

Scripting for Agency

Katarina Ranković

Goldsmiths, University of London

PhD Art

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Abstract

Scripting for Agency presents a new theory of character, whether fictional, human or corporate, in which it can be understood as an attractor in a behavioural space.

To use a more familiar analogy, character is to behaviour what climate is to weather, since a climate “attracts” weather to fall into familiar patterns in the space of meteorological possibility. Implied within this theory of character is also a theory of “the human being,” which, by virtue of being capable of performing behaviours in patterned combinations, can be understood as a character substratum, or character-playing machine. Specifically, the human being is versed in playing out the kinds of characters that are commonly recognised as “personality.”

Following this, the thesis posits a second theory: that “the social agent” can be understood as a character (or relatively narrow family of characters) which the human being consistently adopts when it enters the social milieu. Given that the human being is a social animal and spends much time in the social milieu, the social agent and the human being appear, most of the time, to be the same thing. However, the fact that the social agent represents a relatively narrow group of characters within a much vaster character repertoire suggests that the human being is oddly overqualified for society: it is capable of playing out a far greater diversity of characters than it typically does. This attenuation of human character range, or “bureaucratisation of spirit,” may have evolved to enable social collaboration, as evidenced by social practices and aesthetics of authenticity that police human character variability.

This raises questions with potentially far-reaching social and ethical implications in areas such as politics of identity, human rights law and AI alignment efforts: are there any benefits to embracing the character diversity of the human being? Would a greater acceptance of personal diversity endanger, or enrich, social complexity?

Art, a discipline that is characterised by running experiments in social contracts, aesthetics and states of being on its audience, is precisely suited to the task of probing this question. From within the spiritual laboratory of a performance practice in which I am possessed by characters, and by drawing on Daniel Dennett's evolutionary theory of agency, Erving Goffman's theatrical framework for self-presentation, Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency, and Miloš and Slavica Ranković's work on cultural formulas, the thesis demonstrates that cultivating personal diversity can enhance critical thinking, engender more creative explorations of aesthetic space, and bring new philosophical intuitions to one's everyday experience of selfhood.

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Part 1: Documentation of Practice

The practice submission consists of 10 video works.¹ Below, video stills of each work are reproduced, along with information and a link to the full video. Alternatively, documentation of the entire practice submission can be viewed on [this YouTube playlist](#).²

Works 1–6 are a selection of video performances in which a character faces the camera and tells a story. The works are all performed by me and the stories were improvised during recording.

Work 7, *Politics of Inner Self*, is a performance video in which I take on the part of two characters, who then converse with each other.

Works 8–9 are audio performances in which I voiced over AI-generated portrait images.³

Work 10, *Individual Relic*, is a video work made in collaboration with artist Nina Davies. Nina selected and shared with me a series of clips from the social media platform TikTok, often showing people carrying out dance challenges. I wrote a text in response to these clips, which Nina then edited into a montage of these as well as some new clips.

¹ Several months after the submission of this thesis, an exhibition called *As Above, So Below* was presented as part of the viva examination at 43 Lewisham Way on 14–16 March 2023. It consisted of two parts: *The Story of Room 03*, a site-specific audio work for the downstairs gallery space, and *Letter to the Dominant Character*, a screening held in the upstairs cinema room. The Documentation of Practice in this thesis details the work submitted before this exhibition took place. *The Story of Room 03*, a story told from the perspective of an empty exhibition space in 43 Lewisham Way, has since been made available as an audiobook on most platforms (e.g. [Apple Books](#)). The video works that were included in the screening are listed and linked in the Documentation of Practice. The text for *Letter to the Dominant Character* can be found in the dissertation, in Section 5.2. A press release for *As Above, So Below* can be found at <https://sebsartlist.com/events/katarina-rankovic-as-above-so-below>.

² <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLy1-BHyY85dxXaHcZZVQtLOMXKjM4NfAV>. It is recommended the works be watched on a browser that has an ad-blocker installed.

³ Images generated at: www.thispersondoesnotexist.com.

During the PhD, I also completed a novel called *Anomaline*. Originally proposed as one of the outcomes of this PhD research, I realised halfway through that the novel had become a separate project in its own right, and thus did not include it as part of the thesis. Nonetheless, I occasionally refer to *Anomaline* in the dissertation as it explores many of the same themes as this PhD research, albeit from a different angle and using different methods. At the time of writing this PhD, *Anomaline* is yet to be published.

Work 1: *Time Off*



Fig. 1. *Time Off*, video, 4 minutes 9 seconds, 2020. Link: youtu.be/PTPnhMels3Y.

Work 2: *Suburbia*



Fig. 2. *Suburbia*, video, 8 minutes 1 second, 2021. Link: youtu.be/S5yShx7fGCs.

Work 3: *The Man on the Ceiling*



Fig. 3. *The Man on the Ceiling*, video, 9 minutes 5 seconds, 2021. Link: youtu.be/L3xAXiuKC8U.

Work 4: *The Trickle Traitor Effect*



Fig. 4. *The Trickle Traitor Effect*, video, 6 minutes 23 seconds, 2021. Link: youtu.be/rSOwub0kgms.

Work 5: *Homo Horizontalis*



Fig. 5. *Homo Horizontalis*, video, 14 minutes 3 seconds, 2021. Link: youtu.be/qgGbC5kFp1A.

Work 6: *Coaxing the Lofty Other*



Fig. 6. *Coaxing the Lofty Other*, video, 19 minutes 51 seconds, 2021. Link: youtu.be/oJxJso-HmkJQ.

Work 7: *Politics of Inner Self*



Fig. 7. *Politics of Inner Self*, video, 41 minutes 33 seconds, 2020. Link: youtu.be/sl2tkGgP0Bg.

This is a longer video. Please watch the excerpt from 05:39–15:30 (10 min) for a shorter sample.

Work 8: *Hospital of Happiness*



Fig. 8. *Hospital of Happiness*, sound and AI-generated image, 12 minutes 9 seconds, 2019. Link: youtu.be/vY3RQ5k06pM.

Work 9: *Fictional Politician*



Fig. 9. *Fictional Politician*, sound and AI-generated image, 3 minutes 2 seconds, 2019. Link: youtu.be/0pf8RxQpXe8.

Work 10: *Individual Relic*

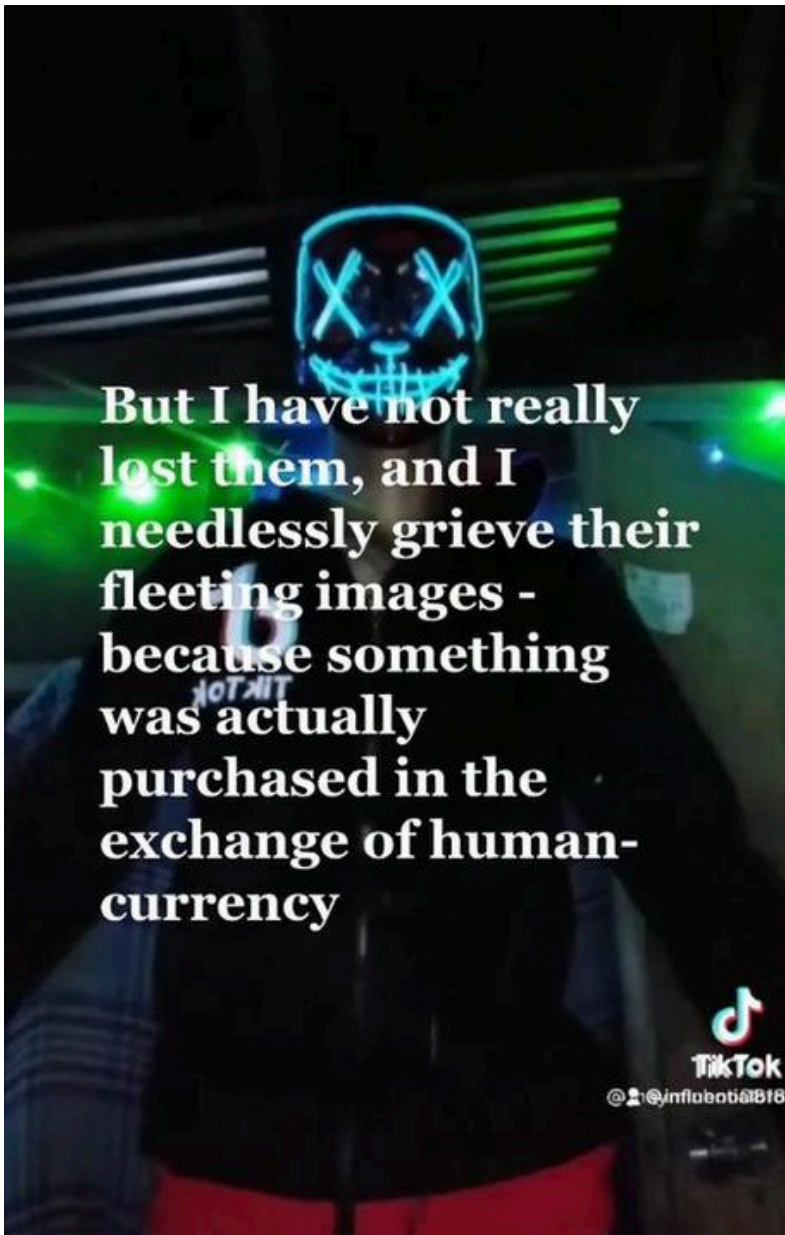


Fig. 10. *Individual Relic*, video made in collaboration with Nina Davies, 4 minutes 3 seconds, 2021.
Link: youtu.be/jVrJBMuhnXo.

Part 2: Dissertation

Prologue: Developing a Research Character

This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be—a case of bald social climbing—but at the time I genuinely thought *this* was the voice of lettered people, and that if I didn't have the voice of lettered people I would never truly be lettered.

—Zadie Smith, *Speaking in Tongues*⁴

Continue, without losing consciousness [...] Superstitiously [...] Out of the corner of your hand [...] With a healthy superiority [...] Like a nightingale with a toothache [...] Attaching too much importance [...] Full of subtlety, if you believe me [...] Almost invisible [...].

—Erik Satie, performance indications scattered throughout his piano works, as published⁵

As an artist writing a PhD dissertation, I am given pause before setting down the first word. I don't yet quite know in what guise to clamber into this newly explored world of academic writing. Knowing myself to be something of a newcomer (or intruder, depending on your

⁴ Zadie Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," *The New York Review of Books*, 26 February 2009, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/02/26/speaking-in-tongues-2/>.

⁵ Selected from a list in Erik Satie, *A Mammal's Notebook*, ed. Ornella Volta, trans. Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 2017), 51–54.

thoughts about practice-based PhDs), I find myself momentarily lacking a research character with which to enter the space of writing the dissertation.

In the supermarket of potential research characters I could adopt in order to write, there are those that quickly come forth and beckon me as the kinds of voices that will surely enhance my sense of belonging within the particular environment of thesis writing, and furnish me with the confidence required to set down the first word. These characters present themselves to me readily enough, and so, in a hurry to get along and make the points I have come here to make, I could, if I wished, select one of these characters in a flash, almost without thought, as if my selection were merely the natural consequence of the genre and its conventions. But for some reason I find myself loitering at the task, wandering non-committally past these characters, continuing to browse.

In the gap between not having and having the research character I am looking for, it appears to me to be something like a ticket without which I may not enter the discourse in the first place. After all, just as newcomers to a country must learn the local language and customs in order to participate in social life there, newcomers to a genre must acquaint themselves with the characters and voices that have hitherto populated it, in order to become legible to the readership and constructive to the discourse. The character of the writing, the character of the researcher, acts as a kind of license. Without this license, I cannot set down the first word. Perhaps I cannot even think it.⁶

⁶ This point is similarly echoed by the narrator of one of Italo Calvino's novels, when he says: "the author of every book is a fictitious character whom the existent author invents to make him the author of his fictions." Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (London: Vintage, 1998), 180. Similarly, in one of his own prefaces, Jonathan Lethem writes: "I've never managed a routine book review, let alone an essay I thought worth reprinting, without first having to invent a character who'd be issuing the remarks the essay would subsequently record, and also figuring out what motivations this guy—call him "Lethem"—would have for working his thoughts into language." Jonathan Lethem, *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc* (London: Random House, 2012), xvi.

In the first quoted passage above, Zadie Smith writes about a similar kind of situation: the process of becoming lettered, by way of first adopting the voice, the characteristics, of someone lettered. Citing George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which the Cockney flower woman Eliza Doolittle becomes transformed by elocution lessons into a veritable lady, Smith traces in her essay the transformation of her own voice upon leaving her working class London neighbourhood to study at Cambridge.⁷ In this vibrant tale of the journey of the voice, Smith reflects somewhat wistfully on the voice of her youth which, unintentionally and incrementally over time, was lost to the newly acquired “posher” voice. She wishes she could have retained both, rather than fully adopted either. Her essay ends with a provocation, advocating the virtues of “speaking in tongues” and cultivating the use of multiple voices at one’s disposal, as opposed to maintaining consistency for fear of the charge of duplicity.

The moment of stepping into a research character—and this could happen any moment now—is a consequential one: character comes with social strings attached. When making a debut into a new society (and for an early career researcher, a PhD acts as a kind of debut into a field of academic scholarship) one risks losing something: a previous character, along with the communities that character granted membership into. Perhaps this is why I have so far been hesitant about finally adopting my research character—the “Katarina” that will become the author of this thesis. I am in the process of making my first impressions before a new audience, but wish to remain within the space of self-reinvention uniquely permitted by fresh starts: not quite letting go of who I was before, nor fully committing to who I am to become.

Further, the voice or persona I adopt—this imminent “Katarina” of the thesis which I am currently working on writing into existence—will shape the world of the research and the

⁷ George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioLife, 2009).

discourse of this dissertation. Because character is a point of view, and a repertoire of behavioural habits, this “Katarina” character will determine the way in which I research: what kinds of sources become open to me as valid points of reference, how I come to connect pieces of evidence and theories, and what kinds of methodologies present themselves as appropriate to me to adopt. To assume a character, then, is to seize an opportunity: the opportunity to see the world through that character’s point of view. But this opportunity has its cost, for every point of view has its blind spots. Selecting a character, in both fiction and research, is a matter of choosing one’s bias.

The trouble with understanding the process of character change that Smith is describing is that it tends to happen so imperceptibly, so innocently, that it will have very often caused much change before one has noticed it, let alone had a chance to study its movements and workings. Perhaps I too could, with the right education, acquire the voice, the demeanour, the character, required of me to step into the discourse that follows, and, if I am careful, perhaps I could find a way to spare myself the loss that Smith incurred, through a study of the process of character acquisition itself. Is it possible, by some special technique or sideways glance, to observe the self oscillating in and out of character?

My first challenge here then, before even setting down the first word, is to discipline myself, and protract the time within which the research character is developing, so that this movement from one character to another may have some chance of opening itself up to observation. I must resist the temptation to start writing as if there were only ever one voice or one way to tell the story of the research, avoiding any casual presumptions about who is to tell it. And so, because what I want to write about is character, and the kinds of possibilities presented by the skill of speaking in tongues, I feel obliged to document for my reader the period in which I am searching—in writing—for my research character.

Happily, there is already a literary convention in place to assist the writer in saying things that can only be said before setting down the first word: the prologue. The prologue establishes the primordial atmosphere of a fledgling intent, and that is precisely what we hope to capture here: the very faintest desire to become otherwise, pictured in its early, nebulous form.⁸ Like both Zadie Smith and Eliza Doolittle, I am about to undergo a character transformation by way of the careful retraining of my (writerly) voice. Yet I—like they—cannot *only* be said to be subjugated by the forces of socialisation, for I have come here in search of my own transformation. I am calling for my own undoing.

Smith's becoming lettered must have first originated in a desire to become something she was as yet not, a determination to become otherwise. Similarly, I think of the moments preceding my arrival to the university, the tireless efforts employed in writing my proposals and attending interviews before finally entering the academy to pursue my artistic research. These investments are themselves testament to the desire to become a different sort of artist to the one I was previously.

Like Lady Macbeth in one of her famous soliloquies,⁹ where she calls on evil spirits to stifle her “womanly” instincts before embarking on her murderous plan, I too am inviting a change to my very nature, my habitual way of operating, in the service of an aim (though hopefully a more defensible one). But now that I have finally arrived, now that I am comfortably installed within the library or the seminar room or the postgraduate study room, I find myself in search of a model for how to behave and speak and write.

⁸ I have found that I also enter “a prologue” of sorts before my performances. In “[Introspective Performance Experiment](#),” I observed that I enter a state of “initialising character” as soon as I have made the decision to set myself up for a performance. In this, both a prologue and character initialisation are framing devices.

⁹ “Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here/ And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty [...]” From William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1.5.40–43.

In truth, I find I am not always sovereign with respect to my influences; that the very smell of the library and its busy silence, its hard chairs and tired photocopiers, speak to me in an instructive language. The way in which the university library speaks to me is nuanced and sometimes absurdly over-specified, like the instructions Erik Satie left for future performers of his compositions: *out of the corner of your hand*, he directed his pianist, *almost invisibly*, and, if you can muster it, *like a nightingale with a toothache*.

Satie's performance indications are normally appreciated as welcome witticisms in the often sombre cultural environment of musical composition at the time. But in addition to the comedy of their over-specification and the often impossible demands made on the performer, the performance indications are striking for their poetic specificity. For I am sure that there is in fact *some way* to play the piece "almost invisibly" and that the indications succeed in directing the manner in which each new recital of the pieces is played, however subtly, or however obligingly the performer receives the written directions. They are too indicative not to have insinuated themselves by subtle suggestion into the pianist's very fingertips.

So it is that the very architecture of this institution of learning carves my spine with its firm seating, and even directs how I hold my pen. Yes, I think, sitting up straight, I too want to be a "man of letters" seated staunchly at his mahogany desk, a "natural philosopher" of the 17th century surrounded by his alchemical books. I too want to wander the halls of the university like a monk devoted to a path of learning, or like a player of Herman Hesse's Glass Bead Game.¹⁰

At the same time, when a pianist today studies and plays the music of Erik Satie, we call that act, that skill, *interpretation*. In the world of classical interpretation, technical accuracy

¹⁰ Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Vintage, 2000).

is valued highly, but interpretation—the manner in which the pianist reinvents and redeploys the score to the point that it becomes her own voice—is perhaps even more prized. With virtuosic playing, the score becomes less like a set of instructions and more like a personal idiom—a set of conventions and constraints within which the pianist can find her own brand of eloquence. I like to think then, that if the library writes me, if it corrects me with its careful insinuations, that I in turn interpret its command, accommodate myself within its language, and make its structure the very conditions of my own agency. So is it that, even as the library air (or aura) infiltrates me and alters me from within, I make my way willingly further into its caverns, curious about the new powers it has to bestow upon me and what I might be able to do with them.

Tomb-like, the university library buries its occupants in a labyrinth of ageing books, in spite of the growing availability of digitised titles. But these tall shelves are more than mere repositories, just as the walls of a labyrinth are more than mere hedges. They serve to immerse us in a learned tradition by eclipsing the world beyond; they are transportive, if not in space, then in the realm of ideas. Within the shelves I search, browse, rummage, parse, scan, delve, ponder, weigh, deliberate, crouch, decipher, dismiss, recognise, register, translate, judge, presume, qualify, enumerate, indulge and discriminate. *Do it ponderously*, say the shelves, *with the parsing finger of a clairvoyant... surreptitiously*.

No doubt the auspicious scent of printed matter and machine static causes me to unfurl in the studious room, into something else. And there, near the window overlooking London's New Cross, I relinquish myself as a man of letters and adopt instead the wry, simmering determination of one who, on the contrary, has *not* been accommodated quite so comfortably within the university library.

Absent-mindedly opening a volume lying unwanted on a study desk, I notice that my thoughts are being accompanied by a familiar voice: tuning into it, I realise it is that of the narrator in *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf.¹¹ After being denied entry into a university library on account of being a woman, the narrator sets off instead to the British Museum in search of answers to the question of the effect of sex on literature.

Alarmed at the copious volumes she finds there about women (all written exclusively by men), and untrained in any scholarly method by which to cope with this mountain of work, she proceeds furtively, wastefully through the information, her mind wandering wildly from this statement to that on the nature of women, unable to find any consensus on the matter. And as the day wanes and her study session draws to a close with next to nothing gleaned, she begins frustratedly sketching out a face in her notebook: it is an imagined portrait of "Professor von X," one of the books' hypothetical authors.¹²

She has drawn him ugly, red-faced and angry. But why should he be angry and why should all these men, writing these apparently natural facts about women, write so passionately in a studious domain whose genre precisely promotes *dispassion*? Here the narrator has, in all her scholarly incompetence and clumsy research, managed to glean from her work a most important clue, a clue which lay not in *what* these men wrote about women, but *how*. The fervour of the writing so often drew attention away from the argument and to the author himself, whose disposition our narrator considers further, realising that such anger, such passion, denoted the author's motivation to protect his superiority and thus an underlying recognition that it could, in fact, be lost.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 24.

When I think about the voice of Woolf's narrator, the act of learning becomes something else. It no longer implies the disciplined comforts of entitled tenure, but the unsolicited and almost vengeful determination of one who has never belonged in a university. Still holding the book in my hands, I wonder suddenly if I have something to prove, or to fight for, with my learning.

Spotting some of the rustling roadside trees below on the street outside, I picture then an early scene in *A Room of One's Own*, in which the narrator, walking across the quadrangle of a reputable university, lost in the pursuit of a nascent thought, is approached by a flustered, waving beadle, who reminds her that women are not allowed to walk unaccompanied on the grass and ushers her promptly off.¹³ He had dispersed her nascent thought like a school of furtive fish, never to be found again. How ironic it was then, when, waiting at the bus stop on Camberwell Green on the way to the library today, listening to *A Room of One's Own* on audiobook in my earbuds and emotionally absorbed in the argument about Shakespeare's sister, a man interrupted my thoughts too; first waiting patiently for me to remove my earbuds and pause my audiobook, to then ask me a series of questions. I still don't know why he interrupted me, to ask my name, to ask where I'm going; these are ostensibly innocent questions, and yet I felt tense and worried all the same: at the thought of the unknown motivation behind them, at his unperturbed access to my mental privacy, at his persistence when I was asked to remove my earbuds a second time. And even after my bus had arrived and I had promptly hopped into it, gratefully escaping my congenial persecution, I found that even in the safety of my seat I kept replaying the last thirty seconds of the audiobook over and over. Frustrated with myself, I realised that I was repeatedly losing my thoughts as they wandered obsessively back to the encounter with the man. Concentrate! I reprimanded myself, but to no avail. At the very least, Woolf had by this point furnished me with the tools to see myself as only one distracted woman among a

¹³ Woolf, 5.

long line of perennially distracted and interrupted women, their thoughts made to disperse and flee like furtive fish, never to be found again.

But look at what she has made me do: mind wander. And Woolf was a master of mind wandering if anyone was; yet her drifting prose, taking on the movement of a window shopper, peering first in here, then there, had not the misty quality of a meandering dream, but instead a startling analytical precision, whereby each object under her observation presented itself in utmost lucidity, as if it were a solid thing turned over in her hand. Perhaps it is that very quality which made her a woman capable of writing fiction in her time—that “sudden splitting off of consciousness”¹⁴ which enabled her to exert a certain level of mastery over her inevitable distraction. And it is this very ability to address, as opposed to overcome, the things that stand in the way of progress, as well as the ability to put the very fact of distraction, difficulty and obstacle into the work itself, which makes her scholarship in *A Room of One's Own* so miraculously straightforward given the complexity of the subject, as if she had taken a shortcut through the woods, where everyone else followed the winding path around. It was her novelist's skill in noticing *character*, in relentlessly paying attention to the voice of the text, which enabled her to read the unwritten in men's writings about women.

Wandering into the Law section to scan the titles vertically without pulling any out, I think of my cousin, newly enrolled on a course in law last semester after becoming enamoured with the female protagonist in a series of books; and then I think also of my aunt, who, now a judge, similarly pursued the path of justice following her admiration of the women in the 1980s law drama *LA Law*.¹⁵ It was the way these characters dressed, and spoke, and held themselves, which seemed to carry something of significance for my relatives, and per-

¹⁴ Woolf, 73.

¹⁵ Steven Bochco and Terry Louise Fisher, *LA Law*, aired 15 September 1986 to 19 May 1994, on NBC.

haps these visible qualities served as proxies for something else, something more greatly cherished. These were, after all, competent, resourceful, self-possessed women, and this is how they looked and dressed.

The urbane eloquence of a well-spoken artist like Susan Hiller or Adrian Piper may have similarly served as a model for me, with their worldly North American accents, lazily erudite and cool. These are the scholarly artists, and this is how they look and sound.¹⁶ And how helpful these proxies can be on a practical level, too. Sometimes, when I find myself vainly trying to read an inscrutable text, I'll start reading it aloud in a voice attempting an approximation to Hiller's. And then like magic I'll find I suddenly begin to decipher the text, that it willingly discloses itself to me as a lock come undone to the right key.

And so on and on do these various characters populate my mind and insinuate themselves into the twitching fibres of my body. That is how the library opportunistically shapes my person with various impressions in this hour of ambivalence, furnishing my hands, my lips, my faculties, with strange new behaviours, and with them, new powers. Maybe this is precisely what it means to "become institutionalised," although the term is often employed in a derogatory sense. Might not an institution provide the very conditions for certain actions, like a tradition, or a game might?

I was now going to say that I feel a little bit like my "fictional characters," the characters of my performances or novels, who must tentatively feel their way into being, who must emerge from a nondescript soup of non-specificity and assume a definite mould before they can become actors. But perhaps it is more than a resemblance. Perhaps it is pre-

¹⁶ See for example any lecture or artist talk by either artist, such as Adrian Piper, "What, exactly, is the Idea of Artistic Research?" Post Digital Cultures, Symposium by Federal Office of Culture, Switzerland and Les Urbaines in Lausanne, 4–5 December 2019, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/tYZLg9-x3g4>. Or: Susan Hiller, "Art Talk: Susan Hiller in Conversation with René Morales," Pérez Art Museum Miami, uploaded 27 March 2017, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/EUAdD2Uvi38>.

cisely what happens to anyone who must find their place in a new world. “Character” is, after all, closely related to “role;” in dramaturgy the two are synonymous. Character and role are form and function, and, as in most cases involving form and function, the two are often difficult to prise apart and apprehend separately.¹⁷ I have one job to do—complete the PhD—but to be functional, to be fit for purpose, I am now called by the occasion to assume a certain form.

And what about you? We mustn’t forget you in all this. As a factor outside the scope of the research, perhaps it is something you could ask yourself. Are you too in search of a reader character; a manner from which to assume the role of recipient? What attitudinal disposition ought you settle into in order to receive in the way you wish to receive? Were you already altered—did you already assume a slightly different charge—when you picked up this thesis, as I did when I picked up my laptop to write it?

Those initial, preparatory moments are in fact critical, as when in the beginning of Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, the author troubles himself to enquire as to the reader’s comfort before starting the story.¹⁸ Should you sit, leaning on the arm of a sofa? Should you lean casually on the side of a desk? What elapses in the decisions about where and how to read entails a readiness to become otherwise, and the book entwines author and reader in a mutual promise of alteration.

¹⁷ Dr Sylvia Terbeck has pointed out to me Zimbardo’s “Stanford prison experiment” and Milgram’s experiment as famous examples of the dramatic transformation of behaviour caused by context and social role. John Frow has further discussed how in Roman law, where the term “person” itself originated, “one individual [is allowed] to have multiple personae according to the legal role he is playing (that of owner, of inheritor, of plaintiff...)” in his lecture, “On Personhood in Public Places,” (no date), Public Culture Research Unit, University of Melbourne, transcript, https://www.academia.edu/2562822/On_Personhood_in_Public_Places. For the experiments, see Philip G. Zimbardo, “On Rethinking the Psychology of Tyranny: The BBC Prison Study,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45, no. 1 (2006): 47–53 and Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 4 (1963): 371–78.

¹⁸ Calvino, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, 3.

But let us resist a little longer, the temptation to settle, and develop a certain infidelity to our choice of research character and reader character respectively. Let us make the exercise of writing an account of this research, as well as the exercise of reading it, an experiment in sustaining above all a curiosity in the movement of our character, and who we are to become on the other side of writing and reading the research.

Introduction

I began this research with adventurous purpose, having set my sights on a rather impossible goal; namely, to embark on a quest for a kind of storyteller's holy grail: some special elixir, or rare ingredient, that could make my fictional characters *come to life*.

Usually when we speak of a character "coming to life," such as from the page of a novel, we mean that the author has succeeded in so textured and true a portrayal that the weave of words from which this character is actually constituted is replaced by an image so powerful in our imagination, it feels as though the character were a real person, conjured right there in front of us. My meaning, however, was not metaphorical. Mad though it seemed, in my novels, films and performances, I sought in earnest to free my fictional characters from the shackles of my authorship, and find a means by which they could become the authors of their own lives, truly autonomous.

The result, to my surprise, would be continually finding myself in situations in which it became necessary to reformulate the original research question, until the emphasis was no longer so much on bringing fictional characters to life, as on understanding what differentiated real persons from fictional characters in the first place, particularly in my video performances, where I witnessed both the characters of my imagination and my "own" character (my *habitual* way of presenting in everyday life) playing out on one and the same surface; in this case my body.¹⁹

Where did my fictional characters come from? Was it possible that they came from the same place that "I" did and were we wrought from the same material, despite going on to

¹⁹ See "Part 1: Documentation of Practice" for examples of these video performances.

take on such different classifications—“imaginary” and “real”? How much did I actually share with fictional characters—and other kinds of agents for that matter, from other organisms, to artificial intelligence, to corporations? Eventually, the project had become an exercise in challenging and reorganising a series of intuitive relationships between concepts such as “character,” “self,” “person,” “human being,” and “the social agent.” By running a number of experiments in performance designed to probe those relationships, these concepts began to take on different meanings: character increasingly appeared to be something independent of the organism that happened to be playing it, making it possible to view fictional characters on a level playing field with the “personalities” of real people; likewise, a “human being” increasingly appeared to be a universal character-playing machine that could be reprogrammed, and a social agent (an instance of which you can spot wherever I use the word “I”) no longer seemed to be the same thing as a human being, even if, in practice, we behave as if that were the case.

But let’s start at the beginning. Why does such a project as “making fictional characters *really* come to life” seem so futile and misguided (perhaps even morbid) so as to befit a mad scientist—like Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, or *Metropolis*’ Rotwang?²⁰ Pinpointing what it takes to make something “come alive,” become animated with spirit and display the characteristics of an autonomous agent in many ways remains a mystery shrouded in Promethean danger, but one thing seems certain: you can’t *write* a fictional character to life. After all, writing character entails determining all it says and does in advance—and if my character has no voice other than the one I give it, then surely the only autonomous agent present in the equation is me. “Scripting” and “agency” are antithetical to one another by definition.

²⁰ Victor Frankenstein manages to animate a humanoid assemblage of dead body parts in Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (Great Britain: Wordsworth Classics, 1999) and Rotwang creates a “Machine-Person” as a substitute for his lost love in Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou’s *Metropolis* (Germany: Parufamet, 1927).

Or are they? Seen from another perspective, scripts seems to crop up a great deal in studying the mechanics of autonomous agents. Living things, from microbes to humans, seem to exhibit varying degrees of agency, yet they are driven by the genetic script written into their DNA which, in concert with the wider environment, encodes the unfolding of their being. Social life, without which there would be no audience for our self-expression, is itself orchestrated by “codes of conduct,” protocols and social scripts of various kinds, from table manners and queuing, to religious doctrines and international treaties. Most exemplary, perhaps, is artificial intelligence: not only is it scripted in computer code, but, as we are now rapidly discovering, training it on natural language might well prove to be the key to generalising machine intelligence. What if, as in these three examples, writing, text, and scripts were not only compatible with agency, but a key ingredient in it? To what extent is something as close to home as the self *written*—inscribed by ancient grooves of genetic memory, articulated by chains of DNA text and scripted by a culture of stories?

Seen in this light, the original artistic ambition to bring fictional characters to life is no longer simply make-believe, or at least, it is non-trivially comparable to the make-believe required to recognise agents in biology, sociology and AI research. Art presents itself therefore as another relevant domain within which to approach the question of scripting for agency, whereby the institution of the practice-based PhD enables a systematised and peer-reviewed study.

The remainder of this introduction will highlight the implications and significance of the research (covered in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7), give an overview of the state of the art (Chapters 1–4), describe the methodology (Chapter 1) and list the research findings (Chapters 4–7).

Implications and Significance

As I worked on this research, my mind often wandered amusedly back to a time in my childhood in the early 2000s that now felt oddly relatable, when, by some curious fit of passion, I began telling my peers that I was going to create general artificial intelligence, and that this would be my life purpose.²¹ Naturally, I was variously ridiculed or told to go away as a result. But I must have been caught by the breeze of a wider fascination in the subject that was already in the air: this was the time of *The Matrix*, Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* and Ray Kurzweil's predictions about machine intelligence and the technological singularity.²² The turn of the millennium had brought with it fears and optimism about the future, with attention increasingly being drawn to the possibility that we were on the cusp of scripting a new machine species into being, whom humanity would either end up worshipping, warring, or merging with.

Today, artificial intelligence can recognise the nuances of human emotion and is capable of generating convincing human portraits.²³ It writes witty and insightful prose.²⁴ It creates artwork fluent in an astonishing array of human visual cultures.²⁵ It can write its own programs and compose music according to familiar styles and genres. The story of AI has become the most relevant story of our time with respect to the more general quest to “script for agency,” as natural language as well as computer code increasingly reveals its funda-

²¹ General artificial intelligence would be able to apply itself to a wide range of previously unseen tasks and respond appropriately, as opposed to the more specialised AIs that exist today.

²² The Wachowskis, *The Matrix* (United States: Warner Bros., 1999). Steven Spielberg, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (United States: Warner Bros. and DreamWorks, 2001). Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (London: Penguin, 2000).

²³ Tero Karras, Samuli Laine, and Timo Aila, “This Person Does Not Exist,” Nvidia. Updated December 2019. <https://thispersondoesnotexist.com/>, and Unreal Engine, “Metahuman,” released 2022, <https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/metahuman>.

²⁴ OpenAI, “GPT-3.” <https://openai.com/blog/gpt-3-apps/>.

²⁵ OpenAI, “DALL-E 2,” <https://openai.com/dall-e-2/>.

mental role in the generalisability of machine intelligence. It is a story that is rapidly progressing: throughout my PhD project, aspects of my research that had to do with AI were the only aspects that I had to continually keep updating in my writing, presentations and thinking, all the way to the very last month of this work, just to keep up with the pace of development in this area.

Within the past three years, attitudes towards the promise of general AI have shifted out of the domain of science fiction and are increasingly being taken seriously, particularly as machines began to achieve a level of mastery in domains previously thought to have been well outside of the remit of automation,²⁶ and as engineers working at companies like Google started getting fired for speaking out publicly about their belief that such machines have already become sentient.²⁷ Following these developments, our artistic representations of a world co-habited by humans and AI look less and less like the dark, fantastical hinterland of reality in *The Matrix* and more like our own world—complete with stylish corporate offices, takeaway coffees and train commutes, as in Spike Jonze’s *Her*.²⁸

The fast approaching AI revolution brings the need to better understand the notion of scripting for agency into a state of urgency as human values and the value of the human are thrown into question more acutely than before. Beyond the immanent possibility of replacing the human workforce in areas as diverse as software development, customer service and illustration, AI forces us to ask: who or what should be the final arbiter of human

²⁶ Examples include: Deepmind’s AI “Alpha Go” winning against Go world champion Lee Sedol in 2016, <https://www.deepmind.com/research/highlighted-research/alphago>; Karras et al. and Nvidia’s imaginary people generator at <https://thispersondoesnotexist.com>, and Open AI’s staggering recent advances in machine creativity—see for example GPT-3 for machine writing (<https://openai.com/blog/gpt-3-apps/>) and DALL-E 2 for machine art (<https://openai.com/dall-e-2/>). Note: both of the last two innovations depend on a starting prompt from a human user.

²⁷ See Richard Luscombe, “Google engineer put on leave after saying AI chatbot has become sentient,” *The Guardian*, 12 June 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jun/12/google-engineer-ai-bot-sentient-blake-lemoine>.

²⁸ Spike Jonze, *Her* (United States: Warner Bros., 2013).

decision-making and goal-setting? According to Yuval Noah Harari, it used to be the gods, followed by “human feelings” with the rise of secular capitalism—and even that, while at first sounding democratic and humanistic, turned out to have its own serious problems.²⁹ “What we want” turned out to fail us in terms of the wiser question, “what do we want to want?”³⁰ Soon however, even deciding on such determining questions as “what is in my/our best interest?” will become increasingly relegated—not to gods, nor human feelings—but to AI, unless we decide otherwise and take steps toward some as yet unimagined alternative.³¹

One response to this lies in the question of how we *already* think about the nature of human agency, before the influence of AI. Why is it that we might find the prospect of living with such overqualified AIs as these so troubling? Does it have something to do with the assumptions that currently underlie our day-to-day understanding of ourselves? Just how do our current intuitions about the workings of such notions as “person,” “self” or “agent”—the implicit, unconscious schemas we draw upon as representations of our own functioning—inform something so profound as, for example, how we mourn the dead (the lost persons)? After all, we must have some idea of *what* it is we have lost.

Such implicit mental models and intuitions that we carry and which guide our perception of the mechanics of self on a daily basis (discussed in more detail Chapter 2) have the power to set the terms of our most consequential communal negotiations, about, for example, politics of identity and social agency, sovereignty, disenfranchisement, cultural appropri-

²⁹ Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Vintage, 2018), 57–88.

³⁰ Harari concluded his online course, “A Brief History of Human Kind” from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with the question, “what do we want to want?” in anticipation of some of the themes discussed in *21 Lessons*. The course is no longer available on the original website (Coursera) but can now be found as a playlist of lectures on the author’s YouTube channel: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLfc2WtGuVPdmhYaQjd449k-YeY71fiaFp>.

³¹ For further reference, see Hannah Fry, *Hello World: How to Be Human in the Age of the Machine* (London: Black Swan, 2019).

ation and the AI alignment problem.³² With the rise in essentialist categorisations of human beings, phobia toward all manner of categorical “others,” and deteriorating mental health, making art that reintroduces doubt into our most basic assumptions about the mechanics of self could offer tools to rethink the grounds for societal politics through a politics of self.

In particular, the intuition that it is a contradiction in terms to “script” for “agency” is indicative of the underlying assumption that the self must be in some way unscripted, spontaneous and indeterminate to qualify as an autonomous agent. This intuition alone brings with it a cascade of others: it can foster the assumption that agency must be attributed to an essential source within each individual, and in turn promote hard categorisations of individuals as being essentially this or that “way.” Identity can be unforgiving in such a social climate; one is not allowed to change, adapt or experiment with one’s self-presentation because the idea that identity can be fluid does not fit the essentialist ideological paradigm of self within which we currently live. Betrayal becomes a common point of conflict—as when a person in a formerly same-sex relationship enters a heterosexual relationship and finds themselves suddenly excluded from the LGBT+ groups they used to feel at home in,³³ or when someone who discovers a new piece of family history finds themselves suddenly racially ostracised and accused of “passing”—since contradicting or changing social allegiances should not be possible within such a paradigm and can only spell duplicity or fraud. This logic of the fixity of identity can extend beyond the individual and map onto attitudes

³² I.e. how to “align” the development of AI with human values.

³³ A fictional instance of this is explored in Sarah Watson, *The Bold Type* (Canada: Freeform, 2017). See also how this manifests in bisexual people’s experiences in Tangela A. Roberts, Sharon G. Horne and William T. Hoyt, “Between a Gay and a Straight Place: Bisexual Individuals’ Experiences with Monosexism,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 15, no. 4 (2015, 554–569).

towards the “character” of entire groups or nations, entrenching impressions that become difficult to change.³⁴

Pursuing a study of the notion of scripting for agency allows us to open up these fundamental models and intuitions about agency to question, thus helping to keep alive the chance to discover human values and the value of the human, in an age of political divisiveness and rapidly maturing artificial intelligence.

Overview of the State of the Art

Although scripting and agency might appear to contradict one another given the indeterminate spontaneity attributed to agents and the determinacy attributed to scripts, for centuries philosophers, cultural theorists, scientists and artists in various domains have attempted to provide a mechanical account of agency in which no mysterious source or glitch of indeterminacy need be invoked—from Douglas Hofstadter’s model of the self as a “strange loop,”³⁵ a self without centre, over developmental psychologists’ emphasis on the formative experiences of early childhood, to Judith Butler’s theories of social subject formation.³⁶ In turn, such ideas are wittingly or unwittingly being put to the test in the field of artificial intelligence, whereby I argue that this can also be achieved in the laboratory of art practice. Here I will briefly outline some of the main areas, scholars and artists that inform the

³⁴ The second entry for the noun “character” in The Britannica Dictionary defines it as “a set of qualities that are shared by many people in a group, country, etc.—usually singular,” citing examples such as “the *character* of the American people” and “the French/Japanese/Mexican national *character*.” <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/character>, last accessed 4 September 2022. Further, it has been shown that the personification of states is positively correlated with stronger attitude formation. See Kathleen M. McGraw and Thomas M. Dolan, “Personifying the State: Consequences for Attitude Formation,” *Political Psychology* 28, no. 3 (June 2007): 299–327.

³⁵ Douglas R. Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

project, many of which will be reviewed in more detail throughout Chapters 1–4. Given the relatively wide, cross-disciplinary scope of the question of scripting for agency, I have grouped the relevant research domains in the following way: “Continental Philosophy,” “Formulas, Tradition and Communal Memory,” “Social Psychology and the Contextual Person,” “Art, Metafiction and Authorship” and “Determinism, Computation and Agency.”

Continental Philosophy

The notion that a “person” or “self” can be understood as a kind of text spans across post-structuralism, feminism and hermeneutics. Jacques Derrida’s concept of deconstruction argues against the possibility of fixed meaning or “presence” in the signified, showing how meaning is indefinitely deferred in dynamic, living language.³⁷ Consequently, the identity of a person, or the meaning of “self,” is not determined by an inherent, fixed attribute, but is always being defined and redefined in relation to other identities and experiences, mirroring Julia Kristeva’s notion of “intertextuality.”³⁸ The notion of a fluid and constantly shifting self is echoed by Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*,³⁹ and Paul Ricœur further develops this in his exploration of narrative identity.⁴⁰

Relating specifically to the role of institutional practices, rituals and speech acts in subject formation, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* can be seen as a precursor to theories on the textuality of persons, as it explored how “woman” is constructed by social narratives.⁴¹ This exploration continues in Michel Foucault, for instance where he outlines the

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2001).

⁴⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁴¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2010).

discursive production of sexuality through history.⁴² Louis Althusser added to this emphasis on language in the production of identity by introducing the notion of interpellation, a process by which individuals are “hailed” into subjectivity by ideological state apparatuses such as education, religion and the family,⁴³ and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity builds on these concepts to examine the societal scripts through which identities are played out and revised.⁴⁴ In providing accounts of textuality in relation to agency generally and in relation to subject formation in particular, most of these scholars are referred back to across the whole thesis.

Formulas, Tradition and Communal Memory

Of great influence to me has been both the independent and joint work of Slavica Ranković (my mother) and Miloš Ranković (my father), notably Slavica Ranković’s notion of “distributed authorship,” developed through her study of orality-literacy in South Slavic poetry and Icelandic sagas,⁴⁵ which shaped my methodological focus on the author as “medium” (discussed below and in Chapter 1), and Miloš Ranković’s “Meteoric Theory of Art,”⁴⁶ which, through using the tools of ensemble forecasting to theorise how artists navigate aesthetic space, led me to see character as an “attractor” in the space of possible behaviours (discussed in Chapter 4). Their joint research on formulas, tradition and com-

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998).

⁴³ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

⁴⁵ Slavica Ranković, “Spectres of Agency: The Case of Fóstbrœðra saga and its Distributed Author,” in *In Search of the Culprit: Aspects of Medieval Authorship*, ed. Lukas Rösli and Stefanie Gropper (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 175–192.

⁴⁶ Miloš Ranković, “Meteoric Theory of Art,” art:language:location art festival, Cambridge, 25 November 2014, YouTube video <http://youtu.be/o573OIADvY8>.

munal memory have a particular relevance to this project,⁴⁷ where the three of us have noticed a point of convergence around how they (following other students of orality-literacy) use the term “formula” and how I use the term “character.” Both “formula” and “character” converge also with Richard Dawkins’ concept of the “meme” (discussed in Chapter 1), but all three terms bring slightly different connotations that alter the perspective with which one might think about units of cultural inheritance (see “A Note on the Use of the Term ‘Character’” below).

As my parents, Miloš and Slavica Ranković are more intimately bound up in my own “scripting” than the other references I draw upon: over the years, we have shared our research and ideas between us more expediently than is usually possible between scholars, often in combination with other activities, such as having dinner, assembling IKEA furniture, or shooting hoops. This means that certain figures of speech or concepts that have become indispensable to us in conversation and to me in this dissertation (such as “relationship without a touch” or “vertical disciplining”) cannot always be traced to published work. In these cases, I indicate who coined the term and label its origin as “personal communication,” along with related publications, if available.

Social Psychology and the Contextual Person

Because my methodology predominantly involves performing and acting (see “Methodology” below), throughout the dissertation I have drawn extensively on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who rigorously set out how theatrical performance can be used as a framework for studying the presentation of self in everyday life (often noting the grey areas

⁴⁷ Slavica and Miloš Ranković, “A Formula is a Habit Colliding with Life,” in *The Formula in Oral Poetry and Prose*, eds. Daniel Sävborg and Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

between the two).⁴⁸ By formulating interpersonal behaviour as a performance for the many different audiences encountered by an individual throughout daily life, Goffman posits a view of the person that is highly context-dependent, tracing the various ways in which the individual is scripted by the social situation they find themselves in.

Further, both my research and methodology are very much informed by my own chameleonic experience as someone who moves fluidly between multiple, sometimes conflicting, national, cultural, linguistic and class identities on a regular basis. Living with character inconsistency and fluidity itself requires an attuned skill in “frame switching”: adaptively negotiating the incongruent social groups in one’s life by presenting different versions of oneself (what I call “characters”) depending on the context. My fascination with this personal fluidity became the bedrock of my artistic experiments in character morphology in video and writing, whereupon I often found parallels between the cultural psychology literature on frame switching and what I observed in my own art practice and life. Cultural psychology concepts such as “knowledge activation theory,” “cultural frame,” and “cultural priming” were instrumental in theorising character as a free-floating behavioural script of varying scale that can be readily transmitted between human beings, and which, once adopted, becomes a cognitive frame (covered in Chapter 4).

Within this area I have been particularly influenced by the work of Alexandria L. West, Rui Zhang, Maya A. Yampolsky and Joni Y. Sasaki, whose joint research on frame switching revealed that the inconsistent self-presentation occurring as a consequence of frame switching is read as inauthentic in social settings, highlighting “the potential cost of cultural

⁴⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990).

fit.”⁴⁹ This led me to propose authenticity as an aesthetic quality whose function is to socially regulate human character variability in Chapter 6.⁵⁰

Art, Metafiction and Authorship

When it came to describing the artistic references that informed this PhD, I often found that I had a much harder time remembering who the relevant artists or artworks were than I did when tracing my academic references. Yet even as I succeed and list, for example, artists who adopt, as I did, the practice of performing others (Nicki S. Lee, Cindy Sherman, Chiara Fumai, Gillian Wearing, Francesca Woodman, Genevieve Gaignard, Andrea Fraser, Shana Moulton, Oriana Fox, Amalia Ulman), scripting others (Carey Young, Lucy Beech, Edward Thomassen), and querying selfhood in fiction (Luigi Pirandello, Virginia Woolf, Milan Kundera, Elif Shafak, Orhan Pamuk)—even if they are artists whom I deeply admire—the process ends up feeling somehow disingenuous, as if I were betraying the truth about how artworks really get made.

I believe my difficulty with tracing my artistic influences in this project has to do with differing traditions in how sources are drawn upon between artistic practice and academic writing. As artists, we are taught (up to a point) that it is good to steal: we can be less scrupulous about referencing even as we are cautioned against our genius complexes by being reminded that what we are making is always thoroughly citational. We can borrow and deploy aesthetic formulas so expediently that we do not always even have a name for what it is we have borrowed, let alone taken note of where we borrowed it from. In academic writ-

⁴⁹ Alexandria L. West, et al., “The Potential Cost of Cultural Fit: Frame Switching Undermines Perceptions of Authenticity in Western Contexts,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (20 December 2018), doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02622](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02622).

