A Real Barn Burner of a Performance:

An Examination of the Persuasive Rhetoric of Penn and Tellers Flag Burning Trick.

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Introduction

From their Vegas show, to their weekly blogging, to their hit Showtime television show *Bullshit*, Penn and Teller have placed themselves not only near the top of the magic industry, but also the entire entertainment industry. Famous for their rather unusual act, Penn the always opinionated, constantly speaking, larger member of the act contrasts the silent straight man Teller. With a blend of silence and sound, visual and verbal, political theorizing and over the top slapstick comedy, Penn and Teller have created a niche for themselves as entertainers. Performing in India, Egypt, China, England, The United States, and numerous other countries Penn and Teller are not just an American household name, they hold worldwide recognition.

But even with their critical acclaim Penn and Teller are not resting on their laurels, but instead pushing the boundaries of magic. Working on pushing their art form to have higher levels of political and cultural significance. And perhaps, this is the perfect industry in which to frame a political message. It exists in that grey area between the real and surreal, where individual constructs of the possible and the impossible are challenged and warped. If magic can influence an individuals’ perception of reality, if only for a moment, what would preclude magicians from influencing an individuals’ perception of political and cultural reality?

Penn and Teller would seem to agree with this idea of magicians being able not only to entertain, but also to influence their audiences opinions through persuasive rhetoric intertwined within their art. Perhaps the best example of this is the illusion in which Penn and Teller “burn” a United States flag on stage in front of an audience. “We’ve been thinking about doing this trick for a long time. What would happen if you burned a flag? Not in protest of anything, but in celebration” (Jillete, Penn 2007). Communication scholars of course would claim that within any action or utterance there is a wealth of analyzable information, but within the boundaries of a magic trick perhaps there is more than usual.

Within the four to five minutes in which Penn and Teller perform their flag burning trick, numerous rhetorical strategies are employed not only to persuade the audience that Penn and Teller are entertaining, but also that their point of view is valid and worth examining. Such an act is worthy of further examination and brings forward questions about the ability of magic to be a persuasive tool both culturally and politically.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore this analysis will focus on answering two questions regarding Penn and Tellers’ performance. What sort of persuasive techniques do Penn and Teller use to add an aura of acceptability to their perceived burning of an American flag? Second, is Penn and Tellers’ performance able to create a debate in the minds of their audience using magic as a persuasive tool?

To answer these questions we will address the terminology used in the remainder of the paper, look examine current literature on the topic of persuasion in magic, prepare the model of analysis, examine the different levels of persuasive signification in the trick itself, and finally draw some conclusions about not only Penn and Teller, but also the persuasive abilities of magic as an art form.

Terminology

For this analysis the currently accepted terms for semiotics will be used when discussing the sign relationship. These terms are “signifier’ for the actual object, utterance, or idea, “signified” for the context through which an individual examines the signifier, and “sign” for the resulting psychological image. The word “layer” will be used to describe the effect signs have on one another without forming a second order signification. For the discussion of magic, “trick” will be used to describe every individual performance that ends in an effect. If there is a set up followed by an effect, it is a trick. “Illusion” will describe the combinations of tricks that are performed together to create a larger trick or an overarching message.

The Magic and The Magicians

While there has been much written about the methodology that magicians use to perform tricks and the classifications these tricks fall under (Lamont & Wiseman, 1999, p. 5), very little has been written about the rhetorical techniques magicians use to persuade their audiences. However, scholars have examined the ability of actions to persuade. All examinations of magic trickery have placed importance on the ability of the magician to move the audience to a specific belief through the use of misdirection (Fitzkee, 1945; Fitzkee, 1944; Fitzkee, 1943; Lamont, 1999; Tamariz, 2007; Mangan, 2007).

Juan Tamariz (2007) states that this misdirection is created physically by the magician through the use of the eyes, the voice, the hands, the feet, and the body, to direct the audience to a specific action, place on the state, or object the magician wishes the audience to examine or recognize. However, even with a focus on the voice, there is no discussion of persuasive techniques that can be used. Instead, Tamariz (2007) focuses on the proper way to use the voice in order to achieve results, such as projection and tone. These results do not focus on the ability of the magician to persuade the audience, but instead simply the proper way to move the audience through the trick and view the magician as skillful, rather than persuasive.

