have any question, ask me or contact me at o.pavon.5ht@gmail.com



References

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