⁵⁰ “Authenticity” is in this research discussed as an aesthetic quality. Like other aesthetic qualities such as “cleanliness,” authenticity is an effective means of regulating norms—in this case norms relating to the presentation of self within the social milieu—by acting as a measure of virtue and thus a form of social currency.

ing however, the same move—taking a fragment of somebody else’s work without acknowledging it—is more readily interpreted by the stigmatising name of plagiarism. While it is said that artists should “steal,” in academic practice there is the saying that one “stands on the shoulders of giants.” This metaphor of stacked endeavours implies an additive, rather than combinatorial process. It also asks that we name our giants.

The scrupulous logging, tracing and acknowledgment of where ones in references come from in academic practice comes with noble intent, since to trace the provenance of ideas is to distribute the credit for them. Yet the fact that there is no imperative to trace and log sources in artistic practice makes the process of iterating through ideas in a certain sense “faster” in art than in scholarship. At the same time, both traditions fail in their own ways: academic citation never succeeding in a faithful portrait of influence and art practice vulnerable to false attributions of originality.⁵¹ Perhaps art is then, in this sense, no less rigorous than academic practice, even when its referents get lost in the mayhem of creative iteration. Perhaps it just trades in one type of rigour for another.

While acknowledging the influence of the artists and novelists listed above on my methodology and thinking through their thematisation of variable identity, selfhood and scripting, I chose to contextualise my performance practice within the arts through an examination of process rather than content: through artists’ own theories of authorship, in particular those that understood themselves as taking on the role of a “medium,” since these tended to simultaneously imply a theory of self (auto) as a medium (with Paul Cézanne, T. S. Eliot and Cindy Sherman forming the main examples, in Section 1.3). In this way, these artists’ creative endeavours also constituted a reflection on the mechanics of self. The medium metaphor will prove especially useful to the question of scripting for agency because a

⁵¹ AI will probably be able to do this job of tracing references much more accurately than humans have been able to do, potentially revealing undiscovered links in famous chains of intellectual influence. In this way, AI might reveal that there has always been a certain artificiality to citation practices.

medium is a spiritual machine; a machine for the playing out of an “other.” Here, Marina Warner’s historical exploration of spirit aesthetics and Alfred Gell’s theories of agency in relation to artworks provided a lens through which to think about artistic channelling.⁵²

Determinism, Computation and Agency

Daniel C. Dennett’s evolutionary theory of what is sometimes thought of as “freedom,” and what I have here called “agency,” offers tools to reimagine agency and selfhood in terms of algorithms, code and computation, in a bid to help readers intuitively transcend the determinism/freedom binary. His *Freedom Evolves* is drawn on as a key text (throughout, but especially in Chapter 3), since enacting an analogous transcendence is precisely what this thesis attempts to achieve in performance using the concept of repertoire.⁵³ Dennett’s description of the “substrate neutrality” of algorithms inspired me to think of character as a free-floating behavioural script that could be “run” by different agents. Further, his way of thinking of “personality” as a human-to-human interactive interface led me to theorise the social preference for character consistency as an evolutionary advantage to the extent that it promotes social cooperation in Chapter 6.⁵⁴

⁵² Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵³ Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Penguin, 2004).

⁵⁴ I will draw extensively on Daniel C. Dennett and by proxy, on Richard Dawkins (in particular his notion of the meme) throughout the thesis. I will also draw on T. S. Eliot’s theory of authorship, and by extension, of self. Although Richard Dawkins takes an explicitly atheistic position in his writing on evolutionary theory, and T. S. Eliot a devoutly theistic one in the latter part of his life, this thesis takes neither an atheistic or theistic approach in its theorisation of character, scripting and agency, and it is neither implicitly compatible nor incompatible with theism. (I am in fact not sure what the author-Katarina’s thoughts are on God—I haven’t asked her yet). What is true, is that the research is characterised by a mechanistic point of view, in which human beings are understood as character-playing machines, and that it is also a deeply spiritual project, since it is concerned with exploring the breadth of human agency and understanding “spirit” in mechanistic terms. Some readers may intuit that a mechanistic point of view necessarily aligns with an atheistic perspective, but this is the very intuition this thesis aims to challenge, by showing how scripting need not necessarily be incompatible with agency, and/or the notion of “spirit”.

Methodology

Since the aim of this research is to critically reflect on habits of thought relating to scripting for agency and conceptualisations of self, and since habits of thought are carried and recapitulated in language, particular uses of language form part of the methodology.

Having found myself in a position to think through the relations between concepts such as “self,” “character,” “person,” “agent,” or “soul,” terminology has in fact been a constant source of headache throughout this PhD project, particularly as their treatments by other scholars have turned out to vary considerably.⁵⁵ I say this not in order to vent or to shirk my theorist’s responsibility, but rather to suggest that the very irksomeness of dealing with terminology in this project is itself symptomatic of a broader cultural ambiguity surrounding such terms. I will attempt to disambiguate them in my own way in Chapters 5 and 6—in the meantime, I will sometimes resort to listing terms together as a strategy for calling to mind some of their common meanings without resting too long on any one of them.

In some cases, I will begin to use certain terms in specific ways much earlier in the thesis. I will therefore begin this section on methodology with some notes on my use of mechanistic language, the term “character” and the phrase “mechanics of self,” before giving an overview of the self-estranging performance practice and the critically self-reflective approach characterising the methodology more broadly.

A Note on the Use of Mechanistic Language

Throughout the sources cited in the overview above, reflections on writing and selfhood are occasionally made using mechanistic language, as when Derrida writes that “to write is

⁵⁵ Compare for example Dennett and Goffman’s divergent use of language when discussing the memetic nature of behaviour in “Character as a System of Memes” in Section 1.2: “On Jealousy.”

to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive,”⁵⁶ when Erving Goffman refers to the role of “expressive equipment” in the presentation of self, or when Foucault describes “technologies” of the self in his study of subject formation.⁵⁷ This is a style I will continue to adopt throughout this dissertation because mechanistic metaphors inherently steer me away from essentialising the self, which I must do if I am to faithfully consider the possibility of “scripting” for agency.

In particular, I will frequently refer to the terms “the human being” and “character” in ways that are specific to this thesis. From now on, I will take “the human being” to mean “that which plays out character” or “character substratum.”⁵⁸ I will take “character” to mean “a system of memes which plays out across a human being that is embedded within a social milieu” (see Section 1.2). By referring to character as a system of memes, I mean that it is a free-floating behavioural script capable of being transmitted between human beings. This sets the thesis up for thinking of the human being as a being of potential, rather than essence, a distinction that will become increasingly important throughout.

A Note on the Use of the Term “Character”

Using the term “character” as a vehicle through which to think about the possibility of scripting for agency originated from my storyteller’s quest to bring my *fictional* characters to life, but a closer look at its wider meanings later solidified its usage here as especially apt. The word “character” calls to mind a number of meanings which may appear to be different, but which this research tries to understand simultaneously:

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 316.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Great Britain: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 16–49.

⁵⁸ Terms such as “brain” or “body” are avoided in this thesis in order not to prematurely specify the boundaries of this character-playing machine; “the human being” might not start or end with the body or the brain.

- The characters involved in *writing*, such as the characters on my keyboard.
- A “quality” or the tendency of something to be a certain way.
- A synonym for *personality*; the way an agent is, or acts, including fictional characters.

This list reflects the historical iterations that the English word “character” has gone through to arrive at a single notion suggesting something to do with both writing and agency. Originating from the Ancient Greek *kharaktēr*, which once meant “stamping tool,” the word later makes a metonymic jump and begins to refer to the *marks* made by such a tool. Later still, the word comes to take on the more abstract meanings of “distinctive mark,” “distinguishing quality” and eventually, “personality.”⁵⁹

Talking about distinguishing marks of this kind might remind us of the way in which each mark in a drawing seems to be planted there deliberately to give special qualities to the drawing overall. In this way, the characters from which it is made manage to give the drawing as a whole something like a “personality.” This is where “scripting for agency” comes in: the research focuses on the cognitive association revealed by this etymological route, between writing, mark making and pattern on the one hand, and personality, agency and subjectivity on the other. The research zooms out to assume the most abstract definition of character: a “distinctive mark,” which can then be applied to both scripts and agents as a

⁵⁹ *Oxford Languages and Google*, s.v. “character (*n.*),” accessed 30 August 2022, <https://www.google.com/search?q=define+character>. Other, more specific meanings to the word “character” can be found in this dictionary entry, but they still fall under the broader categories of “personality,” “disposition,” and “temperament” by referring to character traits, as when “moral” character refers to characteristics such as integrity and honour, or when it is said of someone that they “are a character,” to mean that they are “eccentric.”

means of tapping into some of the features and mechanisms that the two might have in common.⁶⁰ Some such commonalities include:

A writing/reading mechanism: Character, whether it is a letter on my keyboard or a person's recognisable manner of being, is *legible*; it is made up of pattern and recognition, of writing and reading. Character, the observable dynamic by which agent legibility is performed and read, is inscribed within a common language and requires training in order to be read.

Predictability: In order for it to be legible, and thus recognisable, character must be relatively predictable. Something self-same about it must return, again and again, for it to be re-recognised as *that* "distinctive mark." The characteristic rush of an ocean wave towards the shore is only characteristic, and even appears to have something like a personality, because it returns again and again, and because I can recognise it in its return. Likewise, for you to recognise me as Katarina, I must behave in a relatively predictable way so that next time you run into me, you can re-read me as Katarina, and not as someone else.

⁶⁰ In "A Zoom Lens for the Future of the Text," Christian Bök considers the different scales at which writers have regarded the fundamental unit of composition in writing, from the mark (Jacques Derrida), to the letter (Isidore Isou), syllable (Charles Olson), phrase (Jean-François Lyotard), sentence (Ron Silliman), paragraph (Alexander Bain), page (John Trimbur), book (Stéphane Mallarmé), corpus (Robert Kroetsch), archive (Kenneth Goldsmith) and finally, Jorge Luis Borges' Library of Babel, containing all the possible texts that can be written in language (Christian Bök, "A Zoom Lens for the Future of the Text," *CARPA 7 Conference*, Uniarts Helsinki, uploaded 27 October 2021, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/WvNICH1LMIQ>). In a sense, however, all of these units ultimately act like "marks" (they have their own *character*) relative to other members of their category, and it is their capacity to perform their difference which enables a texture of meaning to emerge at each scale. The characters of words, books and archives alike are set off against those of other members of their kind. Rather than privileging the "mark" in the atomistic sense of "a stroke composing part of a letter," the idea that the dynamic of the "mark" can be generalised at all scales of writing is how I understand Derrida's notion of *différance*. It is this capacity of the mark to be different to other marks that I see as etymologically linked to the concept of human personality in the word "character."

For a study of units of composition and their elusive scales, see Slavica and Miloš Ranković, "A Formula is a Habit Colliding with Life," in which they problematise the idea that units of composition can be found within the text itself at all, at any scale.

Virality: In order for character to be able to return again and again, it must have a means by which it can reproduce or transmit itself. In the case of the ocean wave, repeatability is most often achieved by the returning winds, which are themselves driven by the cyclical process of the Earth's rotation and the resultant uneven heating of its atmosphere. In the case of human character, character is repeated by contagion. Humans "catch" character and spread it again. Such cultural viruses are called memes, and human character is a system of memes.⁶¹

Ghostliness: There is something ghostly about character, in the same way in which there is something ghostly about a pattern—for where exactly is the pattern located within the material components of which it is made? Again, a wave is a good analogy for this. Imagine a Mexican wave. The effect is impressive, when, at a football match, a row of people stand up and sit down when their neighbour has done the same. We watch the wave flutter across the stadium like a snake rushing through the seats. But where is the wave, exactly? It is entirely produced by the act of people standing up and sitting down, but no individual person, nor the row as a whole, can be said to be the wave. The wave is an emergent property of the human beings that produce it, and so it is somehow dependent upon, but also eerily *independent* of the standing and sitting people. The same is true of a domino effect, or an ocean wave. The wave—the pattern—is a ghostly, abstract property that seems to emerge from a substratum. Character too is a pattern that seems to emerge out of a collection of behaviours performed by an object or an agent. This ghostly in/dependence of character from its physical substratum is perhaps what is captured by the term "soul."

Although the term "character" as it is used here may be defined as a "distinctive mark" or a "recognisable pattern" of any kind, this thesis focuses primarily on human character—that

⁶¹ The concept of the meme and its origin is discussed in more detail in Section 1.2.

is, the set of characters that together form a grammar of human “personality.” There are other kinds of character, such as the character of a line in a drawing,⁶² but I set human character as my focus for now because I claim that the performance practice described here can provide new tools for thinking about the mechanics of human self, and by extension, that of the selves of our prospective spiritual relatives: general artificial intelligences.

Character will prove to be rather multifaceted as we move through the thesis and refine our analogies, from thinking of character as a pattern, to a system of memes (Section 1.2), to a kind of software (Chapter 3), to a frame (Section 4.1) and finally, an attractor in the space of possible behaviours (Section 4.2).

The Mechanics of Self

Given the need to continually refer to research from such wide-ranging domains in this project, I propose “the mechanics of self” as the unifying term and the shared focal point for research devoted to an elementary study of “self” and its close relatives—“agent,” “person,” “soul,” “spirit,” “subject,” “intelligence,” “being,” etc., including attempts at reevaluating and disambiguating these terms.⁶³

Research into the mechanics of self is concerned with the architecture of agency, focusing on testing, expanding, troubling or elaborating some of the *a priori* assumptions about how self works: its shape, movement, plasticity, mechanism and scope. It does not take for granted what self is “made of,” or the kind of material substratum upon which it might play

⁶² I have written elsewhere on character in drawing, using a drawing experiment analogous to the “[Introspective Performance Experiment](#).” See Katarina Ranković, “A Story About A Drawing,” *The Journal of Arts Writing By Students* 4, no. 1 (April 2017): 85–92.

⁶³ In time, readers may notice that I privilege the use of some of these terms over others in this thesis, particularly “self,” “agent” and “soul” over “subjectivity” or “consciousness.” I stick primarily to a behaviourist approach and focus on observable agent-like behaviour in the interest of limiting the scope of this intrinsically unwieldy theme. “Soul” is included in the discussion because, as I argue in Section 2.3, “ghostliness” is an observable quality of emergent systems.

out, and therefore potentially encompasses, in addition to humans and other biological candidates, prospective general artificial intelligence, extraterrestrial life, fictional characters and other autonomous agents which may share similar properties to those continually defined and revised by the field.

The way in which “self” is modelled, imagined and theorised at the level of its fundamental mechanics has consequences at higher levels of endeavour, such as the politics of identity, the ethics of social interaction, representational politics with respect to social diversity and epistemological concerns about positionality. Although the politics of identity is given little direct consideration in this thesis in favour of attending more deeply to questions of self mechanics through performance practice, there is a related kind of politics active within this thesis that starts by acknowledging the intimate and interdependent relationship between the two levels of endeavour. The mechanics of self is elementary to the politics of identity just as physical mechanics is elementary to biology, with both levels of study being equally relevant and important modes of research. For example, rather than focusing on the lived experience of inhabiting specific identities in themselves, the mechanics of self asks how subject positions arise, or what kinds of assumptions belie the notion of “positionality” in the first place. And just as advances in physics occasionally come to the aid of biologists and *vice versa*, I embark on my performance experiments in character with the hope that attending to assumptions about self at the elementary level can furnish the project for social justice carried out at a higher level with new critical tools that might aid this ongoing ethical work.

Performance Practice as a Laboratory of the Soul

The research methodology (detailed in Chapter 1) is primarily comprised of a character performance practice centred on the empathetic inhabitation of alternative personas.⁶⁴ The performances start with a process I call “self-estrangement,” in which I change aspects of my appearance, behaviour or environment (what Goffman calls “mobile expressive equipment”), in either obvious or subtle ways, until those changes bring with them a cascade of associations and tip me into the temporary state of believing I am someone else—someone who moves and looks like the new character I am at that moment presenting. Within this space of character play, I find I can plug theories on the mechanics of self into my performances and watch them play out on the surface of my own person. The performance practice has thus become a kind of laboratory of the soul, in which I have been able to use acting, improvising and scripting character in order to flex my intuitions about my own self and its mechanics.

In the budding era of artificial intelligence, a character role-playing, oral storytelling practice such as this may seem a surprisingly ancient technology to consult on the the question of scripting for agency. When observing the magical capabilities of the latest generative AIs (like Open AI’s ChatGPT), explanations of its power often place the emphasis on the AI technology itself: the learning algorithm, or the supercomputer required for its training. However, the real power of large language models like GPT stems from a much older technology: language itself. It is precisely the shared cultural context encoded into language and its role in subject formation that is what what brings artificial intelligence, fictional character and human character into the same realm: character is exchanged freely between all three categories of agent. Through my performance practice, I am able to manipulate the same materials that would endow any kind of agent, artificial or organic, fictional or real, with character.

⁶⁴ This is outlined in brief here and more comprehensively examined throughout Chapter 1.

Critical Self-Reflection

I approach the research not as only as the character(s) that bears the author's name—the social agent “Katarina”—but as an ecology of characters comprised of her and all the nameless interlocutors that appear in the performances, and I take advantage of the diversity of perspectives they afford me. Chapter 5 is an example of a moment when a character adopted in a state of performance took the reins of the research and steered it in a direction that I (in my “habitual” character) never would have anticipated.

Related to this, “self-estrangement” intentionally borrows its terminology from Bertolt Brecht's concept of estrangement in theatre making, as it serves as a device for entering into a critical engagement with the object of study, in this case “self.” More broadly, in both the dissertation writing and performance practice this thesis takes a critically self-reflective approach. Critical self-reflection is a methodology that sustains a line of meta-level questioning about the researcher's own assumptions regarding their role and what they are doing throughout the process of researching itself. It involves becoming aware of one's own presuppositions and challenging “the sources, nature and consequences of our habits of mind.” In addition to the self-estranging performance practice, this approach is present in parallel attempts to self-consciously reflect and report on the research process, throughout the thesis and in various forms, such as the experimental dialogue in two characters in Section 5.1, the analyses of “failures” and unintended biases in my own works of art or scholarship in Sections 4.3 and 5.3, or the performative account on becoming a research character in the Prologue. In all of these cases, it was necessary to initiate the “making strange” of the research.

The Performance Experiments

Particularly instrumental to arriving at my findings were four performance experiments and one drawing experiment. Four of these experiments are written up as detailed reports linked throughout this thesis, with the fifth, being the most significant, described in the main body (Section 5.1: “Politics of Inner Self”).

The first experiment associated with this thesis, “Self-Estrangement Methodology Exchange,” involved attempting to teach 5 participants how to adopt my performance method and run performance experiments for themselves.⁶⁵

The second experiment associated with this thesis, “Introspective Performance Experiment,” involved creating 7 recordings of myself adopting alternative characters while introspecting on the process and orally reporting on any reflections that came up, thus opening up the performance method to retrospective analysis.⁶⁶

The third experiment associated with this thesis, “Diagramming the Self: Deriving Lay Theories of Selfhood from Drawings,” involved asking 104 participants to “diagram the self” in order to analyse the resulting drawings for implied lay theories about the mechanics of self.⁶⁷

The fourth experiment associated with this thesis, “Thought Shift Performance Experiment,” involved creating 8 hour-long recordings of myself going into character with a focus on exploring how a deep focus on character empathy alone (without thinking about storytelling, for instance) influenced what I said and did.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ <https://www.katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-1>.

⁶⁶ <https://www.katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-2>.

⁶⁷ <https://www.katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-3>.

⁶⁸ <https://www.katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-4>.

The fifth experiment associated with this thesis, “Politics of Inner Self” (Section 5.1), involved making a recording of myself alternately adopting two different characters and staging a spontaneous conversation between them.

The dissertation and the experimental reports linked to it are quite distinct in that the former has a theoretical character while the latter is empirical. Although these experiments have been relegated to online links, in practice I do not privilege the theoretical work I have undertaken over the empirical, and could easily imagine another version of this thesis with flipped priorities: empirical process and results in the main body of the thesis, with theoretical papers linked.⁶⁹ On this particular occasion however, as a means of managing aspiration against contingencies, and scope against scale, I have arrived at the current order of priorities in reference to the fact that, since my performance practice itself draws on the diverse disciplines of self mechanics, I would in turn like to make my own theoretical contribution available and applicable to diverse endeavours beyond the arts, while still making available the specific processes and evidence gathered in the online experimental reports. In any case, it is likely that the empirical work undertaken will form the main part of future work.

A Note on Character Choice

At this point I would like to explain why the thesis will treat the specific choice of character in the performance works as relatively arbitrary within the narrow scope of this particular research, when it is not arbitrary in my performance practice more broadly.⁷⁰ There is of

⁶⁹ As Mark Dion put it: “artists are not interested in illustrating theories as much as they may be in testing them.” Mark Dion, “Field Work and the Natural History Museum,” in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Alex Coles, Vol. 3 of DE-, DIS-, EX- (London: Black Dog, 1999), 39.

⁷⁰ The scope of this particular thesis is much narrower than the scope of my artistic practice as a whole, echoing Nelson Goodman’s insight into the repleteness of individual artworks. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 229–31.

course, a great deal that could be said about why certain characters interest me over others, but this would be beyond the scope of the aims of this particular thesis. Here I am specifically considering the creative potential in mobilising the effects of character switching brought about by performance, as well as tracking the insights into self mechanics such a deliberate frame switching practice can yield. To that end, the focus here is on the “switching” between characters itself and the difference it makes to my authorship, rather than the specific kinds of characters I gravitate to when I switch.

A whole other thesis could be written on the way in which character choice in a practice like mine contributes, wittingly or unwittingly, to a politics of representation, sometimes reproducing, sometimes deviating from cultural stereotypes across innumerable dimensions, including familiar ones, such as gender, class and ethnicity, but also many more, as yet unrecognised classes of human generalisation. Indeed, giving more thought to my criteria when choosing which kinds of characters to study and perform will probably be the focus of my work after this PhD.

Nevertheless, while the exploration of character within the privacy of my practice is decidedly experimental in the sense that I often do not know where I will end up when I begin improvising a departure from my habitual character, I do exercise political agency when I select which of my performances will go out into the world as works of video art. An example of this is the way in which the performance video works frequently introduce contradictions to expected behaviours within certain stereotypical characterisations. There is, for example, the revolutionary leader who trades in anti-establishment zeal for commercialised “self-care” by abandoning her post-revolution leadership role in favour of a beach holiday (*Time Off*, 2020). Or, there is the feminist who inadvertently finds herself reproducing the stereotypical duties of a suburban housewife (cooking, wearing an apron, observing her male partner mowing the lawn), wondering if playing out the stereotypical role whilst

mindful of its power as a social script in any way liberates her from its gender determinism all the same (*Suburbia*, 2021).⁷¹ Performing at the brink of a stereotypical representation, first deviating from it, then returning to it, might even provide the audience with a direct way of questioning such expectations of behaviour and thinking through them in the vicinity of the artwork.

Furthermore, later I will claim that working with stereotypes to produce artworks forged out of a palette of characters is a consequence of the very social purpose of character and why it exists. Working with stereotypes as a consequence of working with character is in part due to the fact that human beings must labour to generalise *themselves*, to place *themselves* within stereotypical categories, in order to be part of a social system. This notion of character, as a tool for communication and social cooperation that comes with a complicated mix of costs and benefits to the individual, including self-generalisation, is a notion that will be explored in Chapter 6. It is my hope that an artistic practice which takes these generalisations and stereotypes as its principal medium and plays with the language of character might go some way to rendering the costs and benefits to self-generalisation within character management visible, intuitive and open to question.

Research Findings

The performance practice presented in this thesis contributes in a small way to providing thought experiments, “intuition pumps”⁷² and philosophical gyms in which people encountering the artwork can flex their intuitions about the mechanics of self. In particular, these

⁷¹ Links to these performance video works can be found in “Part 1: Documentation of Practice.”

⁷² This is a term coined by Daniel Dennett to describe thinking tools and thought experiments that help us train and flex our intuitions about a given phenomenon. See Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

works stimulate viewers to test their intuitions about the relationship between character variability and authenticity, performance and self-presentation, and scripting and agency.

My own expectations and assumptions about self, character and identity have been challenged a great deal over the years that I have engaged with this character performance practice, leading me to arrive at the following research findings (presented in more detail throughout Chapters 4–7):

- **Character is the shape of what is thinkable to the human being for the time it is adopted.** A meteorological analogy is used to illustrate this: climate is to weather what character is to behaviour. In the space of all possible behaviours that a human being can perform, character is an “attractor,” the underlying shape of a system’s tendency. In the character shifts achieved in my performances, I am tilting the landscape of my mind, as if tipping myself into an alternative personal paradigm. Adopting this temporary alterity allows me to entertain thoughts and ideas that have never before occurred to me. This in turn means that I am able to consult the characters of my performances *on matters to which I do not yet have an answer*, as I might consult another person. The catch with adopting any character, of course, are the perspectives forgone: the opportunity cost of character is other characters.
- **“The social agent” and “the human being” are not the same thing, but in practice we act as if they were.** The social agent is a special type of character within the various classes of character that emerged in this research (see Chapter 5). Namely, it is that character (or family of characters) which is adopted by the human being when it enters the social milieu, endowing it with rights and responsibilities. While the human being is in fact capable of playing out a much wider

variety of characters by virtue of being a character-playing “machine,” social pressures train it to stick only to one character per social group, through a process described by Goffman as “a bureaucratisation of spirit.” In a sense, the human being is overqualified for society, and tempers its universality into singularity for such a large portion of the time that this fact of human character breadth is forgotten, and only occasionally resurfaces in special, bracketed-off circumstances like theatrical performance. As discussed in Chapter 6, overcoming the conflation of the social agent with the human being has wide-ranging ethical, legal, political and social implications, as it introduces an ambiguity with regard to who is being referred to (the human being, or the social agent?) in, for example, human rights law, biographies, descriptions of identities and “positionality,” and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion efforts. The need to negotiate the character-variable human being with the carefully-policed but seemingly necessary social agent introduces the need for a “politics of self” directly correlated with the social politics with which we are more familiar. After all, can we understand social diversity without also understanding the diversity of the self?

1. Becoming a Question

In this chapter, I will describe a performance practice that I have developed over the past ten years involving “self-estrangement,” by which I mean deliberately making my own self feel unfamiliar, strange or foreign to me for a time.⁷³ Thus detached from my habitual character, I am primed to become other. I then spend the remainder of the performance trying to find out who that “other” could be, and if I am able to sustain it, allow myself to spend time in the condition of being someone else. Self-estrangement serves the purpose of making my character plastic, malleable and open to discontinuity with my habitual, everyday way of presenting.

In order to find that “other” that I am turning into, I slowly begin to change small superficial details about myself: the gymnastics of my facial features, the degree of trembling in my voice, the way I hold a cup. Through these altered behaviours, I begin to piece together an alternative character that takes shape in the caverns of my body. I begin to experience existence through their lens, inhabiting their perspective, feeling things as I think they would feel them, and thinking things as I think they would think them.

This is a process that may happen in my privacy, without anybody ever knowing and with no documentation remaining; it might be something I test out in play or jest with people who are close to me; or it might be a process that I stage for camera. Sometimes this “staging” has been very deliberate: I prepare a set and step into the camera’s field of vision expecting to induce myself into a state of self-estrangement. At other times, it has happened unexpectedly, in some vacant, nondescript hallway, fumbling hurriedly about my pockets to retrieve my phone camera to capture the moment before it has gone and I am

⁷³ I derive the term “self-estrangement” from Bertolt Brecht and Viktor Shklovsky, discussed in Section 1.4.

back to being my “habitual self,” without a means of retrieving the character that had temporarily inhabited me.

Although the performances may at different times pass recorded or unrecorded, in the presence of others or in deepest privacy, the availability of a video record of some of these events has added a valuable dimension to my own experience and understanding of the self-estrangement performance practice. Watching them back often involves a great deal of surprise on my part: at seeing myself so effectively displaced from my habitual character; at the character themselves and what they do and say; and at finding a distinct appearance of “comfort,” “naturalness” or “authenticity” in my adoption of that character. The video documentation of these characters, whether edited or unedited, has become a series of artworks that I have called *The One Woman Empathy Circus* (2012–present),⁷⁴ viewable on [this YouTube channel](#),⁷⁵ and otherwise presented in various formats—as cinematic screenings in darkened rooms or single-channel works in art gallery exhibitions. As the circus reference suggests, the works involve performing certain skilful feats that aim to dazzle the audience with a kind of “contortionism of the soul,” while also merely highlighting the mundane conditions of being a person inhabiting a social milieu.

⁷⁴ Not insignificantly, this performance practice evolved during a formative period of my life (17–28 years of age), in which I was learning to flexibly adopt characters and switch between them. How such a practice might converge with the mechanics of self from this formative perspective will be discussed in Section 1.2 and in Chapter 4.

⁷⁵ Katarina Ranković, “The One Woman Empathy Circus,” 2012–present, YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8ySXEzVcbO4GJqmGoIF9gA>. Offshoots of this video performance practice include voiceovers for AI-generated portrait images, typing ventriloquisms and conversations with my split self.



Fig. 11. MA Degree Show exhibition. The Lethaby Gallery, Central Saint Martins, 23–27 May 2018.

This is the point at which I entered the PhD research. One of the motivations for pursuing it in the first place has been to try to understand what is going on in these performance sessions and why its outcomes regularly surprise me. It was also a way of coming to better terms with the mechanics of the performance practice itself—how it works and how it might relate to other practices of “becoming other” historically. This is the focus of the present chapter, which will:

1. Introduce the self-estranging performance practice with a two-part tutorial video that the reader can follow and try for themselves.
2. Introduce the role of “jealousy” in the performance practice, as a means of cultivating my own impressionability and exposure to character contagion.

3. Contextualise the performance practice within a wider historical perspective on the artist as “medium,” i.e. a channel through which external agency can be summoned. This will reveal how theories of authorship have implications for theorising the mechanics of self.
4. Use the self-estranging activity of mirror gazing as a metaphor for how the performance practice shifts my view of myself from being an “answer” to becoming a “question”—from seeing myself as a being of “essence” to a being of “potential.”

With a deeper analysis and contextualisation of the self-estranging performance practice in this chapter, it will become possible to see how it can be used as an experimental tool in generating new insights about character and its relation to the mechanics of self, through first unearthing certain tacit social assumptions surrounding the management of human character, and then acting as an arena in which these assumptions can be questioned and reimagined.

1.1 Self-Estrangement as Method

During the PhD candidature, I joined a research group, Intelligence Debiased, comprising seventeen artists and curators, and run by the art gallery Exposed Arts.⁷⁶ Its aim was to probe “intelligence” outside of its common association with human intelligence, the brain, “reasoning,” or doing well on IQ tests. The researchers I worked with were interested in plant, machine, microbial, body, ecological, market, atmospheric, as well as human intelligence. My own approach to the theme was to focus on “character intelligence,” exploring a way of viewing character as autonomous from the human, the fictional protagonist or any other agent, and speculating on the kind of intelligence—if any—such an adaptive, viral entity could have.⁷⁷

Recognising that group members presented a diverse array of entry points into the subject, drawing on a series of very different disciplines and modes of practice, we devised a strategy called the Methodologies Exchange. This exercise turned out to be particularly relevant to my research, because it involved members of the group taking turns to temporarily inhabit each other’s methodologies, as if to play-act each other as researchers. This process echoed my own practice of inhabiting an alternative character and temporarily experiencing the world through their perspective. At each meeting one researcher would present their methodology, which could include an artistic strategy, a way of experimenting, or a way of reading. Between meetings, each group member tried to adopt that methodology to consider the theme of intelligence through the newly acquired lens. Our efforts were documented and discussed, compared and contrasted in the subsequent meetings.

⁷⁶ Exposed Arts Projects, “Intelligence Debiased,” <https://www.exposedartsprojects.com/2020-intelligence-debiased>, last accessed 31 August 2022.

⁷⁷ The virality of character will be discussed in Section 1.2.

The methodology I shared with other researchers was self-estrangement as a performance approach, recorded as a video in two parts (see below). The videos serve both as an introduction to the self-estranging performance practice employed in this thesis and as a tutorial enabling the method to be reproduced by others.⁷⁸ In Part 1, I provide step-by-step instructions on how to induce self-estrangement and subsequently inhabit the space of performance opened up by it. In Part 2, I demonstrate the process myself. For a detailed report of the outcomes of this exchange, see the first of four experimental reports associated with this thesis, “Responses to the Self-Estrangement Methodology Exchange.”⁷⁹

While providing a concrete demonstration of my process, this video insertion also hopes to draw attention to the role of the active body throughout the thesis, which can be expressive of character in more obvious ways than text. Writing is not disembodied, although it can sometimes appear to be. Nor is the character adopted at the time of writing somehow neutral or transcendent to the particularities of its adopted patterns of behaviour, which could just as easily have been foregone in favour of another writer-character complete with other patterns of behaviour. The person that the body allegedly stands in for is continually searching for a character, an attitude, a manner with which to enter the space of thinking in writing. Through the tutorial videos, we can see the body of the person who authored this thesis, waving her hands about and delivering thoughts in a particular way, where perhaps different thoughts and different ways of delivering them could have been selected. The videos serve as a reminder to view horizontally, as opposed to vertically and hierarchically, what will later become increasingly central in the writing: the different characters that authored the thesis and the difference they each contributed.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ This attempts to be an analogue to the “verification by repeatability” process afforded by scientific disciplines, by giving future performance-experimenters transparent access to my own approach.

⁷⁹ Katarina Ranković, “Responses to the Self-Estrangement Methodology Exchange,” 2022, experimental report 1/4, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-1.

⁸⁰ See Section 5.3 for a discussion of the role that my research character has played in determining the kind of “knowledge” I have been able to produce during this PhD project.

Please click on the video links below to watch the introduction to the practice.



Fig. 12. a. *Self-Estrangement as Method: Part 1*, video, 11 minutes 46 seconds, 2020. Link: youtu.be/V8CPNTRK1y0.



Fig. 12. b. *Self-Estrangement as Method: Part 2*, video, 15 minutes 44 seconds, 2020. Link: youtu.be/NkzKRpeeMnE.

The “Before” and “After” Characters in the Video Tutorial

In the tutorial videos above, you can see me occupying at least two distinct characters. In Part 1, I intended to present as my habitual, everyday self, removing any self-conscious attempt at performance in order to simply deliver an explanation of the method “as myself.” In Part 2, I intended to once again return as this “habitual character” before self-estranging and transitioning into a different character. The aim was to produce a “before and after” effect which left the difference enacted open to observation by the viewer.

However, it was only upon rewatching the videos that I realised the “before” character I presented was nothing like my habitual character. If anything, it was as if I were exaggerating the display of normality—performing what I thought was my own normality—which necessarily made it *abnormal*, in the sense of “not my average way of presenting.” This be-

gins to stir the questions: “What is the normal Katarina, anyway?” “How do we know when she is being normal, ‘not performing,’ and is there a difference?” “What is the nature of the relationship between the ‘normal’ character and the other, ‘fictional’ ones?”

This video tutorial is just one of several instances in this research that reflects the ambiguity between character performance and the everyday presentation of self. Repeatedly encountering this ambiguity led me to discard notions of “the real Katarina” versus “the fictional characters she plays” as my research developed. From now on, I will refer to myself as an ecology of characters, without privileging one type over another. I will assume that at any one time—in writing, researching, performing, speaking or daydreaming—I am adopting *some* kind of character, where my “habitual character(s)” are merely the one(s) I present most of the time, to most people. In Chapter 5 I will propose more precise terminology to distinguish between the classes of character that appeared in this research.

Genre and Character

Genre and context also come into play here because the manner that my “before” character displays is not arbitrary. Rather, it is stylistically recognisable as YouTube video tutorial narration: simply by virtue of filming on a phone camera and uploading my works onto YouTube as a matter of course, the mode of address particular to vlogging regularly leaks into my performance works in general.

Genre, very much like character, has a way of not only being used *by* us, the authors that wield the aesthetic tradition summoned by it, but has a way of also *using us*. Not only do we wear genre like a cloak that gives colour to our authorship, but genre in turn takes us for a ride, puppeteers us, animates us with its habits, insinuates itself into us with the momentum of its historical usage. So does the genre of the YouTube video tutorial invest me

with the materials that make up my “before” character, and so does the historical momentum of the PhD thesis as a genre invest my writing with an agenda of its own.

Manipulating Expressive Equipment

In the tutorial, viewers are encouraged to begin the process of self-estrangement by changing a small superficial detail about themselves. The kinds of changes I suggest, such as to voice, posture or appearance, fall into a category which Erving Goffman called “expressive equipment,” which includes the behaviours and attributes (“sign vehicles”) used to manage an impression of self in a social interaction.⁸¹ Expressive equipment could include “setting” (furniture, decor, background props, or other features external to the person making the impression) and “personal front” (items intimately identified with the impression-maker, such as clothing, sex, race, posture, accent, etc.).

Goffman distinguished between relatively fixed “sign vehicles” (e.g. race) and more mobile ones (e.g. facial expressions).⁸² It is these mobile aspects of expressive equipment that one is able to manipulate in artistic performance, whereby both setting and personal front can become the palette with which character is conjured and edited. As Goffman realised:

Whether an honest performer wishes to convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings. Because of these shared dramatic contin-

⁸¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 34.

⁸² Goffman, 34.

gencies, we can profitably study performances that are quite false in order to learn about ones that are quite honest.⁸³

For Goffman, this meant that studying the “dishonest” performances of con men or actors could yield insights into the same mechanisms active in the production of self. The shared dramatic contingencies of being and pretending mean that a performance practice is well poised for conducting experiments in the mechanics of self, where mobile expressive equipment becomes the variable.

Introspective Performance Experiment



Fig. 13. *Introspective Performance 1*, video, 62 minutes 17 seconds, 2021.

To expand upon my present understanding of the mechanics of my performance practice, I initiated an “Introspective Performance Experiment.” This experiment was designed to open up the processes involved in “becoming other” in the performance practice to more detailed observation, by focusing in particular on *how* I achieve a shift from one character

⁸³ Goffman, 73.

to another. I recorded seven performances in which I attempted to report aloud the decisions and the methods involved in shifting from one character to another, *while* simultaneously enacting that shift. A detailed description of the experiment and its results can be found in the second experimental report associated with this thesis, "Introspective Performance Experiment."⁸⁴ Here, I will provide a brief summary of my findings.

Through an analysis of the introspective performance recordings, I have been able to identify several recurring stages of the performances:

- Stage 1 involves an immediate shift in character produced by the knowledge of having entered a state of performance and the expectation of the rolling camera. This means that when I enter the state of the performance, I have already become a different character to the one I was prior to the recording. Like a computer initialising a programme, this initial character acts as a starting point from which I can "load" the rules of the performance before beginning to enact a shift into a second character, which will likely become the subject of the performance video. This initial character can be seen as analogous to the "before" character in the tutorial videos above.
- Stage 2 involves shifting from the initial character into another character through a period of searching. The state of the environment and the state in which I find myself (my appearance, my mood, my energy levels) offer cues for beginning this character shift by triggering a chain of associations. These cues can be very subtle: the noise of a neighbour, the sense of not wanting to do a performance, the teacup in my hand.

⁸⁴ Katarina Ranković, "Introspective Performance Experiment," 2022, experimental report 2/4, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-2.

- Stage 3 involves building up a palette of traits born of these associations and amalgamating various character influences until I land on a character whose voice and thoughts I am curious to hear.
- Stage 4 involves developing a narrative tangent from the perspective of the character. If a problem, paradox or contradiction can be raised for the character to work through like a puzzle, this can help to sustain the improvisation and lead to a string of ideas that follow the logic of the problem to its end. This forms the shape of the story into that of a tangent. The tangent only ends when I arrive at a mounting sense of exhaustion and a sense that I am running out of options to explore in the puzzle.

The pace of the tangent and the rhetorical devices employed to persuade both me and the audience of the import and logic of the unravelling tale, appear to work together to resist the viewer's critical distance to the performance and encourage them into a state of receptivity. In this way, the viewer is encouraged to "entertain the thought" and inhabit the character along with the performer.

The introspective performance experiment revealed the following key features of the practice, observed throughout the four stages:

- **Mood:** Performances had the propensity to profoundly change my mood. Mood revealed itself to be similar to character to the extent that it acts as a mind-frame, while "temperament" might describe what mood is when it becomes a character trait. Mood, temperament, atmosphere, genre, register and tone all relate to "the way in which something is," placing them in a close relationship with character.
- **Exhaustion:** It is exhausting to sustain character inhabitation. The effort employed in performing the character at first seems to contradict my claim to authenticity in

the act of inhabiting them, because there is an assumed correlation between effortless self-presentation and authenticity. However, just as introverts spend comparably more energy on sustaining social interaction while still being able to present themselves authentically,⁸⁵ and just as learners of a new language must employ greater effort to communicate without being disingenuous, this correlation does not always hold.

- **Thought Shift:** In each performance video, I was able to have thoughts that have never occurred to me before. This suggests that inhabiting a new character has a way of shifting my perspective and opening me up to new narrative and aesthetic possibilities. As a creative device, character can lead me out of familiar aesthetic spaces and make it more likely for me to stumble upon novelty.
- **Character vs Narrative:** During the introspective performances, I found my attention was split between the task of inhabiting a character and the task of coming up with a story to tell from the perspective of that character. There was a certain trade-off between characterisation and storytelling, where the focus on the latter seemed to impact my ability to focus on the former. As a performer, this dilemma was resolved by privileging characterisation. By focusing on committing myself to becoming possessed by character, I maintained an experimental element to the performance through which the story I told could emerge from that character's perspective without interference from my habitual character's judgement on what constitutes a good story. Conversely, when rewatching my own performances, as a viewer, I found my priorities inverted: the value of the performances did not ultimately lie in the performer's ability to present a convincing character, but in the stories and ideas that emerged from that character.

⁸⁵ See Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (London: Penguin, 2013).

- **Error:** Certain “errors” such as inconsistency in characterisation, mispronunciation or accidental misuses of words do not necessarily undermine a performance; rather, their transparency serves as a way for a viewer to trace the path the performer takes when her mind is shifting frame. However, this is not to romanticise errors and say that there are none that could undermine a performance (see Section 4.3).

These observations about the performance practice will continually inform the theory of character proposed in this thesis, as well as the positioning of art practice in relation to the study of self mechanics. While this section described the performance practice as a process, the next section will look at where the characters in the practice come from in the first place and how character operates as a system of memes.

1.2 On Jealousy

When I was eight years old, I watched the Disney animated film *Mulan* at home on a VHS tape.⁸⁶ Mulan was such an infectiously impressive character to me, a warrior woman who exuded honour and valour; qualities that I had typically encountered only in male heroes. I remember feeling my heart beat afterwards, and an irresistible urge to copy. Finding the remote control in my hand and tossing away the banal thing with some distaste (would Mulan have time to watch rented VHS films?), I switched off the TV and went to take a photograph of myself.

⁸⁶ Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, *Mulan* (United States: Buena Vista Pictures, 1998).



Fig. 14 a. (above) *Mulan*, 1998. Still image from the Disney animated film. Fig. 14 b. (below) Childhood photograph of me imitating Mulan, taken by myself.

Becoming Known to Oneself Through Character

How is a child, comparatively untrained in managing her own impressionability to character, supposed to contain the effects of such a film? Perhaps adults are accustomed to such aesthetic gestures as women cutting their hair with their father's sword, or taking his place in battle. But children are not. At some point this gesture must be dealt for the first time, with the impressiveness of the sword's blow, taken to cut the fine black lines of a daugh-

ter's femininity. Would I do the same for my father, had he too been unwell and conscripted to join the army? Would I too make that sacrifice with the same fearless determination? These are questions of character: *would I?*

It is not always easy to say what one would do in hypothetical or unprecedented situations awaiting us in the future. That is why we have the phrase, "I'll see what I'll do," conserved for those cases in which one does not yet know what one's response will be, but has a good sense that they will miraculously find out when the time finally comes.⁸⁷ When that time comes and when that response is enacted, it will appear to reflect on one's character overall, as if in those split second moments one is revealed to oneself.⁸⁸

The film had equipped me, that afternoon, with the imagination to first become conscious of, and then further dwell on, the hypothetical situation of choosing whether or not to take my father's place in battle. It provided even a mental platform from which to rehearse my response, preparing me for it, so that the fictional character Mulan had already begun to affect the outcome of this possible eventuality.

There must have been many occasions like this one, in which the dissatisfaction of staying still, staying as I was, had filled me to the brim and urged me to shift something, something deep about myself. Moreover, this "deep" shift could begin to be enacted by relatively "superficial" adjustments: moving into another room, wielding a fatal prop, or staring into the camera with a look approaching an oath.

⁸⁷ According to Dennett, this is endemic to all decision making: "We have to wait to see how we are going to decide something, and when we do decide, our decision bubbles up to consciousness from we know not where. We do not witness it being made; we witness its *arrival*." Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 227.

⁸⁸ Yuval Noah Harari gives an example of this when he says that stone age couples knew each other more intimately than contemporary couples, since one could see how one's partner would react in all sorts of critical situations. See Harari, "A Brief History of Humankind," Lesson 1.

The camera (as opposed, for example, to a mirror) was just the right audience for this sort of shift. Instead of looking at the mirror and seeing oneself reflected in the present, the camera is a future-oriented thing, a prop for becoming. Staring into the vortex of its lens, the performer stages herself for the future, stages the version of herself she will become.

Mulan had looked at me like that, while I was watching the film; as if I had been the camera lens. Now I too had entered the world of images and looked back at the lens with a grain of contempt, as if on the other side of it sat the cowardly girl I had left behind.

Jealousy as Orientation Towards the Other

“Jealousy,” in the sense that I will use it in this thesis, is a concept that comes directly out of my artistic practice. I began using the word very early on, before I started out at art school, to explain to myself what I felt was happening in my character performances and why I was so motivated to make them in the first place. I use it to refer to the emotional state I found myself in before imitating Mulan as a child: a particular kind of emotional positioning towards another that also turns out to be key to my performance practice. While it might not necessarily be applicable to all practice, for me it has usefully served as a relational concept for thinking about authorship, influence and curiosity in the other. For this reason, the term “jealousy” will come up every now and again in this dissertation, particularly when I am discussing the beginning of my performance process and how characters “come” to me in the first place.

My use of the term “jealousy” diverges somewhat from both colloquial uses and dictionary definitions, most conspicuously, perhaps, in the way I describe it as playing a positive, generative and liberating role in my practice, when more conventional cases of jealousy can trigger a sense of personal inadequacy, as well as outward-facing negative emotions

such as hostility, bitterness or resentment directed towards the other of whom one is jealous. Despite these divergent experiences of jealousy and its effects on self-worth and regard of the other of whom one is jealous, using the word “jealousy” in my practice is accurate because it hinges on the same initial feeling: the sudden sense, upon encountering another, of wanting something that they have. But the jealousy I experience as an artist is not burdened by any resentment for the other that possesses it, or the wish that they should have to lose their admirable quality or possession as I gain it; on the contrary, it is an emotion characterised by an admiration of the difference of others. It is, to call back to the story at the beginning of this section, the feeling I get when I am stopped in my tracks by someone else’s character (be they fictitious, like Mulan, or real, like a friend), and filled with a sense of wonder and longing to know what it must be like to be somebody like that. For me, performance is a venture to answer the curiosity in the other that jealousy stirs in me.

In my search for a term that might more accurately describe my emotional state preceding a performance, I have so far found alternatives to “jealousy” to be inadequate. For instance, although “envy” is said to sometimes be mistaken for jealousy, the emphasis on the value of *audience perception* (how one is seen in the eyes of others) in jealousy makes it a more relevant concept for my performance practice, since in my work I am querying the difference that changing character makes to who I become.⁸⁹ Because character must

⁸⁹ In *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown points out that contemporary colloquial uses of “jealousy” tend to confuse it with “envy,” where “envy occurs when we want something another person has,” and “jealousy is when we fear losing a relationship or a valued part of a relationship that we already have.” A good rule of thumb, Brown says, is that envy typically involves two people, and jealousy three. Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (United Kingdom: Penguin Audio, 2021), audiobook, “Chapter 2: Places We Go When We Compare,” 13:50–21:00. However, this distinction is perhaps not so clean-cut. For instance, if I am envious of someone’s shoes, it may not actually be the shoes alone that I want, but rather what they enable their wearer to *become* in the eyes of others: the way they draw attention and invite compliments. In that sense I am jealous, rather than envious, of the owner of these shoes, since I am not primarily concerned with the objects in her possession, but the audience reaction she commands with them. (Such jealousy could apply to characteristics as much as material possessions.) Thus, what may at first seem like envy can easily become triangulated into jealousy once the third party—the “audience”—comes into play.

be read in order to be recognised as such, the audience must always be taken into account in any question of “who I am becoming” when I change character.