Most authors seem to view verbal and physical actions in the same way for magician, as methods for “tricking” or “bluffing” the audience to move them through the illusion, rather than persuading them accept the trick as valid. (Fitzkee, 1945; Fitzkee, 1944; Fitzkee, 1943; Lamont, 1999; Mangan, 2007).

While this examination has been valuable to magicians technically, they have yet to examine the relationship between rhetoric and the “good” magician. These authors would seem to place the ability of a magician to be entertaining purely on the technical skill of the magician, and view verbal rhetoric as simply another skill that magicians either have or they do not. The idea being that some magicians are able to make tricks work better than other simply because they have mastered the technical skill of “patter” rather than the rhetorical skill of persuasion ( Fitzkee, 1945; Fitzkee,1944; Fitzkee,1943; Lamont,1999; Tamariz, 2007; Mangan, 2007).

Method

In order to analyze the persuasive power of Penn and Teller’s flag burning trick we will use the work of two well-known theorists in the field of semiotics: Fredrick de. Saussures’ seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* and Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies.* First, Saussures’ work in the “science of signs” (Barthes, 1972, p. 111), otherwise known as semiology, allowed for the examination of what Saussure (1972) termed sound patterns or, “the hearer’s psychological impression of a sound as given to him by the evidence of his senses” (p. 98). Examining sound patterns rather than simply “speech sounds,” or verbal utterances, allows for semiology to examine not only the spoken word in a performance, speech, or everyday conversation, but also to examine the psychological effect of objects and physical actions on the listener as the act of viewing an object relays a psychological understanding of the linguistic representation of the object (Saussure, 1972, p. 98).

In order to properly understand the psychological representation of a sound pattern as a persuasive instrument, Saussure (1972) claims that we must understand that we inherently attach meaning to sound patterns outside of the boundaries of linguistic and physical definition. While language to some is simply a nomenclature (Saussure, 1972, p. 97), for Saussure language exists on duel levels, as nomenclature and as psychological representation of an idea (Saussure, 1972, p. 98). For example, when an individual physically views an apple, the individual places a title on that object from their linguistic knowledge, in this case apple. However when an individual hears the utterance “apple” many different psychological imagines may appear in any individual mind. Perhaps the listener prefers Granny Smith apples and thus imagines one, or perhaps they might imagine a Delicious Red. The available amount of images is infinite, and every individual imagines something specific to their own individual experiences.

However, even giving our example the ability to determine the color of the apple imagined may be too much freedom, as while linguistic signs may be arbitrary “it must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker” (Saussure, 1972, p. 101). Instead “it is the characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary…they show at least a vestige of natural connextion between the signal and its signification” (Saussure, 1972, p. 101). Our individual will always imagine some shape or form of apple because the context of the utterance is culturally pre-determined.

Acknowledging this concept of how utterances lead towards individualized psychological representations allows for an examination of how the individual arrives at these representations. For Saussure, the method by which an individual arrives at their own psychological representation is explained through the following formula (Saussure, 1972, p. 100):

Signal + Signification = Sign

While this is ordered much order like a formula, it is important to note that this formula “is not at all one term after the other, but the correlation which unites them” (Barthes, 1972, p. 113). This means that the sign is not simply the reaction of the signification to the signal but is instead the combination of the two together in the mind of the individual, as they work together not as separate entities.

The signal, also known as the signifier, for the purposes of our example, is the utterance “apple.” The signified is the individualized meaning that the listener places to that word, or the preference of one type of apple to another. The sign is the combination of the signal and the signification into the psychological representation of the apple. It is important to note that while the utterance “apple” is the source of our example, this does not necessarily predicate that only utterances can be signifiers. Instead, Saussure (1972) claims that the only pre-determinate of a signifier is that it must have a corresponding word or phrase within the linguistic base being analyzed (p. 115). Thus objects, actions, and all forms of non-verbal communication can all be signifiers in some way.