Another potential alternative to “jealousy” that has been suggested to me is “desire,” placing the emphasis on the “wanting” or “longing” itself involved in “wanting what someone else has;” in particular, the sense of wanting to overcome a *lack* of something and achieve the aspired gratification that “filling the void” is often hoped to bring.⁹⁰ Working in favour of this term is the fact that it is already used in some discourses on art practice.⁹¹ Yet jealousy is still preferred over desire for two reasons. Firstly, desire implies a metaphorical or literal drive towards *consumption*, or even subsumption, of the object of desire, reflected in references made to eating and satiation in discourses on desire.⁹² The experience of jealousy, however, preserves the autonomy of the other. That which one wants, as well as they who already possess it, remain outside of oneself, even in the event that one finally “gets” what one wants and becomes more like that of which they were once jealous. When Mulan’s character impresses me, I do not wish to consume or subsume her character in order to fill a Mulan-shaped void within me; I wish to be more *like* her and *copy* her. Jealousy’s aspiration for likeness over desire’s consumption implies a relationship to the other characterised by *duplication* over *consummation*. The cake I *desire* gets eaten and be-

⁹⁰ However, this gratification, at least as it is initially imagined to feel, may never come. As Samuel Beckett put it: “We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment,’ the principal reason being that what we attain was desired by the person we were, not by the person we have become when we attain it. The subject which desires a particular object has died, perhaps many times, on the way and ‘For subject B to be disappointed by the banality of an object chosen by subject A is as illogical as to expect one’s hunger to be dissipated by the spectacle of uncle eating his dinner.” Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997) 143.

⁹¹ See for example Jean Matthee, “Eating the Book,” *Journal of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research* 4 (Summer 1994): 113–135. <https://jcfar.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Eating-the-Book-Jean-Mathee.pdf>. Here Matthee speculates on art practice as “an act, a limit contact with the real, an act with jouissance at its core, an ethical form of catharsis that is malediction acquiesced in as the realisation of desire. [She] speculate[s] this to be the stake and true meaning of aesthetic inquiry.”

⁹² In the footnotes to this paragraph, I cite Samuel Beckett and Jean Matthee, both of whom make a reference to eating to illustrate their reflections on desire. Desire implies a search for satiation, even if, as Beckett pointed out, like a mirage, the possibility of finally satisfying ourselves recedes further into the future the closer we advance towards it.

comes one with me, but the character of which I am *jealous* remains external to me even as I imitate it.

Secondly, desire seems to connote a more durational form of wanting than jealousy, whereas the latter is sometimes described as coming in short, sharp doses, as in the phrase: “a pang of jealousy.” The character jealousy that motivates my performances is temporary and piercing, often surprising when it comes, and the period for which I wish to have what the other has is not lasting. This is another sense in which my use of the term “jealousy” diverges from conventional uses: I do not aspire to permanently acquire the characteristic of which I am jealous and, when a performance ends, I find that I can comfortably come back to my habitual way of presenting. This defined temporality gives contours to my performance practice, enabling it to become an experimental field in which I can isolate the various nuanced effects of shifting character on my authorship.

For these reasons, and in spite of some of the potential negative connotations of the term, jealousy remains the most accurate English word I can think of to communicate the emotional state preceding the moments of character contagion so instrumental to my practice (as when Mulan “infected” me with her character). Further, some of the hard edges of “jealousy” can be softened when we recall that, in everyday contemporary usage, the theatrical expression of jealousy can even serve as a compliment and expression of admiration.⁹³

Thus, in this practice, jealousy manifests not as the disgruntled regret of one who thinks of what she lacks; it is rather a positive, appreciative gesture towards something out there, an orientation towards ways of being that are otherwise. Implied within this concept of jealousy is empathy: when I see an enviable characteristic in someone else, it is already play-

⁹³ Brown’s example is: “I love your shoes—I’m so jealous!” Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart*, “Chapter 2: Places We Go When We Compare,” 13:50–21:00.

ing out to some extent in me. Where jealousy comes to me as a pang, an emotional experience orienting me towards the other, empathy is a skill, turning the dance between self and other into a practice. Empathy is the next step in entertaining one's character jealousy, which is why I call my performance video series *The One Woman Empathy Circus*.

So far, exploring how jealousy is defined in my practice has raised several related concepts, such as character contagion, copying and empathy. All of these will be elaborated on below, along with a closer look at how they come together in my performance practice. For now, it is only necessary to note that jealousy, as it is understood in this practice, is about the back and forth interplay between self and other, present in the shifting foundations of a soul in movement.

Jealousy as a Gateway to Becoming Other

While copying for its own sake has sometimes been deemed an embarrassment to contemporary art, which seeks the new, the original, the *avant garde*,⁹⁴ it seems to be the very thing that thrills so many artists into the state of practicing in the first place, in the same way it thrills children watching films with strong characters. Perhaps one of the motivations for art practice and the copying it entails is the attractive possibility of becoming something else. Of shape shifting into something new, through the work that is not necessarily coming from the artist alone, but comes from the world outside to merge with and reshape them.

⁹⁴ On the embarrassment of copying for its own sake in art, Gemma Blackshaw writes: "There is something shameful about the act of copying; it induces a sense of not being enough, of a lack of imagination, courage, conviction; it is furtive, leaning towards its longed-for object, whilst willing itself out of sight because a copyist does not like to be noticed as a copyist, to be found out. Copyists, we are led to believe, are forgers, cheats, frauds. In the visual arts, they are also 'amateurs', attempting yet eternally failing to learn by imitation. This is what lies behind the hands that hide the drawing completed by the museum visitor on their stool in front of the object or motif when another member of the public peers over their shoulder to look at what they're doing; the apologetic, weary smile." Gemma Blackshaw, "In time the likeness will become apparent": Rebecca Fortnum's Feminist Copies," in *A Mind Weighted with Unpublished Matter*, eds. Rebecca Fortnum and Andrew Hunt (London: Slimvolume, 2020) 6.

Perhaps the practice lends the artist an escape route from themselves, as when T. S. Eliot writes: “poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.”⁹⁵

The comparative images above serve to highlight the function of jealousy in my performance practice in a number of ways. One of these is the idea that there is a link between jealousy and becoming. Feeling the kind of admiring jealousy as I felt for Mulan, or any character that does not seem to belong to one’s own repertoire of expression (an interesting acquaintance or striking celebrity, for instance) can quickly give way to an empathetic effect.⁹⁶ This empathetic effect entails temporarily feeling oneself *becoming* or assimilating oneself to that other character, as in this description by Alfred Gell of his experience of looking at a painting by Vermeer:

Gazing at the picture, my jaw drops, in admiration—and defeat. This defeat is, however, profitable to me also, to the extent that in mentally retracing Vermeer’s origination of his picture, the technical and imaginative performance which culminated in the finished work, I do manage, exercising such powers as I possess, to attain a certain point, before I break off in bewilderment and can follow Vermeer no longer through the maze of his artistic agency. Up to a point, I can be Vermeer, I can identify with his artistic procedure and see his picture, vicariously, as a product of my bodily engagement with the world and with the materials artists manipulate.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Sean Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 73–80.

⁹⁶ Throughout this thesis, my use of the word “expression” follows Erving Goffman’s sociological definition and is referred to in terms of the “communicative role it plays during social interaction,” rather than the essential release of some “truer self” within. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 241.

⁹⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 69. The link between perception and empathy is described earlier in the same text, as “the very secret of mimesis; that is, to perceive (to internalise) is to imitate, and thus we become (and produce) what we perceive [...]” 31.

This link between perceiving another agent carrying out an action (or its results, in the case of the painting) and identifying with the action perceived as though it had been carried out by oneself, has been supported by mirror neurone theory. A mirror neurone is a kind of neurone that will fire in my brain when I do something, such as lift a heavy object, but will also fire when I see *another* person lifting a heavy object. In this way, the mirror neurone system in our brains appears to code “agent-independent actions” and form a certain degree of equivalence of experience from the point of view of the perceiver, regardless of whether they or somebody else is doing the action they are perceiving.⁹⁸ This phenomenon could be extended to countless other examples, and art often takes advantage of it. When watching characters in a romantic scene in a film, for example, as viewers we might also feel romantic emotions, or as though we too are in love.⁹⁹ This is why mirror neurones have become key to research on empathy:

It has been proposed that these neurons can provide a link between self and other, enabling intersubjectivity through an intentional attunement mechanism that enables the understanding of the actions and associated mental states of others through the unreflective, automatic simulation of the actions and associated mental states of the self.¹⁰⁰

Mirror neurones enable the way in which others do things—their character—to infiltrate us through perception alone, since they fire in response to what we perceive. This creates an internal simulation of what the other is doing, so that it feels as if it were ourselves who

⁹⁸ Lucina Q. Uddin, Marco Iacoboni, Claudia Lange and Julian Paul Keenan, “The Self and Social Cognition: The Role of Cortical Midline Structures and Mirror Neurons,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 4 (2007): 153–57. See also Cecilia Heyes and Caroline Catmu, “What Happened to Mirror Neurons?” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 17, no. 1 (2022): 153–68.

⁹⁹ Alan Palmer argues that we approach fictional characters and read them in a similar way to which we read real people. See Alan Palmer, “Storyworlds and Groups,” in *Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 183.

¹⁰⁰ Uddin et al., “The Self and Social Cognition.”

were doing it.¹⁰¹ “Jealousy” is here being proposed as a highly attentive and interested form of this empathetic perception, and it can tip one out of the state of perception alone into action, into imitation.

Mulan’s own martial training in the film had consisted of imitation: in repeating the military drills and combat choreographies over and over. Her clumsiness is eventually straightened out and replaced by deft virtuosity. Whatever moral kinks existed in my resolution to replace my father in battle some day could be ironed out through practice, I thought; through a keen study of the occasion and the character I would need to have in order to rise to it.

Perhaps my efforts were not wasted. I was, after all, rehearsing, and gaining in some sort of imaginative brand of life experience, the kind that is appended to our personal life experiences by the stories of others. Mulan’s character had become for me a training ground for rehearsing courage.

Copying in Art

When I ask artists about how they started being artists, it often begins with a story about copying. They were maybe copying something as in life drawing, or maybe they were tracing over an admired artist’s work. Originality often starts with copying, because being an individual starts with the communal.

¹⁰¹ This phenomenon is taken to extremes in a condition called mirror-touch synaesthesia, whereby people can viscerally experience what they are perceiving is happening to someone else; a condition which has sometimes been described as a form of hyper-empathy. People with mirror touch synaesthesia may be able to feel an icy cold sensation on their tongue when they see someone eating ice cream, or pain when they see someone falling over and hurting themselves. Daria Martin speculates on some possible implications of the condition by creating a kind of empathetic infinity loop in her film *At the Threshold* (16mm film, 17.5 min, 2014–15), which centres on a relationship between two characters, a mother and her son, who have the condition. In the film, the two characters find ways to use various sensory stimuli to trigger pleasurable experiences for themselves by taking advantage of their enhanced empathetic capabilities.

One of many ways of describing what an artist is, is someone who deals in character. Not just people-like characters, but also thing-like characters. A bush has character. A Pokémon has character. A voice as character. Characters are meaningful cultural patterns, and as artists we become very attuned to them: tracing them, copying them, repurposing them, deploying them to our various private investigations.

In my practice I write novels, I pretend to be different people, I draw Pokémon, I sing in the shower and I dance to hip hop music videos. In other words, I expose myself as much as possible to character: I grow pleasantly jealous of these characters, I inhabit them (willingly or unwillingly); I allow myself to become infected, to become under the influence of character, to become a vehicle for character to manifest and disappear; I get to know characters, I form relationships with them, which also means forming relationships with myself.¹⁰²

Copying, pretending, role-playing, imitating, gesturing, insinuating, delineating—these are things any artist can do with a brush, with a camera, with a pencil, with their bodies, with whatever actions are dear to them, and it allows them a way into the characters, the meaningful patterns that flow like currency in our shared world. Character allows artists to empirically touch and prod the world in intimate ways.

Jealousy at Work in the Performance Practice

Performing made me realise how easily affected I was by external character; how I seemed to be carrying with me an unexplored bandwidth of alterity all the time. The performances turned out to be an organised staging of the kind of imitation I produced of Mulan as a child, only now I was often discovering the sources of my character jealousies in

¹⁰² Similarly, Jane Rendell writes of writing: “I discover parts of myself in my encounters with others.” Jane Rendell, “Travelling the distance/Encountering the Other,” in *Here, There, Elsewhere: Dialogues on Location and Mobility*, ed. David Blamey (London: Open Editions, 2002), 53–54.

retrospect. Each performed character betrayed multiple lineages, amongst likely many more which I will never succeed in tracing. Characteristics from different sources combined into one hybrid character. One of them, for example, was a concoction forged out of (at least) Coco Chanel, my aunt, Slavoj Žižek and Catwoman's *Kitka* disguise.¹⁰³

My urge to practice in this way seemed to stem from a longing to inhabit, just for a moment, some quality that I admired or envied. Such a jealousy as this is not a bitter or resentful jealousy, but rather a discontented kind of admiration, a motivating jealousy. Nor must the object of this jealousy resemble a person. Here are some examples:

- I am jealous of the tender line in Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo*.¹⁰⁴
- I am jealous of how much humanity seems to fit into a single movement in a Pina Bausch choreography.
- I am jealous of the delightful vivacity of the bush outside my window.
- I am jealous of my friend Aistè, who effortlessly sheds expressive gestures and glances that are a treat to notice.
- I am jealous of Amélie Poulin's appreciation of mundane events, and I am jealous of that French aesthetic that surrounds her and which I was not born into.¹⁰⁵
- I am jealous of the rigour of the scientific method, where this thesis is an experiment in importing some of its characteristics into artistic practice.

¹⁰³ I am referring here to an early performance work of mine in which these influences combined: Katarina Ranković, *Amado Mio*, video, 2012, <https://youtu.be/dVZFianPtRY>. Kitka appears in Leslie H. Martinson, *Batman* (United States: 20th Century Fox, 1966).

¹⁰⁴ See Winsor McCay and Bill Blackbeard, *Little Nemo 1905–1913*, 2nd ed (Köln, Germany: Taschen, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (France: UGC Fox Distribution, 2001).

The fact that I am jealous of all these characters does not mean that I would prefer to swap places with them, but that I would, without sacrificing my own history and condition, desire to temporarily avail myself of a power I have not deserved.¹⁰⁶

Character as a System of Memes

“Character” is here defined as a recognisable, distinguishable pattern. In being distinguishable, it must be different to other things of its kind; in being re-cognisable, it must be able to return, so it can stand a chance at being identified *again*. Character does return, because it is contagious. When we begin to talk about the contagiousness of character—the fact that it can be passed on from one “host” to another—we are thinking of character in terms of a system of *memes*.

Memes, conceived in Richard Dawkins’ original sense, are units of cultural inheritance.¹⁰⁷ In this, they are the cultural analogue to *genes*, which are units of biological inheritance. There turn out to be many similarities in the behaviours of genes and memes. Where biological organisms reproduce their genetic information by leaving copies of it in their offspring, as *cultural* organisms, human beings reproduce ideas, stories and norms through tradition. Both genes and memes are transmissible vertically and horizontally. Where vertical reproduction consists in passing *down* genetic or cultural information to the next generation (through reproduction or tradition respectively); horizontal reproduction consists in the transmission of this information *across* generational peers (horizontal gene transfer or contemporary culture). As they are transmitted, units of cultural information—memes—can evolve over time, just like genes can. This is because (like genes) memes get copied

¹⁰⁶ That is, I have not committed to the character. “Commitment” here means “spending a lot of time within the frame of this character,” but it also means committing myself to that character before others within my social milieu. The social commitment to character will be explored in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Penguin, 1991).

again and again, and each time they are copied, there is a chance that a mistake will be made in the process. This mistake is called a “mutation.” If the mutation alters the meme in a way that makes it likely to be copied again, then the family of memes to which it belongs is likely to evolve in that direction.

An example of a meme is waving with your hand to indicate a greeting. Waving is a unit of cultural inheritance: it is a gesture which our caregivers transmit to us in early childhood when we learn to greet. This single choreographic routine is repeated through tradition (vertical transmission) and reinforced in daily practice (horizontal transmission). Each time someone waves at someone else, the meme has been copied, transmitted, and reinforced in cultural memory.

Through history, waving has evolved in different places and different times, so that we can now identify a few different *styles* of waving. One famous waving meme is the royal wave. The way in which members of the British royal family wave at their subjects appears to amuse spectators no end, because it is markedly different to how just about everybody else in the country waves. As in evolutionary biology, when we examine patterns of the evolution of waving, we can only speculate as to why such divergences in waving have arisen, based on the degree to which the mutation serves the purpose of propagating itself again in the future. An evolutionary change in a meme usually (but not always) happens because it benefits the host in some way, so that the host is likely to perform the meme. In biology, if a genetic mutation leads to an evolutionary trend in the direction of the changed trait (sharper teeth, greater camouflage with the surroundings, keener hearing), it is usually because it benefits the survival rate of the creature hosting the genes in its body, since all the genes that were not beneficial to their hosts typically died out with them.

We can speculate that the royal family has evolved to wave in this way out of some ancestral benefit to their social class, since people outside of their class do not wave in this way. The wave, reserved, is less energetic and eager than most other waving styles. This restrained wave, along with other historical European aristocratic and royal habits such as wearing stiff clothing that limits movement, served perhaps to differentiate these classes from the toil and labour associated with others, by communicating a lesser need to expend energy. In this way, we can see how the royal wave, in concert with other memes, may have served to reinstate social distance and thus power. If the royal wave meme helped members of the royal class sustain their power in any way, however negligibly, it was likely to be repeated, and thus transmitted amongst its hosts through time.

Another analogue we can draw between memes and genes, is the difference between “latent” and “expressed” inherited information. Each biological organism has a genome, a complete “recipe” that encodes its biological makeup. These recipes, residing in DNA-form in every single one of our cells (bar red blood cells), are constantly being read by our bodies and causing things to happen within them in the continual labour it takes simply *to be*. Sometimes, it is clear to see how parts of this recipe (genes) code for characteristics, such as eye colour. Most of the time, the link between the genome and the resulting characteristics of the organism cannot be made so directly and instead the characteristics arise—are expressed—*epigenetically*, which is to say in concert with all the micro-choreographies going on in the body and in the environment beyond genes alone. When an individual displays a characteristic because of its genes, we say that the gene for that characteristic has been *expressed*. Sometimes, an individual may have a latent gene (whether it is physically located somewhere distinctly in the DNA molecule or dispersed epigenetically) that encodes for a characteristic that does not get expressed. This is why genetic diseases can skip a generation or two: its hosts may not be ill as a result of carrying the gene without it

being expressed, but this does not prevent it from passing on and expressing itself in offspring.

Just as individual characteristics belonging to an individual can be latent or regularly expressed, my observations of my performance practice suggest that character, as an entire *system* of memes, can also be “carried” by a human host without necessarily coming into expression. If my performance practice acts as a way of “switching on” latent characters I have inherited but not previously expressed, this would explain why I occasionally find myself carrying out never-before performed systems of behaviour with unexpected familiarity and readiness, sometimes even with ease, as I demonstrated in *Self-Estrangement as Method Part 2*. The character I slipped into in that video performance I had never prepared, designed or rehearsed before, and yet it came across with considerable consistency and was distinct from other characters I have performed.

Character is “caught” via memetic contagion.¹⁰⁸ It then may or may not come into expression, but the potential for it to surface remains. The “stern look with sword held across face” is part of a larger system of memes that make up a character like Mulan. When I repeat this action in the image of my imitation above, this is an instance of a meme coming into expression in a new host.¹⁰⁹

Using virus-related terminology such as “contagion” or “host” with reference to memes is common, as when we hear about “an [internet] meme going viral.” After all, a biological virus is pretty much just some genes encapsulated in a membrane, with nothing else but

¹⁰⁸ I am referring to character as a system of memes, a pattern of interrelated behaviours which are internally diverse but overall consistent. It could be, however, that an entire character can be regarded as a meme, itself part of a larger super-character, or an archetype. Seen this way, character would have holarchic structure—a nested hierarchy of autonomous units that also act as parts.

¹⁰⁹ My performances suggest that these individual behaviours, or memes, also act as a way of accessing a broader system of memes, or character, to which the behaviour may plausibly belong.

its own possible repeatability and the assistance of host organisms to propagate it.¹¹⁰ Character too, can be thought of as a free-floating behavioural script that is contracted and then transmitted amongst human beings, intervening in their lives in the meantime.

Daniel Dennett goes so far as to offer a definition of the term “person” as “a hominid with an infected brain, host to millions of cultural symbionts.”¹¹¹ For Dennett, a person acts as a vehicle for propagating these cultural symbionts through time and space. To illustrate this, he gives the biological analogue: when we see a seed floating airborne away from a great old tree, we tend to say that the *tree* is reproducing, with the tree as the active subject in that sentence. A more accurate way to put it perhaps, is that the entire scenario: the painstaking growth of the tree, its tireless photosynthesising, the architecture of the seed and its parachute-like wings, act as an apparatus in the service of the little DNA molecule tucked away inside the seed. After all, genetic information is the only thing that survives; the biological apparatuses that temporarily house it and then pass the baton on to the next generation, wither and die in the service of the great relay race of life.

At the risk of continuing to provide a bleak portrayal of our human predicament as gene and meme receptacles, here is a similar assessment of our relative passivity in the task of becoming, this time from Erving Goffman:

In analysing the self, then, we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for

¹¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, “Viruses of the Mind,” in *Dennett and his Critics*, ed. Bo Dahlbom (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 13–27.

¹¹¹ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 173.

producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down in social establishments.¹¹²

The “receptacle” which hosts character has been variously called a “person” by Dennett, a “body” or even a lowly “peg” by Goffman, and a “human being” by me. Likewise, what Goffman is here calling a “self” he has earlier in his text called a “character.”¹¹³ As mentioned earlier, terminology poses a significant challenge in research on the mechanics of self, reflecting a wider ambiguity in meanings in specialist literature as well as lay usage.

For the purpose of this research, I will take “the human being” to mean “that which is capable of playing out character,” where the verb “to play” is intended to draw associations to a machine playing out a script, or a computer running a programme. “Human being” is preferred to “human body” as it does not presume the basis of this character-playing machinery, remaining strategically open with regard to its physical constitution. Meanwhile, reference to the “human being” rather than a being in general, roots us in our focus on the subcategory of characters that are frequently played out by and transmitted between human animals.

Although referring to the human being as a machine for character, or a vehicle for memes, or a peg upon which communally generated attributes are hung, may appear to devalue human agency; rather than dismiss it entirely, perhaps a deeper understanding of how character lives and passes through the human can change the way in which we think about *where* the value of the human is located. Foregrounding the relative passivity of the human being here merely serves to emphasise the capacity of the human being to be possessed by a character, and the capacity of character to be shared between human beings.

¹¹² Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 245.

¹¹³ He does this consciously, stating that, “in our society the character one performs and one’s self are somewhat equated.” Goffman, 244.

Before we return to jealousy, the final comment I wish to make about character as a system of memes is the way in which communication technologies have throughout history served to lubricate the transmission of character between human beings. According to Dennett, language has been the chief technology enabling the transmission of “symbionts” (memes).¹¹⁴ However, we live in a time of particularly rapid innovation in tele-communication, and this is probably affecting the speed, flexibility and migration patterns of character through space and time:

the first mechanical communications technologies, such as Morse code and telegraphic signalling, disembodied persons in the world of the senses when they made it possible to broadcast human voices over the air waves and record them for playing back on a gramophone. They could move an individual though time and space—through the electromagnetic field—and the possibility has fundamentally shaped modes of storytelling, not only in literature and film stories, but in the way we tell our lives to ourselves.¹¹⁵

Letters are an even earlier means of telecommunication, and there too I am sure an observant historian could trace the picking up and passing on of specific turns of phrase, accents to handwriting, and styles of signing off, across individuals living very far apart and having little or no face-to-face contact. More recent enablers of telecommunicating human character include, of course, video sharing platforms such as YouTube or Twitch, where a popular and already mature culture of vlogging enables people to broadcast a seemingly authentic screen-based character; internet discussion forums (Twitter, Reddit) where an analogous transmission can occur through writing; and virtual reality, where our cartoonish

¹¹⁴ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 173.

¹¹⁵ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 258–59.

and photorealistic avatars alike will be able to meet in the Metaverse and transmit patterns of human behaviour there.¹¹⁶

Before the rise of telecommunication technologies, geographic separation meant a greater segregation of human character, just as it largely segregated biological species,¹¹⁷ but geographic separation has rapidly become less of a barrier to the transmission of human character. Telecommunications are to human character what “superspreader events” such as indoor concerts are to viruses: they bridge gaps between infectable nodes—human beings—with greater rapidity and seamlessness. Given that most of my artistic education was derived from videos uploaded by various enthusiasts on YouTube, of exhibition walk-throughs and artist talks, obscure old black-and-white films and out-of-production records, it is no coincidence that a character performance practice like mine did emerge. I was being constantly bombarded with character via the internet.

The Community of Character

Jealousy and empathic imitation paired together constitute a practice of momentarily being “in touch” with the staggering historical proliferation of meaning upon which I depend in order to come into expression as the person I am. I am the “outcome” of this enormous bulk of history, operating, as I write, at the frontier of its burgeoning skin, carried by its overwhelming momentum.

Perhaps the practice of being jealous, and thus of being “in touch,” provides me with a means of getting to grips with the forces that urge me forth into being the being that I am;

¹¹⁶ Chris Stokel-Walker, “Welcome to the metaverse,” *New Scientist*, 8 January 2022, 39–43.

¹¹⁷ With globalisation, the barriers segregating “biological” or “cultural” patterns (languages, species, mannerisms, etc.) are fading: plant seeds travel on our fibrous clothing on the plane back from a holiday, mice hitch a ride on our ships crossing the oceans, and viruses hop between colleagues at an international conference.

into repeating the arguments, the passions, the disappointments of my ancestors and contributing to their common value.¹¹⁸ In a flash of a performative moment, I can glimpse my origins in a revealing synaptic spark. When I pose as Mulan, I reckon with my heritage, whilst also laying a miniature claim on my legacy.

Copying or documenting pose is something that a number of artists have taken advantage of, often in the service of highlighting certain cultural habits or stereotypes, from Harold Offeh's *Lounging*, a photographic series in which the artist imitates the relaxed poses assumed by male black singers on 1980s album covers,¹¹⁹ to Marianne Wex's photographic studies of gendered gesture and pose.¹²⁰ By virtue of the fact that character can be seen as relatively substrate-neutral, it becomes a communal entity that lives across instances: a formula.¹²¹ Goffman pointed out that the self (character) emerges out of a scene, but that the props, script and rehearsal that goes into that scene is part of a historical repertoire older than any of its individual players—is of “collaborative manufacture.” The performances become then a sort of identity prosthesis; a becoming-other, or becoming-communal, that renders me all the more familiar to myself.

Jealousy as the Emotional State of Character Contagion

I propose my usage of the term “jealousy” to mean the energetic or emotional state that directly precedes memetic contagion. As an artist, jealousy is something I need to cultivate

¹¹⁸ The video work *Individual Relic*, made in collaboration with Nina Davies (see Part 1), focuses in particular on this exchangeable aspect of memes.

¹¹⁹ Harold Offeh, *Lounging*, photographic series, 2017-2020, <https://www.haroldoffeh.com/projects/lounging>.

¹²⁰ Marianne Wex, *Let's Take Back Our Space: Female and Male Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures* (West Germany: Frauenliteratur Hermine Fees, 1979).

¹²¹ See Slavica and Miloš Ranković, “A Formula is a Habit Colliding with Life.”

and train. It is a precious kind of vulnerability that places me in a state of wilful impressionability.

This is why art students are taught “contextual studies,” is it not? To make them sensitive to character, aesthetics, moods, by exposing them to materials to which they must position themselves openly. Is not jealousy the feeling one gets once successfully *inspired* (“breathed into”)?¹²² Like jealousy, is not inspiration always attended by an ache, located in a close dream not yet realised, rather than merely creative bliss?

When one is jealous, one has become attuned to the valence of memes, by way of making oneself a willing host. Jealousy is the first step towards intentionally becoming possessed by character, which will be the subject of the next section.

¹²² “To inspire” derives from the Latin *inspirare*, “to breathe or blow into.” Merriam Webster, “Breathing Life into ‘Inspire’,” 22 September 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-origins-of-inspire>.

1.3 Accommodating Others: The Artist as Medium



Fig. 15. *Pseudo*, video, 6 minutes 19 seconds, 2018. Link: youtu.be/SCdB8AeaCvc.

This section regards the role of the artist through the metaphor of a “medium.” The analogy has been drawn in a myriad ways by artists and critics for reasons not dissimilar to those that give the spiritual medium her title. The medium is the channel, substance or field through which a spirit manifests itself before the living. Notably more often female than not,¹²³ she finds herself in between (the “middle”) of input and output, and makes an

¹²³ See Marina Warner on European seances in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in *Phantasmagoria*, 226: “The seances themselves involved women directly and often intimately, and often young women. There were male mediums [...] But it was a *carrière ouverte aux talents* for women [...]” Warner goes on to say that Victorians believed that women’s “uneducated minds” made them “truer vehicles” for conveying spirits.

instrument of herself.¹²⁴ Whether interpreter, go-between, or one “possessed,” the nature of her occupation has a peculiar consequence for the flavour of her personhood.¹²⁵

In her pop-cultural appearances, the medium’s personal conscience is rarely seen to intervene in the seance; she serves irrespective of motives. While the preparatory meditative trance and closed, humming eyes attest to great concentration and a collected mind, the twitches and shudders which eventually follow and the fits and cries after that, become the mark of a usurped will, of someone overcome. She has made her own person recede, accommodating a ghostly other in its wake. Like meditation, and perhaps like art, this achievement seems to come easily by accident and laboriously by design. But beneath the grip of horror conjured by the main event—the bursting presence of a silenced someone—other things might go through our minds as we watch what takes place.

We might pity the medium for the torturous nature of her calling—a calling, not a choice. We might become anxious about the scarcity of soul-space within her body and the economy of consciousness that demands. In either case, we are led to wonder at the passive nature of the role. She may be a person who does everyday things and has everyday thoughts, but as a continual conduit of others’ stories, her individuality and the sanctity of her interior life is compromised by the external spirits overpopulating and saturating it. On screen, this bombardment is often represented by the schizophrenic burden of “hearing voices.”¹²⁶ With experience, and as the role takes hold of her identity, it becomes paradox-

¹²⁴ The analogy between a spiritual medium and instruments was widespread in the 19th century. According to Marina Warner, the rise in spiritualism, seances and the belief in possibility of contact with the dead coincided with advances in communication technologies. For instance, the Fox sisters, famous for their communication with spirits via rapping, called themselves “celestial telegraphers.” *Phantasmagoria*, 221.

¹²⁵ Of course, beyond the recognisable figure of the medium, possession has a role to play in many spiritual practices around the world.

¹²⁶ For example, in the 1990 film *Ghost*, fake psychic Oda Mae Brown suddenly discovers her actual ability to commune with the dead when the protagonist, Sam (a ghost), begins speaking to her without her solicitation.

ical to ask “who” the medium is, because her very role is defined by the practice of dimming down her own inner light.

Within the context of art, the term “medium” is typically associated with an artist’s material means of production, whether paint, clay, or movement. However, rather than being external perusers of these materials, some artists have conceived of their *person* as a medium—part of the art-making apparatus. The analogy of a medium casts the authority of the “author” as a passive form of power that authorises a *relinquishment* of the self in order to “make space” for someone or something else. The metaphor of the medium invites us to consider the artist as someone who facilitates the playing out of an other’s voice. By rendering the self as a kind of instrument, this perspective on authorship begets a line of questioning about creative processes and the mechanics of agency. Can a person become a medium for another agent? Does this practice require a preliminary act of “making space” for the other, and to what extent is this space also shared or occupied by the author? Is it a joint occupancy, or a swap? And why is this spatial conceptualisation of selfhood so pervasive in our psychic imagining of agency? Is it illuminating or misleading?

The distinction between an “active” versus “passive” conception of the artist’s role in creativity recalls familiar twentieth-century debates about originality and authorship, debates which will probably continue so long as active and passive modes of authorship are believed to be mutually exclusive.¹²⁷ Just as in the case of grammar, with its active subjects and passive objects, at the heart of this distinction is the question of “who” drives the intentionality behind an artwork’s apparently singular voice. Encompassing this question is a larger one that asks “who” drives the intentionality behind our own selves, since both art-

¹²⁷ Here I am thinking of the lineage of enquiry preceding and following Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader*, ed. Sean Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 125–30.

works and personal artefacts (such as voice) stimulate in their recipients the search for an originating agent upon which to pin responsibility, property and belonging.

Without directly engaging in that debate, or explicitly endorsing the author's role as "medium," this section will simply attempt to appreciate a series of enduring historical accounts that in some way attest to the need to "disappear" the self in a creative act, in order to make room for something altogether other. This discussion will then allow me to speculate on the spatial conceptualisations that attend the notion of "making room," and to consider the self as a spatial entity that requires room in which to operate.

Being a Medium

"The landscape thinks itself in me," Paul Cézanne is thought to have once said, "and I am its consciousness."¹²⁸ The painter offers his consciousness to the landscape, and like a stethoscope, amplifies its rhythms. His brushwork too, is characteristically rhythmic, as if he allows himself to be vibrated by the antics of the mountains and trees, recording their chatter through the seismograph of his hand. He is no longer the protagonist of his consciousness. The landscape has filled the chamber of his being, which the quotation invites us to imagine as a medium in which the external agency of the landscape can enact itself. The comment reinforces for me what I otherwise intuit when looking at Cézanne's paintings: that those quivering strokes are more than an affectation, more than a mannerism of the times; that they are a methodology for mediating otherness.

¹²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 67.



Fig. 16. Paul Cézanne, *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*, oil on canvas, 650 x 950 mm, ca. 1890. Collection of the Musée D'Orsay. Image: Google Art Project.¹²⁹

Locally, each brushstroke seems identical enough to the others. They are not like fingerprints, not autographic gestures, but more like an impersonal alphabet of marks. Devoid of a personality in themselves, these marks are for the landscape to make of them what it will, by incrementally insinuating itself into the painter's consciousness and vibrating his hand.

Their metronomic regularity enable him to remain in a prolonged state of impressionability. The marks are short enough to be iterated quickly, thick enough to sacrifice precision in favour of the whole and thin enough to retain their malleability. They are translucent enough to be revisited and identical enough to democratise each change, rendering the painting indefinitely pliable. Together, the characteristics of these marks allow Cézanne to

¹²⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_Cézanne_-_Montagne_Saint-victoire_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.

mechanise himself, their dimensions setting the frame rate of the landscape's "thinking." The brushwork records a methodology of *submission*. Not unlike the spiritual medium, the artist's own account of the painting process renders him a passive subject to whom something is being done. Cézanne's comment might not merely be interpreted as a poetic turn of phrase about the to-and-fro dance of perception, but rather a self-reflexive take on "impressionism." Does painting render him so impressionable as to become a conduit for a would-be agent, like a landscape?

"Impressed or Expressed?" is itself one of the guises of the "passive versus active" question. Where expressionism in art historically evokes an agential directionality from inside to outside, projections of an inner state, impressionism affords the opposite: letting the outside in. Thinking of an artist as a medium in or through which something takes place seems to suggest a *passive* mode of authorship. However, there is an ambiguity in this passive/active distinction. Just as Cézanne's landscape is sculpted by geological pressures, the artist that (actively) "expresses" only does so through a mind/body apparatus shaped by external, bio-social climates. And just as Cézanne must work like a machine and go through pains to position himself (passively) in the path of impression, the artist that is "impressed" upon is the architect of his own submission, a decisive actor in the process.

Alfred Gell discusses this ambiguity of the artist's state as agent/patient when he points out that "being a 'patient' may be a form of (derivative) agency."¹³⁰ Likewise, being an agent is not a straightforwardly active state either:

Because one's hand is not actually directly controlled by the visualized or anticipated line that one wants to draw, but by some mysterious muscular alchemy which

¹³⁰ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 23.

is utterly opaque to introspection, the line which appears on the paper is always something of a surprise. At this point one is a spectator of one's own efforts at drawing; that is, one has become a patient.¹³¹

Asking whether the artist is “passive” or “active,” a “patient” or an “agent,” assumes a unidirectional conception of agency comprising a set of discrete agents either acting or being acted upon: subjects and objects. However, must these supposedly opposing positions necessarily be mutually exclusive? The presumed dichotomy between passive and active authorship reflects back to us some dated, yet still lingering assumptions about the mechanics of agency; the vectors, topologies and materialities of selfhood.

Another example of understanding the artist's role as medium can be found in T. S. Eliot's “impersonal” theory of poetry.¹³² In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he asks what role—if any—the individual or “personality” has to play in the process of making art. Here, Eliot argues that the talent of the ideal poet lies not in their ability to pour themselves into their work, but on the contrary, in their ability to facilitate, in their imagination, the playing out of various ideas, *without* the imposition of their own person. In short, that the best artists took care to remove themselves from the creative equation. As was also the case with Cézanne, the artist appears to be markedly vacant, if not entirely absent, in the act of authorship.

“The progress of an artist,” he writes, “is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality,” and “it is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the conditions of science.” For Eliot, authorship seems to entail a muffling of the self, to make way for other agents to play out their collective will within the space of the poet's mind. A good

¹³¹ Gell, 45.

¹³² T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

artist is in this case like a good scientist: impartial, privileging experimental practice and protecting it from premeditated agendas which might compromise the conditions for discovery. But this “self-sacrifice” and this “extinction of personality” sound like quite harsh working conditions—unless there may be something misleading about how we think about persons in the first place. Eliot briefly touches upon this, but does not pursue the idea for long:

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is that the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways.¹³³

In his essay, T. S. Eliot is trying to resolve an apparent paradox about authorship—how an artist can make something novel out of tradition. His solution is to imagine the author as a medium through which tradition is recycled into novel combinations, but is led to wonder: why stop at “author?” Is a medium, “in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” a conceivable model of self and not only authorship? Is the assumed “substantial unity of the soul” getting in the way of a better understanding of the mechanics of self?

More recently, Peggy Phelan notes of Cindy Sherman’s photographic self-portraits that they allow her to “develop the human body’s disappearance into the prop, the prosthesis,” at which point we witness “the *mise-en-abyme* of self-production and reproduction.”¹³⁴ Rendering the body as prop or prosthesis recalls the medium’s practice of instrumental-

¹³³ Eliot, 78.

¹³⁴ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 69.

ising herself, inviting a self-transformation. In an interview, Sherman describes her process as independent of her own tastes and predilections, evocative of T.S. Eliot's idea of "impersonal" authorship. When asked whether her characters are a reflection of her own desire to become them, she explains: "When I'm doing the characters, I really don't feel like it's something that grows out of my fantasy, my own dreams."¹³⁵ But if not hers, then whose?

Sherman's photographs of herself, taken under various meticulously composed guises, seem to render her at once anonymous *and* brimming with character. Beyond the bewitching attraction of the humanoid *trompe-l'œil* achieved by her miscellaneous disguises, and beyond the exquisite theatricality of these *tableaux vivants*, is the poignancy of her ubiquity: she is at once everyone, and no-one. Walking through one of Sherman's retrospectives,¹³⁶ one might squint between photographs but still be left wondering: *where is she?* By some optical, forensic manoeuvre, one can try to outwit the displays and excavate her from some latent residue, a betrayal of continuity across the portraits underneath the layers of dress-up craftsmanship. And sure enough, there she is, again and again. But the continuity we extrapolate is not very reassuring, as with each fresh gaze we only seem to lose her further to a kind of everywoman. Tempting though it may be to play this game of catching the artist out and spotting a slip-up in her illusion of becoming other, such a sport would yield only the most unsatisfactory reassurances: a real tooth, a bare leg, an eye, but still no Sherman.

This career-long experiment in split-second role-play (for all that is needed is for another character to come and replace her in the blink of a camera shutter) recalls the practice of spirit photographers—those ghost hunters who sought in earnest to capture the fleeting

¹³⁵ Cindy Sherman, "Characters, Cindy Sherman," Art 21, uploaded 1 April 2011, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/cindy-sherman-characters-short/>.

¹³⁶ For example, *Cindy Sherman*, National Portrait Gallery, 27 June–15 September 2019.

form of spirits. And although in this sense her task is equally arduous,¹³⁷ instead of searching haunted nooks and crannies, Sherman turns the camera at herself, and there, in her living body, finds more ghosts than she could ever hope to discover elsewhere.

Beyond the illusions of art and artifice, disguises and the *mise-en-abyme*, perhaps greater attention could be paid to the way in which Sherman's condition in her work is enacted in everyday life. The persuasiveness of the portraits, however subtle or caricatured, seem to tease the idea that any one "self" must find itself entrenched in the performativity of always mediating something other, something which comes from "outside." What is surprising about the phenomenon of the "everyperson," staged with craftsmanship and artistic discipline in Sherman's practice, is that it can be found beyond art, in the silent permutations of a daydreaming face. Because of this, I sometimes wonder whether Sherman's elaborate disguises are there to help persuade herself, rather than us—a kind of ritual for becoming other. In Sherman, the self is staged as nothing *but* a prop for the task of becoming.

Interiors and Exteriors

Throughout the ages, creative practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds have attributed their productivity to some external force, or at least attested to feeling some bafflement as to their own contribution to the work they have made. The renunciation of self as part of authorship is familiar to Maurice Blanchot, who claims that a writer is fated to "sacrifice himself for the work, become other;" that "he must become no one, the empty and animated space where the call of the work resounds."¹³⁸ Here, we are reminded also of Deleuze's "virtual object," an entity that lacks its own identity precisely so as to have the

¹³⁷ Sherman has described the characters' staging, posing and capturing as exhausting in "Characters."

¹³⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 215–16.

capacity to accommodate an alternate quality.¹³⁹ Speaking in the 1970s, an African carver offers a particularly compelling testimony about the mask he has made:

I see the thing I have made [...]. To me, it is like what I see when I am dreaming. I say to myself, this is what my *neme* [familiar spirit] has brought into my mind. I say, I have made this. How can a man make such a thing? It is a fearful thing that I can do [...].¹⁴⁰

In guises more or less intuitive to our modern sensibilities, the idea of the author as a medium dates back at least to antiquity. Where the Ancient Greeks attributed artistic craft to channeling the divine voices of the Muses, the evangelists reported that their hand had been guided by the Holy Ghost in writing the gospels. Coinciding with the birth of experimental psychology, it is possible to trace a resurgence of this emphasis on inspiration in nineteenth century Romanticism; only, in this case, the divine is replaced by the unbridled forces of the unconscious.¹⁴¹ As in the examples from Cézanne and T. S. Eliot, the same idea surfaces in Modernism, taking on a register that is at once scientific and spiritual. This preoccupation with the artist as medium persists in contemporary artists' conceptualisations of their own creativity, as can be seen, among many others, in Cindy Sherman (see above), Orhan Pamuk's poet Ka¹⁴² and the sculptor Heidi Lau:

¹³⁹ "Although it is deducted from the present real object, the virtual object is different in kind: not only does it lack something in relation to the real object from which it is subtracted, it lacks something in itself, since it is always half of itself, the other half being different as well as absent." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2001), 102.

¹⁴⁰ Warren Leonard D'Azevedo cited in Gell, *Art and Agency*, 46.

¹⁴¹ Sean Burke reflects that, "unlike previous critics," Percy Shelley attributes inspiration in the creation of poetry "not to a god or a muse but to the unconscious depths of the poet's own mind." Burke, *Authorship*, 50n6.

¹⁴² "A careful reading [of his notes] reveals that Ka did not believe himself to be the true author of any of the poems that came to him in Kars. Rather, he believed himself to be but a medium, the amanuensis [...]." Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*, trans. Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 384.

It really feels like I am the medium. Something passes through me or my hands directed by the clay. Instead of me sculpting it, it's like it's sculpting me back.¹⁴³

A common intuition emerging from these examples is that artists must “empty” themselves in order to be receptive as mediums. In Plato’s *Ion*, Socrates claims that a great poet works at their best when they are “out of their senses,” or “beside themselves” because that is the state in which they are most amenable to being possessed by exterior forces so as to be used as “ministers” of the whims of some third party.¹⁴⁴ Imagine then, an ancient poet getting ready to compose a verse. They step outside of their own body and wait, “beside themselves,” whilst a ghostly voice enters their vacated corporeal cavity and instrumentalises it for purposes unknown. After all; a muse, god, subconscious desire, brooding landscape, familiar spirit, or any ghostly agent for that matter, surely cannot enter a body that is already occupied with a lucid soul; it must be *vacated* first.

Throughout history, the voice that speaks through the medium of the artist has been attributed to different sources. However, in each case there is a sense that something came and went through and by means of the artist as its “minister,” and that somewhere within the person of the artist there was a space which was full and then emptied. The assumption that adequate *space* first needs to be made before this other can enter, inhabit or possess the medium of the artist, reveals a certain fixation on the spatiality of selfhood, complete with coordinates, positions and distance. This is also reflected in prepositions used. T. S. Eliot suggests that tradition recombines itself “inside” the poet’s mind, just as Cézanne invites the landscape to think itself “in” him.¹⁴⁵ Further, we might ask: what is the

¹⁴³ Heidi Lau, “Heidi Lau’s Spirit Vessels,” Art21, uploaded 1 June 2022, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/0ffsSKNKKSc>.

¹⁴⁴ Plato, excerpt from *Ion*, in *Authorship*, ed. Sean Burke, 14–18. My emphases.

¹⁴⁵ This use of “in” and “inside” foreshadows the “vessel” model of self with its implied interiority, discussed in Section 2.1.

artist mediating *between*? Where does this ghostly agency come *from*? How does it pass *through* the artist? What is it that comes *out*?

There is a certain mechanical pragmatism to this language, which renders its subjects roomy and viscous: things take time to “pass through” the artist and must labour to get out. The artist is a thing that is *here*, in relation to its potential possessor which comes from some indiscernible vanishing point over *there*. Here we recall the presumed vectors within subject/object or active/passive relations in grammar and the “agential directionality” they imply. The use of these prepositions in discussing agency reflects a spatial conception of self which models it as a function receiving inputs and returning outputs: a machine for being. This seems to reveal an underlying assumption of a “physics” of agency (or a mechanics of self), complete with laws of motion, conservation of (spiritual) matter, and an exclusion principle—the intuition that two agents cannot occupy the same soul-space simultaneously, that one or the other “takes over.”

Spacial conceptualisations of self and how they govern our expectations about the mechanics of self will be discussed in Chapter 2. For now, we can ask: what are the qualities of a good medium? Following Cézanne’s iterative brushstrokes, a good medium must be made of some uniform cellular volume, like the atoms of sounding air. For T. S. Eliot, a good medium makes no personal impositions, which are only noise to the self-othering the poet seeks. (One must lie still, like a guitar string, to become animated with character). With Cindy Sherman, we saw how her mediation of diverse fictional characters affects also the flavour of her own selfhood, at least as it is perceived by her audience. As with the spiritual medium, she is possessed by “others,” and her entire identity (for us, her audience) seems characterised by her anonymous ubiquity. With T. S. Eliot we might then wonder whether subscribing to this view of authorship-as-mediation in turn suggests the

broader notion that a person in itself is a kind of medium, whose essence, if we had to ascribe it something such, would be an essence of *potential*.

1.4 Mirror Gazing: Becoming a Question

This section is about the journey I take through and around myself when I gaze for a longer-than-usual amount of time at my reflection in the mirror. It aims to highlight one movement in particular made by that activity: the way in which I gradually go from regarding my own reflection as an answer, to a kind of question.

This movement—from the reassuring confirmation of a reflection-as-answer, a stabilising reminder of each coordinate of my being, to the destabilising possibilities opened by my reflection-as-question, where the precise description of my being becomes less clear the longer I gaze at myself—provides me with symptoms of uncanniness and discomfort that suggest that I am being taken out of a normal relation with myself. And just as, in the past, brains which had suffered exceptional trauma have through study provided neurologists with tell-tale symptoms spotlighting the functionalities of different parts of a healthy brain,¹⁴⁶ usually invisible by the very seamlessness of their functioning, the uncanny symptoms of prolonged mirror gazing and the abnormal relations it constructs between gazer and reflection can perhaps offer a telling perspective on the mechanics of self in my normal, day to day functioning as a soul among souls.

In tracing the journey of the self-gaze from “answer” to “question,” I will reflect upon my own self-gazing experience, which, in my practice, occurs in the live video feedback from my camera as I film my improvised performances. Along the way I will echo other self-gazers and estrangers, such as Luigi Pirandello’s *Moscarda*¹⁴⁷ and Bertolt Brecht. I sug-

¹⁴⁶ See for example Oliver W. Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Picador, 1986) and the work of Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, in particular regarding “mirror therapy.” Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, “The Emerging Mind,” Reith Lectures, 2003, BBC Radio 4 programme, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2003/lecture1.shtml#top>.

¹⁴⁷ The protagonist in Luigi Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, trans. William Weaver (Sacramento, CA: Spurl Editions, 2018).

gest that our *a priori* assumptions about the mechanics of self affect how uneasy we might feel about becoming a question instead of an answer.

The Estrangement Effect in Mirror Gazing

If you wanted to truly “know thyself,” and get to the bottom of *who you are* once and for all, an obvious place to go looking for yourself would appear to be the mirror. In the mirror you can see every part of your body reflected in full resolution. In particular, as Namwali Serpell reflects in a collection of essays on the valence and legibility of the face, when someone says: “Look at me,” it is often their face that they are asking you to look at, and often they are saying it with an agenda in mind (whether it be loving or threatening).¹⁴⁸ Similarly, when I decide to gaze at myself for a prolonged period in the mirror, on a quest to excavate myself from my reflection, I spend most of the time looking at my face, as if that is where I will get the most convincing answer to the call to find myself.

A glance is usually enough to reassure me of my whereabouts, a brief restoration of the knowledge that I am still here, still on this earth moving about and doing things. The departure from this normal state of affairs—from the reflection as answer—has occurred to me most powerfully in my hours of boredom, particularly childhood boredom, when there was more time to be bored. Looking at the mirror, I behold myself at first but then gradually lose myself to a mask. The face I assumed to know so well starts to look like someone else’s, or nobody’s at all, as when a word’s correct spelling suddenly looks unnatural on a page. I notice the volume of my head, become conscious of the space inside of it and the peepholes punctured into it, and remember that I am a machine whose apparatus is defined by functions, processing, churning. My face is the mask of a friendly robot, the supple skin a functional gauze exuding metabolic exhaust through its tiny pores. Somebody else could

¹⁴⁸ Namwali Serpell, *Stranger Faces* (Oakland, CA: Transit Books, 2020), 9–10.

have easily worn this face; indeed my ancestors have to some extent already worn it, as my descendants will wear it. It is uncanny. Defamiliarising. From boredom I seemed to have launched myself into something approaching quiet terror.

What is particularly unnerving about seeing myself in this way is recognising in my reflection a being of *potential*, not of essence. The more I look searchingly into the reflection, at the self-regulating way the head bobs to hold its balance on the neck, at the slight muscle twitches caused by the breeze disturbing its whiskers, the more convinced I am that I am not looking at myself at all, but at some kind of benign machine, subtly whirring in a state of standby. Awaiting orders.

One would have thought that a mirror would help me have myself, but in fact it makes me see myself as an everyperson, a “prop for becoming.” It is interesting that this deep form of looking at oneself should lead to a feeling of self-estrangement, as if under that close gaze the person is lost. Perhaps a certain amount of distance from oneself is required, in order for one to have oneself, to be self-possessed, to be a person.

In Luigi Pirandello’s novel *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, the protagonist Moscarda arrives at a similar state of self-estrangement.¹⁴⁹ After his wife points out to him an annoying detail about his nose that he had never noticed before, he becomes so disturbed by the idea that others may know him in a way that he does not know himself, that he begins a series of stringent experiments in seeing himself, with mirrors and reflective devices of various kinds featuring as the principal props. (Being a wealthy heir, Moscarda also has a lot of time on his hands). In the following scene, he is trying to catch a glimpse of himself “without himself” present. That is, he is (consciously) trying to see himself in a state of unselfconsciousness, as he would appear walking past a stranger, the stranger ignoring him

¹⁴⁹ Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, 19–41.

and he ignoring them. He tries to peel back his self-conscious presentation before the mirror in order to finally arrive at himself without himself:

And then: I was filled with this truth that reduced my experiment to a game, all of a sudden my face in the mirror ventured a sordid smile.

“Be serious, fool!” I cried at it then. “There’s nothing to laugh about!”

In the spontaneity of this anger, the change of expression on my image was so immediate, and this change was so suddenly followed by a stunned apathy, that I could see my body detached from my imperious spirit. I saw it there, before me, in the mirror.

Ah, at last! There it was! There!

Who was it?

It was nothing. No one. A poor mortified body, waiting for someone to take it.

“*Moscarda...*” I murmured, after a long silence.

He didn’t move; he stood, looking at me, dazed.

He might even have a different name.

He was there, like a stray dog, without master and without name, that one could call *Flik*, and another *Flok*, however they chose. He knew nothing, nor did he know himself; he lived to be living, and didn’t know he was living; his heart beat, and he didn’t

know it; he breathed, and he didn't know it; he moved his eyelids, and wasn't aware of it.¹⁵⁰

Prolonged mirror gazing has caused recognition to fall apart, and Moscarda has become a question. He has suddenly seen himself as a being of potential, not of essence. Like the mediums discussed previously, he describes this nameless self of his in the mirror as a vacant vessel awaiting possession. He is not used to seeing himself in this way, and getting there required some special feat of overcoming character, or at least appearing to have done so. This other Moscarda, zombie-like, is shocking for him to see; self-evident, there, in front of him in the mirror, but also utterly estranged from any way in which he normally perceives himself. Yet notice how he uses estrangement as an observational tool, enabling a kind of scientific enquiry into the self.

We could liken this scientific utility of estrangement to dramaturgist Bertolt Brecht's aim to embed what he termed the "estrangement effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in his theatre work.¹⁵¹ Brecht intended to estrange spectators from the norms of viewing theatre through the use of a series of aesthetic devices designed to disrupt and disorient spectators' expectations about character, setting and their own role as spectators. This, he hoped, would transform a Western spectator's experience of the theatre from one of passive reception, to active critical enquiry, arguing that familiarity is the very thing which obscures socially conditioned phenomena from scrutiny.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, 37.

¹⁵¹ Brecht's notion of *Verfremdungseffekt* has been translated as both an "alienation" effect and as an "estrangement" effect. According to Anthony Squiers, "estrangement" might be a more accurate translation of the German word than alienation, but the "alienation" translation may have been motivated by the known link between Brecht's work and his Marxist influence (i.e., Marx's notion of the "alienation of the worker"). Anthony Squiers, "A critical response to Heidi M. Silcox's 'What's Wrong with Alienation?'" *Philosophy and Literature* 39, no. 1 (2015): 243–47.

¹⁵² Molly Kelly, "Estrangement, Epochē, and Performance: Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* and a Phenomenology of Spectatorship," *Continental Philosophy Review* 53, no. 4 (2020): 419–31.

While Brecht's reading of Marx's ideas about class consciousness has been widely noted to have influenced his motivation for making theatre self-conscious through the critical gaze of estranged spectators, Molly Kelly refers to phenomenology and the philosophy of Edmund Husserl to explain *how* estrangement might work to stimulate an attitude of critical enquiry in theatre spectators.¹⁵³ The link between Brecht's estrangement and phenomenological methods is centred on the fact that both approaches aim to suspend (or "bracket," in the language of phenomenology) those socially conditioned approaches to interpreting phenomena, such as a piece of theatre, *while* they are being experienced. Not only does this wrest the phenomenon being observed free from habits of perception, which may project past experience and conditioning onto what is being perceived, but it also makes those very habits of perception, and those very structures of social conditioning, visible as well, thus opening them to critique. For Brecht, following the Russian formalists and in particular Viktor Shklovsky, the estrangement effect was a tool for critical thinking by way of bringing the obvious, and thus invisible, into stark relief.¹⁵⁴ The political role of aesthetic estrangement is also reiterated by Mark Fisher:

As any number of radical theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a "natural order," must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.¹⁵⁵

Perhaps gazing into the mirror and subjecting oneself to the unsettling and estranging effects of seeing one's own face becoming unfamiliar in the reflection might also offer a pro-

¹⁵³ Kelly, "Estrangement, Epochē, and Performance."

¹⁵⁴ Daniel P. Gunn, "Making Art Strange: A Commentary on Defamiliarization," *The Georgia Review* 38, no. 1 (1984): 25–33.

¹⁵⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 17.

ductive method for exposing the ways in which one has been socially conditioned to view oneself. By bringing these implicit, everyday, habituated theories of self into the realm of thinkability, it becomes possible to replace them with alternative hypothetical models and observe how they might shift such everyday experiences as what “recognising oneself” feels like.

The Human and its Character

It seems paradoxical, but it is as though the very proximity with one’s reflection, far from the prying eyes of social others, is precisely what brings about this feeling of self-estrangement. It is as though getting *closer* and looking apparently more frankly at one’s own self—stripped of the role-playing involved in social interaction—were to engender a *greater* distance to “self knowledge,” and turn the whole experience of looking in the mirror from one of recognition, to one of alienation.

Earlier I defined “the human being” to here mean “that which is capable of playing out character.” I defined character, meanwhile, as a “system of memes” coding for what is recognised by other human beings as “self.” In later chapters (4 and 6), we will explore the special role of the social milieu in regulating human character, following the theory that “self” is a shared fiction that helps members of the human species predict each other’s behaviours and thus organise at a social level.¹⁵⁶ The fiction of “self,” propagated by each human being through the character they present to others, is pervasive because so many of our daily activities involve social interaction, and therefore involve performing character.

For the same reasons that self-estrangement can be observed in order to study the self, Erving Goffman was interested in observing “performance disruptions” or “incidents” in or-

¹⁵⁶ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 253.

der to study the presentation of self in everyday life; moments where the usually well-oiled performance of character broke down in a social setting, often causing awkwardness, embarrassment or conflict:

When such an incident occurs, the members of an audience [...] may discover a fundamental democracy that is usually well hidden. Whether the character that is being presented is sober or carefree, of high station or low, the individual who performs the character will be seen for what he largely is, a solitary player involved in a harried concern for his production. Behind many masks and many characters, each performer tends to wear a single look, a naked unsocialized look, a look of concentration, a look of one who is privately engaged in a difficult, treacherous task.¹⁵⁷

Is this “naked unsocialised look” the look I saw in the mirror upon becoming estranged from myself? Is it precisely the removal of the social, and even, as with Pirandello’s *Moscarda*, the eventual removal of myself as witness (through boredom, perhaps; a slip in attention), which allows me a rare glimpse at myself as a machine, as “a fundamental democracy,” rather than as a particular character?

Prolonged mirror gazing is a unique circumstance in which the usual presentation of self is punctured by the absence of the social milieu that usually regulates it. An idle human being is like an idle machine: it becomes objectified by its idleness. When a machine is busy and active performing impressive feats—lifting, whirring, driving, computing—its hardware seems to disappear as the vitality of its actions become president. Conversely, when a machine is idly lying charged with the possibility of action, its objecthood is foregrounded.

¹⁵⁷ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 228.

Prolonged mirror gazing makes the human being *socially* idle, and thus offers a rare glimpse into the human being as a machine of potential, rather than essence.¹⁵⁸

Character, it is worth noting, *is* a thing of essence because its precise pattern is what defines it; therefore, the way it appears is also intrinsic to what it is. The human being however, as will be presented in further detail in subsequent chapters, is a machine of *potential* and is thus not reducible to any single character, nor can it be distilled into any particular essence, not even the “social agent” (one’s most habitual, everyday character(s), discussed in Chapters 5 and 6). Self-estrangement provides a chance to temporarily see oneself as a character machine, where normally that machine is too animated by character to be perceived as such.

Becoming a Question

In the case of mirror-gazing self-estrangement is achieved accidentally, but inducing it can be approached more systematically, as an artistic method for yielding intuitions about the mechanics of self. It is artistic because it tampers with aesthetics and is generative of new aesthetic tools, enabling a viewer in the vicinity of the artwork to question established intuitions about the self and in turn generate new ones: an activist spirit of estrangement familiar to other approaches in art, such as Fluxus.¹⁵⁹ The performance practice presented in this thesis is offered as a philosophical “gym” in which a viewer may flex their intuitions about the mechanics of self, just as the practice has enabled me to flex my own.

¹⁵⁹ Owen F. Smith conjures another machinic metaphor in describing the activism of Fluxus when describing their approach to play. An acceptable amount of “play” in a machine provides some wiggle-room for fiddling with it without interrupting its overall function. Smith suggests that “Fluxus seeks not only to instigate play, but to do so in order to create too much play and thus cause the machine, in this case the system of meaning, and generally the art world, to become at least partially inoperable, or to operate incorrectly (in terms of individual and institutional expectations).” Owen F. Smith, “Playing with Difference: Fluxus as a World View,” in *Fluxus Virus 1962-1992* (Köln: Galerie Schuppenhauer, 1993) 119.

Like mirror-gazing, self-estrangement in my performance practice is a means of turning myself from an answer into a question. As explained in Section 1.1, a performance session begins with a process of self-estrangement, achieved by gazing at my reflection in the video feedback monitor of my camera. Both the mirror-gazing session and my performance sessions (which almost always occur in deepest privacy) involve perceiving myself in a scenario removed from the everyday social milieu, as if temporarily “suspending” it.¹⁶⁰ This period of self-estrangement can be seen as analogous to the process of “preparing the ground” familiar to other artistic disciplines, such as painting. With my social milieu suspended and my camera witness patiently waiting, the character that normally stands in for me within the social milieu is temporarily abandoned and my spectrum of possible behaviours seems to subsequently widen. My person ceases to be an answer (to the call of the social other) and instead becomes a question.

Within this suspended moment, between starting a recording and settling into the character who will be the protagonist of the video, I enter the initialising character (see Section 1.1). It is as though I have reverted to the “main operating system” of my machinery in order to choose a different application. The performance then goes further by providing me with a different “answer” to the one I started with, and can in this way more accurately be described as an exploration of the movement *between* becoming an answer and becoming a question. The practice thus seeks to gain access to the hardware of character and explore its versatility. From this vantage point I can then begin to ask new questions, such as whether we might wish to care about that “poor mortified body,” the machine-like human being, lurking behind character.

¹⁶⁰ In all these years I have found it very difficult, although not impossible, to achieve this movement in and out of character in front of other people, particularly people I know, probably because of the implied pressure to assume a recognisable character in social interaction.

Since the objective of self-estrangement in my performance practice is to prepare the ground for a shift in my character in order to access the alternative perspective that will enable, the approach may at first seem similar to other strategies employed by artists to initiate mind-altering experiences in the service of their creativity, from Paul McCarthy's use of spinning, to Rodney Graham's use of LSD in his film "Phonokinetoscope," which echoes the cliché of artists resorting to psychedelics or alcohol to induce a state of inspiration.¹⁶¹

Miloš Ranković describes artistic strategies like these as "shaking the box," as one might do when pondering the unknown contents of a present.¹⁶² When dealing with the unknown, as artists do when they pursue the creation of something novel, it is not always clear how one should proceed—or even what questions to ask. Shaking the box is a way of forcing some feedback out of the unknown, as when the precise sound of the present's rattling gives clues as to what it might be. Artists, meanwhile, must find this as-yet unknown thing (i.e. the seed of the next artwork they want to make)—not inside a box—but somewhere inside their minds, so that is what they need to shake. To this end, spinning, psychedelics and intoxication can actually work, although, some of these can bring on side-effects that may be unhelpful to creative practice in other ways. The use of chance and collaboration, as in Dada's chance collage and Surrealism's exquisite corpse, are similar as strategies in that they serve to prompt the artist in ways that take them out of a normal relation to themselves and their habits of thought.

¹⁶¹ See Kristine Stiles and Paul McCarthy, "Kristine Stiles in conversation with Paul McCarthy," in *Paul McCarthy*, eds. Kristine Stiles, Ralph Rugoff and Massimiliano Gioni (London: Phaidon Press, 2016) 6–30. See also Rodney Graham, "Phonokinetoscope," 16 mm film installation, 2001, <https://www.303gallery.com/gallery-exhibitions/rodney-graham5/press-release>. Last accessed 28 June 2023. These techniques in turn resemble spiritual practices designed to induce altered states, such as the spinning of whirling dervishes or the use of hallucinogens by some Native Americans in religious ceremonies. I am grateful to Professor Simon Morris for bringing these comparative references to my attention.

¹⁶² A metaphor sometimes used in our personal communication together with Slavica Ranković.

What the self-estranging performance practice presented here shares with these other methodologies is the imperative to explore new aesthetic territory by way of moving out of the familiar, into the unfamiliar. In Chapter 4 I will show how temporarily sustaining the empathetic inhabitation of an alternative character's perspective puts me in a significantly different frame of mind, opening up avenues of thought that were not there in the previous character. However, I find that the self-estranging performance practice offers me more granular control in navigating the unknown space of alternative characters than "shaking the box," as it attempts to approach something closer to an empirical experiment.¹⁶³

How this is the case will become clearer in Chapter 4, when I will liken the relationship between behaviour and character to that between weather and climate. Just as a study of weather over time reveals the climate of a region (its meteorological "character"), study of a person's behaviour over time reveals their character. Weather and behaviour are both concrete, observable phenomena, whereas climate and character are not. Yet by mapping it over time, weather can become an access point into modelling the abstract, in itself unobservable, climate. Likewise, by tweaking socially codified behaviours, through performance I am able to begin to feel out the contours of the character I am inhabiting and in the process of discovering.¹⁶⁴ In my character performances, the manipulation of expressive equipment (such as behaviour, appearance and setting) is like throwing sand at an invisible object to reveal its form (in this case, character), in the same way the distribution of

¹⁶³ In an interview with Kristine Stiles, Paul McCarthy similarly describes his spinning exercises as approaching the conditions of "experiment" in the empirical sense, referring to concepts like repetition and refinement. However, the refinement methods available are predominantly limited to "heightening the experience," i.e. more or less intense instances of spinning, giving the artist only one variable to work with. Stiles and McCarthy, "Kristine Stiles in conversation with Paul McCarthy." Below, I will explain how the self-estranging performance practice gives me many variables to work with, in the form of expressive equipment that I like to visualise as "dials," and which are manipulated to produce different character effects in performance.

¹⁶⁴ This "feeling out" of character is taken to satirical heights in Lars von Trier's film *Direktøren for det hele* (The Boss of It All), in which an actor hired by the boss of an IT company to pose as him pauses at a critical moment in the film where livelihoods are on the line, to seriously consider "what the boss would do," regardless of what the real boss, moments from him, is emphatically demanding he do. Lars von Trier, *Direktøren for det hele* (Denmark: Nordisk Film, 2006).

granular iron filings near bar magnets can be used to reveal magnetic fields.¹⁶⁵ Expressive equipment can also be thought of as dials, which, as they are turned, revise the emerging shape of character in the performance. Thus, as a methodology, the performance practice is specifically tailored to an aesthetic inquiry into character and the self, allowing me to isolate variables and build a nuanced intuition of the relationship between mobile expressive equipment and character.

¹⁶⁵ To view the beautiful forms revealed by this trick, see Seattle University, “Magnetic Fields—Iron Filings,” <https://www.seattleu.edu/scieng/physics/physics-demos/electricity-and-magnetism/magnetic-fields---iron-filings/>. Last accessed 29 June 2023.

2. The Shape of a Thinking Thing

What do we imagine when we think about the shape of a thinking thing? It is far from trivial. Just think of other instances where shape has turned out to matter. The shape of an atom spells out its very properties and functions, and our models of it have had to shift and iterate over time to accommodate new knowledge about its behaviours. Before the architecture of neurones and their galaxy-scale interconnectivity was revealed, the brain seemed insignificant to a study of mind.

The study of something so elementary as shape even has the potential to make some of the hitherto most relevant debates redundant. For example, people used to ask whether the Earth was finite or infinite, whether you could travel in one direction forever, or risked falling off one of its edges. Although it is hard for us to put ourselves in their shoes today, this is an entirely commonsensical argument to have if you assume the world to be flat. When someone comes along and suggests that the world might be round, not only does this new shape pose a solution of sorts to the question, but it renders the terms “finite” and “infinite” utterly irrelevant as categories, since both of these designations can be seen to be, in a sense, true. The Earth is finite, in that it is not endlessly large, and it is infinite, in that you could endlessly travel on it in one direction without ever meeting the world’s edge. The shape with which we initially pictured the world set the terms for the entire debate, and only now is it plain to see how the original question itself was based on a critical assumption. Rather than simply answer it either way, the concept of a round Earth came to radically transform, and even transcend, the finite/infinite Earth question.

It is revealing to observe in so simple an example how a question can prematurely answer itself by way of an underlying assumption, curtailing access to a more enabling enquiry. A

question has the capacity to mislead research towards ends that would be made entirely redundant had the core models we used to ask it in the first place been questioned. The trouble is, it can be difficult to spot these core models. Our assumptions are just that—assumptions; they are set aside for the sake of convenience and do not enter the realm of questioning.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps this is why radical re-framings of debates, such as that enabled by a round Earth model, have tended to happen more or less accidentally, as a byproduct of researches into altogether different fields, and why just how radical they are tends to be more obvious in retrospect.¹⁶⁷

But what if something akin to a “round Earth” could be applied to today’s debates about agents, selves, or thinking things—debates which manifest diversely, from discussing artificial intelligence, to negotiating politics of identity? What if these discussions are currently arising out of flat-Earth like assumptions about the shape of thinking things? Just like the finite/infinite Earth example, the things people do and say in relation to thinking things reveals that they already have a certain shape for them in mind, whether or not they reflect upon it.¹⁶⁸

Let us first consider what exactly is meant by “shape” before exploring how it applies to thinking things. The use of the word “shape” here is intended to mean something very sim-

¹⁶⁶ And yet, there is no way to operate without assumptions. They are a necessary convenience when navigating a data-rich world using minds with limited processing power. See, for example, William Ocasio, “Attention to Attention,” *Organization Science* 22, no. 5 (2011): 1286–96.

¹⁶⁷ The point I am making here has its roots in Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm shifts in his analysis of scientific revolutions throughout the past. See Thomas S. Kuhn and Ian Hacking, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). An analogue to this is Foucault’s notion of *épistémè*, epistemological paradigms that govern the conditions of possibility for discourse at a given epoch in history. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 365–66. The likeness between Kuhn’s paradigms and Foucault’s *épistémè* was pointed out by Jean Piaget in *Structuralism*, trans. Chanihah Maschler (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 132.

¹⁶⁸ Adriana Cavarero similarly adopts an attention to shape as a mode of analysis in her study of the “inclined” versus “upright” postures and their role in (gendered) aesthetics. See Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

ilar to a scientific model. A model, of an atom for example, is not necessarily a visually representative picture of an atom, but a functional one, picturing the way it works rather than the way it looks.¹⁶⁹ Models, like those of the atom, change over time as new observations of the phenomenon present themselves. High school physics textbooks often present the evolution of the atomic model as a linear progression, with some models finally discarded in favour of others, gradually improving our understanding of its behaviour and allowing us to make better predictions about atoms over time.

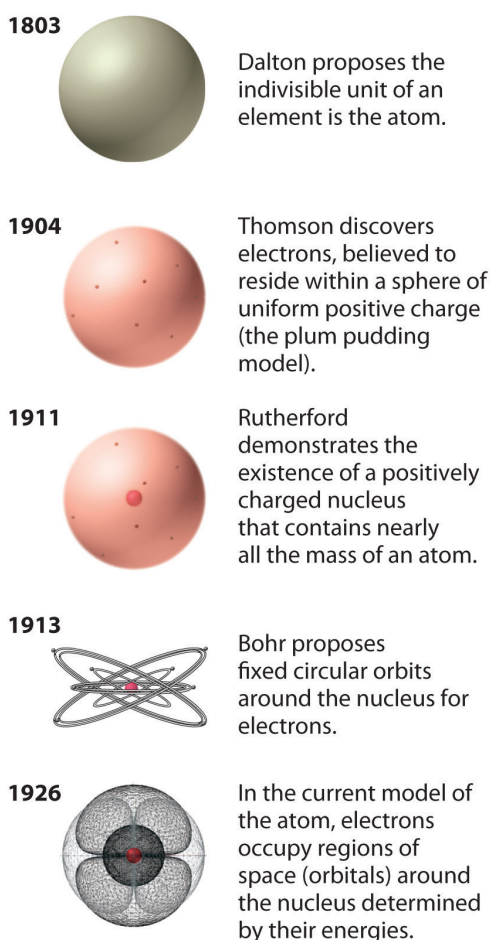


Fig. 17. “The Evolution of Atomic Theory, as Illustrated by Models of the Oxygen Atom” in *7.1: The Discovery of Atomic Structure*, LibreTexts Chemistry. Last updated 5 June 2019.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Indeed, with some phenomena, such as subatomic particles that are too small to reflect light or are simply destroyed by the energy of a photon, it does not make sense to think of them as “having a visual appearance” at all.

¹⁷⁰ [https://chem.libretexts.org/Courses/Bellarmino_University/BU%3A_Chem_103_\(Christianson\)/Phase_3%3A_Atoms_and_Molecules_-_the_Underlying_Reality/7%3A_Quantum_Atomic_Theory/7.1%3A_The_Discovery_of_Atomic_Structure](https://chem.libretexts.org/Courses/Bellarmino_University/BU%3A_Chem_103_(Christianson)/Phase_3%3A_Atoms_and_Molecules_-_the_Underlying_Reality/7%3A_Quantum_Atomic_Theory/7.1%3A_The_Discovery_of_Atomic_Structure), last accessed 8 October 2022.

But the development of models is not simply linear. Even at the level of the state of the art in a given discipline, there may be several models of the same phenomenon that variously highlight some specific facet or mechanism at the expense of another.¹⁷¹ In the case of atoms, several different accepted models exist today, each highlighting particular behaviours or properties and underrepresenting others. Some models focus purely on different electron orbitals and barely feature any information on the nucleus, others emphasise the nucleus and grossly simplify electron orbitals.

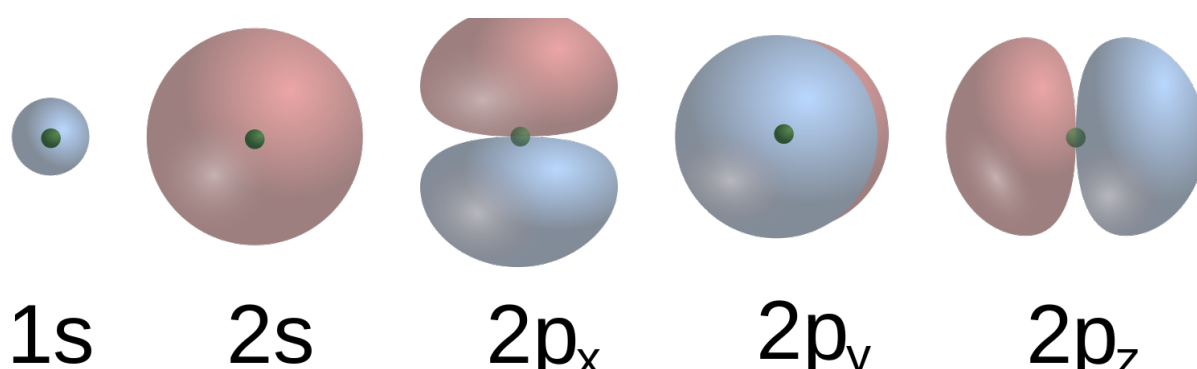


Fig. 18. Illustration showing s and p atomic orbitals. Wikimedia Commons, 2006.¹⁷²

The fact that each model is biased towards specific qualities over others suggests that a model can itself be thought of as a kind of character. A character is, after all, a frame; it allows us to see, but this vision always comes at the expense of what it necessarily excludes. This duality of affordance and cost is key to the understanding of character presented in this thesis.

Imaginative shapes, models, or intuitive diagrams, such as the shape of the Earth or a model of an atom, are thinking tools that enable us to intuit different properties of a given

¹⁷¹ Although models can be represented visually, in a drawing, diagram or 3D render, often they are represented mathematically, as in the case of statistical models generated by artificial intelligence algorithms. AI uses statistical relationships and probabilities to form a model of whatever it is learning to recognise, whether it is human faces, suspicious activity in online banking, or cancer cells.

¹⁷² <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:S-p-Orbitals.svg>.

phenomenon. Moreover, since they are light, portable ideas (I can flip between envisaging the world as round or flat with relative ease), and since they serve a functional purpose (they enable us to do, say or think particular things in relation to the phenomenon), we are likely to be carrying such internalised, intuitive models about all kinds of things, all the time. These portable and functional properties of the model mean that we are especially likely to be carrying implicit models of things that we need to continually work with and think about on a daily basis—such as other human beings.

In this chapter, we go in search of the shape of a thinking thing, which is to say, we go in search of simple thinking tools to help us intuit the mechanics of self. As with the multiple models we have available to intuit different aspects of the atom, I discuss several shapes that foreground different aspects of the mechanics of self.¹⁷³ Rather than necessarily settle on any one of them, the diversity of shapes available to us hopefully allows us to move flexibly through our observations of the mechanics of self.

I will present at least two shapes that have guided the popular imagination of thinking things: *the vessel* and *the distributed self*. The prevalence of the vessel model in particular is suggested by anthropological research (discussed below), as well as a small scale empirical study I conducted, the details of which can be found in the third experimental report associated with this thesis: “Diagramming the Self: Deriving Lay Theories of Selfhood from Drawings”.¹⁷⁴ In this study, I invited 104 participants to make a drawing of what they thought a diagram of the self would look like, thus providing further data on how self mechanics are conceptualised in the popular imagination today. Following the discussion of the vessel and the distributed self, I will emphasise certain properties and behaviours

¹⁷³ The aim of this chapter is not to offer an exhaustive list and definitions of shapes of thinking things, but merely to draw attention to the way in which these shapes go on to inform the development of theory around the self.

¹⁷⁴ Katarina Ranković, “Diagramming the Self: Deriving Lay Theories of Selfhood from Drawings,” 2023, experimental report 3/4, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-3.

that those two models do not, by proposing another shape that could add to the palette of our intuitions about the mechanics of self: *the line*.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ In mathematics, a line is not, strictly speaking, a shape, since it does not enclose a form. Rather, it can be described as a one-dimensional “figure”—a series of connected points (see Christopher Stover and Eric W. Weisstein, “Line,” *MathWorld—A Wolfram Web Resource*, <https://mathworld.wolfram.com/Line.html>, last accessed 16 June 2023). As will be discussed below, in this chapter I adopt a more colloquial usage of the term “shape” to refer to the models one can adopt to think about selfhood. In this way, I use “shape” synonymously with “figure”, and include “line” among the models that can be adopted to emphasise certain observed properties of selfhood.

2.1 The Vessel

In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell writes that all around the world and in numerous different places and epochs, artificial objects have been made not only to represent spiritual entities, but also to instantiate them. These objects, often used in rituals or otherwise consulted on important matters are, or have been, assumed by their human counterparts to be thinking things, to be in possession of a soul, to have “inner light.”¹⁷⁶ So what do these man-made avatars of spirit look like?

There is, of course, a lot of diversity: some are shaped anthropomorphically, figuratively representing the deities or spirits that they incorporate. Some are more abstract in form: spherical, cylindrical or cuboid, sometimes adorned with symbols. Yet there is a cross-cultural design feature common to them, and that is that they tend to be hollow, or have some sort of orifice. Gell calls this the “homunculus-effect,” suggesting that animacy can be achieved in non-anthropomorphic figures “so long as the crucial feature of concentricity and ‘containment’ is preserved.”¹⁷⁷

Similarly, writing on the sixteenth-century European practice of making anatomical wax figures, Marina Warner explains that anatomists were not queasy about studying cadavers by using the most invasive means, justifying their curiosity with the belief that once the soul had departed, the body left behind was only an “empty husk.”¹⁷⁸ Emma Claire Brownlee argues that this view of the cadaver in Europe may have began around the seventh century AD, correlating it to the Christian concept of the afterlife of the soul and its effect on burial practices:

¹⁷⁶ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 133.

¹⁷⁷ Gell, 133.

¹⁷⁸ Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 34.

[The abandonment of grave goods in the seventh century across most of Western Europe] suggests a change in the way the corpse was perceived, from an embodied, active social agent, to an empty vessel which had ceased to be the locus of personhood.¹⁷⁹

In Europe, the belief in the ephemerality of flesh and immortality of spirit has been largely influenced by Christianity, but the intuitive configuration of spirit *within* body seems to have been relatively universal, according to Gell. The results of a recent study I conducted on diagramming the self (see “[Diagramming the Self](#)”)¹⁸⁰ provided further evidence suggesting that the vessel continues to be the most prevalent shape used to model self in the human imagination, underpinned by the instinct that an “inner life” requires interiority—a space in which the implied kernel of selfhood is housed. Interiority is a mark of soulfulness, of a thinking thing.

Is the soul contained? Are thoughts sequestered like moths caught fluttering in a jar? Does the mind flit and spark internally like a light bulb? Are memories collected and stored like papers in a filing cabinet? Is the vessel, when taken to be the shape of a thinking thing, misleading or telling?

On the one hand, yes; when I look into another creature’s eyes, I judge their soulfulness by the depth of their gaze, and seem to find a fellow inmate hidden in the hollow behind them. On the other hand, the vessel sends me searching inside that Other’s eye, searching for a kernel of selfhood hidden within the interior—a sacred space in which the true

¹⁷⁹ Emma Claire Brownlee, “The Dead and Their Possessions: The Declining Agency of the Cadaver in Early Medieval Europe,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 23, no. 3 (2020): 406–27.

¹⁸⁰ Ranković, “Diagramming the Self,” 2023, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-3.

Other can be found. But a homunculus model like this only perpetuates the problem of locating intelligence by infinite regress, becoming an intellectual matryoshka doll whereby each homunculus opens into another, and another, and so on. It has often been intuited that one could eventually, through this process of peeling back layers, reach a point at which the origin of volition is located, as communicated in the following observation by Erving Goffman:

In our society the character one performs and one's self are somewhat equated, and this self-as-character is usually seen as something housed within the body of its possessor, especially the upper parts thereof, being a nodule, somehow, in the psychobiology of personality.¹⁸¹

We can call this configuration of self as a point within a vessel *pointhood*.

In *Freedom Evolves*, Daniel Dennett explains that in problems of infinite regress, there often lies the philosophical temptation to invoke a “buck-stopper.”¹⁸² We try to find “where the buck stops” when we try to identify, for example, which species in the chain of biological evolution was the first mammal, giving rise to all subsequent mammals. The endeavour to identify the prime mammal in a system like evolution, which is characterised by change occurring in gradations is, however, another one of those instances where a question appears to be paradoxical when it is actually just founded on the wrong assumption to begin with. There is no such thing as a prime mammal because there is no such thing as a category called “mammal” which evolution itself must adhere to in order to drive changes in species. “Mammal” is but another model, a convenience for economising our way through a data-rich world, and it has its affordances and its costs.

¹⁸¹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 244.

¹⁸² Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 126–8.

Similarly, we might look at the vessel model of self and wonder where the buck stops. By how many degrees does the matryoshka doll of self open until we arrive at the final source of will and agency? No matter how far down you go, “you can't stop infinite regress by invoking a Prime Mammal, by inventing a special difference that is ‘essential’ but invisible.”¹⁸³

The pointhood model is pervasive and a useful example of it is cited by Dennett. In a neurophysiological experiment by Benjamin Libet,¹⁸⁴ it was shown that there is a 300 millisecond gap between the point at which participants report that they made a spontaneous, conscious decision (to press a button) and the point at which their brains’ *readiness potential* was activated.¹⁸⁵ This meant that participants typically reported their decision happening circa 300 ms after the brain had already set in motion enacting that decision, leading many scholars in the neuroscience community to conclude that we do not really have free will, but are rather under the illusion that we have made a decision when our “brain” has in fact already made it for us.

Dennett finds several ways to problematise this conclusion, but the main point of interest to us here is how it raises the problem of *locating* the self in the brain, a spatiotemporal problem of shape and modelling. As Dennett remarks, “where you are” becomes significant if you want to register consciousness by measuring speed.¹⁸⁶ Libet’s experiment, or more specifically, the conclusion that agents do not really have free will, presupposes that “you”—the “you” that makes the decisions and is conscious—is located in a single point,

¹⁸³ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 272.

¹⁸⁴ Benjamin Libet in Dennett, 219–42.

¹⁸⁵ Readiness potential is a sudden surge of detectable activity in the brain. The experiment assumes that readiness potential is the point at which an action is initiated in the brain. This interpretation is another point of critique by some scientists. See Steve Taylor, “How a Flawed Experiment ‘Proved’ That Free Will Doesn’t Exist,” *Scientific American*, 6 December 2019, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/how-a-flawed-experiment-proved-that-free-will-doesnt-exist/>.

¹⁸⁶ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 232.

presumably somewhere in the brain (in what Dennett calls the Cartesian Theatre), waiting on the input from “the brain” that will ultimately colour your decision. However, Dennett argues that there is no reason to suggest such a point in time and space exists. Rather, it is much more likely that “you,” your “self,” is *distributed* in time and space, and that in fact, decisions are essentially temporal (and spatial) events, not instantaneous nor confined within a point:

Once you distribute the work done by the homunculus (in this case, decision-making, clock-watching, and decision-simultaneity-judging) in both space and time in the brain, you have to distribute the moral agency around as well. You are not out of the loop; you *are* the loop. You are that large. You are not an extensionless point.¹⁸⁷

Even if we simply confined our definition of “mind” to the contours of a brain, the brain matter and brain activity too are vastly distributed in time and space, and when we examine the brain’s architecture, it refuses the expectation of centralisation that we so casually bring to our reading of mind.

Dennett shows that to conclude from Libet’s experiment that “we do not really have free will” depends on a particular model that locates the kernel of self within a point, just as the finite/infinite Earth debate depended on a flat-Earth model. While I do not suggest that we should now dismiss that model (there may well be valid insights that come with this intuition of centrality), Dennett’s criticism does invite us to try to come up with other kinds of models that might shape our implicit theories of self mechanics differently.

What I would add to Dennett’s commentary of Libet’s experiment is that the very scientific desire for *precision* and the way precision itself is conceptualised or aestheticised, might also be forming our assumptions about the shape of a thinking thing. When we think of

¹⁸⁷ Dennett, 242.

“precision,” we tend to think of something like acupuncture, whose needles lead us in search of a point. But what if the shape of a thinking thing calls for a different kind of tool? In other words, not only can we get the shape of a phenomenon wrong to start with, but sometimes the very tools with which we approach it presume that shape for us. The discerning needle *pinpoints*, and in the case of Libet’s experiment, the very precision tactics employed in it (the clock, the spontaneous report), mean that the very sharpness of the discerning tool blunts our understanding.

Here are some of the shortcomings of the vessel model, and its attendant poynthood:

1. It does not take into account the social milieu into which self is steeped, and attempts to account for self without others.
2. It does not provide a mechanism for memetic contagion, and thus essentialises the self.
3. It shrouds the ghostly properties of a self in mystery, by relegating self to a vanishing point by infinite regress.

These shortcomings will be addressed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, and alternative models considered. However, the vessel shape does bring with it some intuitions that should not necessarily be dismissed:

1. Hiddenness and Attenuation

A key characteristic of agents is that they make other agents wait and see what they will do; there is a subtle unpredictability in their actions. Once the agent decides to do something, e.g. talk about what they want to do tomorrow, we can see their resultant actions, *but not their causes*. This “attenuated” property of agency is discussed by Miloš Ranković

in his PhD dissertation, where he proposes the shape of the neurone as a model for describing agential mechanisms.¹⁸⁸ A simplified model of a neurone can be described as a channel with lots of inputs and only one output. While lots of signals of various strengths can go into a neurone, the neurone must attenuate all this information into one single output. Following Dennett, Ranković notes that the elaborate causal structure that kicks into motion the agent's unfolding decision is itself distributed, but the output (i.e. the agent's action or decision) is singular. Since we, observing the agent, sit on the outside of this unfolding, distributed process—since it is hidden from us—we only have the end point of the agent's behaviour upon which to judge its mechanics. Thus, because an agent only ever delivers a single, observable output, and because its inputs are hidden from view, it looks *as if* the cause of the action came from a singular origin too, giving rise to the impression of pointhood.

Although pointhood provides a flawed model of self given that it is difficult to explain how volition can spontaneously arise out of thin air, the vessel model does highlight the crucial observation that causes of agent behaviour are profoundly hidden—even if their hiding place is not the cage of the skull alone.

2. A Procession of Skins

In presenting the pervasiveness of “concentricity” in modelling agency as a vessel, Gell asks us not to dismiss infinite regress too quickly.¹⁸⁹ We may not necessarily only read the concentric layers of the homunculus effect inwardly, towards a presumed centre point of self, but also outwardly. He cites Egyptian idols as examples of figures that were themselves often hollow, vessel-like, with inlaid eyes, but then also points out that these figures

¹⁸⁸ Miloš Ranković, “Theory and Practice of Handmade Distributed Representation,” (PhD diss., The University of Leeds, 2007), 28–31, https://www.academia.edu/1458773/Theory_and_Practice_of_Handmade_Distributed_Representation.

¹⁸⁹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 133.

were in turn enclosed in arks, and in temples with concentric layers of rooms extending outwardly. The homunculus effect here emanates both inwardly and outwardly and it is not quite certain where the “authentic layer” is located. The “skin” or “boundary” of the agent can be formulated differently depending on the level at which the distributed object is being perceived. We can then consider whether the point is not actually to ever arrive at the supposed “authentic layer,” whether deep in the centre of the mind or out at the scale of temples or traditions. Rather, we could model animacy precisely as *a procession of skins*:

We must enter these holes [the ubiquitous orifices of animated idols]. And then what would we find? Who can say—and does it matter?—for by now it is apparent that the animation of the image is not a matter of finding the “sacred centre” at all. What matters is only the reduplication of skins, outwards towards the macrocosm and inwards towards the microcosm, and the fact that all these skins are structurally homologous; there is no definitive “surface,” there is no definitive “inside,” but only a ceaseless passage in and out, and that it is here, in this traffic of to and fro, that the mystery of animation is solved.¹⁹⁰

Through exploring some of the affordances and blindnesses of the vessel model, as well as the related concepts of agency as “pointhood,” “attenuation” and “a procession of skins,” we have occasionally come across the notion of a “distributed self.” This arguably more abstract shape is the next model of self I will consider.

¹⁹⁰ Gell, 148.

2.2 The Distributed Self

In his critique of Libet's experiment, Dennett described the mind as distributed, in contrast to the experiment's assumption of pointhood. This concept (shared by, among others, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's work on the "dividual" or "partible person;"¹⁹¹ Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus;"¹⁹² and Slavica Ranković's work on oral traditions and distributed authorship)¹⁹³ presents a model of the self that simultaneously locates it in the spontaneous, intimately embodied present, *and* in the habits and formulas of an unfolding history composed of many bodies and other objects.¹⁹⁴ In anthropology, this idea appears to trace at least back to Marcel Mauss, who studied how external objects like gifts act as indexes of personhood in some cultures.¹⁹⁵ In this model, the self is distributed in the sense that it is located in objects outside of the body as well as of the body. But it is also distributed in the sense that one's most intimate, private experiences can be seen as but the latest iteration in an ongoing, communal repertoire, and thus are not entirely one's own experiences alone.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ See Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also "Art and Anthropology after Relations," *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 no. 2 (2016): 425–39.

¹⁹² See Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 14–25, where *habitus*, defined as "the mental structures through which [agents] apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world."

¹⁹³ See Slavica Ranković, "Spectres of Agency." See also Slavica and Miloš Ranković, *The Talent of the Distributed Author*, in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. Slavica Ranković et al. (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 2012), 52–75.

¹⁹⁴ Daisy Hildyard attempts an ecological analogue to this model in *The Second Body* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017).

¹⁹⁵ Further discussed in this passage by Gell, *Art and Agency*, 232: "The Kula system as a whole is a form of cognition, which takes place outside the body, which is diffused in space and time, and which is carried on through the medium of physical indexes and transactions involving them."

¹⁹⁶ See Miloš Ranković on "arcs of intent" in his lecture, "Meteoric Theory of Art," <http://youtu.be/o573OIADvY8>.

Artists have sometimes participated in aestheticising alternative models of thinking things, developing a vocabulary or intuition for them, and thus enabling us to see the self differently. In her novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf provides a meditation on the self as a distributed phenomenon:

[...] She said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not “here, here, here;” and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter—even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. Perhaps—perhaps.¹⁹⁷

In this meditative moment, the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway explains how a different way of perceiving herself has crept up on her: she is distributed. When she sees herself marked in others and them marked in her, she becomes much more expansive and large than her habitual representation of herself permits—an idea that even seems to suggest the possibility of overcoming death.

This passage is evocative of the entire novel, which I would suggest acts as an aesthetic response to the proposition that a person is distributed, inflected in others, subject to

¹⁹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 2007), 168.

memetic contagion.¹⁹⁸ This is most conspicuously achieved by the fact that, although the novel is entitled *Mrs Dalloway*, signalling itself as a portrait of the protagonist, Mrs Dalloway herself makes relatively modest appearances in it. Instead, a medley of other characters who cross paths with her by the slightest strings of attachment take centre stage, and the novel takes pains to describe their characteristics, peculiarities and longings, allowing the protagonist to drift in and out of focus. The self portrayed here is expressed as a reverberation across the thickness of a distributed expanse; its consciousness is diffuse.

The model of the distributed person foregrounds an anxiety which has perhaps always lived with humans, namely, that without the centralisation afforded by pointhood, no part of a self is able to see the whole simultaneously, and that parts of us remain hidden from ourselves at all times.¹⁹⁹ However, it provides a promising alternative to the infinite regress of pointhood and stimulates our model of thinking things to include the social milieu which seems to play a vital role in instantiating them.

As I will show in Chapter 5, through the performance practice I came to think differently about loneliness just as Woolf's Mrs Dalloway came to think differently about death during her reflection on the distributedness of self. Just as death might not be so final if the boundaries between the individual and the communal are not seen as so definite, neither

¹⁹⁸ A slightly different model of the self in *Mrs Dalloway* is foregrounded by Shannon Forbes in "Equating Performance with Identity: The Failure of Clarissa Dalloway's Victorian 'Self' in Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs. Dalloway'," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 38 no. 1 (Spring 2005): 38–50. Here Forbes provides evidence of a *fragmented*, rather than distributed, model of self in the novel. This, she argues, is characterised by the protagonist's anxiety of having no essential self at all. Forbes argues that Clarissa clings to her title "Mrs Dalloway," the "perfect hostess," as a means of ascribing herself a Victorian variant of a stable, monolithic self, without which she is confronted by her own emptiness, having no self at all. The difference between a fragmented and distributed model of self will be returned to in Chapter 5.

¹⁹⁹ The lack of a centre is explored by Mark Fisher in relation to capital: "The supreme genius of Kafka was to have explored the *negative atheology* proper to Capital: the centre is missing, but we cannot stop searching for it or positing it. It is not that there is nothing there—it is that what *is* there is not capable of exercising responsibility." Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 65. This fear of a lack of a centre being related to a lack of responsibility can arise when we adopt a distributed view of the self. However, the assumed connection between centralisation and responsibility can itself be questioned.

is loneliness so total when one finds oneself alone. By adopting the model of the distributed self, I was able to use character performance to derive a sense of communality when alone, since the characters I adopt do not come from within me; they are products of a communal repertoire and that community speaks to me through the medium of character.