Finally, signs combine to create cultural significance and language. “A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others” (Saussure, 1972, p. 113). This claim allows for multiple significations, signifiers, and signs to layer together to create both a cultural understanding and language as whole. Because signals, signification, and signs are all codependent on one another, they all influence each other. A person may see an apple and consider it to be food, edible, or delicious but with the inclusion of another signal, for instance a worm crawling out of the apple which would offer the sign “rotten”, the two signs combine to form a complex thought about the viability of actually consuming the apple.

This idea of signs working together to create language and cultural significance is expounded upon by Roland Barthes in his work *Mythologies*. Working from Saussures’ concept of signs being interdependent, we can further this concept by examining the idea of second order signification, meta-signification, and myth. In agreement with the terminology section, Barthes uses the more accepted terms of signifier and signified to replace Saussures’ signal and signification.

First, second order signification reinforces the idea of signs and signifiers working together. The second order signification exists on a meta level of linguistics, or a level where the second order discusses the first. (Barthes, 1972, p. 115). To create a second order signifier we must examine the “sum of the signs” (Barthes, 1972, p. 116). To Barthes this means taking the signs which can be placed together through chronological and cultural connections within an event and combining them to create a new signifier (Barthes, 1972, p. 116).

Our example now requires some expansion. Let us combine the sign of a psychological representation with the signs hot, delicious, and freshly baked who had the signifiers of temperature, smell, and appearance. At this point we can combine all of these signs together to form a second order signifier of hot delicious freshly baked apple. This new signifier then combines with the cultural signified understanding of warm fluffy delicious deserts to form the sign for hot apple pie.

Within this second level signification exists something else though, Barthes describes this as the myth. Myth is what is created by this second order signification of the sum of signs. “Myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification…” (Barthes, 1972, p. 109). The myth cannot exist within first order signification because it is a combination of multiple first order significations. The myth of the American hot apple pie exists because we attach meaning to the signs which comprise it. The smell, the taste, the visual imagery all work together to form the myth, and this myth is a cultural representation of everything that makes apple pie what is it to the American culture. Therefore myth is not simply a psychological image, but it is also a cultural image we create based on the cultural signs we have learned throughout our entire life.

We say learned because as Barthes states “myth in fact has a double function; it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes on us” (Barthes, 1972, p. 117). Through the very nature of myth existing within a cultural framework, the myth forces the individual to contextualize it in a very specific way. A pie will always be a pie and will never be a cake, because our cultural understanding has been shaped by years of acceptance by society at large, and the very act of examining the myth reinforces that cultural understanding within the individual mind.

However this second order signification is not where Barthes stops; he continues to expound the theory into a third level of signification known as the meta-level signification. This meta-level of signification occurs in examining the cultural image as a whole, and is a combination of second order signification and myths. Myths themselves are a part of this meta language as they “speak about the first language” (Barthes, 1972, p. 115). In examining myths as part of a culture and examining the framework that they fit into, we no longer need to question the makeup of the language, but instead can combine myths together in order to examine the cultural effect they have on individual belief systems and the individual at large (Barthes, 1972, p. 115).

Thus an examination of a cultural event can be broken down into three parts. The first order signification of those objects that cause individuals to create psychological representations of meaning, the second order signification which is a combination of those parts into myth, and the meta-order signification when examine how they create cultural frameworks and belief systems.

The Illusion

With an understanding of Saussure and Barthes we can now apply the principals of semiotics to Penn and Teller and their illusion. To help facilitate our analysis we will split this section into three parts mirroring the format of the illusion. These sections are the initial burning, the reveal and discussion, and the big finish. Within each section we will examine each first order signification as it happens chronologically, and examine expanding orders of signification as they occur.

The Initial Burning

At the start of trick one, Penn (2007) begins with a discussion of his and Tellers’ patriotism and love of their country while beginning to take down an American flag from a flagpole. He and Teller, after putting on white military-issue gloves, proceed to fold the flag in military style. Within the first thirty seconds of the trick both Penn and Teller have created five moments of signification which have already prepared the audience to be shocked, and these moments of signification not only help to shock the audience, but also prepare them to be persuaded.