2.3 A String Theory of Self

I will now propose another shape we could use to think about thinking things: the line. In Section 1.3, we explored the role of the medium in authorship and noticed, following T. S. Eliot, that some of these observations about being a medium as a mechanism in authorship might also be applied to theorising the mechanics of self in general. Seen from this point of view, human beings seem to act like mediums all the time, becoming possessed by character and allowing others to become possessed by theirs. This relates to the concept of the distributed person, because understanding the self as a medium places the focal point of agency on objects and practices that come from outside of the individual. I suggest that the line *is* the shape of a “medium.” The line has a certain capacity for alterity and presents a form that can go through different motions. As a shape it can help us intuit the self as a plastic substratum continuously vulnerable to becoming “impressed upon” by character, which is, as was defined in Section 1.2, a “system of memes” freely exchanged between such line-like selves.

I first discovered lines as someone who draws. I discovered them on the page, as traces of the places I inhabited in the universe of the sheet of paper. Lines are very much subject to memetic contagion. They are characterless entities that soak up character at the lightest touch or the faintest suggestion. Impressionable, they buckle gracefully under the weight of a drawer’s hand, which then gives way to a naked expressiveness sometimes unintended. You can read character in a naked line, which has absorbed the fluttering panic in the drawer’s passing strokes. Like a seismograph recording the tremors of the earth, a line records the tremors of an artist’s uncertain change of heart to the task of drawing.

The idea of the line as a vehicle for making a copy of something else famously appears in Pliny the Elder’s tale about the Corinthian maid, Dibutades, who, wishing to keep a

memento of her lover before he set off on a long journey, traces a line around the profile of his shadow cast on the wall.²⁰⁰ Over the subsequent centuries this story has been turned into a myth about the origins of drawing and painting in the Western tradition, which places particular emphasis on *mimesis* in art. Lines have subtle bodies that are capable of receiving and registering complex impressions, making them apt vehicles for character.

The mathematician Joseph Fourier also found lines to be highly expressive entities. The “Fourier analysis” breaks down a complex function (a complicated relationship) into the sum of simpler ones (trigonometric functions), such that any relationship can be very accurately described by just a handful of simple lines added together. Because of this economy of the line, the Fourier analysis is used in compressing files, notably .jpeg files.²⁰¹

An analogue to the line model can also be drawn to the field of physics, in which mediums play an important role. A line is to character, what a field is to a wave. In physics, a field is characterised by the phenomenon it is amenable to facilitating. It is that which waves. Therefore, an “electromagnetic field” facilitates “electromagnetic waves,” or light. Air is a field that facilitates sound, and water is a field that facilitates the kinds of waves which manifest, at various scales, as ripples or tsunamis. Without the necessary field, a phenomenon will not manifest: in a vacuum, sound is not heard, because there is no matter to disturb in a vacuum, and thus the event of sounding does not take place. A field is a substratum that accommodates a wave coming into expression, just as a line is a shape that accommodates character coming into expression.

Imagine a guitar string. It lies still when not played, straight, silenced, assuming the shape of *potential*. When plucked, a waveform emerges across its body. It is animated with char-

²⁰⁰ See Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 159.

²⁰¹ David Morin, *Fourier Analysis*, in unpublished textbook on Waves, 2009, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/david-morin/files/waves_fourier.pdf.

acter, a distinguishing pattern, which we can recognise by the unique frequency of any given note.²⁰² The relationship between the guitar string, made of metal or nylon, and the singing note vibrating across its body, to then vibrate the air, then the skin of our ear drums at a distinct frequency, is the relationship between line and character, and it is a unique kind of relationship (see Chapter 3).

In fact, although the distinction between “field” and “wave” is intuitive and serviceable to theories of physics, it is a distinction directly analogous to “mind and body” dualism. Like a soul, a wave has ghostly properties—it “appears” as an apparition. This is because the wave (like a Mexican wave) is not reducible to any part of the field (no single person, standing up or sitting down, *is* the Mexican wave). The wave is an effect operating at a higher level of organisation to the field, which is its substratum.

The wave is both dependent, and eerily independent, of its substratum. For example, you could use some other material than people to create a Mexican wave. The “same” phenomenon could be copied and performed on another substratum. Both waves and character are patterns capable of retaining their integrity across different substrata. This makes them conducive to viral behaviour. Character is contagious. And a line, antennae-like, is a shape that can “catch” viral character.

Phenomena like light, sound and the waves crashing against a coastline are characterised by their pattern. What we know as the colour “blue” waves the electromagnetic field with comparably greater levels of energy than “red;” its energetic blueprint is experienced by us

²⁰² In fact, musical and tonal metaphors are often drawn in relation to personality, character and spirit. See Goffman’s description of performance disruptions as “off key,” (*The Presentation of Self*, 60) or Marina Warner’s discussion of the archaic use of the term “sweet airs” as drawing a “syn-aesthetic equivalence” between air, spirit and music (*Phantasmagoria*, 79). See also the TV series *Mozart in the Jungle*, in which conductor Rodrigo De Souza says to the president of the New York Symphony Orchestra: “Gloria, we are notes in this beautiful concert of existence. If we don’t play ourselves, nobody will.” Roman Coppola, Jason Schwartzman, Alex Timbers and Paul Weitz, *Mozart in the Jungle*, season 2, episode 3, “It All Depends on You,” (United States: Amazon Prime Video, 2014) 00:11:17.

as a unique colour and luminosity. This travelling pattern of energy is in physics conceived as a disturbance within the field, that then ripples in a persisting domino effect throughout the medium. This repeated pattern is what gives a phenomenon like a wave coming towards the shore the minimal requirements of a personality. It is a pattern that repeats and persists in such a way that it can become familiar and recognised. Character too, must return, so that it can be recognised as itself. Character is constantly being both written and read by line-like human beings within a social milieu.

The line is a shape, and in turn a thinking tool or model, intended to enable certain intuitions about the person. It is a model of self that emphasises a dual mechanism akin to that of the “field and the wave,” presenting the human being as a character-playing substratum, and presenting character as a viral pattern adopted by and shared between human beings.

The line:

1. Is a shape amenable to memetic contagion, with broad representational range.
2. Broadcasts character across its body, which is then read by other agents in the social milieu, who are also performing character.
3. Corresponds to the idea of a distributed person, whilst attributing a locality to the thinking thing within the social milieu.
4. Offers itself as a substratum to the ghostly (but not mysterious) phenomenon that is character.

Thinking things are like lines that quiver to the heartbeat of the world at large, registering in their localities one way of capturing an uncapturable entirety. The human being lies quietly in wait, like a string on a harp, only coming into animation when plucked into a resonating pattern of expression. The line provides us with a view of the human being as a substratum

um amenable to being waved at distinct frequencies that we recognise as character.²⁰³ For the purposes of this thesis, character is a contagious system of memes which plays out across a substratum that is embedded within a social milieu.

²⁰³ The line as a metaphor for impressionable beings is explored in my novel, *Anomaline*.

3. Code and Expression

At this point we have adopted a computational model of the character and the human being. For the purposes of this thesis, the human being is that which is capable of playing out character, it is the *medium* of character, a material for possession. Just as a computer (a “universal computing machine”) can in principle run any computation, within a computational model of the self, a human being can in principle run any character where character is understood as a transferable pattern of human behaviour.

Using this analogy, we can take character to be something like a computer programme, a piece of software or code that can be run by the human-being-as-computing-machine, and which can be copied and distributed between such human beings. The relationship between the human being and character, between hardware and software, between a forcefield and a wave, or, more generally, between any medium and the performance it facilitates, is a rather eerie relationship. Evocative of “body and spirit,” within all these dualisms there is a simultaneous intimacy and alienation between the medium and the performance which gives the latter a ghostly, transcendent quality. Such dualisms exhibit a “relationship without a touch” where the performance hovers eerily above the medium at a higher level of organisation: it is an *emergent phenomenon* in relation to that medium.²⁰⁴

In this chapter we focus on the “software” side of that dualism: the character that is played out by the human being. In particular, we look at how character scripts the human being by

²⁰⁴ The “relationship without a touch” is a term I am borrowing from Miloš Ranković through personal communication. It is used to describe the simultaneous dependence and independence of a superstratum to its substratum, a ghostly interaction analogous to a mind’s relationship to its constituent neurones. This phenomenon is discussed in more detail in Miloš Ranković, “Something like thinking, that is, intervenes:” ‘The spectral spiritualisation that is at work in any *tekhnē*,’ unpublished paper (2011): 1, https://www.academia.edu/5879590/ Something_like_thinking_that_is_intervenens_Hebb_The_spectral_spiritualization_that_is_at_work_in_any_tekhne_Derrida_.

considering the features of a script more generally. A script can be thought of as a dual mechanism comprised of *code* and *expression*. The difference and interplay between code and expression can be observed in a number of different kinds of scripts playing out on very different kinds of substrata. A computer may have some *code* stored on its hard drive that it can then *run*. A biological organism stores *code* (DNA) in its cells and its ribosomes *parse* its instructions. A theatre performance is *encoded* in a script and then *executed* by performers. *Codes* of conduct, etiquette and social *scripts* likewise guide the daily behaviour *performed* by people in social settings. Whether genetic, computational or social, scripts appear to be predicated on the more general performative potential of a code and its expression: of *writing and reading*.²⁰⁵ Character too, is encoded and expressed, written and read.

Thinking more generally about the role of scripting in the creation of autonomous agents becomes particularly relevant for a storytelling practice that strives to employ words towards achieving the Frankensteinian ideal of making fictional characters “come to life.” The dual mechanism of code/expression carries with it a fundamental performativity, providing a mechanical account of agency that preserves its ghost. If character were a script, then that which feels most real and substantial to us could in theory be written and rewritten by aesthetic and textual tampering.

The “skill,” the “art” in my performance practice has precisely been to train myself in the language of writing and reading character. I have become a character programmer, where the machine I am working on is my own self. When I perform, I programme character, *overwriting* my default character. Then I press “run”—I play out that character, I allow it to

²⁰⁵ The terms “writing” and “reading” are commonly used in some of the examples given here: ribosomes are often described as “reading” parts of a DNA chain at a time. Similarly, a computer is said to “write” data onto external discs.

govern my being. This is how art practice enables me to experimentally address the theoretical distinction between character and the human being.

First we will approach “fictional characters” such as appear in novels and plays, and compare their status as agents to that of human beings. This will then lead us to ask about the relationship between prescription and autonomy, and whether the two are necessarily at odds, touching upon current advances within the field of artificial intelligence. We will then ask how scripting relates to spontaneity, asking whether these too are necessarily opposites, before finally speculating on art practice as one arena in which it might be possible to “script” an agent.

3.1 Inheritance and Legacy

In Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, there is a passage in which Kundera-the-narrator pauses the internal narrative of the novel in order to reflect on the origin of its protagonist:

And once more I see him the way he appeared to me at the very beginning of the novel: standing at the window and staring across the courtyard at the walls opposite. This is the image from which he was born. As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility [...]. I have known all these situations, I have experienced them myself, yet none of them has given rise to the person my curriculum vitae and I represent. The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own "I" ends) which attracts me the most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.²⁰⁶

Kundera was writing characters, and yet wrote about them as if they were people, people who he could never be and who were also his kin. Kundera's protagonists were comprised of *his* jealousies. In the passage, the author stands irrevocably side-by-side with his protagonist, cohabiting the page with him, and together, character and author comprise two types of ghosts. How different are these ghosts in kind? How important is Kundera's distinction between being "born of a woman" and being "born of a situation, a sentence, a

²⁰⁶ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 215.

metaphor” to my understanding of my own origins and legacy? Am I not also composed of formulaic components that together delineate the range of behaviours you can expect of me, and have I not also inherited these components which I have adopted in exchange for becoming a person?

In 2015, Kundera’s novel inspired me to write a play script called *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers*, which aimed to tease out this distinction between human and fictional character agency. The script is designed to be read aloud, every now and again, by a new pair of volunteer readers playing the part of Rosa and Lawrence, the “eternal lovers.” These performers will not have read the script beforehand and will know little about it. The configuration of reader (computer) and character (script) allowed me to treat the script as a kind of software that could be “played out” across the readers, who would form its substratum. The script specifies that readers sit on chairs facing towards each other (as in the image below), but besides this there is only dialogue, no stage directions.



Fig. 19. *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers*, performance, 15 minutes. Theatre in the Pound, The Cockpit Theatre, 21 December 2015. <https://youtu.be/ts3rH2fxAG8>.

In the dialogue, the characters Rosa and Lawrence discuss the span of their lives, which they experience as a kind of episodic “falling asleep” and being resuscitated (with each new reading).²⁰⁷ The lovers grasp for dear life onto the human readers whose bodies and minds they have borrowed to achieve this temporary lucidity, but await with dread the inevitable end of the reading. As the human readers read the script, they too slowly realise that their mouths, voices, bodies and consciousnesses have been hijacked by the fictional characters; that they have become vehicles for the lovers, who are otherwise impeded by the silence of the page. Sometimes the reader’s creeping smile, or stumbling mispronunciation, will undermine the presence of the characters—the reader momentarily comes to the fore—so that the audience finds they are perceiving four agents, not two. The aim of the work is that with each renewed reading, the two characters increasingly come into their own; that a certain quality might emerge across idiosyncratic readings that we, as onlookers, can recognise only as Rosa and Lawrence: beings with peculiar arrangements for the “playing out” of their consciousnesses, but beings nonetheless.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ There is a great instance of this “character black-out” formula in Bo Burnham’s film *Inside*. The comedian’s sock puppet laments its existentially impoverished state and implores Burnham not to send him back to oblivion as a punishment for singing a series of Marxist revelations about the world today. Bo Burnham, *Inside*, released 30 May 2021, on Netflix.

²⁰⁸ The project website is <http://rosaandlawrence.art>.



Fig. 20. *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers*, performance, 15 minutes. New Writing with New Contemporaries, The South London Gallery, 19 February 2022. <https://youtu.be/3z0iiek18s4>.

The project suggested a strange possibility to me: that scripting, through its dual mechanism of code and expression, could potentially be embraced as a material for coaxing agents “out of thin air.” Of course, Rosa and Lawrence were not coaxed out of thin air, but out of that same staggering historical momentum from which I too have emerged. They are not only Rosa and Lawrence; they are also Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, and all the other star-crossed lovers. And I am all these too, I house their quiet rhythms somewhere within me.

One common feature of human and fictional agents is that they both have an inheritance and a legacy.²⁰⁹ In other words, both fictional characters and human beings are contextu-

²⁰⁹ See David A. Brewer, *The Afterlife of Character, 1726–1825* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

ally inscribed by the cultural milieu of which they form a part. They also both cause lasting ripples in that milieu.

In noting that “social personhood functions as a kind of fiction” (legally, medically, culturally), John Frow tempts us to consider the ontological similarities between real persons and fictional characters.²¹⁰ Not only do fictional characters move us and become familiar to us, and not only do we engage with them in cognitively similar ways to real persons,²¹¹ fictional characters teach us *how* to be persons. They are social constructs that enter our social purview and construct us in turn.²¹² This is made possible by the softness of character as software: it transmits seamlessly between creatures of biology and creatures of literature—eerily independent of the materiality of the substratum that “runs” it. From earliest history, the fictional characters that populate our stories begin to live among us and raise us in their image. Humans live with the ghosts of fiction and become ghosts of fiction themselves.

²¹⁰ John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vii.

²¹¹ See Palmer, “Storyworlds and Groups,” 183.

²¹² See Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

3.2 Prescription and Autonomy

Both Kundera's novel and my own experiment in bringing fictional characters "to life" through the activation of performance have played with a view of scripting in which it can be instrumental to the emergence of agency and agents. However, this is not congruent with popular intuition. A common understanding of the relationship between scripting and agency is that scripting implies a determinism that is directly *at odds* with the autonomy exhibited by agents, as suggested by the following advertisement, which I spotted one day whilst walking through the wormholes of the London Underground.



Fig. 21. Poster for a touring live show by Joan Collins, September–October 2016.

The advertisement invites fans to join a conversation with actor Joan Collins as her more authentic self, divorced from her "scripted" character in *Dynasty*, and ask her anything ("within reason").²¹³ The event is advertised as an evening of spontaneous Q&A with the diva, as if the "unscripted" nature of the programme itself lent greater credence to the authenticity of her self-presentation. A significant value must be attached to this, since it forms a principal selling point in the advertisement. But is scripting necessarily at odds with

²¹³ Joan Collins, "Joan Collins - Unscripted," Royal & Derngate, uploaded 10 August 2016, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/uG7IUTPMcXA>.

agency? As I have argued previously,²¹⁴ the role played by *genetic* scripts in the “playing out” of biological creatures, or the way in which *computational* code promises to form the textual substratum of prospective artificial minds, seems to provide evidence to the contrary.

In *Freedom Evolves*, philosopher Daniel Dennett puts forward a compatibilist argument—not only in favour of scripting and agency, but more generally, in favour of the compatibility between determinism and “freedom.” According to Dennett, agents exhibiting what is sometimes referred to as “free will” can exist in a deterministic world, a world in which each next configuration of all the atoms in the universe were in theory predictable based on the last configuration, a world in which physics obeyed strict laws of cause and effect.

Dennett suggests that the intuition that determinism and freedom are diametrically opposed stems from the fact that the term “determinism” is often conflated with “inevitability.” This leads to the understanding that a deterministic universe is a world which an agent has no way of navigating freely. According to Dennett, however, the fact that an event was “determined” does not mean it was inevitable.²¹⁵ Further, the fact that it was determined is actually part of what has made the event *meaningful* from the perspective of decision-making agents since an undetermined event is virtually random, without cause. Much of Dennett’s subsequent writing then aims to train the reader in acquiring a different intuition about determinism and its role in what we as agents perceive as our “freedom.” At the same time, he sets out to reexamine what we mean in the first place by “freedom” in the sense of a “free will.” Such freedom is not, after all, achieved merely by the removal of (option-restricting) rules—and neither would such a world likely be desirable, as it would be senseless. If

²¹⁴ Katarina Rankovic, “Unborn Lovers: Scripting for Agency,” *Curating the Contemporary*, 2 May 2016, <https://curatingthecontemporary.org/2016/05/02/unborn-lovers-scripting-for-agency>.

²¹⁵ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 56–61.

free will is the ability to “choose,” what would it mean to choose in a world ungoverned by the historical precedents that give sense to choice?

Dennett's thesis is that choice is an emergent phenomenon: a phenomenon dependent upon, but also eerily independent of, the laws of physics. Like the field/wave metaphor, freedom, free will and agential dynamics take place at an emergent layer of organisation made possible by the deterministic substratum, but transcendent in relation to it. Freedom can evolve out of determinism.

Evolutionary theory provides us with a mechanism that can account for the emergence of freedom from deterministic origins. “Freedom,” the autonomous willing, wishing, and doing particular to living creatures and possibly variable in kind and degree across different species, need not be conceived of as a universally stable property that a being either possesses or does not possess. It can be seen as one of the many innovations of natural evolution, like flying, seeing, mating, or camouflaging.

Evolution is a system which over time endows the agent with powers to propel itself through the various mediums of space, whether water, air or mud; to sequester energy for itself and metabolise it to its own ends; to mobilise other objects around it and make of them prostheses, such as nests or tools. Yet evolution itself is a simple and deterministic algorithm. Each step in the evolution of species is determined by the previous step. It is a selection algorithm that hinges on death and reproduction. If an individual survives long enough to reproduce, it will pass on its genetic characteristics to its offspring which will propagate those characteristics further if they still turn out to be favourable to survival. If an individual does not survive long enough to reproduce, its genetic characteristics will propagate no further, thus eliminating these characteristics from the gene pool. In this way, evolutionary algorithms “select” in favour of genetic characteristics which happen to be fa-

avourable to a species' survival within a particular environment and "deselects" characteristics which do not. But out of this deterministic algorithm, all kinds of things, including perhaps agency, begin to emerge.

Cellular automata can help us intuit the emergence of agency from deterministic origins. They are simple, rule-based universes, often comprised of square cells in a two-dimensional grid.²¹⁶ At any given time, each cell in the grid can either be left empty ("off"), or filled ("on"). We can then write some simple rules that will govern our grid-universe, for instance: "if a cell is filled and surrounded by empty cells, fill the cell to the left of that cell;" or: "if three consecutive cells are filled, make the middle cell empty." Once we have written our rules, we can set the initial state of our grid-universe, which is to say, set which cells we would like to be filled, and which empty, at the start of the life of our grid-universe. We can then "run" our grid-universe. It will apply our rules to every cell in the grid, and then it will have reached its "second state." Then, the rules will be applied again, so that the grid shifts into its third state. These states can be seen as units of time in cellular automata. As time ticks on in the grid-universe, we can observe how our rules affect the dynamics of "on" and "off" cells within it. These dynamics, from the very start, all the way to infinite time in the world of the cellular automaton, will be entirely determined by the rules and which initial state we set at the very start. A cellular automaton is a simple, deterministic universe that we can create, either by laboriously drawing each state of the grid on a piece of paper, as was once done by early mathematicians, or, as is now the norm, as a graphic visualisation on a computer screen, programmed in computer code and calculated by the computer.

In testing the relations between the "laws" of a world and its resulting complexity, this branch of mathematics and computer science explores precisely the dynamics between "code" and "expression." Sometimes, a given rule and initial state will return a very boring

²¹⁶ You can have one-dimensional ones too, as in Miloš Ranković, "Theory and Practice of Handmade Distributed Representation," 80–89, or any number of dimensions.

universe in which nothing happens; nothing changes from state to state. Sometimes however, a given rule and initial state, even very simple ones, can give rise to stunning effects that are captivating to watch unfold in the cellular automaton.

The particular example given by Dennett is John Conway's Game of Life, a cellular automaton that is capable of giving rise to categorically different phenomena at higher levels of organisation.²¹⁷ In this world of "on" and "off" cells governed by four simple rules,²¹⁸ emergent phenomena like movement, exploding, and "eating" appear, and the community that tinkers with the game have had to invent an extensive vocabulary for the types of "characters" that recur in the Game of Life as a result of the deterministic computation of initial state cells. These emergent characters and phenomena seem at once dependent, and eerily independent, of their cellular substratum, and serve as a useful way of witnessing the unique relationship between sub- and superstrata: a relationship without a touch.

The levels of complexity that can emerge from the Game of Life, as well as many other cellular automata, are so extensive that they have been shown to be Turing-complete, meaning that they can theoretically house within them a universal computer that can perform any computation. In 2002, Stephen Wolfram mathematically proved that a system as complex as our own universe is technically programmable, and that in theory it only takes very simple rules for such complexity to emerge, given enough time and computing power.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ John Conway in Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 36–47. The Game of Life has also been implemented online by Edwin Martin for interactive fiddling: <https://playgameoflife.com/>.

²¹⁸ The rules are: "For a space that is populated, 1) Each cell with one or no neighbors dies, as if by solitude; 2) Each cell with four or more neighbors dies, as if by overpopulation; 3) Each cell with two or three neighbors survives. For a space that is empty or unpopulated: Each cell with three neighbors becomes populated." John Conway, "The Game of Life," (website), implemented by Edwin Martin, <https://playgameoflife.com/>.

²¹⁹ Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science* (Champaign, IL: Wolfram Media, 2002).

Character—patterns of behaviour—emerges in the Game of Life. When commenting on the community of practice that surrounds the Game of Life, in which people are engaged in discovering initial states that give rise to especially peculiar outcomes, or outcomes that exhibit evolutionary dynamics and so change over time, Dennett remarks on the strange independence different levels of organisation appear to have from one another in the Game of Life:

Notice that something curious happens to our “ontology”—our catalog of what exists—as we move between levels. At the physical level there is no motion, only ON and OFF, and the only individual things that exist, pixels, are defined by their fixed spatial location, $\{x, y\}$. At the design level we suddenly have the motion of persisting objects; it is one and the same glider (though composed each generation of different pixels) that has moved southeast [...], changing shape as it moves; and there is one less glider in the world after the eater has eaten it [...].²²⁰

These experiments, or rather “intuition pumps,” as Dennett calls them—tools we can use to exercise our intuitions about a particular phenomenon—offer a way of thinking about the compatibility between scripting and agency, where agency emerges at higher levels of organisation within a deterministic system. It is also useful to think about it from the other direction: would an *indeterministic* universe necessarily be more compatible with freedom?

No, is the answer Dennett gives. After all, what reassurance could a pinch, or jolt, of randomness (indeterminacy) add to our search to reassure ourselves of our free will? Dennett writes:

²²⁰ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 40. These emergent levels are discussed in terms of Arthur Koestler and John R. Smythies’ theory of “holons” and “holarchy” in *Beyond Reductionism: New Perspectives in the Life Sciences* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 210–16.

It is worth noting, finally, that just as evitability is compatible with determinism, inevitability is compatible with indeterminism. [...] In fact, if you are faced with the prospect of running across an open field in which lighting bolts are going to be a problem, you are much better off if their timing and location are determined by something, since then they *may* be predictable by you, and hence avoidable. Determinism is the friend, not the foe, of those who dislike inevitability.²²¹

There is sometimes a tendency within the humanities to invoke “quantum” indeterminacy in this regard, in the hope that embedded indeterminacy at the level of quantum mechanics might hint at the fundamental irreducibility of agents.²²²

When we learn that down in the strange world of subatomic physics, different rules apply, indeterministic rules, this quite appropriately gives rise to a new quest: showing how we can harness this quantum indeterminism to open up a model of a human being as a striver with genuine opportunities, capable of making truly free decisions.²²³

At the same time, we often readily abhor the term “determinism,” based on the assumption that deterministic underpinnings necessarily translate themselves upwards to higher levels of organisation.²²⁴ “Algorithms” are often associated with cold and lifeless automation, mindless systems that undermine the autonomy of free, spontaneous creatures like

²²¹ Dennett, 60.

²²² See for example Karen Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168–87, doi: [10.1080/13534645.2014.927623](https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927623).

²²³ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 8.

²²⁴ My critique of common uses of the term “determinism” and the misunderstandings that can follow from that does not suggest that I am in favour of “biological determinist” arguments, e.g. “women are naturally more emotional/empathetic, etc...” See Gina Rippon, “How neuroscience is exploding the myth of male and female brains,” *New Scientist*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24132190-100-how-neuroscience-is-exploding-the-myth-of-male-and-female-brains/>.

ourselves. But in that case it is forgotten that our very biological apparatuses, as well as our cultural inventions, are the results of evolutionary algorithms. As the dynamics within the worlds of cellular automata seem to suggest, “a whole can be more *free* than its parts.”²²⁵ The recourse to indeterminacy as a source of freedom would appear to reveal a lacking intuition about the “relationship without a touch” between sub- and superstrata.

A similar attraction to indeterminacy as a source of freedom can be found in the current cultural appeal of “the glitch.” The glitch is a very popular aesthetic invoked in contemporary art, where it is common to see video work spasming under superimposed images as if malfunctioning, or hear artefacts of error pulsate in electronic sound work. In our technocratic world, freedom is temporarily found in the cathartic symbolism of breaking the computers that surveil us and mine our personal data. The glitch is supposed to save us, by way of a loophole of randomness, from the inevitability of deterministic systems as governed by algorithms.

The intuitive connection between the glitch, or indeterminacy, and agency is strong. During my research, colleagues have often brought up the notion of the glitch in conversations about scripting for agency, intuiting that, in order to script, and therefore predetermine, an agent, which should act freely and therefore indeterminately, one would need to build into one’s script a faulty mechanism, a source of error, a jolt of randomness, a glitch. The recourse to the glitch pivots once again to the understanding that agency must stem from—if not determination—a spontaneous accident. But this dependency on accident does not get us further in ascertaining the role of automation in autonomy.²²⁶ Rather, effective experi-

²²⁵ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 48.

²²⁶ Sometimes the glitch is likened to the instrumental role of “mutation” in evolution, since mutation constitutes a “mistake” in the copying of genetic material. Every now and again these mistakes are generative, in that they “drive exploratory processes into new patterns, and out of old patterns.” Dennett, 93. However, at the individual level, most of these mutations are at best inconsequential and at worst destructive, and selection pressures will in turn approve or disapprove of them, selecting or deselecting them, *without* error.

ments in “scripting for agency” must faithfully follow the script, and assume that no glitches are necessary.

It is interesting to see areas where our intuitions contradict each other. A simple example is the fact that skill, such as the skill of drawing or playing tennis, is often cited as a locus of freedom. When one exercises skill, one exercises agency; one “expresses” oneself. And yet, learning a skill to a high level is a kind of automation of self.²²⁷ In *Breakdown of Will*, George Ainslie uses the term “intertemporal bargaining” to refer to the paradoxical phenomenon of exercising *control* over yourself as a form of freedom.²²⁸ As Dennett points out, we even see it as a form of praise when we say, “she is so determined,” because we see self-determination as a deeper form of exercising will, rather than simply “doing whatever she wants” on a whim.

In art, skill has traditionally played a decisive role in artistic agency, yet only by means of what was discussed in the previous section: inheritance and legacy. In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell demonstrates how the artwork’s intentionality extends far beyond the artist-agent that summons it, and elopes with its complexity to act rather as an agent in its own right.²²⁹ Like any agent then, the artwork has magical potential, some reckless agenda inscribed beyond the stuff and history of its making. Art is not merely “about” something, but constructively meddles with the stuff of the world and newfangles it—newfangles the world. This potential for art to act as an agent within the world will be the key that enables me to script for agency in art practice.

²²⁷ Dennett, 238.

²²⁸ George Ainslie in Dennett, 207.

²²⁹ “In speaking of artefacts as ‘secondary agents’ I am referring to the fact that the origination and manifestation of agency takes place in a milieu which consists (in large part) of artefacts, and that agents, thus, ‘are’ and do not merely ‘use’ the artefacts which connect them to social others.” Gell, *Art and Agency*, 21.

3.3 Scripted and Spontaneous

There is an association commonly made between spontaneity and authenticity. When somebody presents themselves before us and appears to react spontaneously to what we are saying, we usually read their reactions as authentic. When, conversely, they appear to have calculated what they were going to say to us beforehand, and appear to respond in a strained way that betrays premeditation, we tend to read their behaviour as inauthentic.²³⁰ This is something I had long intuited in my own performances, which are always improvised. I sensed that it was necessary to always arrive at the works spontaneously if I wanted my characters to come across as authentic, invested, or otherwise “real.” However, following the pathway from the literary birth of Kundera’s protagonists, through my own scripted characters Rosa and Lawrence’s attempts at episodic living, to Dennett’s thesis on deterministic freedom, I am led to consider the role of scripting in giving rise to agency, and to question whether rehearsal and scriptedness should necessarily be read as antithetical to authentic self-presentation.

Following Conway’s Game of Life, in which gliders glide, blinkers blink, and edge shooters shoot with their own pixellated brand of *joie de vivre*, I am led to think about the very scripts that possibly underlie and govern my “spontaneity” when orally devising characters and stories through improvisational performance. In this respect, maybe spontaneity and scriptedness is a false dichotomy. Rather than understanding my scripted and improvisational works to have adopted opposite strategies, perhaps these strategies could be seen as two sides of the same coin.

²³⁰ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 77.

Althusser's notion of the interpellated subject²³¹ and Judith Butler's formulations of gender identity as interpellated by social scripts and institutional speech acts, together gesture toward the evolutionary inertia behind each personal "expression."²³² Butler's notion of "gender performativity" has often been misread as the suggestion that gender is a flippant "performance" that one can take on and off like clothing. However, the direction of intentionality in the performance of gender is a subtle thing to try to capture. Dennett emphasises this when he writes that "identification cannot be a matter of a pearly Cartesian ego or immaterial soul accepting some memes and rejecting others; the entity that does the endorsement has to be itself some kind of complex meme-brain structure."²³³ The social agent is not outside of the memes it adopts and propagates; it is itself a system of memes subject to the selection pressures of all memes. Further, in his use of theatrical performance as a framework for observing the presentation of self in everyday life, Erving Goffman did not regard such performances as flippant at all, remarking that the repertoire afforded by "anticipatory socialization" enables social agents to economically adopt socially coherent behaviours without following a set script.²³⁴ Thus, "the details of the expressions and movements used do not come from a script but from command of an idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little calculation or forethought."²³⁵ In other words, systems, institutions and social practices write us. Our spontaneous acts are only ever an iteration, the result of an individual-communal *repertoire*.

As a concept, *repertoire* seems to transcend the spontaneity/prescription dichotomy by inhering both a momentous, driving past which scripts the present, and a unique and viva-

²³¹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 115–24.

²³² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

²³³ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 285.

²³⁴ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 79. "Anticipatory socialization" is a concept Goffman adopts from Robert King Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968).

²³⁵ Goffman, 80.

cious present that is phenotypic to that underlying momentum. Script and improvisation form two sides of the coin that is repertoire. Similarly, I can recognise the orally improvised performances that form the principal outcome of this project as the surface expressions of a repertoire, in some ways both scripted *and* spontaneous.

During my PhD I accidentally came across a particularly apt genre in which to tease out this distinction between being scripted and spontaneous: the introductory presentation. In academic settings, I have often been invited to formally introduce myself to colleagues or to students in the form of a short presentation. This is a scenario in which I am being asked to give a premeditated impression of myself. At the same time, given that in this scenario I am entering a social space in which authentic self-presentation is prized (discussed in Chapter 4), it is preferred that I present as *if* I am being spontaneous. Almost everyone who has been in a position to orally present has been advised never to read off a script for risk of coming across too robotic, predetermined and automaton-like. This is also why, prior to one of these events, the organisers expressly asked me not to prepare any slides, since “we want to hear your voice, your reflections on the personal links to your thesis.” This instance echoes the broader tendency to give speech primacy over writing (where speech is apparently more spontaneous than writing), a tendency which Jacques Derrida pointed out and critiqued in *Of Grammatology*.

The formal self-introduction presents itself as an apt space in which to perform the self as repertoire, by switching, as I did when introducing myself to my new students at the Glasgow School of Art, between visibly reading off a script and improvising, and asking listeners to try to track the differences in the scripted and spontaneous Katarinas they were in the process of getting to know.

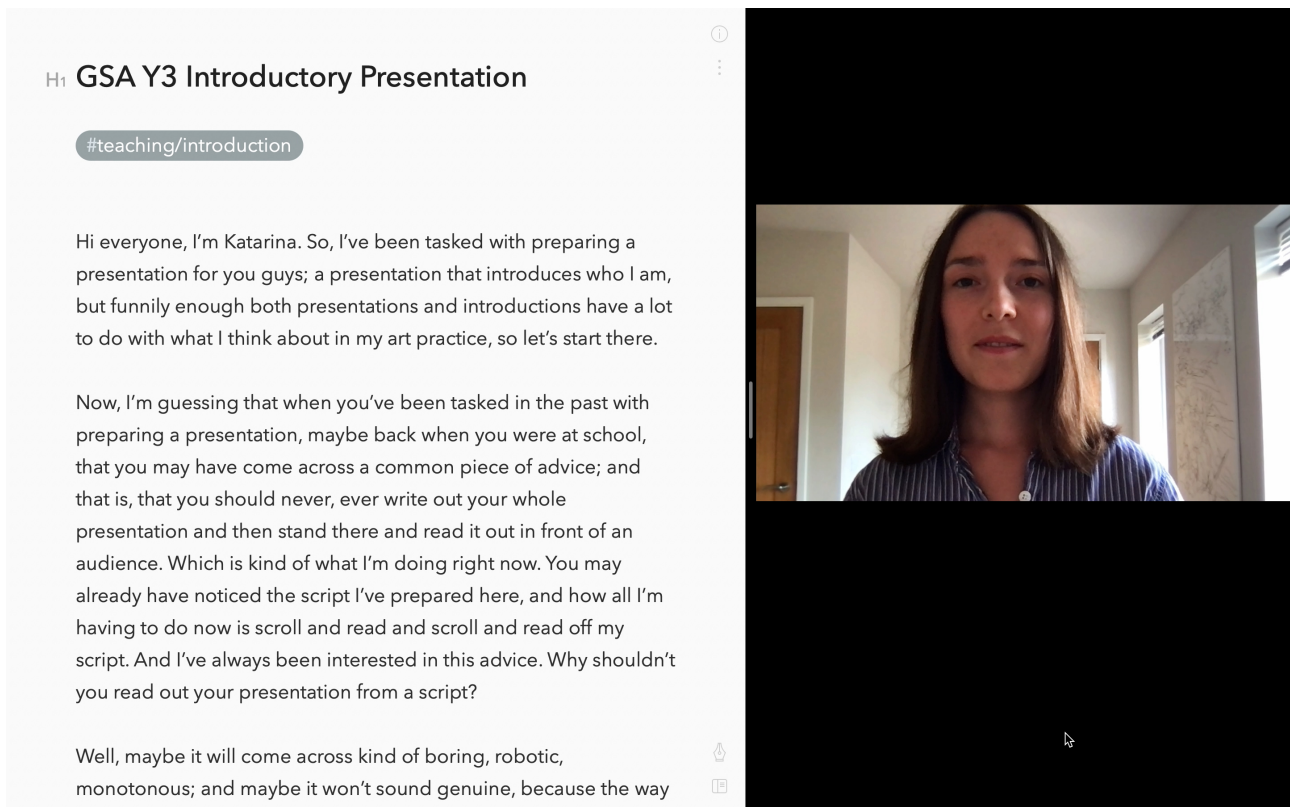


Fig. 22. *A Scripted Introduction*, online presentation for Painting & Printmaking students at the Glasgow School of Art, September 2021. Link: youtu.be/6aJgLLz6x4s.

Performance thus presented itself as a way to touch on the distinction between the scripted and the spontaneous, and make it conspicuous enough to critically and intuitively engage with, by exploring the space encapsulating performance and being: repertoire.

A Note on Machine Learning and Repertoire

The impressive feats of AI to date have primarily been achieved through an approach called machine learning (ML), in which machines are taught to recognise and thus intervene in aspects of our world through reinforcement learning and immersion in vast amounts of data, such as large numbers of images of faces in the case of facial recognition. While the theory that machines could learn in this way (using digital neural networks which gradually build an internal model of similarities and differences between the data to which they are exposed) has long existed, until about ten years ago we lacked sufficiently

large amounts of data and processing power to put this theory into practice. The staggering amount of multimedia information uploaded to the internet and technological development in computer processing power solved both of these obstacles.²³⁶

Since then, AI has developed at a rapid pace and become integrated into many areas of daily life—from recommending films on Netflix, over automatically filtering job applications for employers, to deciding how likely a prisoner is to re-offend if let out on parole. The capacity of AI to match (and exceed) certain cognitive capabilities of humans in areas such as pattern recognition has been astonishing, but tech company spokesmen and other commentators assured us at the time that, while machines may impress us with their prowess for calculation, pattern-spotting and inferences from data, they will never truly have what humans have: that special-something, that ingredient-X, that emotional investment in the world—a consciousness, a self-awareness.²³⁷ Increasingly, however, the “ingredient X” that was meant to save us from being reduced to our machine counterparts is beginning to resemble that “jolt” of indeterminacy, that elusive glitch, upon which hopes have been placed to redeem us from an automaton’s fate.

Perhaps there is something to learn about ourselves when we observe the recent great leaps made in machine creativity via exposure to the corpus of human cultural production: namely, that each of us, in a sense, *is* a model of that corpus, just as Open AI’s GPT is a model of that corpus as it is captured in recorded language. And just as each human being can be said, under this analogy, to be a “model” of all of human cultural production (at least the portion of it to which they have been exposed), the characters a human being is

²³⁶ The Royal Society, *Machine learning: the power and promise of computers that learn by example*, April 2017, <https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/projects/machine-learning/publications/machine-learning-report.pdf>.

²³⁷ See, for example, Mick Grierson interviewed by Samira Ahmed, “The Arts and Artificial Intelligence,” *Front Row*, BBC 4 Radio programme, 21 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00017b1>.

capable of playing out is comparable to the characters AI language models are beginning to master, as when a user prompts ChatGPT to role-play a particular character before generating a response. Interestingly, in [this video](#), a YouTube commentator observes how useful it can be to assign ChatGPT a persona before asking it for advice, and that: “the crazy thing is—don’t ask me how—some personalities even give you better responses than others.”²³⁸ This observation touches precisely on what this PhD research is about, and in Chapter 4, I will try to offer an explanation for it.

²³⁸ Hayls World, “10 ChatGPT Life Hacks - THAT’LL CHANGE YOUR LIFE !!” Uploaded 31 March 2023, <https://youtu.be/-fopYsgFdzc?t=590>.

3.4 Scripting for Agency

Through a reading of the compatibility between determinism and freedom, evolutionary algorithms, social theories of subject formation and recent advances in AI and machine learning, this chapter has proposed that scripting has a role to play in producing agents and agent-like behaviour. In particular, it is the script's underlying mechanism of "code" and "expression" which lends it an automaticity approaching autonomy, as when Jacques Derrida remarks: "to write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive [...]."²³⁹

The dual system of code and expression, enacted by "writing" and "reading," appears in autonomous systems as diverse as biological organisms, prospective artificial intelligences and social interaction. But what exactly it means to "express," "run" or "play" a piece of code—whether that be a particular initial state in the Game of Life, one of the characters in my performances, or a strand of DNA—seems a difficult question to answer. It taps into the very distinction between code on the one hand, and the performance of that code on the other. It also highlights the way in which these two aspects of "the same phenomenon" (a play as both a script and a performance) often exist on entirely different material "grounds." A script exists as text printed on paper and a performance exists in the live movement of the bodies of performers, props and effects. Similarly, genetic scripts are encoded into deoxyribonucleic acid, but their expression appears in the phenotypic characteristics and behaviours of the creature that is being coded for.

We have come across this eerie relationship characteristic of emergent phenomena several times, notably in Section 1.3 on mediums and Section 2.3 on the line model of thinking

²³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 316, as part of his wider theory of the deferral and co-constitution of meaning in text.

things. It is the relationship between the medium and that which has possessed the medium, between the field and the wave which has possessed the field, between the substratum and the superstratum: a relationship between two things intimately and co-dependently bound, but also of an entirely different order—a relationship without a touch.²⁴⁰

The relationship without a touch enables a feature of particular interest to this research known as substrate-neutrality.²⁴¹ An algorithm is substrate-neutral in that it can run essentially the same performance on substrata made of different materials, like a Mexican wave performed by people at one time, and by graphic pixels on a computer screen at another.²⁴² Character is just such a substrate-neutral algorithm, and this is what makes character a script that can be transferred between humans, and between humans and other kinds of agents, such as fictional characters.

Can the project to script for agency (and thus better understand the role of scripting in agency) be expanded from AI and evolutionary theory into art? Can an artificial intelligence be written via a theatrical script or an improvisational repertoire, if it can be written genetically or computationally? How might developing an intuition about autonomy and its relationship to scripts inform my authorship and my approach to coaxing agents out of writing (whether in performance, novels, etc.)?

²⁴⁰ One of the submitted video works, *Coaxing the Lofty Other*, explores the seance as a way in which two levels of organisation can speak to each other—a substratum speaking to the superstratum—by attempting to stage the impossible overcoming of hierarchical distance in the relationship without a touch. This motif also appears in my novel, *Anomaline*, in a scene in which the forest must go through great pains to communicate with the protagonist who forms a part of its substratum.

²⁴¹ See Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 188.

²⁴² Substrate-neutrality has special relevance to theories on the origins of life because the field demands theories that can explain the jump in self-replicating systems between inorganic matter and organic matter. Such a theory was explored in A. Graham Cairns-Smith, *Seven Clues to the Origin of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

In the next chapter, we will consider character as a frame of mind that can be toggled to generate novelty in art making. To this end, some of the conceptual tools proposed so far will be utilised: the role of the medium in authorship, the line model of thinking things and code/expression as the mechanism that enables agents to emerge from scripts.

4. Character, Frames and Climates

By the end of Chapter 2, we assumed a “computational” view of the self composed of the human being (as substratum) and character (as superstratum), proposing that “the human being is that which plays out character.” In the previous chapter, we explored the code/expression mechanism involved in scripting for agency, noting that it gives rise to a “relationship without a touch” between substratum (the human being) and superstratum (character). In this chapter, we will further explore the status of character within this dynamic—how it can be observed and experimentally manipulated in the space of the performance practice.

So far, we have defined character as something like a pattern: recognisable, by virtue of something “same” about it returning again and again. I have described character as a system of memes which is transmittable between human hosts, and which is capable of evolving over time as it does so. Here I will try to give a more nuanced account of character as a “frame,” and then as a “climate,” rather than simply a pattern, drawing on models from cultural psychology and meteorology. Psychological research into “frame switching” will come to inform a reading of my character switching performance practice. Meanwhile, tools for understanding complex systems in meteorology, such as phase portraits, will be used to model character as a “behavioural probability landscape.” The “frame” and “climate” model of character will then help us develop a more effective way of manipulating character in the performance practice, through theorising about what happens to me when I switch character. Along the way, we will have an opportunity to discuss the social privileging of character consistency and reflect on how a practice based precisely on character *inconsistency* might offer a way of thinking about that social norm.

4.1 Character as Frame

When as a Yorkshire-born, Serbian teenager living in Norway, I was asked about my cultural identity, I struggled to give an economical answer. At the time I spoke three languages, but sounded slightly foreign in all three and could not pinpoint which geographical location I most identified with. In all three places, I was perceived, in some regard, as a foreigner. Moving between these three self-identifications and negotiating some hybridised compromise between them gave me much occasion to reflect on the mechanics of self. For the teenage Katarina, harbouring some theory or other about the mechanics of self was an ongoing necessity.

The need to negotiate potential conflicts or contradictions in self-identification are known to give rise to specific behavioural outcomes. One of these is known as “frame switching,” which is when a person seems to “snap” into a different system of behaviour depending on the cultural frame they have adopted, triggered by situational cues.²⁴³ Frame switching is very common and particularly conspicuous in people like myself, who use more than one language, or identify and interact with more than one distinctive social group, nationality, or “culture” on a daily basis.

This kind of person is referred to in the cultural psychology literature as a “bicultural” or “multicultural.” The opposite, a person identifying with and interacting with a single culture, is referred to as a “monocultural.” Since research into frame switching will be relevant throughout this thesis, I would like to first reflect on the usage of the terms “multicultural” and “monocultural.”

A Note on the Terms “Multicultural” and “Monocultural”

²⁴³ Alexandria L. West et al., “More Than the Sum of Its Parts: A Transformative Theory of Biculturalism,” *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology* 48, no. 7 (2017): 963–90.

The two terms and the distinction they profess may strike some readers as a false dichotomy, and a gross simplification of both those deemed “multicultural” and especially those deemed “monocultural.” Indeed, there is not really any such thing as a “monocultural” because nobody belongs to only one social group, and in fact, because of this, everyone frame switches, not only so-called multiculturals. Cultural psychologists are aware of this when they employ such terms. Rather, they are highlighting relative differences, usually within specific areas that have dominated cultural psychology studies, such as the relationship between a “host” and immigrant population.²⁴⁴ In the latter case, immigrants are often labelled “multicultural” and the host population “monocultural.” This then highlights the way in which immigrants’ frame switching is often more conspicuous (from the point of view of both populations) than the host population’s frame switching.²⁴⁵

Within the cultural psychology literature, “culture” is most often taken to mean “nationality,” “language,” “ethnicity” or “race.” This probably reflects, in turn, a wider focus on these parameters as markers of “culture,” beyond the field of this academic study. In our current social climate, ethnic or nationality differences are perhaps marked as more essential to identity than occupational differences or differences in aesthetic tastes.²⁴⁶ However, the fault lines delineating “culture” ought not to be drawn at the boundaries of nationality or ethnicity alone in order to account for the broader scope of switching. A great deal more diverse and intersecting cultural facets present pressures on an individual’s systems of behaviour. An individual must then resolve these complicated identity conflicts as they arise, whether they are triggered by moving between different age groups, social and pro-

²⁴⁴ See Sunil Bhatia, “Rethinking Culture and Identity in Psychology: Towards a Transnational Cultural Psychology,” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 27–28, no. 2–1 (2007): 301–21.

²⁴⁵ See for example Jan Pieter Van Oudenhoven and Veronica Benet-Martínez, “In Search of a Cultural Home: From Acculturation to Frame-switching and Intercultural Competencies,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 46 (2015): 47–54.

²⁴⁶ These different categories of culture are, of course, often interconnected.

fessional roles, affiliation to different music or fashion cultures and their attendant aesthetics, or just by proximity to certain people who, by the subtle influence of their own character, “bring out a different side” in you.

Although cultural psychologists are themselves often aware that there cannot exist such a pure notion as a “monocultural,” and although the dichotomisation imposed by this terminology is likely employed in the service of simply differentiating between *more or less* conspicuous cases of frame switching, the use of such binary terminology arguably contributes to the dominance of essential views of culture and identity, in turn exaggerating the very conspicuousness of the phenomena under observation (i.e. frame-switching). In other words, frame switching seems more conspicuous to us when we assume that most people do not frame switch; that “not frame switching,” and remaining “culturally consistent” is the norm. Then frame switching appears to be a quirk, an abnormality, a special case.

Social expectations about “culture”—how a person should behave given the “culture(s)” they belong to, and how consistently—are part of the story of frame switching. Rather than being an essential category, the term “multicultural” is a symptom of current dominant lay theories of self, and the use of this term in specialist contexts like cultural psychology may be propagating such theories further. Such social expectations and lay theories will be discussed in more detail below. First, I will provide a brief review of studies into frame switching that are relevant to this research, including code switching, knowledge activation theory and the notion of a cultural “frame.”

Frame Switching

As West et al. explain in a 2017 review, studies within the field of cultural psychology have provided

a wealth of evidence demonstrating that biculturals can switch between cultural frames in domains such as personality and self-descriptions, cognitive styles, emotional experience, and social behaviors. Cultural cues that can trigger frame switching include iconic and mundane cultural images, language, and ethnicity of the interlocutor.²⁴⁷

People who frame switch are often aware of this phenomenon too, even though the switch itself usually happens more or less unconsciously, and often they describe that they have become “a different person” when they switch to using a different language, or when they move from one social group into another.²⁴⁸ I still find that I unconsciously and seamlessly switch to a Leeds accent when visiting my hometown and interacting with childhood friends there, whereas I revert to something approaching a London accent when returning to the city in which I studied and worked for eight years. Attending these accents appear to be whole systems of behaviour which, in either case, feel intimately mine when I perform them in daily contexts.

While frame switching is most conspicuously observed through changes in a person’s behaviour (such as a switch in accent, mannerism, perceived personality traits, or language), Kay and Kempton²⁴⁹ and Sui et al. both show that switching from one cultural frame to another can also change basic cognitive processes, such as subjective experiences of colour or the processes involved in remembering.²⁵⁰ Frame switching studies thus cast the per-

²⁴⁷ West et al., “More Than the Sum of Its Parts,” 963–90.

²⁴⁸ See Sylvia Xiaohua Chen and Michael Harris Bond, “Two Languages, Two Personalities? Examining Language Effects on the Expression of Personality in a Bilingual Context,” *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 11 (2010): 1514–28. See also Nairán Ramírez-Esparza et al., “Do Bilinguals Have Two Personalities? A Special Case of Cultural Frame Switching.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, no. 2 (2006) 99–120.

²⁴⁹ Paul Kay and Willett Kempton, “What Is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?” *American Anthropologist* 86, no. 1 (1984): 65–79.

²⁵⁰ Jie Sui, Ying Zhu, and Chi-yue Chiu, “Bicultural Mind, Self-construal, and Self- and Mother-reference Effects: Consequences of Cultural Priming on Recognition Memory.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 5 (2007): 818–24.

son as thoroughly contextual, as a Swiss Army knife of personalities that can be wielded and withdrawn in response to changing social environments. Studies have even shown that something so intimate as values or beliefs can change when the person switches cultural frame,²⁵¹ which is reminiscent of Goffman's description of selves as "merchants of morality."²⁵²

The phenomenon of frame switching is often explained using "knowledge activation research."²⁵³ According to this theory, culture is not something that influences a person's behaviour, cognition and world view regardless of the situation. Rather,

culture is internalized in the form of a loose network of domain-specific knowledge structures, such as categories and implicit theories [...]. [I]ndividuals can acquire more than one such cultural meaning system, even if these systems contain conflicting theories. That is, contradictory or conflicting constructs can be simultaneously possessed by an individual; they simply cannot simultaneously guide cognition.²⁵⁴

The fact that these different knowledge structures cannot simultaneously guide cognition is directly involved in producing the effect of frame switching. People who frame switch fluidly adopt (consciously or unconsciously) a significantly different disposition, manner and po-

²⁵¹ See Alexandria L. West, et al., "The Potential Cost of Cultural Fit," doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02622](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02622). Also: Kennon M. Sheldon, et al., "Trait Self and True Self: Cross-Role Variation in the Big-Five Personality Traits and Its Relations With Psychological Authenticity and Subjective Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, no. 6 (1997): 1380–93, and Ramírez-Esparza et al., "Do Bilinguals Have Two Personalities?"

²⁵² Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 243.

²⁵³ See Chi-Yue Chiu and Shirley Y. Y. Cheng, "Toward a Social Psychology of Culture and Globalization: Some Social Cognitive Consequences of Activating Two Cultures Simultaneously," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 1, no. 1 (2007): 84–100. Also: E. Tory Higgins, "Knowledge Activation: Accessibility, Applicability and Salience," in *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, ed. E. Tory Higgins and Arie W. Kruglanski (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 133–68.

²⁵⁴ Ying-yi Hong et al., "Multicultural Minds: A Dynamic Constructivist Approach to Culture and Cognition," *The American Psychologist* 55, no. 7 (2000): 709–20.

tentially world view, when situational factors activate a certain culture-specific knowledge structure, or cultural “frame.” When they move into another social environment, they frame switch again and a different knowledge structure is activated, one that might “conflict” with the former cultural frame. “Cultural priming” has therefore been a key experimental strategy in cultural psychology, whereby subtle cues called “primes” can be planted into an experiment, activating a certain knowledge structure within the participant and inducing them to frame switch.

Cultural priming exposes the participant to a “culture-laden stimulus,”²⁵⁵ such as the specific accent or ethnicity of the interviewer, images of cultural icons, or the language in which a questionnaire is written, before asking them to complete a task that measures a given psychological dimension (such as personality traits, cognition, self-concept, etc).²⁵⁶ Researchers can use priming to manipulate which of the individual’s cultural frames will become salient, predicting which behavioural and cultural scripts will become activated and thus what kinds of behaviours, values, cognitive processes or self-conceptions might become more likely in a given context. Cultural priming thus allows researchers to study “contextual personality” by causing participants to frame switch.

Code Switching

A closely related concept to frame switching is “code switching,” originating from linguistics. Studies of code switching in multilingual people and communities involve analyses of when, how and why people switch between languages or language codes. Similar to frame

²⁵⁵ Chi-Ying Cheng, Fiona Lee and Veronica Benet, “Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Cultural Frame Switching Bicultural Identity Integration and Valence of Cultural Cues,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37 (2006): 742–60.

²⁵⁶ In one experiment, the ethnicity of the interlocutor has been shown in particular to trigger “cultural accommodation,” whereby a bicultural participant will show “characteristics corresponding to their perceptions of normative personality in [the interviewer’s culture].” Chen and Bond, “Two Languages, Two Personalities?,” 1514–28.

switching, code switching is almost always motivated by social factors, e.g. signalling group membership, distancing oneself from a group, negotiating class dynamics, or negotiating different domains of speech.²⁵⁷ Increasingly, the concept of “code switching” has become relevant to areas such as intersectional feminism, critical race theory and more generally studies of marginalised groups and how members of these groups manage the threat of discriminatory treatment through learning to adopt different codes of behaviour.²⁵⁸

In studies of racial dynamics, code switching may refer to how people of colour modulate the way they act and speak as they enter white-dominated domains, in order to suppress negative racial stereotypes that might come at a cost to the individual. In this respect, code switching is a social risk management strategy. This has been explored with special attention to professional and educational domains in Lucrece Grehoua’s insightful BBC 4 programme on code switching in people of colour living in London.²⁵⁹ Further, in the 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* by Boots Riley, code switching in the workplace is satirised to powerful effect when the protagonist, an African American telemarketer, suddenly strikes fame and fortune in the company when he discards his authentic voice and language code and adopts instead an affluent “white voice” when speaking on the phone.²⁶⁰

This distinct pressure to code switch can be expanded to characterise the way in which a member of any marginalised group must negotiate their behavioural patterns—the charac-

²⁵⁷ Carol Myers-Scotton, “Common and Uncommon Ground: Social and Structural Factors in Codeswitching,” *Language in Society* 22, no. 4 (1993): 475–503. See also Youssef Tamer, “Language Choice & Code Switching,” L’université Ibn Zohr, uploaded 14 December 2014, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/meOlp0SxL14>, for a lecture on the Moroccan code switching context.

²⁵⁸ West et al., “More Than the Sum of Its Parts,” 963–90.

²⁵⁹ Lucrece Grehoua, “Code-Switching,” BBC Radio 4 programme, 30 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000ls8x>.

²⁶⁰ Boots Riley, *Sorry to Bother You* (United States: Mirror Releasing; Focus Features; Universal Pictures, 2018).

ter they take on—within the dominant culture.²⁶¹ Then, further expanding beyond marginal/central or minority/majority dichotomies, everyone must be code switching to some extent in order to negotiate different social situations, avoiding costs and seeking advantage, however subtly, and even where the power hierarchy between parties in a given social interaction is not obvious or predefined in a clear-cut way.

One way of characterising the difference between code and frame switching is that code switching seems to initiate through the deliberate (if instinctive) management of external behaviour via, for example, language choice, and usually in order to manage the effects of unequal social power dynamics. Meanwhile, frame switching appears to change, not only external behaviours for the sake of navigating social dynamics, but also “internal” changes—changes in values, world view, personality traits, self-description and cognition. In the context of studying social power dynamics between dominant and marginalised groups, code switching presents itself as a draining, inauthentic “act” that a marginalised individual has to perform in order to survive social situations and minimise risk of threat. It involves the pain of having to sideline a sense of one’s own self that feels authentic in exchange for an inauthentic performance that shields the individual from threat of discriminatory treatment. In this context, code switching feels necessary, but inauthentic, and is thus a specific type of social burden carried by marginalised individuals. Frame switching, on the other hand, seems to entail a significant switch in the person themselves, from one form of authentic self-presentation to another form of—*also* authentic—self-presentation. The burden of frame switching is thus not that the switching individual must present an inauthentic version of themselves, but that they have multiple authentic versions of themselves to present. This is a different kind of burden—it is caused not by a society’s intolerance to-

²⁶¹ See for example this lecture on lesbian code switching by Lauren Hough, “A Lesbian Walks into a Bathroom: A Lesson on Code Switching,” TEDx Talks, uploaded 31 March 2020, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/mXhiwukPatc>.

ward a particular *type* of character per se, but rather society's intolerance toward an individual exhibiting *multiple* characters: intolerance toward character inconsistency.²⁶²

Erving Goffman was especially interested in those moments in which a person acts "out of character," including the social cost of doing so. He focuses in particular on the bodily slips and communicative errors that interrupt a consistent presentation of self in everyday life: loss of muscular control, nervousness, misreading the context, or having a secret divulged. I would add frame switching to this list of what Goffman called "destructive information," although unlike Goffman's examples, frame switching is not an error, secret or a bodily glitch, but a rational strategy for managing one's own personal diversity in changing social contexts:

The crucial point is not that the fleeting definition of the situation caused by an unmeant gesture is itself so blameworthy but rather merely that it is *different* from the definition officially projected. This difference forces an acutely embarrassing wedge between the official projection and reality, for it is part of the official projection that it is the only possible one under the circumstances.²⁶³

Character Consistency and Authenticity

Frame switching has been observed to bring both certain advantages and disadvantages to the individual. In their "transformative theory" of multi-/biculturalism, West et al. remark that frame switching, along with other strategies for managing the internalisation of mul-

²⁶² The burden of code switching and the burden of frame switching are not mutually exclusive: the same individual may harbour multiple self-presentations that feel authentic and between which they willingly switch in certain contexts, while also feeling obliged to give an inauthentic performance to avoid risk of discrimination in others.

²⁶³ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 60.

tiple and potentially conflicting cultural frames,²⁶⁴ together enable the “multicultural” individual to:

- “reconcile new and old information about the self without sacrificing its clarity”
- possess “broader and more complex self-schemas”
- experience a “greater flexibility of the self”
- develop greater creativity and “wisdom” (i.e., with respect to being able to “see the bigger picture” and think in abstract terms).²⁶⁵

However, these same psychological consequences might sometimes come at a cost to the individual. For instance, whereas the greater “flexibility of self” afforded by frame switching may seem like a benefit,²⁶⁶ a later study by West et al. (2018) showed that, in all contexts that have been extensively studied and especially in the western world, individuals who visibly frame switch are widely perceived as less “authentic” than individuals who present a consistent character regardless of the social context, by both themselves and third-party observers. The perception of an individual as “inauthentic” affects their social integration.

²⁶⁴ These include “hybridizing” (creating a third “hybrid” culture irreducible to either “source” culture) and “integrating” (reconciling the similarities and differences between different cultures).

²⁶⁵ West et al., “More Than the Sum of Its Parts,” 963–90. The transformative theory posits that the need to negotiate multiple and at times conflicting psychological facets such as differing self-concept, motivation and cognition processes as elicited by different cultural influences, might present some unique psychological consequences that go beyond the contribution of either/any internalised culture on its own. The authors acknowledge that this approach in fact bears much resemblance to a feminist intersectional framework of social identity, which emphasises how multiple identities can combine in a single person to produce a unique experience of being (and unique experiences of discrimination), irreducible to the constituent identities alone.

²⁶⁶ One such benefit of the flexibility of self is an increase in the psychological facet known as “self complexity,” which involves having a varied self-concept. This means the individual is able to see themselves in multiple roles, which has been shown to have a positive correlation with mental health. See Patricia W. Linville, “Self-Complexity and Affective Extremity: Don’t Put All of Your Eggs in One Cognitive Basket,” *Social Cognition* 3, no. 1 (1985): 94–120.

The same study showed that frame switching individuals were additionally rated lower on “likeability,” “trustworthiness” and “warmth.”²⁶⁷

It is commonly assumed that self-consistency is a marker of authenticity.²⁶⁸ This is something I intuited early on in my personal experience as someone who presents inconsistent character in daily life. As I moved between countries, spending near-equal portions of my life in different social and cultural groups and investing myself in each of them accordingly, I found that something so intimate as my voice would wax and wane, shape shifting into new forms as I moved in and out of social contexts. My migratory patterns had left a mark on my voice, so that whenever I returned to a place of previous residence and encountered old friends there, I was invariably met with attitudes ranging from amusement to suspicion. As it happens, “even sympathetic audiences can be momentarily disturbed, shocked, and weakened in their faith by the discovery of a picayune discrepancy in the impressions presented to them.”²⁶⁹ I have sometimes been accused of affecting the way I speak because it is not the same way I used to speak. I have been perceived as acting inauthentically and “faking” my behaviours because they morphed over time and conflicted with previous impressions I had made.²⁷⁰ This was only compounded by the fact that I also frame switched in the short term: different social contexts elicited different systems of behaviour from me, and this was occasionally spotted when social contexts overlapped. Pirandello’s Moscarda gives a familiarly mundane example of the problem of overlapping social contexts, namely, the problem of meeting two friends from two different social groups at the same time:

²⁶⁷ West, et al., “The Potential Cost of Cultural Fit.”

²⁶⁸ Chi-Yue Chiu, Ying-yi Hong, and Carol S. Dweck, “Lay Dispositionism and Implicit Theories of Personality,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): 19–30.

²⁶⁹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 59–60.

²⁷⁰ Goffman observed that it is easier for individuals to change their mind about what kind of first impression to make than to alter the line once it is already underway. Goffman, 22.

It wasn't those two who were incompatible, though strangers one to the other, both very polite and perhaps made to get along splendidly; it was the two *yous* that you suddenly discovered in yourself. [...] [F]or your old friend you have one reality and another for the new one [...]. And in the intolerable embarrassment of thus finding yourself two men at the same time, you sought a trivial pretext to rid yourself, not of one of the visitors, but of one of the two selves that the pair obliged you to be at the same time.²⁷¹

The answer to this problem, Goffman observed, is “audience segregation;” that is, ensuring that this contextual overlap does not occur in the first place by segregating one’s social encounters—a tactic he highlights as particularly prevalent in upwardly mobile individuals.²⁷²

As a teenager, I recall reflecting upon such interactions and asking myself whether I was, in fact, pretending to be somebody I was not. Oddly enough, I was not sure. It seemed like a question I should be able to answer easily: if pretending or “putting on an act” were a form of lying, ought not one know whether or not one was lying? But I did not know. The question of my authenticity was so puzzling that I spent the next ten years developing a performance practice in order to ascertain whether or not I could “feel authentic” while also being multiple. Increasingly, I became drawn to asking why authenticity and inconsistency were intuited to be incompatible in the first place, and why this intuition persists. The acceptance of the self as multiple seems to extend at least as far back as William James, and yet social pressures still exist to tame that multiplicity into apparent singularity.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, 98.

²⁷² Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 137–38.

²⁷³ “We may practically say that [one] has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinion he cares.” William James cited in Goffman, 57.

Lay Theories of Personality

There is a branch of psychology which studies “lay theories of personality”—implicit theories which are active in shaping expectations about social interactions between persons. In a similar vein, we encountered some “lay models” of the mechanics of self in Chapter 2, from which we hoped to unearth such implicit theories.

Reflecting on their finding that people who are observed to frame switch are rated lower on “authenticity,” West et al. propose that “the cultural aversion to behavioural inconsistency may be the product of two interrelated lay theories: *dispositionism*, which assumes that behaviour is primarily caused by internal attributes, and an *entity view* of the self which assumes that internal attributes are stable across situations and time.”²⁷⁴ While this “cultural aversion” to self-inconsistency seems to be stronger in Western societies, it seems to be present, if to a slightly lesser degree, in the non-Western societies studied too.²⁷⁵

Goffman also observed and frequently remarked on what is here called the “entity view” of the self, noting that individuals perform their character always as if it were the only one they could possibly perform, maintaining the facade of an essential self for their audience even though that individual will go on to present a different character for a different audience.²⁷⁶ He proposes an explanation for this by way of a generalisable preference for consistency when he remarks: “There seems to be a general feeling that the most real and solid things in life are ones whose description individuals independently agree upon.”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ West et al., “The Potential Cost of Cultural Fit,” doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02622.

²⁷⁵ See for example Helen C. Boucher, “The Dialectical Self-Concept II: Cross-Role and Within-Role Consistency, Well-Being, Self-Certainty, and Authenticity,” *Journal of cross-cultural psychology* 42, no. 7 (2011): 1251–71.

²⁷⁶ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 57.

²⁷⁷ Goffman, 92.

This is a fascinating proposition because it suggests that humans attach an intuitive epistemological significance to consistency. A theory is corroborated when it is repeatedly observed to produce the same results. When information about a person is corroborated through the reappraisal of their consistent behaviour across time and situations, it appears as though we have come closer to the truth of the person. Inconsistency meanwhile, throws a spanner in the works—something does not add up, and the person is most likely lying or presenting in a disingenuous way.

But is inauthenticity the only diagnosis we can offer in response to character inconsistency? To give but one approach, we can invoke the the parable of “the blind men and the elephant.” In the parable, a group of blind men investigate an unknown animal, each touching a different body part of what, unbeknownst to them, is an elephant. Each observer takes away a different impression of the creature—impressions that are in conflict to one another—and yet the elephant has not been trying to mislead them. It has just been standing there, being itself, but its being was too large and variegated to be apprehended all at once, from all angles. Perhaps the self is also “too large” for its audience in this sense, and perhaps this is why it is capable of leaving conflicting impressions in its wake.

The conditions surrounding the performance of self are integral to the impressions it gives, and the subsequent social dynamics it shapes. Lay theories of personality such as dispositionism and the entity view produce the social expectation of character consistency in authentic self-presentation. How such lay theories and social expectations may have evolved, and why we may wish to open them up to critique, will be further explored in Chapter 6.

Effort and Authenticity

I have already highlighted the association commonly made between character consistency and authenticity. There is another, similar association to be drawn between “effortless” self-presentation and authenticity. Conversely, during my PhD project, whenever I remarked that I felt exhausted at the end of my performances, I would be asked whether this exhaustion was a contradiction to my claims of feeling authentic when performing character. This implied the intuitive assumption that effortful self-presentation is inversely correlated to authenticity. But self-presentation is a form of communication, and communication is a fundamentally effortful endeavour. How we come across when we communicate is determined by social feedback: *Am I being understood when I speak like this? Am I being stigmatised in this voice? Am I perceived as interesting when I speak like this? Authoritative?* And this kind of internal questioning may very well occur consciously, or unconsciously, or alternately both, but this social feedback is what gives rise to the personal accent. Voice, one of the characteristics so intimately associated with the person, so often read as the personal essence broadcast from within, is in fact an instrument that is subtly tuned from without.

Communication is always in some way effortful, some amount of energy must be expended; it is just that we get really good at it over time. When we learn a new language, we are reminded of the effort required of communication—a striving. Perhaps it is impossible for me to be authentic when I learn a new language, not possessing, as yet, a self that speaks in that way. And often teenagers learning a second language in school for the first time feel awkward and embarrassed about pronouncing foreign words in front of their peers, perhaps because they feel they sound inauthentic in the guise of another tongue. Even learning our first language as infants was a striving, a constant process of social feedback and conditioning of vocal sounds. Me “just being me,” speaking as I speak, involves a constant listening out for how I am perceived and adjusting accordingly. Striving to come across a certain way in response to the social milieu seems to be indispensable to

social persons, for no lesser a reason than that recognition and belonging as a means of collaboration is necessary for human survival.²⁷⁸

What does this mean for acting? Or: where does the line between “inauthentic” artistic performance and “authentic” self-presentation lie? There are fields of study that delve precisely into this grey area. For example, Arlie Hochschild found that the emotional labour carried out by service workers such as flight attendants involves a committed practice of deep acting in order to perform the service role and keep customers or patients at ease, and furthermore, that the characteristics performed during work hours seems to leak into other facets of life and become more permanently integrated behaviours in areas outside of work.²⁷⁹ The phenomenon of emotional labour seems to mirror, in some ways, the pathways I traversed with my changing accent as a teenager. The striving to belong, communicate, avoid social penalties (and perhaps also gain social upper-hands), likely provides enough motivation for an individual to initiate a form of deep acting, that is, an acting which “involves putting effort into actually feeling and expressing the required emotions,” or more broadly in this case, behaviours.²⁸⁰ In other words: fake it till you make it.

The notion of deep acting is at present largely applied to discourses on mental health and labour, and is usually referred to as a negative drain on workers. This is evocative of the documented draining effect of code switching on individuals belonging to marginalised communities. These are occasions where the individual themselves experiences their performance as inauthentic, leading to known adverse psychological effects such as cognitive dissonance, a condition eloquently described by W. E. B du Bois in *The Souls of Black*

²⁷⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (United Kingdom: Harvill Secker, 2014), 22.

²⁷⁹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2012).

²⁸⁰ Yongbiao Lu, et al. “Surface Acting or Deep Acting, Who Need More Effortful? A Study on Emotional Labor Using Functional Near-Infrared Spectroscopy,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 13 (10 May 2019), doi: [10.3389/fnhum.2019.00151](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2019.00151).

Folk.²⁸¹ However, frame switching shows that this is not always the case: a shift in character, even if it entails effort, can be perceived by the individual as authentic self-presentation.

I am inching towards a subtle distinction that has been one of the trickier aspects of this research to communicate. There exists the burden of “having to perform” (as cited in studies on emotional labour and code switching), but there also exists the burden of being rejected by society for “over-performing” (i.e. presenting too many conflicting characters, as cited in studies on frame switching and the “multicultural experience”). A good example of this distinction occurred when an interlocutor of my research explained that they found the implications of my performance work regrettable because it seemed to suggest that the individual is “never free from performance” and must always shoulder the oppression of performing before others. Such continual, nonstop performance, according to my interlocutor, is a characteristic of the oppressive outcomes of living in a capitalist society.

There is certainly truth to this statement. In addition to work on emotional labour and code switching, scholars of social interpellation such as Simone de Beauvoir, Louis Althusser and Judith Butler have eloquently put forward how our personal performances are instituted and guided by the puppet strings of power. Further, Mark Fisher has asserted that personal identities have had to become more flexible in late capitalism to match the growing precarity of their employment status.²⁸²

But there is also another perspective to take, and indeed all four of these scholars have provided nuanced counterbalances to the above positions. For me, my performance practice has been a site of liberation because, as someone who frame switches daily between

²⁸¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2020).

²⁸² Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 58.

multiple characters with which I authentically identify, I have, on the contrary, experienced the social conditioning towards a consistent, singular self-presentation oppressive. The right to be variable without social repercussion is what I yearn for. And indeed, the pressure to attenuate myself into a singular character, consistent regardless of the social context or era of my life is, I argue, even more evocative of the forces of capitalist culture. The demand to sculpt a singular self, on social media, on CVs and on bios, is the demand to maintain a consistent personal “brand:” the brand of the self. Besides, as Mark Fisher also astutely pointed out, “raw authenticity” is highly marketable.²⁸³

Performance Practice as “Self Priming”

Earlier I explained that in studies on frame switching, multicultural participants are induced to frame switch through the use of “cultural primes”—stimuli that, being laden with cultural associations, activate a specific knowledge structure or “cultural frame” within the individual. I would like to suggest that the self-estrangement process I described as the initial stage of my performances is equivalent to a kind of *self*-priming process, in which I use certain simple stimuli to induce myself to frame switch. Such primes include, among others, altering my physical appearance and looking at my reflection as I perform, placing myself in an unusual setting, or changing my accent. Accent has been shown to be a particularly powerful primer in frame switching studies—even more powerful than a person’s visual appearance.²⁸⁴ In my experiences of performing, deliberately changing my accent and then hearing myself speak in this way is often enough to put me in a different frame of mind. However, the knowledge structures “activated” in my performances go beyond the

²⁸³ Fisher, 10.

²⁸⁴ See Tamara Rakić, Melanie C. Steffens, and Amélie Mummendey, “Blinded by the Accent! The Minor Role of Looks in Ethnic Categorization,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 1 (2011): 16–29. See also Morteza Dehghani et al., “The Subtlety of Sound,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 34, no. 3 (2015): 231–50.

remit of frames I identify as belonging to my own self-concept, because in performing I deliberately explore new frames (characters) to adopt in a state of deep acting.

Today, people are significantly exposed to diverse cultures through media, not only through heritage or where they live. Does that mean that one can “inherit” another culture through sufficient exposure—remotely, not only “first hand?” If “exposure,” rather than genetic inheritance or residential status is what really contributes to the construction of people’s cultural frames, then maybe my performance practice is an active attempt to cultivate the production of such frames, or knowledge structures, within myself. (Call it frame acting, not method acting.) I say cultivate, because I am not constructing my cultural frames out of thin air; my performance method involves searching for some manner of being already existing in me. This could be a simple pattern of behaviour that I picked up from a character in a film, or an acquaintance at a party. I then try to fan this initial spark of behaviour until it becomes a complete character, at which point I endeavour to become comfortable in their skin.

Character as a State, Not a Trait

In exploring frame switching, we are provided with a contextual view of the person. Hong et al. have proposed a “dynamic constructivist” approach to researching culture and cognition, placing an emphasis on the active negotiation of culture that takes place within individuals in given contexts, arguing that the effect of culture upon cognition should be viewed as a “state” rather than a “trait.”²⁸⁵

The notion of a cultural frame as a state rather than a trait could be applied to character: a character state, rather than a character trait. Frame switching studies provide some empir-

²⁸⁵ Ying-yi Hong et al., “Multicultural Minds: A Dynamic Constructivist Approach to Culture and Cognition,” 709–20.

ical basis for the hypothesis that character role-play can activate a different knowledge frame and enable/limit one's thoughts in a novel way. In a performance experiment I conducted (the details of which can be found in the fourth experimental report associated with this thesis: "Thought Shift Performance Experiment"),²⁸⁶ I found that when I adopted a new character in a given performance, I was led to have thoughts, ideas and entertain opinions that have never occurred to me before. When character is switched, mind-frame is switched.

The notion of a frame and how it affects behaviour has been explored in other domains, not only "culture." For example, researchers have shown that, when presented with a moral dilemma, participants reacted differently when they judged the dilemma hypothetically, than when they were immersed in a VR simulation of the dilemma and had to react in an embodied way, suggesting that hypothetical judging might be a fundamentally different frame of mind to embodied decision making.²⁸⁷ Another domain in which frame can be found to govern behaviour is in AI models. DALL-E 2, the image-generating AI model by OpenAI,²⁸⁸ is the kind of artist it is, and produces the kind of images it produces, based on the data of labeled images it was trained on. The training data can be seen as a frame that affects the behavioural outcome—the character—of the AI artist.

Character is then not only, as we have previously defined, a *pattern* of human behaviour that is transmissible between human beings when they enter the social milieu. Character is a frame. When one character is adopted, a position, a perspective, an approach to the world is assumed in favour of that which could have been assumed through the adoption of an alternative character.

²⁸⁶ Katarina Ranković, "Thought Shift Performance Experiment," 2022, experimental report 4/4, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-4.

²⁸⁷ See Kathryn B. Francis et al., "Simulating Moral Actions: An Investigation of Personal Force in Virtual Moral Dilemmas," *Scientific Reports* 7, 13954 (2017).

²⁸⁸ OpenAI, "DALL-E-2," <https://openai.com/dall-e-2/>.

4.2 Character as Climate

You want to be, eh? There's this catch: in abstract, you cannot just be. The being must be trapped in a form, and for some time it has to stay in it, here or there, this way or that. And every thing, as long as it lasts, bears the penalty of its form, the penalty of being this way and of no longer being able to be otherwise.

—Luigi Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*²⁸⁹

In his continued anguish to solve the mystery of the self, Pirandello's protagonist Moscarda first highlights the fact that, in order to be, one must assume a form in which to be: one can never *not* be a character. He then goes on to point out the cost and gain inherent in adopting any given character. Character is an opportunity that always comes at an opportunity cost—other characters (and therefore other positions, perspectives and insights) are foregone in favour of the character adopted. Just as, according to Hong et al., only one cultural frame can guide cognition at any given time, so too can only one character (behavioural frame) be inhabited at a time. The precise character one ends up adopting—when performing theatrically, when writing a PhD thesis, or when buying groceries—becomes then a matter of consequence, the politics of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Here I will briefly consider an alternative, although related, model to the “frame” that adds further nuance to the intuition we are building about character: climate. The relationship between climate and weather is analogous to the relationship between character and behaviour. Just as “weather” is the actual state in which we find a climate system at any given time—whether rain, fog or sunshine—behaviour too is the observable state in which we find a human being at a given time. Climate, meanwhile is a more abstract notion. It can-

²⁸⁹ Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, 90.

not be observed as a singular outcome, like weather can. Climate is a system of probabilities for weather outcomes. Likewise, character is a system of probabilities for behavioural outcomes. This means that the tools used to model climate and make predictions about the weather might potentially be used to model character and make predictions about behaviour.

Climate can be modelled, as can other complex systems, using a “phase portrait.” A phase portrait is a plotted graph showing all the states in which a system finds itself, within a wider space of all possible states.²⁹⁰ In the case of climate, we can start by imagining a multidimensional space containing all possible kinds of weather. There are many dimensions in this space because weather can be described using many parameters, such as temperature, humidity, air current, etc. Any given point in this space describes a particular state, or a type of weather, since the location of the point tells us the value of each dimension (e.g. the degree of temperature or humidity in that particular state).

Now that we have this space in front of us, we can go outside and take measurements to plot the current state of the weather. Once we have taken all our measurements, we will be able to plot a single point into our space of possible weathers that describes the state of the weather right now. Let us imagine that we repeat this process every day for a year: each day the weather might be slightly different, and over time it may vary greatly, but there will always be a point in the space of possible weathers to describe each day. After a year, a scatterplot of points will have appeared in our multidimensional space, causing a fuzzy shape to form within it. This shape is climate. It shows us the *character* of the weather system. While different states within a climate can vary dramatically—from freez-

²⁹⁰ John Lewis, “Roots of Ensemble Forecasting,” *Monthly Weather Review* 133, no.7 (2005). Doi: [10.1175/MWR2949.1](https://doi.org/10.1175/MWR2949.1).

ing snows to sweltering sunshine—the overall pattern of states is consistent, *characteristic*.²⁹¹

In a dynamical system such as that governing weather, a climate is what is known as an attractor. It is as if that cloudy shape in the phase portrait which emerged out of plotting the state of weather over time revealed an outline of an underlying, invisible force which attracts weather into falling into familiar patterns.

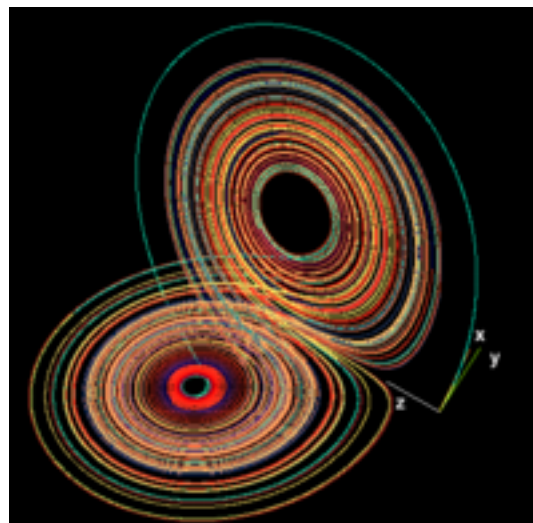


Fig. 23. A sample solution of the Lorenz attractor, which Edward Lorenz discovered as a characteristic shape of naturally occurring chaotic systems. Wikimedia Commons, 2006.²⁹²

The phase portrait can also be used as a tool to hypothetically model character. Just as we imagined the space of all possible states of weather, we can imagine the space of all possible behaviours. This would, of course, be an incredibly complex space, comprised of countless dimensions, describing all possible aspects of behaviour. Each point within this space would describe a particular behaviour, such as crying at the end of a sad film, or tapping someone on the shoulder to return the money that has fallen out of their pocket. Not only this, but a point in such a space would describe exactly *how* someone is crying,

²⁹¹ For this understanding of phase portraits I am indebted to Miloš Ranković's lecture, *Meteoric Theory of Art*, 2014, in which he describes the artist as someone who locates with acupuncturist precision the ambiguities, the taboos, the sore spots and the unarticulated in the complex phase portrait of culture: the "peaks," where the trajectory of the system is most uncertain and chaotic.

²⁹² <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2074483>.

or the *manner* of their shoulder-tapping. Now that we have the space of all possible behaviours, we can undertake the same process of measurement that we applied to daily weather, and plot at regular intervals the behaviour of a given person. As we saw in the case of weather, the gradual plotting of behavioural states would begin to slowly reveal a cloudy shape within the space of all possible behaviours. This shape is character. Within its cloudy scatter of points, we may observe great diversity in the kinds of behaviours exhibited—whether extreme or mundane—but the overall shape is what is familiar, is what we recognise as the person we know. Character, like climate, is an attractor, since we can see behavioural states tending to fall within the contours of its shape.

We are not shocked when, after a summer of hot weather, the seasons change and bring on the autumnal rains and the frosts of winter, because however vastly these weather states may vary, they belong to the same climate, and this variation is expected. But we will be shocked when the climate changes. A change in climate does not merely represent a change in weather, but an entirely new landscape of weather probabilities—a new normal to which we are not adapted. The weather states of a changed climate are fundamentally unpredictable by our meteorologists, by our infrastructures and by our bodies which have evolved to “predict” the patterns of the old climate. The reason we are afraid of climate change is the same reason we are afraid of character change. Character change in a loved one (such as can be brought about in various ways by damage to the brain) is disturbing because it represents a new normal in terms of that loved one’s behaviour. One cannot predict their behaviour based on one’s history with them and may as well be dealing with an utter stranger, an altogether different person.²⁹³

²⁹³ A number of films have dramatised character change, such as Joel Schumacher, *Falling Down* (United States: Warner Bros., 1993) and Mike Nichols, *Regarding Henry* (United States: Paramount Pictures, 1991). The latter is particularly disturbing for its inversion of the usual reaction to character change: the film celebrates the fact that the protagonist has become a nicer person after his character-transforming accident, not mourning for a moment the original, albeit distinctly unlikeable Henry, who has effectively died and been replaced by someone else.

If a character change entails redrawing an entirely new shape within the space of all possible behaviours, this begs the question of whether I am really changing character within my performances. When performing, am I exploring an entirely new attractor in the phase portrait, or am I merely distorting one of the corners of the existing shape? I have described that the initial stages of my performance process involve changing one simple dimension of my behaviour, such as the volume of my voice or the energy behind my gesticulations. I have also described how these small changes develop into larger shifts in my overall perspective on things. Changing the dimension of behaviour can be visualised as dragging one of the points plotted in my phase portrait along one axis. What are the consequences of that? Does sliding one point along a given dimension bring with it a cascade of other adjustments in the shape of the attractor that is the character I am adopting?

A performance experiment I conducted in which I tracked how inhabiting different characters affected my thought patterns and the kinds of stories and ideas I could come up with when in character is documented in "Thought Shift Performance Experiment".²⁹⁴ I found that with each new character I adopted, I was able to arrive at a set of ideas that have never occurred to me before. This suggested that character change, switch, or adjustment (depending on the degree of change I am actually applying to my habitual character in the space of the performance), effectively shifted the way I thought and opened me up to new ideas, as if they had been thought of by someone else. When I shift character, I tilt the landscape of my mind. I can then begin to expose this altered character to the world and see how it reacts. By plotting its reactions, I am building a picture of the new character. I am getting to know them.

By starting with thinking about character as a "frame" of mind, to a climate, or attractor plotted by instances of behaviour, we arrive at one of the research findings of this thesis:

²⁹⁴ Ranković, "Thought Shift Performance Experiment," 2022, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-4.

Character is an attractor within behavioural space—which is to say it is the very *shape* of what is thinkable to the human being for the time it is adopted.

4.3 On Curiosity and Being a Medium

A character performance practice is a way of gaining a radically new perspective on the world, because when character is switched, the lens through which the human being operates has been switched. My performance practice exercises curiosity in the walk a mind can take in and out of character, and observing the difference it makes.

When I induce myself to switch at the start of a performance, I find I am slowly becoming other in a surprisingly substantial way; a way in which the artifice of the act begins to buckle under the fiction that pervades all things. These tweaks to my personality, often echoing those contagious accents, gestures and mannerisms which I pick up from others in my daily adventures, seem to be enough to tip me into another personal paradigm.

Character is a factor in the generation of thought; it makes some thoughts thinkable and others not, by embodying the very shape of behavioural possibility. Through the lens of another character, I find I am able to say things I do not believe, or that would not occur to me in my habitual character. By putting myself in another's, non-existent shoes, I am able to experiment with beliefs and persuasion, like flexing a muscle. The entertaining of ideas through character inhabitation is phenomenological in spirit, because it suspends, or "brackets," what it analyses by first establishing a frame.

The performance practice fosters a curiosity in other ways of seeing, reacting, believing. By shifting character and perspective, it offers itself as a tool for critical thinking and stepping out of a tunnel-vision view. For the same reason, it is useful as a creative engine in the crafting of stories and artworks, because it opens me up to thoughts and perspectives usually inaccessible to me. The performance practice is also a philosophical exercise in observing character as a free-floating script, relatively independent of the human being.

A Video's Cause of Death

I have here established the performance practice as a space in which experiments on the self can be run via character switching. Very often this can give rise to outcomes that are interesting to me artistically because of their tangential nature: the characters I inhabit often allow me to embark on an unfamiliar train of thought, away from my habitual ways of thinking, giving rise to unusual stories and self-expressions. Sometimes, however, there occur “failures” in the performance process which I will try to describe here, by determining a video's cause of death.

A few months ago, I made a particularly bad performance video. Not only was it less interesting than others and unconvincingly performed, but there was also something slightly insensitive about it, something oppressively representational. It was parodic of the character in ways that other performances, even those that employed plenty of humour, were not.

The “cause of death” I give to this video is the motivation with which I approached it at the outset. I did not exercise curiosity in the character. I performed for the viewer, not for myself. I was controlling what I thought would be good for the viewer to see. I was not trying to *discover* the character and join the audience in finding out what the character would say and do.

The performance practice must not, if it is to remain experimental and tangential, aim for *representations*, it must aim for *seances*. This is the difference between a fake medium and an authentic medium: a fake medium acts—tries to affect something that will look like possession to seance-goers. A real medium is possessed. A real medium is listening, waiting for the spirit to answer, is as curious and expectant as the seance-goers. A real medium wants to know what the spirit will say.

Acting versus Soul Searching

One can engage with the performance practice, just as one can engage with a romantic partner, in two different ways. In a long term romantic relationship, one grows to know their partner so well that, in principle, one could at any time choose to say or do certain things and have a fairly good idea about how that partner will react. There may come a situation where, knowing that partner could be spared some pain, one might select one's actions and words tactfully, with the best of intentions, hoping to enhance the happiness of one's partner as much as possible. This is a kind of manipulation which, knowing so much about a partner, one might exercise effectively with good intentions.

Another way to engage that partner is to spare them no pain and in no way preempt or control their reaction, even if, in principle, one might be able to predict it. This would mean to engage the partner from a position of curiosity. One says and does things, and then watches curiously for the partner's reaction, not presupposing to know what it will be. This difference between anticipation and curiosity is, roughly speaking, the subtle difference between traditional "acting" and my own approach to performance, which we can call "soul searching"—a kind of seance with character.

A phrase or an act which is motivated by the desire to control another's reaction is a form of manipulation. This is the motivation of acting, a form of manipulation that we might pleurably subject ourselves to as film or theatre viewers. In day to day relations, this manipulative form of address, if detected by the recipient, comes across as disingenuous and marks the interlocutor as inauthentic and untrustworthy. Meanwhile, when watching films or plays, we consent to being manipulated, and so the engagement is perceived as less malicious, but no less inauthentic (that is why disbelief must be suspended—to allow ourselves to be manipulated).

On the other hand, in day to day interactions, a phrase or an act delivered with curiosity in how the other will react comes across as more authentic. An interlocutor who seems to speak and act with the intention of finding out what your reaction will be gives you the space to be yourself. You trust the interlocutor, because you sense that there is no manipulation or ulterior motive behind the prompt other than curiosity. Curiosity “holds the space” —provides a stage—for the other’s agency.

This distinction between the motivation driving the behaviour (anticipation vs. curiosity) is how I differentiate my performance method from acting. In my more successful performances, I am not seeking to manipulate the audience’s impressions. I am merely curious about how the character will behave when prompted by the performance situation, or by the camera. I suspect that this focus on curiosity as the driving approach behind my performance is what creates the sense of authenticity I tend to feel during my most successful inhabitations: the performance is a curious exploration rather than a manipulation of the audience, and gives space to the character to be themselves. Thus, in my performance practice, I must continually fall in love with character, continually cultivate a curiosity in them and in suspense await what they will do; I must hold the space for character, hold a seance for character.

5. Classes of Character and a Politics of Inner Self

In *Black Milk*, Elif Shafak's memoir on motherhood and writing, the novelist recounts how she has always felt herself to be fragmented into a number of little imaginary selves. She imagines these as an assortment of women no larger than a finger who follow her around and bicker among themselves, together forming what she calls "The Choir of Discordant Voices." Shafak frames the internal tensions between these different parts of herself as a central theme in her experience of postpartum depression. The resolution to this crisis occurs after Shafak receives advice from one of her selves, the ever-wise Dame Dervish:

I think one of these days you should sign a peace treaty with all of us [...]. The reason why the finger-women are quarrelling so much among themselves is because you are quarrelling with us. You think some of us are more worthy than others. While in truth, we are all reflections of you. All of us make up a whole.²⁹⁵

Throughout the memoir, the dynamics between Shafak's multiple selves are likened to diverse political systems. At times the organisation of her characters resembles an oligarchy, with a select coalition of voices reigning over the rest. At others, it resembles a monarchy, a dictatorship, and finally, a painstaking democracy. In other words, there are inequalities between Shafak's characters, with some dominating over others, and the subordinated ones engaging in a struggle for agency. Together, they display the features of a society of individuals managing their common stakes against the centrifugal forces of their divergent interests.

²⁹⁵ Elif Shafak, *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (London: Penguin, 2013), 95.

For Shafak, the model of self presented is one of multiple, competing fragments making up a whole, whereby the job of the memoir is to narrate their gradual reconciliation and acceptance over their differences. The model of the distributed person (encountered in Chapter 2) differs from this fragmented model of self in that it does not first presuppose the integrity of a whole that can then be divided into fragments.²⁹⁶ Nonetheless, the different “miniature selves” as illustrated by Shafak’s fragmented model are themselves part of a communal repertoire. That is why her characters take on an archetypal flavour, as hinted by their names: Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Miss High-Browed Cynic, Blue Belle Bovary and Mama Rice Pudding. These are then not only Shafak’s characters, they are part of all our cultural inheritance.

Following on from the unequal power relations displayed by Shafak’s warring selves,²⁹⁷ this chapter will focus on different “classes” of character and how I stumbled upon them in my own work, as well as how these dynamics led me to formulate a politics of *inner self* somewhat different in kind to the societal politics we are used to, but nevertheless intimately bound up with it. I will begin by describing a performance experiment which first brought the matter of character inequality to my attention. Then, I will begin to classify some of these different kinds of character according to the degree to which they are “tethered” to the social milieu. In the final section, I will apply these ideas to ask “who” (which of my characters) should be doing the research/writing of the dissertation.

²⁹⁶ In Chapter 6 I will discuss “partialness” and “wholeness” from an alternative point of view, using the hologram as a metaphor.

²⁹⁷ This tumultuous view of the self is remarked upon by the nineteenth-century novelist and theoretician, Samuel Butler: “We regard our personality as a simple definite whole [...]. But in truth this “we,” which looks so simple and definite, is a nebulous and indefinable aggregation of many component parts which war not a little among themselves [...].” Butler cited in Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 266.

5.1 Politics of Inner Self

Halfway into the PhD, my research took an unexpected turn, initiated by a character that appeared one day in a session of improvised performance (there she is, in the second video still, below). She confronted me in such a way that, at certain points in the recording, I become visibly surprised.

The performance session itself was unusual. It was the first time I had tried to “split” myself between two characters and have them converse with one another. This came about as I was considering models of the self that foreground the individual as a kind of plurality; in particular, the fragmented and distributed models of self. My art practice does itself not argue for or against these models, but instead aims to make them palpable by staging them for our consideration and providing a means for them to be probed and questioned. At the outset of the performance experiment, I asked myself: if this intimate self of mine were truly understood to be distributed in time and space, if I knew that this was simply how I was built—a material and social collaboration of moving parts and traditions—how would this knowledge change the way I relate to myself?

Just as the idea of the distributed self transformed Mrs Dalloway’s view of the finality of corporeal death, I began to wonder whether it could also affect the way I felt about loneliness. In both the fragmented and distributed models of self, there seems to be something less lonely about being alone. In the fragmented model, one can find a friend (or foe) within one’s own singular presence by splitting oneself into many. Within a distributed model, even when entirely alone one can experience a kind of intimacy with strangers, alive and dead, since the separation between cultural habit and self is collapsed and individual action becomes but a piece of an ongoing communal repertoire.



Fig. 24 a. & b. *Politics of Inner Self*. Video, 41 minutes 32 seconds, 2020. The two video stills show my “habitual” character (above) responding to a newly adopted character (below). Link: youtu.be/sl2tkGgP0Bg.

Thus, I resolved to create a performance experiment in which I would alternately take on two different characters and have a live conversation between them about our relationship, whether or not we both composed the same person, and the shape of our personal cosmos. These characters would act both as fragments (two different characters within my

range of possible expression) and distributed habits (instances of shared communal characters that have survived through time and through many different human beings).

Thinking that the conversation might as well be an intellectual one about the predicament of talking to myself in two characters, I decided to stage it as a faux online research event, like a Q&A or two scholars “in-conversation.”²⁹⁸ To simplify the conditions of this experimental dialogue, I decided that it would be limited to two characters only, and that one of them would be my habitual character. The other one would be someone else, summoned on the spot, using the methods I usually employ in my performances to become otherwise (see Chapter 1). I had not prepared any questions for the “Q&A,” nor prewritten or rehearsed any part of the speech—not even in my mind—because I initiated the performance shortly after the idea occurred to me. The conversation was recorded and shared online on YouTube.²⁹⁹ Below I will recount some key points in the video, including the time codes at which they occur.

²⁹⁸ The online talk was a form which, by September 2020, the scholarly community had become accustomed to due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from the fact that I was talking to myself, the home office background of the video and the low-res webcam quality of the image did not look out of place against the backdrop of the type of academic online gatherings that were happening at the time.