At the very start of the trick the video opens upon Penn and Teller placing military style white gloves on their hands. This action in combination with the utterance “Teller and I are proud Americans. We consider ourselves to be patriotic” creates a sense of not only patriotism, but also profound respect for the flag itself. The choice to use white military style gloves and the folding of the flag in military fashion places the audience at ease with what the pair is doing. The combination of the signifiers of flag, gloves, utterance, and folding result in the creation of signs such as calm, respect, and pride being placed within the audiences mind. The pair has already begun persuading their audience that they hold the American flag in the highest regard, and in doing so have already begun creating pathos among the audience.

Within this section there also exists a certain sense of Americanism being created by Penn. He states, “We got a little more patriotic about seven years ago when we spent a time in Egypt, India, and China. Because nothing can make you love the USA more than overseas travel” (Jillete, Penn 2007). This utterance by itself creates a new first order signification because it adds a layer of Americanism to the previous feeling of pride and respect in the audiences mind. Penn is using the utterance to make a joke with a winner/loser dichotomy. Because Penn and Teller have been to places that Americans view as “bad” or at least “worse” his love for the United States both makes him and the United States “good.” This combination of signs allows for the signs to work together within the audiences psychological framework that places both the United States, Penn, and Teller, on the same level of pride and respect that the flag exists for the flag itself from the first order significations.

It is important to note that at this point the flag itself has become a signifier with its own first order signification. Once Penn draws out the Americanism tendencies of his audience, which we can see he does by the audience laugher response to the previous joke, the flag moves from simply being a “flag” and now represents the United States and its belief systems as a whole. This is compounded by Penn stating “…how much of all of that comes directly from the liberties that are symbolized by this flag” (Jillete, Penn 2007).

While this utterance is not a signifier in and of itself, it is a powerful persuasive tool that Penn has obviously made a conscious decision to use, even if he does not know why. By stating that the flag symbolizes the liberties of the United States he is both reinforcing the sign of the flag in the minds of audience members who already view the flag as such, but is also forcing the remainder of the audience to view the flag within the construct of flag plus united states equals symbol of liberty, whether they previously did or not. So within the construct of the trick we now have two respectful magicians handling not simply a flag, but the core beliefs of the United States.

However, at the forty-five second mark, Penn begins to switch the focus of the trick. Acknowledging that “a couple of goofballs handling the flag on stage in Vegas does bring a weird kind of energy to the room” (Jillete, Penn 2007). At this point Penn and teller have added another first order signification that effects how the audience views the trick as a whole, adding doubt in the magicians’ ability to handle the flag honorably. The audience now has three layers of signification coexisting within their minds and revolving around two men holding a symbol for everything America stands for in their respectful but less than trustworthy hands.

Penn quickly switches rhetorical strategies though, and lights appear on Teller now holding a facsimile of the Bill of Rights. The idea that this is a facsimile of the Bill of Rights is pointed out by Penn and is important in the creation of our next first order signification. The combination of Penn calling out the fact that this is a copy of the Bill of Rights, but is not a historical copy, leads the audience down a converging path with the previous set of signifiers.

While this piece of paper represents the ideas of the first ten amendments to the constitution, unlike the flag it is not an “actual” patriotic symbol. It is just a copy. In being a copy there would seem to be a lack of mistrust in the audience for the potential fate of the piece of paper. Where the flag is an actual flag, the piece of paper is just a copy of a document that could easily be printed off again. This lessens the validity of the piece of paper, and therefore decreases the emotional connect the audience has with it. And Penn (2007) seems to acknowledge this sign in the audience’s mind, “…all the words and more importantly the ideas are on this paper.” Penn is drawing a clear distinction between the ideas of the amendments, and the physicality of the flag. As he claims:

…and the first amendment usually abbreviated the freedom of speech amendment. And speech has been defined rather broadly to symbolize symbolic speech and therefore the Supreme Court has said we can do whatever we want with this flag. The thinking seems to be that no matter what happens to the flag physically, symbolically its always protected by the Bill of Rights. So we can take a piece of tinder and a very eccentric magic wand, and we are allowed legally to do this…and it’s ok because even though the flag is gone, the Bill of Rights remains (Jillete, Penn 2007).