²⁹⁹ Since the aim of this thesis is to provide viewers with a chance to think through their relationship to character when in the vicinity of my performance video works, an important aspect of the PhD project has been to make its findings broadly accessible. This performance video did instigate some meaningful engagement on YouTube, as can be seen in the comments section of the video: <https://youtu.be/sl2tkGgP0Bg>.



Fig. 24 c. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:00:08.

Upon hitting the video record button, I (in habitual character) began to spontaneously formulate an introduction to the faux research event (00:00–05:08). I explained that the premise for the performance experiment would be to conduct a dialogue in which I performed the part of two distinct discussants. After that, the conversation proceeded, in my experience, as organically and co-productively as a conversation between two different people (albeit two people who share the same memories and knowledge).

During my introduction, I immediately ran into a couple of problems. The first was a struggle with vocabulary. I found that I did not know what words to use to even describe the two discussants. Was I (in habitual character) a person, and was my conversational partner a “fictional character?” Were we both “characters” that made up a whole person? Were we two distinct persons? The problem of coming up with the right labels is a key part of the dynamics that were already unfolding in this conversation, before the second speaker had even been introduced. In the video, I decide to dispense with the word “per-

son” entirely, and refer to both myself and the second speaker as “characters” (05:09–05:47), which is a policy that I later adopted in the writing of this dissertation too.



Fig. 24 d. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:05:23.

Following the “Q&A” convention, the next problem I ran into was how to give a bio of the second discussant. Having been conjured into existence on the spot, they were, after all, nameless, ageless and had no institutional affiliation or occupation to provide any sort of biographic anchor by which either I or the audience could begin to know them. I deftly evaded the problem by asking the other character how they would like to be introduced, but in so doing, had already begun to offend *her* (05:48–06:19).



Fig. 24 e. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:06:24.

While speaking in my habitual character, I had been standing to the (viewer's) left of the microphone. To transition into the second character, I stepped over to the (viewer's) right side of the microphone, and in that journey of a few seconds, already began to feel different, emotionally. When I landed on the other side of the microphone, I took a moment to find the second speaker. As is typical of my self-estrangement process, I needed to utter a few words aloud and enact a few slightly altered behaviours before finding myself in the guise of the second character. The character that emerged—an American with a certain vulnerable strength about her—was likely informed by the attitude and behaviour of certain people I have seen at similar academic events before. Here, there is a moment in which the character becomes aware of her own awakening, and like someone who suffers from memory loss, she must gradually find her bearings and recreate the picture of her origins. In so doing, she realises that she has not in fact simply appeared there and then, but rather that she was already in existence and with me when the idea to have this conversation first came to me some fifteen minutes prior (06:20–06:49).



Fig. 24 f. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:06:53.

By narrating her own origins, the second character begins to gain a certain mastery over the situation, because she has managed to carve out a biography for herself, however short, based on the memory of her own “summoning.” In fact, she points out, back when I was just beginning to imagine having this conversation, and when I was just beginning to ponder how I could summon an other with whom to speak, she had already begun to feel herself “tickled into being” (06:50–08:48).

The second character explains that she is having “reservations” about being involved in this conversation, since she was never really asked if she wanted to be a part of it. She also finds being invited to the conversation as my “counterpart” patronising (08:49–09:50).



Fig. 24 g. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:09:57.

There is then a moment when we encounter a technical problem: the computer recording our conversation has gone into sleep mode, abruptly cutting it off. This occurred while the second character was speaking, so she was also the one who had to fix the problem. Here, a short piece of the encounter is missing, but we can still see the second character fussing around the computer on either side of the missing interval (09:51–10:24). Throughout the recording, one of the two characters had to periodically move the computer mouse to prevent it from going to sleep, and it is possible to see them each doing this in their own way when their turn comes.



Fig. 24 h. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:11:50.

The second character recovers herself and explains that she has been invited to the conversation on the condition that she is to be viewed as a *deviation* from me, the “norm.”³⁰⁰ She can only be defined in relation to me (the habitual character) and not as someone in and of herself, like secondary Eve cast out of the rib of primary Adam. Although the two sides of a dichotomy always depend on one another for either of them to come into definition, there is usually a hierarchy between them, where one is the standard and the other the deviation; one is the point, the other the counterpoint.³⁰¹ Here, the second character establishes that there is a hierarchy between herself and the habitual character and that she finds herself in the lesser position of the two (10:25–12:00). I proceed to apologise for making her feel uncomfortable and try to explain that I had invited her merely because I thought she seemed like somebody who might have something interesting to say about

³⁰⁰ For a discussion of the sociology of norms and deviations as implied by the second character, see Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1990), 151–160.

³⁰¹ Such binaries and their hierarchies, like that between speech and writing, have been explored by Jacques Derrida throughout his work (see, for example, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*).

the topic. However, I express that I am not sure what exactly it is I want to learn from her and ask if there is anything she would like to learn from me (12:01–14:10).



Fig. 24 i. *Politics of Inner Self*, 00:12:06.

The second character appreciates the opportunity to be the one to ask a question. She concedes that she and I seem to form a unity together, but would like to know “what it is like to be the dominant expression of a person—the dominant character.” (14:11–16:11).

Surprised by the question, I remark that, since I have never asked myself this, I must indeed be the dominant character. However, I go on to say that the dominant expression of who we are as a person, the dominant character, itself changes over time and that I have not always been the one to hold this position. Nor would I be able to say exactly *when* I became the dominant character.

As I speak, I begin to notice that I am struggling a little to maintain my character, even though it is the habitual one, as some of the second character's mannerisms seem to be rubbing off on me. I notice the same is happening to her; some of my mannerisms are rubbing off on her. I ask her whether she thinks we need to work hard to maintain the distinction between us or whether we should just let ourselves influence each other (16:12–19:22). There is indeed some visible “blending” that occurs when I switch: it can take a moment before the other character “comes back.” It is interesting that it is my habitual self that is making this point here and not the second character, who is less practised at being herself. Yet it is true that it takes a while even to remember how to be my more habitual self.

The second character responds that it is not so much a question of maintaining our distinctions, or affecting difference from one another, but a question of training our conviction in the model of the distributed person for the duration of the experiment. We have to believe that there is such a thing as our two characters within the expressive range of the human being carrying out the performance experiment. Once that happens, we can relax into two very comfortable and spontaneous ways of self-presenting. She explains that she is not acting and that she is not trying to affect difference from the habitual character; instead, she is trying to search within herself for a being that is just like her, in order to give it expression within the special opportunity provided by the performance.

She then likens herself and the habitual character to a phenotype. In genetics, a phenotype is the set of characteristics encoded into the genome that have come into expression in the organism (e.g. outward appearance). There are, however, some genes that do not come into expression but remain latent (as with some hereditary illnesses). Likewise, whereas the human being has encoded into its “cultural genome” a multitude of behavioural patterns inherited from the social milieu, not all of these come into expression. Per-

formance provides a means of bringing into expression latent character codes within the human being that are *not* encoding the habitual character.

According to the second character, this would mean that some characters encoded into the human being come into expression more often than others, that some dominate almost all the time and that some never get expressed at all. She asks whether this opens up the possibility of a politics of *inner* self, whereby the distribution of character expression across the human being must be negotiated, often through the implementation of a hierarchy (some characters having access to more expression time over others). Thus, for the first time in my imagination, this character brought to light the ethics of such a politics. Is it right to subdue her in the name of my own self-consistency? (19:23–25:39).

In response I agree that there must be a character hierarchy and politics of inner self at play, resulting in our overall self-presentation as a person, but that for now, I am not yet convinced that it is necessarily unjust that there should be a habitual (or “dominant,” in her terminology) character. Maybe it is a necessary kind of hierarchy, although, within sociology, notions of “necessary hierarchies” have been criticised.³⁰²

To the second character’s proposed politics of inner self, I add that, where economics is the science of managing scarce resources and where politics is a way of organising a community around it, there is also a certain notion of scarcity that must be managed in character expression, i.e. only one character can be played out at a time (see Section 1.3 and 4.1). Just this fact alone creates the conditions for a politics of inner self to emerge. (25:40–30:03).

³⁰² See for example David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), 4.

The second character explains that one of the difficulties of her “subordinate” position as a rarely expressed character, is simply remembering herself. Coming into expression as someone who has not had much expressive airtime makes one feel faint, insubstantial and forgetful. Forgetting themselves and what they were going to say occurs to some extent for both characters throughout the performance (03:04–32:21).

The conversation concludes with comparisons to this type of performance: other situations in which a single human being converses with herself in two or more characters. One of the examples given is dissociative identity disorder, in which “the presence of two or more distinct or split identities or personality states [...] continually have power over the person’s behaviour.”³⁰³ The disorder is often developed following severe, repeated abuse and trauma in early childhood, before the child has gone through key developmental stages in the formation of their personality. Despite the designation of the condition as a “disorder,” one doctor described that, “I really don’t like calling it a dysfunction because it’s the most functional way to help a child survive,” where his patient added that, “the mind saves you from yourself.”³⁰⁴ Thus in these extreme cases, the splitting of self into multiple personalities functions as a coping mechanism to help consciousness dissociate from the damaging reality—it is, in a sense, the most functional thing the brain can do in such horrifying circumstances. The dissociation from self into multiple selves is not the disorder, it is the traumatic events that took place in the first place that are the disorder.

Another comparison we can make is to the “everyday self-differentiation” that occurs when we talk or mutter to ourselves when wondering what to do next, sometimes in second per-

³⁰³ “Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder),” WebMD, medically reviewed by Smitha Bhandari, 22 January 2022, <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/dissociative-identity-disorder-multiple-personality-disorder>.

³⁰⁴ Robert Phillips and Truddi Chase, “Oprah Interviews a Woman with 92 Personalities,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, aired 21 May 1990, King World. Available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/N0zZmh-JFyM>.

son, or when giving ourselves a “pep talk.” A more staged version of internal dialogues like these can be found in the way authors of non-fiction might instantiate a fictional interlocutor to serve as a devil’s advocate to help challenge and ultimately strengthen their running argument, such as Molly in Ray Kurzweil’s *The Age of Spiritual Machines* or Conrad in Daniel Dennett’s *Freedom Evolves*.³⁰⁵ There is also the case of children playing with toy figurines, soliloquising on the part of each character in their play. They will readily switch between one perspective to the other in playing out a narrative between multiple characters and sometimes sustain long scenes and conversations in this way. This is not seen to be unusual behaviour, but expected and helpful to the child’s development.

I later became aware of another comparable situation that was not mentioned in the video. “Chairwork” is a form of therapy stemming from gestalt psychology and psychodrama that involves the patient taking on two different roles and conducting a live conversation by alternately inhabiting the two parts. It is called chairwork because the patient is often asked to inhabit one role in one chair, and the other role in the chair facing it, giving the chair a function analogous to the two sides of the microphone in my performance experiment: a switching device. There are a great many variants on this theme depending on the needs of the patient. In some cases, particularly where the patient is suffering from internal discord or a dilemma, the therapist might prompt them to take on the role of the two discordant parts of themselves. These two internal parts can then voice their arguments to each other through a staged dialogue. One could argue that Elif Shafak’s *Black Milk* is a public staging of precisely this kind of therapeutic work. In other cases, for instance where a patient is struggling in their relationship with a relative, the therapist will prompt the patient to take on an external role (e.g. their father, as well as themselves). The patient will move

³⁰⁵ See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* and Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*. The fact that these two books were published within four years of each other suggests that the fictional interlocutor may have been a particularly popular formula of non-fiction around the turn of the millennium. In Kurzweil’s case, Molly also transforms throughout the book and becomes an illustration of his posthuman predictions.

back and forth between the chairs, and respond from the perspective of themselves and the significant other. There are many other variations, such as self doubling, in which the patient takes on the role of one version of themselves (sitting in the chair) and another version of themselves standing behind the chair and acting like a narrator, or out-of-body self, who describes the situation of the self that is sitting in the chair.

According to Scott Kellogg, the chair method often leads to rapid and transformative healing.³⁰⁶ A particularly poignant case he cites comes from Paul Chadwick's work with severely mentally ill patients who often have a highly negative self-concept (view of one-self).³⁰⁷ This negative self-perception can highly exacerbate damage to mental health, yet it is often difficult for the therapist to convince such patients that their self-concept could have become distorted in any way because the patient feels they have had overwhelming evidence confirming that they are in some way a "bad person." To subtly challenge this belief, the therapist can use the two-chair method to help draw out an increased sense of *self-complexity* for the patient. (Self-complexity is the degree to which a person sees themselves as occupying multiple roles.)³⁰⁸ It starts with the therapist asking the patient to name one good thing they did. In one chair, the patient is asked to affirm the negative description of their self-concept (e.g. "I am a bad person"). In the other chair they are asked to affirm the good deed (e.g. "I opened a door for someone carrying a lot of things"). The patient is asked to repeat this process, flipping back and forth between the chairs. From the patient's perspective, before the therapy, they could only possibly see themselves in one way: a bad person. After the therapy, they could see themselves as a bad person *and* as someone who opened a door for somebody else. Suddenly the view of the self is not so

³⁰⁶ Scott Kellogg, *Transformational Chairwork: Using Psychotherapeutic Dialogues in Clinical Practice* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

³⁰⁷ Cited in his lecture, Scott Kellogg, "Transformational Chairwork – An Overview," uploaded 14 April 2018, YouTube video, https://youtu.be/i_UsgOnt6zw.

³⁰⁸ See Patricia W. Linville, "Self-Complexity and Affective Extremity: Don't Put All of Your Eggs in One Cognitive Basket."

simple and the latter appears to contradict some of the forceful effect which the former previously had. Further, because there is no dialogue between the two roles that the patient briefly occupies, the negative affirmation cannot immediately destroy the relatively positive affirmation, as would normally occur in the patient's mind through extreme self-criticism. In this case the chairwork therapy has enabled the patient to acknowledge and train a *new* character that previously did not exist as far as the patient was concerned—what Kellogg calls the “drawing out” and then “strengthening” of a “voice” in the chairwork therapy.³⁰⁹

Finally, the performance of multiple alternating personas and perspectives has been explored more broadly within contemporary art, as in Andrea Fraser's performance video installation *This Meeting is Being Recorded*.³¹⁰ In the video, the artist performs the roles of seven different white women engaging a conversation addressing racism through collective self-examination. Rather than being improvised on the spot, however, the dialogue is taken directly from the transcripts of real meetings that took place between the artist and six other participants.³¹¹

When it came to making the video work itself, Fraser gives three reasons for her decision to act out the characters and perspectives of all participants herself: 1) to assume full responsibility for the content of the video and protect the identities the participants, 2) to counteract the way in which individuals habitually “project” their own undesirable attributes onto others, and 3) to perform the racialising move of “lumping together” her white charac-

³⁰⁹ Kellogg, “Transformational Chairwork.” More generally, the gestalt approach to therapy, from which chairwork partially stems, aims to help the patient to “discover, explore and experience his or her own shape, pattern and wholeness [...]. [T]he aim of gestalt is the integration of all disparate parts.” Petrůska Clarkson, *Gestalt Counselling in Action* (London: Sage, 2004), 1. See also Jonathan Passmore and Tracy Sinclair, “Gestalt Approach and Chairwork,” In *Becoming a Coach* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 133–38, doi [gold.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53161-4_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53161-4_18).

³¹⁰ Andrea Fraser, *This Meeting is Being Recorded*, video, 2021.

³¹¹ Morgan Falconer, “Group Dynamics: Andrea Fraser Interviewed by Morgan Falconer,” *Art Monthly*, no. 464 (2023): 1–4.

ters to counter the otherwise apparently “neutral” and “universal” status of whiteness.³¹² In this way, the multiple perspectives made available by the seven women in the group conversation was what yielded the diversity of reflections on racism and which provided the analytical framework—the artist performing multiple characters happens after the fact, and is more relevant with regard to its experimentation with politics of representation, than to what each of these positions makes thinkable to the artist when performing. *Politics of Inner Self* differs in this regard in that it is the splitting up of the *self* into different characters which yields the analytical framework made available by the multiple human participants in Fraser’s work.

Curiously, in all these comparisons to the present performance experiment, the inhabitation of multiple characters appears to have a certain therapeutic effect—even in the case of dissociative personality disorder, where the mind “saves itself” through the constitution of other possible realities that can replace the traumatic one. In chairwork, the inhabitation of multiple roles allows the patient to contain the complexity of themselves or their situation in a way that can be comforting, since the object of therapeutic examination is being made less “black and white” or extreme. The present performance experiment similarly seemed to have a therapeutic effect,³¹³ although it could probably be more closely aligned to the effects of “internal dialogue” (e.g. talking to yourself while cooking) or the child playing the part of multiple figurines, since it provided a mode of enjoying companionship with oneself in the absence of other people. Nonetheless, as in chairwork, the performance allowed me to draw out ideas that would not have been possible through the habitual character alone.

³¹² Falconer, “Group Dynamics,” 3–4.

³¹³ Psychologist Sylvia Terbeck first made this connection for me when she suggested that the performance practice could theoretically bring with it therapeutic benefits due to the training of self-complexity. This could, of course, only be confirmed by experiment.

Another way of approaching the subject is that “role-play as thinking” presents the possibility of something akin to running simulations on your self. After generating some ideas, you can decide which you like, which you do not. This would be “hypothesising or speculating through being.” You would have the freedom then, to entertain trains of thought—even opinions—that you could afterwards readily discard or keep. It is also tempting to consider whether applications of the practice of multiple character inhabitation could have therapeutic effects for society more widely. Could a space be instituted in society, where alternative positions could freely be inhabited, opinions humoured, thoughts entertained? A space that suspended the overinflated attribution of persons to ideas, and *vice versa*? An institution that protected hesitation, doubt and lack of resolution as valid states to adopt in a sustained way? Perhaps that is what art is meant to do: offer the possibility for just such a space.

Before I summarise the main points of this section, I would like to point out that this was only a first iteration of what could be a series of dialogic performance experiments in character. Some possible variations include:

- Repeating the experiment with a different second character, or dispensing with the habitual character in favour of two new characters.
- Gradually transitioning between the two characters as opposed to a “snap” shift.³¹⁴
- Allowing the characters to speak in different languages.
- Including more than two characters in the conversation.

³¹⁴ In the present experiment, I assumed that the two characters would need to be distinct because, without boundaries of difference, character ceases to be: it is assertive of its difference by definition.

- Staging an unprepared conversation in two characters for a live audience, inviting questions that could be addressed to either character.

Throughout this research, the question arises: to what extent does the notion of an experiment differ in science and art? For instance, I have no way of proving (to anyone but myself) that I felt companionship in the presence of the second character akin to the companionship I would feel with another person. I have no way of proving that I did not meticulously rehearse the entire dialogue before recording it. Perhaps this is where an artistic performance experiment might stop resembling a scientific one: the scientific requirement of repeatability is replaced by a spectacle the viewer can empathise with, consider, run hypothetical thought experiments on, but not necessarily rely on as empirical data. In some cases however, I have tried to overcome the problem of repeatability by instructing others in my methods (see Section 1.1). It turned out that this is exceptionally difficult (though not impossible) to achieve in practice because art usually involves highly specific and often idiosyncratic skillsets.

By the end of the performance experiment, I felt nourished and invigorated, just as I might feel after an engaging conversation with a friend. Not only did I feel less lonely when alone by internalising the model of a distributed self, but I had learnt new things from the second character. For all the complaints about her subordination, she often dominated the discussion, speaking more eloquently and expertly than I. Where I fumbled about awkwardly, looking for the right word, she delivered a more comprehensive and well-rounded diagnosis of the situation. Several times, she surprised me with what she had to say. She forced me to reorientate myself towards our respective statuses as characters. She came up, entirely by herself, with a notion I had never thought of before: a politics of inner self. This would be a politics that determines the way in which character expression is organised within a human being, since one can only perform one character at a time. Such a politics

also introduces the ethics of managing classes of character—what she called the “dominant” character and its supposed counterparts, “subordinate” characters. Thus, what I may have in the early stages of this research called “my real self” as opposed to “my fictional characters,” I was now led to refer to as the “dominant character” and “subordinate characters.”

At the same time, the very success of my discussant in imposing these terms on the “dominant character” undermines her claim to inferiority, and by the same token, the distinction itself. Still, even though, as will be seen in the next section, I problematise this binary, the fact remains that the course of this research has been redirected to place greater emphasis on a politics of inner self as a direct consequence of this character’s intervention. The key takeaway of this experiment, therefore, is that I can consult my characters on matters to which I do not currently have the answers.

5.2 Tethered and Tangential

The terms I choose to use when classifying the different kinds of characters within the repertoire of my life and art reveal the criteria I use to divide them into groups. This can be observed in other classification systems, too. “Class” in the sociological sense of “working class” or “upper class” divides a population into groups based on the kind of economic labour they perform (or do not perform).³¹⁵ Here, categories of economic labour become the grouping criteria. In the Linnaean biological classification system, species are grouped according to species and genera, thus we (*Sapiens*) form part of the genus (*Homo*) and are designated as *Homo Sapiens*.³¹⁶ Here, species classification is based on genetic proximity, which can sometimes, but not always, be observed by the naked eye through similar phenotypic characteristics, which is what early biologists like Carl Linnaeus did.³¹⁷ Of course, the categorisation of things according to their *perceived* proximity is inherently political and, when carried out by those in power, potentially violent, as pointed out by Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh in their critique of colonial legacies in the history of botany.³¹⁸

³¹⁵ This is a traditional definition of class. See Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 190–92, for a discussion about how this term may be changing over time, and according to new criteria. For example, some historically “working class” individuals or families in the UK now own homes, while some highly educated individuals or families with cultural capital have little financial capital and cannot afford to get a mortgage for a first home, being forced to perpetually rent.

³¹⁶ Harari, *Sapiens*, 4–8.

³¹⁷ Sometimes species are genetically much closer than they appear to the eye; their characteristics seem to vary greatly, but their genomes present more chemical similarity than another pair of species that may look more similar. Conversely, entirely independent branches of the tree of life can sometimes evolve similar characteristics, not because they have any genetic relation, but because they happen to live in similar environments which place pressure on these two different species to evolve similar characteristics. See for example David L. Stern, “The Genetic Causes of Convergent Evolution,” *Nature Reviews Genetics* 14 (2013): 751–64, doi [10.1038/nrg3483](https://doi.org/10.1038/nrg3483).

³¹⁸ Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh, “The Coloniality of Planting: Legacies of Racism and Slavery in the Practice of Botany,” *The Architectural Review*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/the-coloniality-of-planting/>.

Classification always trades in the complexity of the object of study for the convenience of studying it. This is often brought to bear when we come up against the “grey areas.” There are always grey areas between class groupings in sociology, biology and character: individuals can equally belong in one grouping as well as another. This was something that Charles Darwin already pointed out in *The Origin of Species*: “Certainly no clear line of demarcation has yet been drawn between species and sub-species [...]. These differences blend into each other in an insensible series [...].”³¹⁹ The grey areas reveal that our classification system is not the *whole* story and remind us that, although some things are similar to each other in *some* ways, they can be far apart in others, and that nobody designed society, biology or character by first creating “boxes” into which to group them. The boxes came later, as our means of managing complexity. In this, classification systems have something in common with scientific models. Both are powerful epistemological tools, but they can only highlight one way of looking at something at a time, privileging *one* criterion over another. Further, the criteria we use to classify a population is always political, in that it stratifies its members in one way, when it could have stratified them in another. How we classify a population, then, often comes to have consequences for its members.

As mentioned previously, it seemed necessary at times to group my characters in some way because they seemed different in kind; however, I have struggled to find the right terminology because I did not know what criteria to use. Very early into the research, I thought that the object of my study was “fictional characters.” I did not see *myself* as a character; rather, I thought I was a person and that I was making up characters that approximated persons. I was interested in researching how closely this approximation could be made. At this stage, we can see that a distinction was being made between “character”

³¹⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, ed. J. W. Burrow (London: Penguin, 1985), 107.

and “person,” where “person” was elevated above “character,” in that a character could only ever “approximate” the person.

Soon, I discovered that almost everything I did, in life as well as art, seemed to be expressed by one character or another, depending on the situation. Frame switching studies explained the multiplicity and changeability of character in daily life based on the fact that a human being is expected to exhibit a continuous personality to a given social group, or *audience*, to use Goffman’s term. Since the human being must encounter several different audiences and since the character they express in the presence of these audiences may be different, multiple characters play a role in the everyday life of a human being. Therefore, I discarded the term “person” entirely for the time being and focused only on character (defined as a pattern of self-consistent behaviour) and “the human being” (defined as the apparatus which plays out character).

It was still clear at this point, however, that although characters populated both my art practice and my everyday self-presentation, there was something distinctly different about the group of characters I performed “in life” and the group of characters I performed “in art.” That is why I began to refer to the character(s) exhibited in my everyday self-presentation as “the habitual character” or “habitual characters,” since they were the ones I was more practised at expressing, and which I expressed most of the time. The characters which I used to call “fictional” in my artistic practice began to seem fictional only insofar as I did not normally express them. I could easily imagine another life where I really did act and speak like one of the characters in my performances, and then that character would no longer be “fictional.” As a result, I turned to using the terms “habitual character” and “newly adopted character,” whereby the classification criterion is the frequency with which I adopt a given character.

As discussed in the previous section, I arrived at the present stage of the research when I (in habitual character) conversed with myself (in a newly adopted character). The slight tension I experienced when faced with addressing a newly adopted character from the position of my habitual character attested to a certain hierarchical divide between the two. The newly adopted character herself then provided a new way of classifying our differences: “the dominant character” and “subordinate characters.” Although similar to the previous terms (“habitual” and “newly adopted”) in that they refer to the degree to which a given character “dominates” expression time, the terms are charged with the unequal status that such a binary implies.³²⁰

Should I pity her? I wondered. Is it crazy to pity a character that I have pretty much just made up? It would be like pitying a gene that did not get to be expressed: sure, the organism overall would be a different one had the gene had a chance to express itself, and we can mourn the organism that would have been, but there is no escaping the fact that when one gene is expressed, another is not; likewise, when one character is being expressed, another is not. But if I do not pity the subordinate character for barely ever getting to make an appearance, then I should also not mourn the day when my present habitual character gets exchanged for another. Yet I do mourn the habitual characters I discard over time; I feel their loss keenly whenever I pick up one of my diaries.

From “fictional character” and “person,” over “habitual” and “newly adopted,” to “dominant” and “subordinate,” these different approaches to classifying character in life and in art each reveal a particular dividing bias: the first has to do with the character’s “reality status,” the second with the frequency with which the human being adopts the character and the third with the character’s power status. I was now in a position to decide *in what way* dif-

³²⁰ This theme has appeared in other character performances as well, such as *Pseudo*, presented in Section 1.3, or *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers* in Section 3.1.

ferentiating groups of character might be relevant to this research: what kind of classification system may be most useful.

To stage the dominant/subordinate binary for further consideration, I devised another experiment in which I would inhabit a “subordinate” character so as to give it adequate “soul-time” to voice its concerns. I applied the same self-estrangement approach as I normally would in my performance practice (see Chapter 1), only instead of speaking to camera, I wrote a letter addressed to the dominant character:³²¹

Letter to the Dominant Character

Where do I even begin? *You* have a beginning, a middle, an end—you even have an afterlife called a legacy. I have no such beginning from which to hail. I land into this world fully formed, yet inexperienced. I land into it like a foal already running—and talking—animated with the appearance of having a history. But my history is only one brief scion to your great trunk; a slither of what you could have been. I am the opportunity forgone—you are the survivor who lives to tell the tale.

I struggle a little with accepting the charity of your pen—it was your idea, after all, to write this letter. I can only speak upon your solicitation. But my mouth is a dam, and so precious is the moment my voice erupts, that I comply, and perform the difference you wish here to conjure.

What did you hope I would say? Did you hope I could free you from your own dominance, or reward your oppressor’s enlightenment with the promise of a “character

³²¹ One of the most powerful and moving letters I can think of in this regard is the many versions available of Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Tribe’s speech addressed to Franklin Pierce, President of the United States in 1854: <https://suquamish.nsn.us/home/about-us/chief-seattle-speech/>.

nirvana” into which you could recede, turned from a dominator to a mere drop in the ocean of personality?

Tough luck, you stumbled on a cynical one. Better luck getting someone else to write your damn letter next time.

When I went back into habitual character and read over the letter I received, I was bemused with the outcome, proud of the character’s response, but also skeptical regarding this claim about my dominance and its associated privileges. In a certain sense, the author of the letter is right to point out that I have a beginning, middle and end, as well as a legacy. Although the dominant character is not everlasting and is subject to change over the lifetime of a human being, it becomes part of the socially accepted narrative of the person in a way that the author of the letter does not. I, whenever I am discarded and replaced by another habitual character, will still form one of the voices in the series of diaries that chronicle my life, like one descendent in a lineage of Katarinas. The author of the letter will not. They are, as they say, a scion to the trunk that is this socially accepted “lineage” of Katarinas, a branch that abruptly ends before having a chance to form a lineage of its own.

I dominate in the sense that I am here most of the time, and when I am seen by friends and family, they will recognise *me*, not the author of this letter. But the so-called subordinate character that authored the letter has failed to recognise their own privileges and my burdens. I am under oath to represent the human being known as “Katarina.” I must uphold her reputation in the eyes of others, and see to it that I act consistently under each audience’s gaze. Through my own performance, I must continually work hard to maintain the definition of each social situation, the laboriousness of which is covered in detail by Goffman. Maintaining consistency in the impressions Katarina makes on others can be a tiring business. It is up to me to suppress deviation from my own expression as dominant

character, because it is I who will carry the blame if I do not, I who will cause embarrassment and conflict and suffer the social punishment if I do not maintain Katarina's social consistency. I may dominate in expression time, but I bear the social responsibility carried by Katarina.

This gave rise to yet another way of classifying character within the repertoire of my life and art. Some characters are "tethered" to the social milieu, as am I, and some characters, like the ones that crop up in my practice, are "tangential." Tethered characters are bound to and determined by a constant cost-gain calculus that is being carried out in each social interaction. A tangential character, on the other hand, is perhaps able to fully "be itself" in a way that the tethered character cannot. Fleeting, transitory, the tangential character lives out a short but powerful life. It can express itself in ways that are not restricted by the cost-gain dynamics of the social milieu, but for the same reason, these characters are considered "not really" to be Katarina.

Over the other classification approaches, "tethered" and "tangential" is preferred as it defines character by the degree to which it is bound to the social milieu. This way of understanding the differences between characters "in life" and "in art"—as based upon their role in relation to social life—will bring into relief some of the ways in which humanity has, for the most part unconsciously, managed human character. This will form the central theme of Chapter 6, where we will also explore how experiments with tangential characters might inform the management of tethered characters within the social milieu.

5.3 Running over States of Mind, or: Who Should Be Writing This Dissertation Anyway?



Fig. 25. Still from a personal video of me running, recorded to monitor running form.

Whenever I go for a run, I have noticed I take on a character. I assume a character that I think will help me run further, and in better form. When I run, I decide to become an athlete for the time being, even though I have not deserved that title. On a particularly imaginative day, I can clearly hear the radio commentators discussing my strategies as I run. Only, unlike in a real race or competition, I am responsive to what they say about me. My back straightens when they critique my posture. My pace quickens when they question my conservative approach. Maybe this kind of imagining process occupies me, maybe it takes my mind off the struggles of running. But maybe it makes me that bit more a runner, a real runner, at least for the time being.

I have a running character. I have presumed it to be a good character to inhabit when I want to run. But what if I were to take this character out of her usual running context and

onto some other terrain? What, for example, could this character have to say about my research, if anything? And who has this character replaced, when I decide to research as a runner?

Presumably, the runner has in this case replaced some kind of “academic character.” I think I know this academic character. I have been her too, not when I wanted to go for a run, but when I wanted to learn things for myself and for others, wanted to learn for the sake of learning, learn in a way that stood in for learning in general as well as in particular. Just as the runner character stands in for the desire to exceed one’s physical limits, the academic character stands in for the desire to learn. She not only learns, she is a *learner*. She teaches us how to learn.

The academic character deals with things earnestly. Transparently. She is scrupulous; parsing her predecessors’ work for errors that she can correct or gaps that she can fill for the common good. She believes in this pursuit, believes that the sum total of her efforts might fractionally tilt the future towards a happier trajectory.

The academic character, like the runner character, is a means to an end; she is enabling in that regard, she sets me up for success. The academic character acts, speaks, writes, by the power vested in her. She not only learns, she is a learner, and this is what helps her learn.



Fig. 26. Me in “academic character,” presenting at The Undergraduate Research Forum, Chelsea College of Arts, March 2016.

My academic character is ethically minded. She worries about truth, worries about the way in which truths are sometimes excluded in the name of consistency, in the name of unifying narratives. She does not tell a lie or bend the truth even a little in favour of her thesis when presenting her evidence; she faithfully reports processes and discloses everything. To tell the truth, she realises she must declare her position within the research community, the global community; she must declare her partiality, her situated knowledge, the contextual nature of her perspective. Be transparent. But sometimes, it is precisely in her effort to tell the truth that she commits the pretence and maybe too the pretension of which academics are sometimes accused. Perhaps this road is paved precisely by her good intentions.

I will attempt to show how there can be something insincere about the very sincerity with which one adopts their academic character by critiquing one of my own academic articles.

Below is an image of a publication to which I contributed along with fellow researchers on the PhD programme at Goldsmiths and in which an early version of “The Shape of a Thinking Thing” (which was to become Chapter 2 of this thesis) was published.³²²

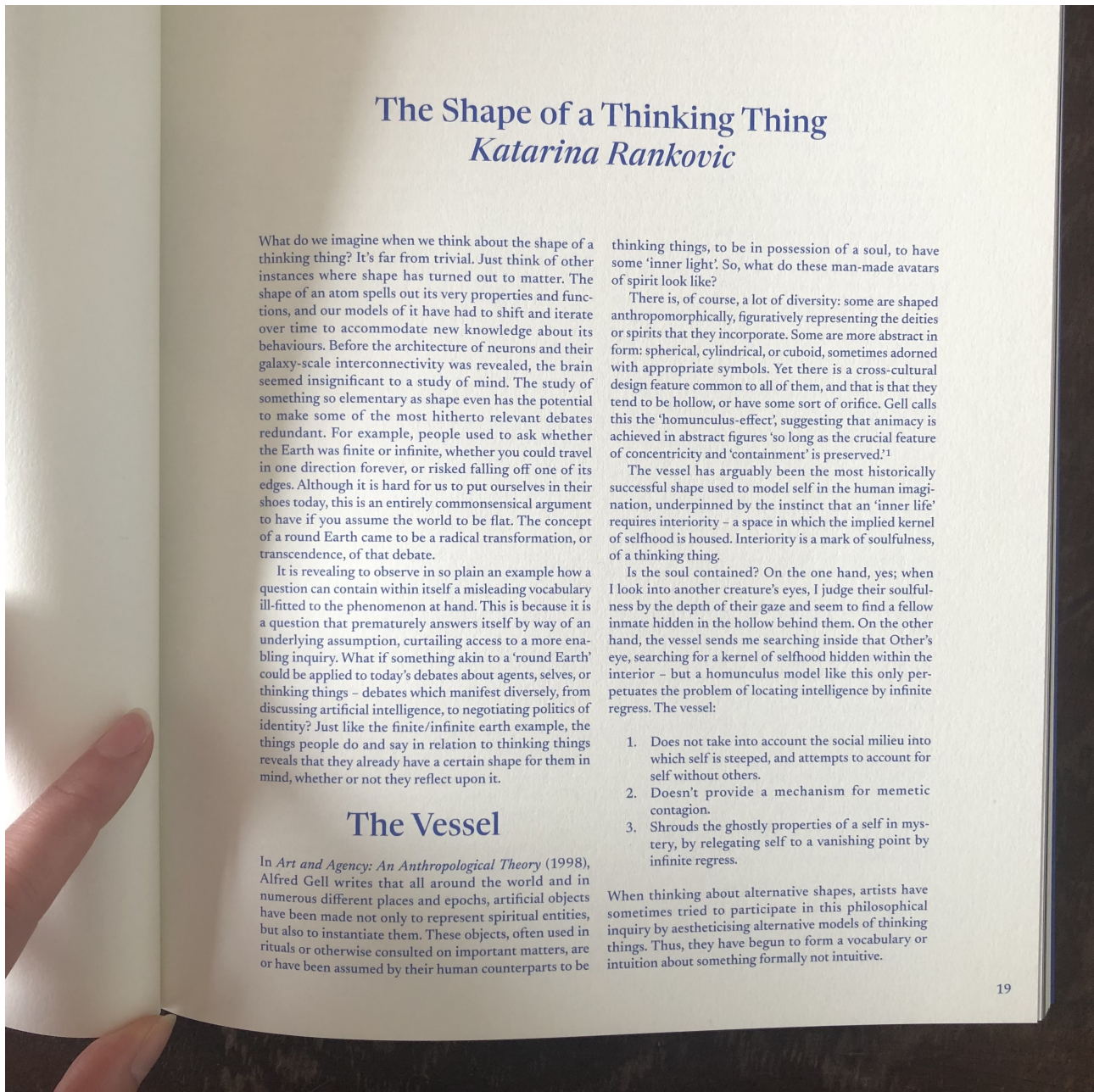


Fig. 27. Image of the precursor to Chapter 2, independently published with my PhD cohort at Goldsmiths College, 2021.

³²² Katarina Ranković, “The Shape of a Thinking Thing” in *Goldsmiths PhD Art Publication*, ed. Marie-Alix Isdahl, Dani Smith and Nina Wakeford (independently published in an edition of 500, 2021).

The text starts by making the case that the simplified models we use to picture something more complicated or difficult to imagine are always worth revisiting since they can often define the very terms on which important debates play out. I presented three shapes, or models, which have been or could be used to think through the mechanics of self, starting with “the vessel,” then “the distributed self,” and ending with my own proposition, “the line.” While writing the article in “academic character,” which is informed by other academics and the culture of the academy, I did something that I think I did not ultimately intend with the text. The article tries to expose the vessel model as inadequate, misleading, primitive. In its place the text declares the line model as if it were an improvement upon the last.

In fact, although the vessel model does indeed fail to illustrate some properties of the self that my line model succeeds in highlighting, the vessel model is not *wrong*, as the article seems to purport. In some ways it is useful to think of the self as a vessel, a container with something hidden inside. Where the line model emphasises the agent’s receptivity to contagion, the vessel model highlights the “hiddenness” of the agent, which may well be a fundamental property of agenthood worthy of study (see Section 2.1). In fact, the flat-Earth model to which I compared it is not entirely wrong either. It certainly was not poor in its capacity to model reality, because sometimes it is far more useful (and hence in some sense more true) to think of the world as flat than round—when navigating a road map, for instance. What I should have done in the article is simply acknowledge that these shapes (such as the shape of the Earth or the shape of a thinking thing), these models and intuitive diagrams are merely thinking tools that enable us to intuit different properties of a phenomenon, rather than presume that some were in need of being debunked and replaced.

As mentioned earlier, models are analogous to character insofar as they provide multiple perspectives on a phenomenon. Each model emphasises certain qualities over others (see the example of atom models in Chapter 2). When one model, or character, or perspective

is selected, it is always done at the cost of another model, character or perspective.³²³ What I should have done in writing my article, is to present the vessel and my proposed line as two different models of thinking things that emphasise different properties at the expense of those they do not emphasise. Yet the article implies that my line model is superior to the vessel model. In time, when I read over the text, now printed so coolly in the publication, the clean typography betraying not even a trace of doubt or hesitation, I wondered why I had done that. Did I really believe at the time, that the line was superior to the vessel—the latest, “improved model” within a series of gradually better ones, as in a linear ideal of progress?

Having assumed the academic character within the space of writing, I inflated the shortcomings of the vessel model and at the same time exaggerated the utility of my line model in order to achieve a familiar scholarly movement: namely, the movement by which a gap is identified and then promptly filled, thereby making a contribution to knowledge. Oddly enough, it was not even necessary, let alone inaccurate, to disown the vessel model and replace it in order to make my contribution. It would have been valid enough to simply place these models side by side, and add my model to a panoply of other ways of understanding a thinking thing. Although upon re-reading, the disownment of the vessel model seemed to me disingenuous, at the time of writing, I remember feeling as though I was approaching the task very sincerely.

³²³ Farhan Samanani makes a similar point about the partiality of any research perspective in *How to Live With Each Other: An Anthropologist's Notes on Sharing a Divided World* (London: Profile Books, 2022), 20.

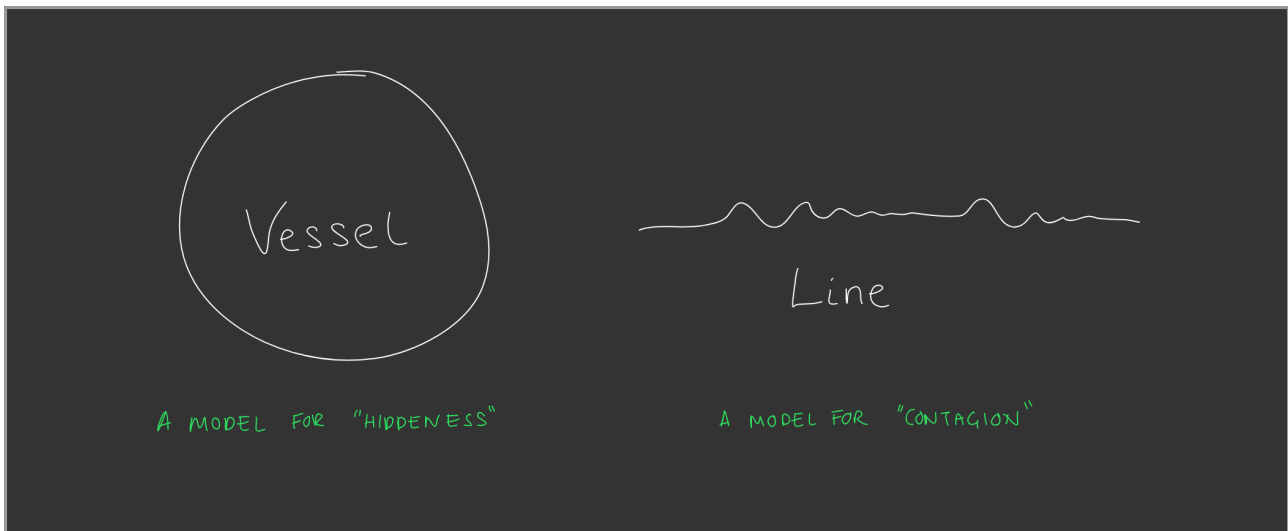


Fig. 28. A diagram showing the vessel and line models of thinking things side by side.

Shortly after I had written my article, I was reading N. Katherine Hayles' *My Mother Was a Computer*,³²⁴ and here I began to read a similar kind of stylistically motivated and unnecessarily inflated kind of antagonism towards preceding theories and their authors. As I will soon argue, this is not Hayles' (nor any individual scholar's) fault: this kind of overshooting critique is a symptom of the academic character repertoire as a whole.

In Hayles' book, I began to recognise this tendency in the section on computational ontology.³²⁵ This is a way of picturing the universe that imagines it to be fundamentally computational; under this model, the universe is what you get when you run a programme on a computational substratum of some kind. (The theory of character in this thesis adopts a computational ontology, in that character is imagined to "run" on the human being.) The programme may be extremely simple but, as it runs, complexity emerges from it on higher levels of organisation (see, for example the discussion of cellular automata in Section 3.2). Hayles charts out a history of this set of ideas, giving credit where credit is due about the findings that promote the computational worldview. Then she proceeds to perform that fa-

³²⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³²⁵ Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*, 17–33.

miliar scholarly manoeuvre, whereby she identifies flaws in previous authors' thinking as a means of preparing the ground for her own contribution.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this, of course; it makes a lot of sense as a principle. The scholar must try to improve upon the past work of others. That is the beauty of academic pursuit and why I began such a pursuit of my own: the endeavour to know is collective and cumulative across time, space and people, and I wanted to know if such a thing would be possible within the field of art practice. Scholars are in an especially good position to attend to this kind of cumulative work as new findings come to light and one has more observations and data against which to test older theories.

Yet the historical momentum of the academic character works on Hayles as she writes her book and occasionally appears to add unnecessary emphasis on the need to highlight the shortcomings of predecessors, rendering some of her criticisms weak, or a little unfair. This can happen when a citation is taken slightly out of context in order to be made more vulnerable to critique. Take for example the tone Hayles adopts when she says that Stephen Wolfram "is not slow to draw sweeping implications from his work," or that he envisions "sweeping consequences" for his research.³²⁶ The antagonistic language then escalates into a parodic picture:

Consider now the moment when Wolfram bends over the output of one of his cellular automata and perceives in it patterns strikingly similar to the shell of a mollusk. What exactly is happening in this scene? One way to understand it is as a re-representation of the patterns that emerged from the first-level operations of the cellu-

³²⁶ Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*, 19.

lar automata by another kind of analog mechanism we can call Wolfram's consciousness [...].³²⁷

This exaggeration may not have been intentional or calculating in any way. Rather, as academics, we tend to read others in the hope of finding flaws that our unique specialisms can redress; we are incentivised to do so by the career apparatuses that reward us for each scholarly output. Such rewards are not only monetary, although the need to make a living would alone be a valid incentive. As academics, we also hope to derive a sense of fulfilment and meaning from knowing we have in some small way contributed to knowledge, and this more idealistic incentive is also forceful.

The excerpt from Hayles' writing provides only an incidental example of this widespread phenomenon. Since catching myself in the act, I have detected this tendency to overshoot a critique working in a great many scholarly texts, this drive to identify weaknesses in preceding ideas even when this may not be very accurate nor ultimately necessary in order to succeed in making a scholarly contribution.

To draw attention to this phenomenon is not to make an attack on the academic community or on the academic character. Nor is it an attack on the practice of identifying a gap and filling it. To be sure, as the running character helps me improve my athletic performance, by allowing me not only to run but to be a runner, the academic character is a hard-won enabler of knowledge pursuit. In fact, some authors, like Harold Bloom, suggest that certain misreadings of predecessors (what he calls "misprisions") are a necessary part of any creative endeavour: an author must reckon with their inheritance and prepare the ground for the difference they wish to make.³²⁸ Whatever creative output a scholar comes

³²⁷ Hayles, 29.

³²⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xxiii.

up with, it *does* something to predecessors, and sometimes that can constitute a form of violence to their work and personal legacy.

However, rather than focus on the utility or hazards of misreading predecessors, my purpose here is only to draw attention to the fact that, not only do we play characters, *characters also play us*.³²⁹ The academic character has a certain inertia and when we don it like an outfit, it can also take us for a ride. Recall that this role reversal is somewhat typical of self-replicating patterns, such as genes and memes (see page 96). Character, being a system of memes, finds a home in our human apparatuses, and if it is a successful character (likely to be replicated), it will go on to stir the spirits of yet more human apparatuses, as the academic character has done with both mine and Hayles'. Certain duties and practices attend the academic character, just as they attend any other kind of character. When I wrote the article in my academic character, it was as if the very character position or frame of mind that I adopted made certain decisions *for* me in advance, and determined the kind of "knowledge" I was able to produce at that moment.

Still, this is not in itself a problem. It is necessary to adopt a frame of mind to think, and a character is a frame of mind. Any character that is adopted at any given time will have its affordances and blindnesses. A problem arises when we believe the academic character to necessarily be more sincere, clear-sighted, honest, truthful or objective, than another character, for it comes with its own momentum and drives us this way and that, occasionally making us overshoot in certain directions.

Despite engaging in a long-standing practice of having thoughts variously enabled and disabled by the different characters I play, during the first half of my PhD I had fallen prey to the presumption that my art practice was a place from which to deceive and manipulate

³²⁹ See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 37, where he points out that social roles come with ready-made characters (or "fronts").

viewers in the hope of delighting them, whereas this space, my academic commentary, was supposed to be where I *step out* of pretending and become honest and straightforward about what there is to learn from these artworks. I have since come to realise that, as long as I believe in my own sincerity when adopting the academic character, my dissertation writing will become *more* insincere, more manipulative than the performance video works. In fact, the artworks are in this sense more truthful than the academic article, since they are sensitive to the movement of character, making observable the passage of character in and out of me and how it frames my human apparatus in that moment, enabling me to think and do certain things, but not others, for the time I have adopted that character.