Within this thirty second speech, a mountain of rhetorical imagery is thrust upon our audience. From a physical standpoint, Penn and Tell roll up the faux Bill of Rights into a tube, place the flag inside, reveal some “tinder”, produce a lighter, and proceed to light the flag on fire causing it to disappear. The two then show the Bill of Rights to be completely intact, not a burn or scorch mark on it. Thus completes the first trick and the first part of the illusion as a whole. The audience applauds and the duo prepares to immediately move on.

While that physical description seems fairly simple, from a rhetorical standpoint there is a significant amount to consider. First, from the previous signs we know what the audience is experiencing in this moment. Two magicians, one pontificating wildly the other standing stoically are handing two different but linked objects. A flag, the symbol of everything we hold dear, and a copy of the Bill of Rights, which has less physical meaning but serves as protection to the flag. The audience has identified with the power of the flag, and is at least considering the symbolic power of the paper, while all the while wondering if these two men and truly be trusted with these artifacts.

In this section of the trick we find another first order signification that not only affects the other first order significations, but it also actually causes a divergence in signs. At the beginning of this section when Penn (2007) explains the first amendment “…and the first amendment usually abbreviated the freedom of speech amendment” he has created another signifier. The first amendment to the Bill of Rights is one of the most contentious, especially when a flag is involved. As previously stated the historical context surrounding free speech and the flag that Penn is holding shows a country divided on the question “Where does free speech end?” It is this question that begins the divergence of signs with these two formula: free speech amendment plus political ideology equals inalienable absolute right, or free speech amendment plus political ideology equals controlled monitored right.

The insertion of political ideology into the signified has created two potential outcomes for the audience’s sign. Either the audience identifies with the absolutism of free speech, or with the concept of monitored speech. Because of the dichotomous nature, of American politics, Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, Penn and Teller have now placed a signifier before their audience that has split them. However, realizing that this may be the case Penn (2007) does attempt to undo some of this divergence of signs with a logos appeal, “And speech has been defined rather broadly to symbolize symbolic speech and therefore the Supreme Court has said we can do whatever we want with this flag.”

Here Penn creates both a logical appeal with the Supreme Court ruling symbolic free speech acceptable and a new layer to this section of signification by leading the audience to the sign of an inalienable right. The signifier formal in this instance would be: Supreme Court plus law making body equals the legality and acceptability of free. In using this sign immediately after discussing the first amendment the company of a flag, Penn has forced the audience to consider the Supreme Court as a signification that reinforces the sign he wants the audience to consider instead of the sign that would prove persuasively detrimental to the remainder of the illusion.

Upon moving as much of the audience as possible to the preferred semological outcome the meat of the trick is then preformed, a lighter and tinder produced, and the flag is seemingly destroyed in a flash of fire. Everything up until this moment in the trick has been to prepare the audience psychologically for not only accepting this twenty seconds as an acceptable trick, but also to set up the discussion of the action that will then take place. None of the explanation of what the flag and the Bill of Rights means, is physically necessary for the trick they perform. The trick itself being rather simple, any two people could easily purchase the supplies needed and walk into any room or public place and perform this flag burning. However without the rhetorical setup, the trick both loses its aura of acceptability and its persuasive appeal.

Penn and Teller could have easily stopped the act there and had a perfectly delightful illusion that most people would have found quite entertaining, but being Penn and Teller the trick continues and something new is added. That something new is continued in the second half of Penns’ monologue and the revealing of the first trick in the illusion.

The Reveal and Discussion

In the previous section, Penn continued his patter for several sentences past what was examined, and if the illusion had been done after the flag was “vanished” then there would be need to examine these signifiers. But Penn and Teller are famous for always attempting to reach beyond the constraints of one simple trick, and instead expand the ideas of the trick out into other avenues of magic. In this instance, that expansion begins with ambiguity. “…relevant to our show is the ambiguity. The fact that you don’t really know what’s going on…did we burn a flag? Did we symbolically burn a flag? Or did we merely vanish a flag in a patriotic flash of fireworks? It’s all of those, it’s none of those, it’s up to you” (Jillete, Penn 2007).

The concept of ambiguity is critical, as Penn and Teller continue with their performance. However where the divergence was stemmed by Penn in the first section, at this point the divergence of signs is approved of and cultivated by the duo. Starting within the previous monologue, Penn creates a new first order signification when he brings out “a piece of tinder and a very eccentric magic wand” (Jillete, Penn 2007) to perform the trick. This “magic wand” is a simple cigarette lighter and causes a divergence in signification. The audience is drawn in separate directions by the phase “magic wand” and the lighter itself. Where a lighter is generally used to cause something to burn or be destroyed physically, a “magic wand” is used to create mysticism, as it “is the instrument and symbol of the magician’s power” (Lantiere, 2001)

Thus the audience is now experiencing two different signifiers, that caused by the lighter as an object of destruction, the idea of the lighter being an instrument of mysticism. The lighter creates the formula: lighter plus fire equals destruction, while the lighter as wand plus mysticism equals illusion and safety. Now the audience has two signs fighting it out to psychologically represent what has happened to the flag. Was the lighter just a lighter and did the flag burst into flames, or was the lighter a magic wand and the flag simply vanish? Ambiguity has been established, and the audience must make their own decisions in the moments before the trick continues.

For the next minute or so, Penn turns to an almost meta-analysis of the trick they just performed. The discussion centers on the factors that went in to creating the trick, and the meaning that the pair want the audience to take from the performance. But still, the most important discussion for our analysis is the discussion of ambiguity, though at this point the trick turns to the destruction of that ambiguity. Saussure and Barthes claim that signification is decided as quickly as possible. An individual will work towards determining the meaning of a signifier or set of signifiers as quickly as possible and once the meaning is located, the individual ascribes that meaning to the signifiers and creates a psychological sign (de Saussure,1983; Barthes, 1972).

Within these moments, Penn (2007) discusses not only this very idea, but he also wants the audience to break from this habit. The problem with semiotics is that it ascribes meaning to signifiers almost instantly and that signification is then rarely changed. But what if the audience is presented with new information about previous signs? With magic the eyes and ears are in a constant battle to find “true” meaning, but the performance is designed to hinder that quest for meaning. Things are rarely what they seem on stage at a Penn and Teller show. But the existence of a meta-analysis within the trick itself could be the most persuasive moment in the show.

Since the audience is presented with two potential outcomes for what happened to the flag, the audience is forced into a divergence of signs. The first road leads to an acceptance of the illusion for what it is, the second is the belief in actual the destruction of a flag. Within the second path is also another divergence based on previous signs. Is burning a flag an acceptable form of free speech or is it desecration? The audience has the ability to choose their own path and make their own decisions. But even in actively stating that the audience has that power to decide for themselves, the duo takes it away. In revealing the trick to the audience Penn and Teller show the audience the true path, and force those that did not take the path of accepting the action as illusion to examine the psychological events that caused them to arrive at the signs they did.

This is exceptionally powerful persuasion by the Penn and Teller. Even the act of examining the signifiers and signified that caused the audience to arrive at a psychological construct is a powerful action. As we have examined earlier, the formula for signification is generally administered and resolved without any truly active participation from the audience. The individual never truly takes an active role in examining the cultural frameworks that make them interpret signifiers because truth is so rarely revealed. Instead the audience creates their own truth, and it is rarely challenged. By placing a “true” path in front of the audience, Penn and Teller are breaking down the barriers between simply reacting to the burning of a flag and the discussion and examination of what that burning means. The audience is no longer simply reacting, but they are now taking an active role in the performance.

The Big Finish

After their meta-analysis, Penn and Teller seem to simply be wrapping up the trick. Penn performs the rarely heard second stanza of the American national anthem as poetry and begins to remove his gloves. Teller retrieves the flag from its hiding place, while Penn once again pulls out his lighter and another piece of tinder. At this point the duo once again seems to light the flag on fire and vanish it, however immediately turning to their right the audience is drawn to the flagpole, where it now waves majestically as Penn finishes the verse, and he and Teller gaze upon the flag in reverence.

This portion of the trick is very short, only around thirty seconds, but as it emerges it has significant power. Penn and Teller move to an almost completely emotional form of persuasion. With the patriotic verse and the flag, the audience realizes that they have been taken on a complex journey and in front of them are two men who truly love their country. So when Penn and Teller vanish the flag for a second time, the logos appeals that have made up the majority of the act until this point are no longer needed. Instead the audience has the tools to rectify the divergence of signs themselves, and simply enjoy the remainder of the trick, not a political message or examination, but instead as a truly beautiful illusion ending in a flash of patriotic fireworks.

This would seem to be a rather simple examination of the final thirty seconds, and it is, but the power of Penn and Tellers rhetorical method is that they have spent the last four minutes preparing the audience to truly enjoy this thirty seconds. They move the audience away from questioning the idea of lighting a flag on fire as a sign of destruction or desecration and towards a level of signification that allows the audience to see the truth behind the trick. These two men have the ability to seemingly light a flag on fire in celebration of that flag, and “it’s okay.”

Conclusion

With an examination of Penn and Tellers flag burning illusion completed we can now return to our research questions. First, what sort of persuasive techniques do Penn and Teller use to add an aura of acceptability to their perceived burning of an American flag? Through the use of semiotics we can see that Penn and Teller make use of the cultural signs in order to create a psychological response in their audience. Individuals who watch Penn and Tellers performance find themselves being pushed into a pre-determined understanding of flag burning as a valid form of expression, due to cultural restraints that Penn and Teller use to their advantage.

Second, is Penn and Tellers performance able to create a debate in the minds of their audience using magic as a persuasive tool? We can answer most definitely yes, with a caveat. Penn and Teller definitely create a debate about the validity of flag burning as an act of free speech, but this analysis can only conclude that Penn and Teller create debate only within the mind of the individual observing the trick. Therefore the art lacks the ability to be broad reaching. Because magic is such a visual activity, any potential generation of debate can only truly occur at first hand viewings. Word of mouth has little potential to accurately portray the moment of sign diversion that allows Penn and Teller to make a lasting political statement. And while grassroots political movements generally have the opportunity to transmit their message via verbal myths, magic is perhaps overly reliant on having the audience at the event and taking part in the illusion. Without an actual viewing of the trick, Penn and Teller become just two men burning a flag, rather than two men making a profound statement about freedom in America.

Because a visual representation of the trick is needed in order for it to create political debate, it becomes difficult to apply any sort of real world significance to this single trick. But the power of political persuasion in magic does not rely on this one trick. Instead through the use of signs and symbols, truly talented magicians have the potential to create moments in time where the audience is completely willing to accept points of view outside of their preconceived cultural notions. Penn and Tellers trick could easily become one example of effective political persuasion in magic, if magicians were willing to use the moments that their art creates to put forward a political or cultural statement.

Despite this power, many magicians shy away from the power that has been given to them to foster and influence debate in their audiences. But for Penn and Teller, their art allows them to create a truly powerful piece of political rhetoric, that doesn’t simply foster an idea, but a discussion about ideas. With little more than a flag, a lighter, a piece of acetate, and some flash paper, and a flash of light Penn and Teller have perhaps unlocked the signification of one of the great cultural and political debates in our country, to further interpretation.

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1. The viewing and analysis of this trick does not take place at a live show, but instead as a *Youtube* clip from Penn and Tellers television show *Bullshit!* where they trick was shown as part of a discussion about free speech. The link to the video can be found in the references section. The actual trick is preformed during Penn and Tellers live show in Las Vegas and Reno. The trick is currently a staple of all of the stage shows they perform. (Kuczynski, 1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)