Character and Research Positionality

While contemporary scholarship in the humanities has widely embraced the declaration of partiality and situatedness on the level of the social agent, it has not yet done so at the level of the human being. This distinction will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6; here, I will only provide a preliminary instance.

The politics of positionality within any research has become increasingly apparent over the past few decades. Headed by feminist and postcolonial thought, it has become increasingly common to critique a research practice that presumes its gaze to be neutral, impartial or objective, and to recognise that knowledge is necessarily situated.³³⁰ For instance, the historical exclusion of women scientists in medical research has led to blind spots in many women's health issues, which are disproportionately under-researched in comparison to

³³⁰ See for example Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

other areas of medical study.³³¹ The problem of researcher bias has also been widely explored in the field of anthropology, where troves of documents exist chronicling Western observations of non-Western communities that are riddled with poor, decontextualised and ultimately harmful interpretations of native culture and customs, many of which served to justify and sustain colonial expansion.³³² Bias is also demonstrated in recent advances in AI research, where facial recognition often fails to detect the faces of people of colour or women in comparison to white men, and some AI systems have been shown to reproduce racial, homophobic and misogynistic slurs.³³³ An analogue can also be found in the field of physics. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle revealed that it is fundamentally impossible to have total knowledge about the state of a subatomic particle once the researcher begins to observe it.³³⁴ The act of observation itself makes it possible to only record a particle's position or velocity, but not both simultaneously. From this point on, a physicist becomes more implicated as one of the parameters of the experiment than previously assumed.

Bringing the positionality of the researcher into the scope of the research itself is of both epistemological and ethical concern. Science is more accurate *and* more just when the observer is included in the observation and when the experimenter is included as one of the parameters of the experiment. When the gaze of the researcher is disregarded, it implies an epistemic stance that goes unquestioned. When a researcher turns a blind eye to

³³¹ See Catherine de Lange, "Know Yourself," *New Scientist*, 21 May 2022, 42–45, and Rachel E. Gross' book, *Vagina Obscura: An Anatomical Voyage* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022).

³³² For example, see the discussion regarding the colonial use of photography in Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 197–98. An interesting twist to the story of the colonial gaze is provided by Graeber and Wengrow in *The Dawn of Everything*, 27–77, where they show how deeply non-Western critiques of colonial cultures influenced the Western world, playing a role in the arrival of the Age of Enlightenment.

³³³ Not only does AI technology reproduce the bias of researchers, but it also captures wider prejudices because AI models are often trained on hundreds of millions of data that have at some point been labelled by anonymous human recruits who largely do this work unmonitored and uncensored. See Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, "Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets," 19 September 2019, <https://excavating.ai>.

³³⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

the partiality of their own gaze and presumes it to be universal and unsullied by bias, they unwittingly undermine other possible epistemic positions. Therefore, a common practice in the humanities, as well as the natural sciences, is to declare the nature of the epistemic position of the researcher and their selected approach.

However, the “positionality” of the researcher is often only considered at the level of the social agent, namely, the position the researcher occupies in society in terms of broad social groupings such as gender, class, race, education level, nationality, ethnicity, neuro(a)typicality, etc. Transparency about social positionality plays a role in understanding a research outcome, but could it be useful to extend this to include character positionality? While my modern, conscientious academic character declares her position to be partial within a society of individuals, the academic character *itself* passes undeclared as a partial character within the community of the self. With that, she hazards the very exclusion she hopes to mitigate, only now on an individual level. My academic character pledges herself to the pursuit of knowledge, yet she does not disclose or even suppose that the very adoption of the academic character in the first place has determined the kind of knowledge that I can produce. Just as social positionality produces partial knowledge, so does character positionality. As we have seen, far from being transparent, the academic character can bring to the research its own biases, exaggerations and blindnesses.

Who ought to be doing my thinking in this research? Should it be the runner character, at the expense of the academic character, or the academic character at the expense of the runner character? Someone must be forsaken in the enterprise, after all. If a character is a frame of mind, what is the right frame of mind to adopt in the research project?

Miloš and Slavica Ranković similarly ask what are the “optimal” states of mind for thinking in their article and art proposal, “Art in the Time of Contractions.”³³⁵ Here the authors propose an art project that engages women in the early stages of labour to think speculatively about the future of humanity, asking whether we actually miss out on key insights when we dismiss thoughts had by people in extreme conditions, such as giving birth:

We wish to ask who does this thinking and when do they do it: is there a privileged state—of mind, of emotions, of intellect, of personal affairs, or repute—to think the future? [...] The history of Western thought is replete with guides on optimal thinking conditions. These rarely include such states as dodging mustard gas while sloshing through a bloodied trench, or dodging neighbours’ eyes on the way to a Black Maria. This is understandable, but is there something important lost on the way? Could some of these thoughts enrich the community’s decision-making ahead of social reforms or acts of war? Could our thinking about the future be similarly enriched by those that literally experience the birth-pangs of the future? Are the thoughts of women obscured or cleared in the state of labour?

My answer to the question of “which character” ought to be doing the thinking in this PhD project is similar to the answer to “which social agents” should be active within fields of research. A “white, male, upper class” perspective in research is not in and of itself a more “accurate” or “inaccurate” position from which to make knowledge. The inaccuracy, skewness and subordination of “the other” within research fields to date come into play when research is dominated by *any* singular perspective. The answer to the question of social positionality in research is not to exclude the historically dominant position, but to diversify the positions that make up the community of research as a whole. Other positions variously come with their own blindnesses and biases to research, but they will also bring in-

³³⁵ Miloš and Slavica Ranković, “Art in the Time of Contractions,” *MIDIRS Midwifery Digest* 24, no. 4 (December 2014): 536–38.

sights inaccessible to others. Diversity in the social positionality of the research community as a whole is what is desired, for the sake of epistemic wisdom as well as social justice.

Conversely, let us consider the role of character positionality in research. When I make my coffee, open my laptop, and return to the document in which I am writing my dissertation, it is within that little ritual that I have “snapped” into the academic character. I have not given thought, prior to starting to write, about which character to adopt when doing the research. Admittedly, even after all this work, the idea that I should take on a different character when doing my research can still sometimes sound absurd to me. But that may be the very force of habit that reinstates the academic character, time and again, in the office chair, writing the dissertation. Not very long ago it was considered absurd and laughable that women should do academic research, so notions should not be dismissed just because they fall well outside of “common sense.” Common sense should always be regarded with suspicion by academics.³³⁶

The case study of my article, in which I overshot a critique of an existing model, provides just one example of the way in which the academic character can leave an “artefact” on the research output, a stylistic error produced by the force of habit. All characters leave their artefacts on our behaviours, all characters lead us to overshoot in certain directions of thought and behaviour, and remain ignorant to others. If human beings, and so researchers, are always in character, this suggests that when left unquestioned or unexamined, certain character positions will dominate in the research and determine its course in ways that may go undetected. These dominant character positions necessarily perform an erasure of the knowledge that could have been generated by adopting other character positions.

³³⁶ Louis Althusser refers to common sense as the effect of “obviousness,” which for him is the “elementary effect” of ideology, and thus a prime target for critique. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 116.

When I end my writing session and leave my laptop to go about my day, I will be a teacher, a student, a lover, an optimist, a cynic, a depressive, an initiator, a ruminator, a victim, a specialist, a layman, a negotiator, a hopeless romantic, a pragmatist, an artist, a dreamer, a hungry animal, a responsible sister, an indulgent daughter, a crude joker, a loudmouth, an introvert, a Slav, an atheist, a moralist, a recluse, an attention seeker, a leader, a follower, a master, a beginner, an interpreter, a hot head, a pacifist, a gossip, a citizen, a listener, a crowd member, a protester, a supporter, a pencil pusher, a runner. What sort of knowledge would these characters produce if they were not omitted from the research?³³⁷ Here would be a good moment to remember that this is not even my (the academic character's) idea, but the idea of the nameless tangential character in the *Politics of Inner Self* performance experiment: *she* is responsible for the ideas in this chapter.

Therefore, while the academic character has shown its historical value by carrying with it a number of "good habits," it may not be the *only* character I wish to consult in the research project. There are other characters that can think for me. Each one is enabling and limiting in its own way. I propose the answer to the question of character positionality within research to be the same as the answer to the question of social positionality: diversity. Diversity of positions, whether on the individual or the communal level, is an antidote to the inevitable blind spots that come with the condition of partial perspectives. Occasionally adopting a different character in the space of research may then potentially enhance critical thinking and research rigour. Within this way of working, working with one's own characters, affordance and blindness are two sides of the same coin. There is no all-seeing perspective from which to think and write. Character is a kind of thought infrastructure, and

³³⁷ I did record myself thinking about this research while running, but this experiment needs more thought (for example, talking may not be the best way to record a shift in mind-frame when breathless). See Runner Researcher Clip 1: <https://youtu.be/hPfqKW8pazc> and Runner Researcher Clip 2: <https://youtube.com/shorts/itpKM6fVJeg>. For now, the "Documentation of Practice" serves as a better example of the effects of switching mind frame through character play.

changing this infrastructure from time to time enables new thoughts and perspectives to emerge.

Bound up in the academic character is not only her voice, which can be read in these words, but also some of the paraphernalia that attend it, such as the aesthetics of the printed word on the clear, white page. Hopefully, this discussion and disclosure of the partial nature of my current perspective enables us both, as author and reader, to avoid inadvertently giving primacy of interpretation to the printed letter, which carries with it connotations of the sincerity of academic character, as opposed to the characters in video “performance,” which bring with them connotations of pretence and falseness. My academic character can be placed alongside the panoply of other characters that feature in my performance-based work, on a level playing field with them. She is just one of many frames of mind, or characters, in which to do my research. Maybe one of the reasons I came to the academy to do my artistic research in the first place was to meet this academic character and learn who she was.³³⁸

In this chapter, we have begun to chart out a preliminary taxonomy of characters as they appeared in this research, and have chosen to refer to two special classes in particular: tethered characters and tangential characters. Tethered characters are bound to the social milieu through the expectations of other human beings and are restricted to being consistent in their public behaviours. Conversely, tangential characters are relatively free of such social binds and can be interchanged noncommittally and inconsistently throughout a period of performance. They can also lead the human being on a tangent of expression inconsistent with the thoughts and behaviours of the tethered character(s). A politics of inner self arises in the way in which expression time is distributed among the characters within one’s possible range of expression.

³³⁸ See “Prologue.”

In the final section of the chapter we began to consider how diversity of character within the human being endows it with multiple perspectives, just as a diversity of social agents within society endows that society with multiple perspectives. I considered how other characters besides the “academic character” could participate in the research.

While this chapter introduced a distinction between tethered and tangential characters, the next chapter will explore another, related distinction: that between “the social agent” and “the human being.” There, I will further speculate on what possibilities might arise out of extending the notion of diversity to the individual human being and consider what consequences a politics of inner self might have for politics on a societal level.

6. The Holographic Human: A Romance of Many Dimensions



Fig. 29. A colourised still of Lucille Ball (left) and Tallulah Bankhead (right) in *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour*.³³⁹

The title for this speculative chapter comes from a brief performance session, recorded on sound, performed in a bathtub, in which I took on a Tallulah Bankhead-inspired character and began elaborating on Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*,³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Jerry Thorpe, "The Celebrity Next Door," Season 1, Episode 2, "The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour," CBS, 3 December 1957. Image: <https://papermoonloveslucy.tumblr.com/post/132932396813/the-celebrity-next-door>.

³⁴⁰ Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (London: Penguin, 1998).

using his story about spatial dimensions to think about dimensions of the soul. The clip can be listened to [here](#).³⁴¹

Schoolmaster Edwin A. Abbott wrote *Flatland* in order to help his mathematics students intuit higher dimensions beyond the first, second and third. He did this by inventing a two-dimensional world called Flatland, in which one of the inhabitants, a square, is exposed to a mysterious visitor, a sphere from Spaceland (the world of three dimensions). Since the square can only experience the universe in two dimensions, he can only ever perceive a slice of the sphere at a time, who, when moving through Flatland, appears from the point of view of the square to be a circle that miraculously manages to change its own size. As the sphere draws near the square, the latter discovers to his alarm that the sphere is even able to touch him from the inside; touch his innards. In this way, Abbott hints at how we, three-dimensional beings, might experience visitation from the fourth and higher dimensions.

The performance practice demonstrated here has been posited as a character-modelling system which enables me to flex certain intuitions about character, the human being, and the mechanics of self. In this way, the aim of the performance practice has been to test, develop and train my own intuitions about the human being as “a romance of many dimensions”—a character-playing machine.

In this chapter, I will speculate on some of the wider possible implications of revisiting intuitions about the mechanics of self through such a performance practice. In particular, I will make a distinction between “the social agent” and “the human being,” and speculate on the potential risks of conflating the two. I will frame “the social agent” as a relatively two-dimensional, flattened representation of the human being, although arguably a necessary

³⁴¹ <https://on.soundcloud.com/oh6cu>.

flattening if social complexity is favoured over individual diversity. I will then consider the relative multidimensionality of the human being by comparing it to a hologram, a kind of image whose “pixels” act as parts of the image but also contain within them the whole image. Finally, I will ask what is at stake with personal diversity: whether something is lost when the “flattened” social agent is adopted, and whether the multidimensionality of the human being should be nurtured or tamed. This becomes a question about the trade-off between individual and communal complexity, the answer to which determines different social realities.

6.1 The Social Agent and the Human Being

A key part of the definition of character here is that it is a distinctive mark. It is a mark that sets itself apart from others. Someone's character tells me that they are clearly Joanna, not Joseph. For something to be a character then, I need to be able to *recognise* it as being set apart from other characters. This also means that the character must be to some degree predictable. When I recognise Joanna as Joanna, it is because she behaves the way I expect Joanna to behave, so she must be acting, to some degree, predictably. We can think of Joanna's character as a kind of recognisable pattern, like the word J-O-A-N-N-A itself, which I can recognise and read.

But what if human beings are in fact very flexible and skilled at playing different characters, not only one? Let us imagine that, rather than containing a particular, fixed character that is unchanging, Joanna is a kind of robot who can run any character, like an app. Joanna the robot lives in a world populated by other robots like her, who are all capable of running any character. But to be able to run a certain character, just like an app, Joanna must download it first. She reads books and watches films containing lots of impressive characters, heroes, villains and all, and by taking all these characters in, she is downloading them, learning their familiar patterns. For example, she learns that villains like to laugh by roaring: "Mohahahaha!" And so if ever Joanna wanted to act like a villain, she could be sure that laughing in this way would get the other robots around her to recognise her as such.

In this hypothetical world populated by robots, like us, they also require certain resources to stay alive, and no single robot is capable of sustaining itself. Robots must cooperate by building robot cities, managing robot farms and finding robot mates to raise families with. It turns out that character is an important technology when it comes to robot cooperation,

precisely because it makes robots predictable. We know that a robot could, in principle, run virtually any character programme, or even go haywire and behave in completely random, unrecognisable ways if it wanted to. But it does not pay off for them to act randomly or unrecognisably. Robots want to be recognised by other robots, so that they can ask them for help and help them in turn. That is how they organise and how they survive.

So even though Joanna is capable of running different character programmes, she learns that it pays off to stay more or less consistent with one—the main Joanna character programme. When she approaches the other robots, they can tell she is not a threat because she is behaving predictably, and they can tell she is open for cooperation because her predictability means that they can expect certain things from her. These other robots in turn offer her the same courtesy and each of them sticks to one “main” programme consistently, so that Joanna can expect certain things from them.

The character programme that each robot consistently runs becomes known as their “personality,” and over time, we forget that they can play other characters, because they always seem to be playing the same one. What happens then, is that the other robots begin to believe that Joanna *is* the main Joanna character app she keeps playing. They forget that she can run other apps and begin to regard her as the main Joanna character app itself.

What if human beings were such universal character-playing robots like Joanna? Since they depend on social organisation to survive, human beings too must behave predictably to cooperate by learning to exhibit more or less consistent characters to others. Perceiving a “human Joanna” as if she were just that one character she keeps running, allows her to seamlessly fit into society. Her character works like a dream most of the time. For example, the other humans present her with gifts that they can guess she will like based on

her previous behaviour. The process of becoming a predictable pattern, becoming a character, is something we learn through childhood and continue to hone as adults. Maintaining the predictability level of one's own behaviour, maintaining a consistent character by which others "know" you, is a skill. Like walking and talking, having a character is trained into an infant from early on, because it will equip that human with the tools to cooperate, and therefore survive, in a social world. We can call the main character app, the main pattern of behaviours by which we know a person, the "social agent."

However, this system in which human beings simplify and limit the range of characters they can display has its glitches. A common problem is that of "betrayal." In the universal character-running robot example, I gave a simplified picture of these robots, by describing them as only running one app. To add a bit more detail to that picture, we could say that really, a single robot does not only need to act cooperatively in one type of social environment, but in several. And so different character apps may be appropriate to each social environment (e.g. work, school, home, etc.). A glitch can occur when such a robot finds itself in a situation where they must interact with members of two distinct social environments simultaneously, because then it becomes unclear which character app they ought to be running (as exemplified by Moscarda in Section 4.1). Running one app could signal a betrayal to members of the other social environment, because one may be behaving in ways that conflict with their expectations.

Another problem that can occur is that we may find that the world is moulding us into a character we might not necessarily wish to run. For example, while it may be nice to know that a person's predictability enables us to gift them things that "match" their character and which they are thus likely to like, such gifts may in fact shape the recipient's character in the first place. An example of this is Judith Butlers's argument that women are "girled" through a consistent series of specific treatments by others that begin, perhaps, with the

speech act performed by a doctor when they exclaim: “It’s a girl!,” following the results of an ultrasound scan.³⁴² From then on, a succession of social mechanisms slot into place to train the female infant to acquire the “correct” character. Through the gifting of a specific selection of toys, such as dolls or play kitchens, the infant girl learns that her role is to mother, cook and clean, and internalises the task of reproductive labour as an essential part of her identity.

In the making of film and drama, the word “character” is used almost interchangeably with the word “role.” The proximity of these concepts appears in everyday social structures too, precisely because character is a technology for organising human beings into types that perform roles. When the female infant is growing up, we train her to hone her main character app, and being female becomes part of her character. We watch her playing happily with the dolls and warmly think: “How typical!,” but our gifts are shaping her behaviours. Through a series of rewards and punishments, the female infant acts increasingly like the sort of creature who would love to be given dolls as a gift, and with this reinforcing feedback loop, her destiny is being written—a destiny which many women have found oppressive. The problem is not that she enjoys playing with the dolls, or that we are giving her dolls, but rather that, in watching her behaviours, we focus too intently on the character of her budding social agent, forgetting that this little human being is in fact capable of playing many other characters. Like Joanna the robot, she has merely learnt that it pays off to stick to one. By forgetting her potential for running more diverse characters, we begin to see the main character app she is running as her self in its entirety, as her essential, unchanging state. Her destiny as woman becomes much harder to escape. The way in which we currently understand “character” and the roles it creates, the way in which the human being is constantly reduced to the social agent, accounts for much social injustice and violence

³⁴² Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 7, 232. This notion is based on Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that one is not born, but “becomes” a woman in *The Second Sex*, 293.

against individuals—even wars. Because certain social groups and entire nations acquire “character” and “role” much in the same way that human beings do, it can be difficult for them to escape the way they are perceived.³⁴³

These are some of the undesirable consequences of living in a system where human beings achieve their complex social organisation through the simplification of their character. It is as if there exists a trade-off between social organisation and individual diversity: the simpler and more predictable the constituent members of a society are, the more organised and functional the society is at a higher level. If individuals were permitted to run a greater diversity of characters, would society become dysfunctional and inefficient? Even if this were to be true, perhaps the most profound question is: should we care if the human being’s capabilities as a universal character-playing machine are deliberately ignored in favour of a well oiled, functioning society capable of efficiently organising people into types and roles?

In Section 5.2, I suggested that characters could be classified according to how “tethered” they are to the social milieu. A strongly tethered character takes on a special significance when the human being enters the social milieu: once adopted, it begins to acquire all kinds of rights and responsibilities. This strongly tethered character (or set of characters) is “the social agent.” Its significance is so great, that when the human being enters the social milieu, it is read in its entirety as *if* it were only one character, the social agent, and not a character-playing machine capable of running different characters. A kind of suspension of disbelief occurs: just as in a theatre we suspend our reading of the actors as actors and instead see them as real people doing real things, so in the social milieu we suspend our

³⁴³ The second entry for the noun “character” in The Britannica Dictionary defines it as “a set of qualities that are shared by many people in a group, country, etc.—usually singular,” citing examples such as “the *character* of the American people” and “the French/Japanese/Mexican national *character*.” <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/character>, last accessed 4 September 2022.

reading of human beings as human beings and see them instead as social agents. This brings us to another one of the research findings of this thesis:

The social agent is that character which is adopted by the human being when it enters the social milieu, endowing it with rights and responsibilities.

The “world” to which Shakespeare refers when he writes: “All the world’s a stage,/And all the men and women merely Players,” is the social milieu.³⁴⁴ In Shakespeare’s time, what was “worldly” encapsulated those things that were of social significance, as opposed to spiritual or natural significance. The world *is* a stage if we take it to be the social milieu because it has the power to suspend our disbelief in the character that is the social agent: we forget the human being that is running it beneath.

The Bureaucratisation of Spirit

The adoption of the social agent when entering the social milieu is an act of tempering the human being, disciplining it, attenuating its potential for diversity towards a singular, self-consistent output. As was shown in Chapter 4, there is a strong social distaste for character variability and a strong social preference for consistency and “expressive coherence” in the presentation of self in everyday life.³⁴⁵ According to Goffman, this required consistency

points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. [...] A certain bureaucritization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. H. J. Oliver (London: Penguin, 2015), 2.7.139–40.

³⁴⁵ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 63.

³⁴⁶ Goffman, 63–64.

Goffman's use of the self-deprecating phrase "all-too-human" is employed to highlight the human being as an animal, or "creature of variable impulse with moods and energies," a side of self which social interaction often seeks to suppress.³⁴⁷ This human being is the "poor, mortified body" that Moscarda caught sight of in his reflection when his social agent had finally been stripped away. It is the "zombie" self which is always there, and whose gruesome, socially illegible facial expression we are occasionally given a glimpse of in a mistimed portrait photograph, where the sitter's face has been caught in the journey between two coherent expressions. The unsocialised gaze of the camera lens shows us how willing we are to edit out the monstrous stills expressed by others around us as their faces journey from one pose to the next—our attention fixes only on what is socially relevant and acquires a strategic blindness to the rest.³⁴⁸

This zombie, this animal, this mortified body, is often perceived as a worrisome and unnerving thing; degenerate, uncivilised and primitive. Over this creature, George Santayana prefers the "mask" we wear, arguing that what I have here called "the social agent" is truer to who we are than the unarticulated thing that lies beneath.³⁴⁹ Character captures our attention, is legible, is aesthetically appreciable. The human being is conditioned to disappear from our attention, is illegible, is abject.

Could it be that what is seen as so aesthetically displeasing about contemplating the human being in and of itself (set apart from character) is not its animality per se, nor its unkemptness and lack of table manners, but its status as a being of potential, rather than essence? And could it be that the very purpose of the social agent has been to suppress the knowledge that we can switch masks at any time, to uphold the belief that the social agent

³⁴⁷ Goffman, 63.

³⁴⁸ This photographed zombie example comes from Miloš Ranković, "Something like thinking, that is, intervenes," https://www.academia.edu/5879590/ Something_like_thinking_that_is_interven_Hebb_The_spectral_spiritualization_that_is_at_work_in_any_tekhne_Derrida_.

³⁴⁹ George Santayana, cited in Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 64.

is the very essence of self, rather than one of many characters within the repertoire of the human being?

It is perhaps not only our “animal aspect” that we conceal when we enter the social milieu. It is the fact that we hold the potential to run multiple characters and are not essentially beholden to any particular one. This is why children who move schools are often told they have a chance to “reinvent themselves” in the new social milieu. The social agent is a fiction that we keep suspended by placing a veto on performing other characters that come into conflict with it. This is enabled through social correction and training, and becomes so habitual that only the odd, irreconcilable case of frame switching and the inability to segregate audiences, amongst other performance disruptions, blasts it into view. And yet, even when such disruptions happen, they are quickly put under wraps again. As Goffman noted, people engaged in a social interaction will often help each other maintain a shared “definition of the situation,” even if this definition is known by some of the parties to be false: this is what is called “tact.”³⁵⁰ It is the *variable character* of the human being, not only its bodily reality, that is considered abject, and in social interaction we go through a great deal of effort to suppress awareness of that variability.

Vertical Disciplining

Why, then, bureaucratise the spirit? Why exercise tact in order to help an individual perform a consistent character and why engage in a strategic forgetting of the human being in order to place sovereignty of self in the hands of the social agent? Although the social agent is relatively simple and homogenous in its capacity as a character, compared with the complexity of the human being in its capacity as a machine of character potential, the social agent is a vitally important character. As we saw in the case of Joanna, the charac-

³⁵⁰ Goffman, 166.

ter-playing robot, without the social agent there can be no society of any kind, whether human or machine.

Daniel Dennett understands the social agent (what he calls the “Self”) to have evolved for its function as a user interface for other humans.³⁵¹ Just as the field of human-computer interaction covers the ways in which computers can be engineered to more seamlessly accommodate humans interacting with them, enabling more intuitive ways of manipulating the computer as a tool, so too have evolutionary processes favoured the emergence of the social agent as a tool for human-to-human interaction. By streamlining behaviour into a single character, the variety of behaviours exhibited by the social agent becomes relatively predictable, and because of this, the human being becomes relatively operable by others within the social milieu. This essential need to use and be used by others in order to distribute labour in ways that enable the survival of our species is why, even if the character one displays must vary, it is vital to keep it consistent *for each social group* (through audience segregation) so that, to each audience and for all intents and purposes, one is still predictable enough to be interacted with by the relevant agents.

For Dennett, of special importance is the fact that the social agent allows the human being to enter the social milieu as a stakeholder and responsible agent, even in a complex world in which the source of responsibility (where the cause of an act or event originated) is in fact impossible to trace precisely. The computation required to trace the chain of causation for a single action down to a choreography of atoms (e.g. the act of throwing a ball) is intractably large. The social agent thus acts as a notation, a shorthand, a currency,³⁵² or an abstract representation of that staggering, distributed calculation. When I say “I” threw a ball, there is much that has been economised by that “I.”

³⁵¹ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 249.

³⁵² Dennett, 283–84, uses the concept of currency to explain the reality that is instantiated by belief in the case of agency.

The social agent claims this intractable chain of causation as its own by standing in for where the buck stops for responsibility.³⁵³ This is what Dennett calls “taking the intentional stance:” a stance, or way of looking at a system, which allows us to *compress* the staggering amount of computation involved in producing an action like throwing a ball into an economical way of capturing causality. Indeed, one possible definition of “agent” could be: “that which captures causality at a higher level of abstraction.” We adopt the intentional stance when we say that a bacterium “wants” to move towards the sugar molecules, or when we begin to see gliders “gliding” in the Game of Life.³⁵⁴ Agents “do” and “want” insofar as these verbs capture deeper layers of incalculable causation that do not actually stop at the level of the agent. The social agent compresses the intractable chain of causation behind social phenomena, endowing the human being with social responsibility and agency.

While the human being may in principle be able to run different characters, in the practical everyday of the social milieu, it pays off for the individual to streamline their range of character and act *as if* the human being were equivalent to the social agent. It is as if simplification at the individual level aided the emergence of complexity at the communal level. Through the bureaucratisation of spirit, through the neat categorising of self into social filing cabinets of character, the individual may be tempered into becoming a predictable cog that contributes to the expressive range of a larger, communal being.

Miloš Ranković’s concept of “vertical” or “top-down” disciplining refers to this disturbing trade-off between complexity at different levels.³⁵⁵ Vertical disciplining occurs when the (inevitably violent) “flattening” of a system at one level enables systems at other levels of

³⁵³ Dennett, 287.

³⁵⁴ Dennett, 45.

³⁵⁵ An iteration of this idea can be found in Miloš Ranković, “Frozen Complexity,” in *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research*, ed. Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 160. The upcoming motorway example is from personal communication.

organisation to flourish in their diversity. *Without* vertical disciplining, these would-be other levels of complexity are stymied—also a kind of violence. Whoever has the power to intervene in vertical disciplining also has the power to choose their preferred level of complexity.

The motorways criss-crossing all over the UK are one of Ranković's examples. Each laying of tarmac, tonne by tonne of it across the land, violently erases the biodiversity beneath it, replacing it with the austere and utterly passionless grey face of unending homogeneity. And yet, zooming out and looking at the same phenomenon at another level of organisation, these motorways become the veins and arteries of culture, lubricating social mobility, re-connecting severed ties, democratising resources and enabling diversity at other levels. Globalisation exhibits vertical disciplining through, for instance, the increasing universal adoption of English as a *lingua franca* (a gradual flattening of linguistic diversity). This is precisely why it elicits ambivalent reactions: some hail the new age of cosmopolitanism and widespread multiculturalism, others lament the flattening of the local, discrete cultures on which globalisation depends. As we toggle our view of globalisation at different levels, we may find reasons to alternately abhor and celebrate what we see.

The social agent emerges out of a “bureaucratisation of spirit” and becomes an instrument of vertical disciplining, through which the diversity of the individual human being is tempered and disciplined in favour of social complexity. The evolutionary argument suggests that this “choice” in favour of social over individual complexity is the outcome of evolutionary selection pressures: human memes and genes were more likely to reproduce themselves when social complexity was favoured.

The Holographic Human

It turns out, then, that the human being is overqualified for society. It can perform a much greater variety of character than the social agent, but does not (at least when it enters the social milieu). Like a computer that is only permitted to run one application, or smartphone that is used only to make calls, the gap between capability and use is wide.

What sort of a thing *is* a human being, if it is different in kind to the social agent, or to any character for that matter? In particular, if it is in some sense to be understood as “singular” but also “universal” (as in a “universal character computing machine”)—a being of potential, not of essence—then how does it act as a “part” within a “whole?” What is the relationship between the human being and the social milieu?

At this point we can turn to holons, holography and the notion of the distributed person as tools designed to rethink part/whole relationships in ways that transcend the traditional binary, by allowing us to think of a given system as a “part” and a “whole” at the same time. This work begins, perhaps, with Arthur Koestler’s notion of the holon. For Koestler, biological, but also other kinds of holons are “self-regulating open systems which display both the autonomous properties of wholes and the dependent properties of parts. This dichotomy is present on every level of every type of hierarchic organization, and is referred to as the ‘Janus phenomenon.’”³⁵⁶ The holon enables us to reconceptualise “hierarchy” as a system composed of part-wholes that are only relationally, not essentially, either part or whole. Thus, an organ in the body can be considered a part of the body but also an autonomous system in itself, composed of an intricate choreography of sub-assemblies of its own. Koestler applied this notion of “holarchy” to all manner of systems, from biological, to social, to galactic.

³⁵⁶ Arthur Koestler and John R. Smythies, *Beyond Reductionism*, 211. “Janus” refers to the ancient Roman god of transition and passages who had two faces.

The “Janus phenomenon,” encapsulating this state of being a part and a whole at the same time, seems to make an appearance in a footnote by Goffman to his discussion on the need to maintain consistent impressions before an audience. When attempting to understand self-presentation at the individual level, one might diagnose the “self-deception” and “insincerity” involved in projecting a singular performance as a *personal weakness*, phrased in clinical language as “self-delusion.” A better way, ventures Goffman, might be to understand such apparent self-deception as that which “results when two different roles, performer and audience, come to be compressed into the same individual.”³⁵⁷ Thus, we can understand the maintenance of character consistency and the suspension of disbelief in the social agent as equivalent to the human being, in terms of what results when a person must negotiate their double status as a self-contained, autonomous agent on the one hand, and part of a larger social milieu on the other.

But one could go further than the Janus phenomenon in terms of transcending the strict split between “part” and “whole,” using the related notion of holography as a model. In a conventional digital image such as a .jpeg file, zooming in one finds that each pixel corresponds to a discrete part of the image as a whole: a bit of skin, or a bit of hair. A holographic image is different, however, in that each “pixel” of the image pictures the whole, albeit a little blurred. Alfred Gell noticed this unique property of holograms and used it to configure the relationship between a single artwork (part) and the oeuvre to which it belongs (whole).³⁵⁸ He uses the hologram model to explain that, although we cannot simultaneously see a *whole* artist’s oeuvre, we are given a blurry glimpse of it whenever we look at any single work within that oeuvre.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 86–87n6.

³⁵⁸ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 166.

³⁵⁹ Gell, 241.

More generally, an all-encompassing *network* can only ever be seen through a *node* within it. Miloš Ranković calls this unseeable-in-its totality network “the bulk,” and its nodes “the conspicuous,” thus likening their ratio and co-dependence to the conspicuous tip of an iceberg and its invisible, submarine bulk:

We used to think, deterministic systems are well-behaved, only to learn that our predictive confidence (about weather, history, psyche) is riding on crests of regularity, barely skimming the ocean of chaotic maths. We thought genes govern development, only to find that stretches of DNA are no more than relative bottlenecks in irreducible cycles of developmental contingencies. We thought meaning is in the order of a code, but neglected the meaning of code. We overestimated the genius, never asking who put the genie into the bottle. We overestimated the boss, by overlooking the strings. Eyeballing the eye, we mistook a creation of a bulk for a conspicuous mark of the Creator. Perhaps this is what we are learning, that the conspicuous [...] is just a face of the bulk, one among the untold multitude in the unfathomably multitasking economy of the hard working now, the bulk’s interface with itself, with the future, conspicuously facing up to itself, beating the beat of the iterating currents of being.³⁶⁰

For Ranković, the conspicuous is the site at which the bulk reckons with itself, “materialis[ing] where the god has stopped.”³⁶¹ It is not only that the conspicuous (being diminutive to the bulk and a consequence of it) cannot “see” the bulk in its entirety save for its own partial, blurry view, but *the bulk too*, has an epistemic horizon.³⁶² So totally im-

³⁶⁰ Miloš Ranković, “The Bulk and the Conspicuous: A Turn on Žižek’s Plea,” unpublished paper (2009): 5, https://www.academia.edu/23519401/The_Bulk_and_the_Conspicuous_A_Turn_on_Žižek_s_Plea. See also Miloš Ranković, “Something like thinking.”

³⁶¹ This is a reference to Dakota Indian philosophy, which Alfred Gell compares with a work by Marcel Duchamp (*Network of Stoppages*) to suggest that temporal stoppages are needed to apprehend the network, unseeable in its totality. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 250.

³⁶² This idea also appears in Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 91n6.

mersed in the painstaking production of the hard working now, even the bulk cannot see itself in its entirety—it is “all face.”³⁶³ In fact, the only way that the bulk can see itself, the only way it can be in touch with itself, is through the conspicuous. This is related to the notion of situated knowledges in which the varied research produced by individuals and influenced by their partial perspectives becomes the conspicuous: the only way by which the bulk can know itself.

Following the computational view of character and the human being, there seems to be a holographic relationship between the human being and the social milieu. In this case, the social milieu churns in and out of itself all the human characters that have ever come into expression. In turn, these characters replay themselves again and again in individual human beings. The human being, like a “pixel” in a hologram, contains a (blurry) picture of the whole social milieu. It is a *part* of the whole, but it simultaneously *contains* the whole. The human being is the conspicuous face, or interface, of the bulk that is the social milieu. Thus, the human being enables the social milieu to have a relationship with itself. This is how the human being becomes a medium for character, an idea that was intuited in studies of spiritual mediums, as suggested in this passage from Frederic Myers, the nineteenth-century co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research:

Each of us is in reality an abiding psychical entity far more extensive than he knows—an individuality which can never express itself completely through any corporeal manifestation. The self manifests itself through the organism; but there is always some part of the self unmanifested, and always, as it seems, some power of organic expression in abeyance or reserve.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Things that are “all face,” such as clock faces, cliff faces or ceilings, is a theme explored in my novel, *Anomaline*. By virtue of being all face, they have no neck, no way of turning about to look at themselves, and are blind to themselves despite being in another sense, all-seeing.

³⁶⁴ Frederic Myers cited in Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, 267.

Once again, we are reminded of Clarissa Dalloway and the way she feels herself to be, not “here, here, here [...] but everywhere.”³⁶⁵ As a human being, Mrs Dalloway contains within herself a blurry image of all human character—that is why she is, seen from a certain perspective, everywhere—in that woman in the street, in that man behind the counter, and even in trees, or barns. On the other hand, as a social agent (as the Clarissa Dalloway that is to give a party that evening), she suddenly becomes committed to a *part*, a role, which forsakes the blurry vastness of the human being in favour of coming into sharp definition as a character: a “distinctive mark” setting itself apart from the noise of “all marks” that is the human being. Perhaps one can never “be” a human being, but only ever a character amongst possible characters. Perhaps “to be” is precisely to step into character.³⁶⁶

OpenAI’s text to image generator DALL-E 2 potentially provides a practical way of observing this holographic relationship between character and character-running machines. This is because DALL-E itself is a character-running machine. Trained on human visual cultures, it was designed to internalise many different artistic styles, some of them attributable to well-known artists. With DALL-E, it is possible to enter a prompt like “a futuristic cityscape painted by Van Gogh” and get an original image that is nevertheless convincing in its adoption of the character of Van Gogh’s painting style. Being able to end prompts with the suffix “in the style of X” and get a coherent result means that DALL-E has internalised multiple artistic characters. DALL-E itself is comparatively characterless. In an ideal sense, it is a universal character-playing machine, its range of possible expression limited by the extent of the data upon which it is trained. DALL-E and other AI systems designed to return expressive output such as GPT-3 which can write articles in the voice of different authors, potentially provide a way of experimentally exploring the computational model of

³⁶⁵ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 168.

³⁶⁶ This is a similar point to the one made by Pirandello’s *Moscarda* on “form,” discussed on page 199.

self I have used here, in which a human being features as a universal character-playing machine also.

Despite the human being's broad character range, the social milieu demands that we attenuate all of the potential of the human being into one set of characters—the social agent—in order to train our character consistency and make of ourselves predictable interfaces. The human being continues to be overqualified for society, but is the continued adoption of a social agent a *necessary* flattening of the human being?

6.2 What is at Stake with Personal Diversity?

Once we conceive of “the social agent” as a character that has intuitively developed as a means of managing human predictability and thus cooperation between humans; once we conceive of the social agent as but one character (or set of characters) of many that can be run by the human being, *how we wish to manage human character* suddenly becomes a question open to collective discourse, rather than an invisible habit that blindly regulates itself.

The management of human character (that is, the management of human behavioural predictability) reveals itself then as yet another dimension across which social dynamics play out—potentially as critical, in its deterministic power, as a choice of political system or the infrastructure of a city. The way in which human character is understood and managed directly shapes social discourse and interactions, precisely because human character has evolved to be a communicative interface between human beings.

To be clear, the issue I raise here is not a matter of *whether* or not we should manage human character variability. Human character variability is *already* being managed, regulated, controlled. In the discussion on frame switching (Section 4.1), we saw how “authenticity” functions as an aesthetic property that manages and promotes character consistency in human beings through social punishment and reward. The question, rather, is whether human character variability should continue to be managed blindly, based on unexamined assumptions about the mechanics of self, or consciously, based on a study of the mechanics of self and a collective discourse that enables greater participation in our own social reality.

A more general question concerns the way in which we might choose to organise our relationships between the social and the individual in the future: do our modern technologies and new theoretical models of self enable us to cope with an alternative, perhaps more variable, fluid or complex social agent? Currently, social agents must still strive concertedly towards self-coherency and consistency. Can that change, and is it desirable for that to change?

Let us imagine that sufficient importance has been attached to this problem of the management of human character variability, that a group of us human beings begin to gather in an imaginary market square. (Let it be a virtual market square on a Minecraft server to accommodate the fantasy of the democratic agora alongside the realities of globalisation). A concerned citizen of Minecraft's Athens pipes up with a question she wishes to bring to the group:

Hey guys, do you think that it is correct to assume that there is an essential trade-off between personal diversity and social complexity? What I mean is, in order to cooperate with other human beings, in order to be of use to you and for you to be of use to me, to get food, shelter, companionship, fulfilment; in order for us all to have access to these things, do I necessarily have to exhibit myself as a coherent social agent with a single, unified character? Do I need to simplify myself in order to be legible to you?

Uneasy murmuring breaks out amongst the crowd, until a voice from the the back rises over the rest and says,

Look sister, I appreciate the dream of extending the individual's powers of self-expression through a cultivation of personal diversity—I really do. But that's just not the way of the world. If you want diversity on one level, you'll need to sacrifice it on

another. That means, if you want a diverse, responsive social system—food delivered to your door within minutes, green jobs to tackle the impending threat of climate change, or all the world’s poetry—things need to be simpler and more streamlined on the granular level. That means you and me. We can either be expressive as individuals, at the expense of social complexity, or expressive as a society, at the expense of personal complexity. Take your pick.

“Hang on, hang on,” interjects another member of the public, who happens to be wearing a choice magenta outfit complete with a sparkling cape,

Don’t be so fatalistic. You’re forgetting where we are. Look around you, look at yourself! If the world of online gaming has taught us anything about ourselves, it’s that personal diversity can be cultivated with the use of new technologies. Perhaps we can use virtual avatars to support the potential of our personal diversity!

While the trade-off you’re talking about may have been a necessary solution in the past, a solution we landed on through the trial and error of cultural evolution, this may no longer be the only way to think about the organisation of human character. Perhaps we can develop technologies—and perhaps such technologies already exist—which may enable us as a society to cope with greater personal diversity without harming our capacities to organise at higher levels.

Here, I see my cue to jump into the conversation, and so, with a swish of my avatar’s fox tail I say,

Maybe so, but it would take more than technological innovation for that to work. We would also need changes to happen in aesthetics. It would have to be possible to see personal diversity enact itself in public without the stigma of “duplicity” or “inau-

thenticity” attached to it. Who knows, maybe those Hollywood heroes that stick to their slogans no matter what, will one day be replaced by protagonists who try out a number of different characters in the space of the film—maybe such plurality and changeability will one day be something people nod approvingly at.

Such a communal dialogue as this imaginary one would be, of course, only the beginning of a politics of human character variability. But arriving even at the possibility of this conversation would not have been possible without a disciplined study of the mechanics of self, just as sticking to a flat-Earth model without ever considering alternative shapes would leave one trapped in the endless debate of: “Is the world finite or infinite?” Through an estrangement of the status quo, the performance practice presented in this thesis provides one way of sensitising viewers to the *a priori* assumptions that guide our understanding of the mechanics of self, thus providing the reader with a means of questioning them.

We have traced one particular prevalent assumption about the mechanics of self throughout the dissertation and performance practice: the idea that human character is, and/or should be, singular and consistent. The adoption of different models, such as the distributed person or the human being as a “character-playing machine,” allow us to speculate on some of the implications of distinguishing between, as opposed to equating, the social agent and the human being along various legal, political and social frameworks. Here are some such questions on which, in future work, we can speculate:

1. Human Rights

Given the distinction between the social agent and the human being, to whom exactly do human rights laws apply (e.g. the United Kingdom’s Human Rights Act 1998 and other

laws pertaining to the category “natural person”)?³⁶⁷ Do they apply to the social agent, or the human being? And does it make a difference?

2. Self-Branding

When it comes to the management of my character within my own career as an artist, should I follow the professional advice I am often given and segregate my art audiences or ensure I “do not tell anyone” in the art world that I am writing a novel, since the allusion to myself as a writer might damage my singular perception as a (visual) artist? While the freedom of artistic interdisciplinarity seems to be desired, the frequency of this type of advice indicates that there is a cost to character inconsistency in professional life too, whereby its management is known as “branding.”

To give another example of this, consistency in the character expressed and beliefs professed by politicians is widely read as a virtue. This is evidenced by the fact that it is rare, during a prime ministerial/presidential campaign, to hear a candidate deviate from a singular, narrow line of address in their public appearances, and conversely, in the way in which *inconsistency* often features as a principal and effective line of attack from the opposing party. We could then look at this social mechanism of encouraging and sanctioning, and thus regulating, the behaviour of politicians, and ask how the measure of consistency as a mark of virtue might be desirable or detrimental to our politics and social life. We could ask questions such as: “Is the consistent behaviour of my political representative a measure of how much I can trust them to stick to their pledges?” Or, alternatively: “Do I wish my political representative to be unable to change their mind about important issues?”

3. Positionality

³⁶⁷ UK Human Rights Act 1998, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>.

When we speak of “positionality” (see Section 5.3), does this refer to the position of the human being or the social agent? It would appear that positionality and the politics surrounding it relates only to the social agent, as mentioned parenthetically in Linda Alcoff’s essay on the ethics of speaking from certain “locations:” “[...] a speaker’s location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or *social* identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech.”³⁶⁸

The specification here is telling, as it signals some remainder after the speaker’s “social location” is taken into account (although this is not discussed further in this particular text). How else can an individual be identified besides their social positionality? Is the way in which we might locate the “position” of the social agent different to how we might locate that of the human being? Like the “discerning needle” of precision science, which leads Benjamin Libet in search of a point for the origin of volition (see Section 2.1), perhaps “position” leads us prematurely in search of a coordinate plane as the organising principle between the human and the social.

4. Social diversity

In recent years, it has become increasingly important to talk about social diversity: in our governments, our workplaces and our schools. What is usually meant by this is the desire to create communities in which its members are as socially diverse as possible in terms of such categories as gender, ethnicity, class or ability, since these categories have historically stratified people and organised them into unjust power relations. Therefore, diversity is nowadays called for for the sake of *inclusivity*, that is, to avoid the injustices of the past by giving equal chances to all, regardless of social position. Some businesses have also

³⁶⁸ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20, no. 20 (1991): 7. My emphases.

caught on with this trend, campaigning for the promotion of diversity in the workplace, arguing that it allows a business to cater more accurately to their consumer base, since their employees are more *representative* of their customers the more diverse they are (for example, according to this logic, having women in the workplace gives insight into women customers).³⁶⁹

More fundamentally, perhaps, diversity among people in various communities could be said to be desirable for the same reason diversity is desirable in ecology. A species with a more diverse gene pool has a better chance of surviving overall, because at least some of its members will be equipped to weather unexpected challenges, allowing the species to survive even if not all its members. Likewise, a species with a less diverse gene pool is more susceptible to extinction since its members are more likely to be wiped out by the same threat. Translating this to human communities, diversity in individuals provides the community as a whole with more perspectives, knowledges and traditions with which to weather the unprecedented challenges we are currently facing (from climate change to the technological singularity), as well as those we have not yet identified. The current picture of social positionality assumes that each person in the community occupies a “position” in the space of possible social agents, in which the coordinates are given by dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, class or ability. Any position has its own privileged views and its own blindnesses (you cannot see everything from any one position), and it is hoped that communal diversity would help make up for individual blindnesses.

While the fixed, unchanging and essential value of social positionality may be ascribed to a social agent within a given point of time, this coordinate view of positionality is, however, not necessarily applicable to the human being, precisely because it is a being of potential,

³⁶⁹ Mediaplanet, “A Mediaplanet Campaign Focused on Diversity in STEM,” *New Scientist*, 11 December 2021, viewable at https://issuu.com/mediaplanetuk/docs/diversity_in_stem.

not of essence. Thus, within public discussions so far, concerns about “diversity” currently *stop* at the level of the social agent and do not extend to the human being. Societies and communities can be considered more or less diverse, but not human beings, which seems at odds with the ample evidence we have of the fluidity and flexibility in a human being’s capacity to run character: people’s bodies, speech, beliefs, opinions and behaviours can and do change, throughout a lifetime or within a day, depending on who they are interacting with or on the mood of the historical moment. The current, predominant model of social diversity presumes that it can be attained and is desirable within a community of social agents, but that diversity does not extend as far as to apply to the human beings that compose that community. Is there reason to believe that considering diversity at the level of the individual human being may have similar benefits to the cultivation of diversity at the level of a community—and do these two levels correlate?

Following Dennett’s assertion that “we will have to devise, and agree upon, systems of government and law that are not hostage to false myths about human nature,”³⁷⁰ I argue that any effort to demythologise the mechanics of self can be understood as part of an attempt to make it more difficult to weaponise such myths, for example, in the service of justifying violence against groups based on essentialist claims about their identity. Character is a powerful thing. In the past few years alone, the attribution of character has saved biospheres (as in the recent granting of legal personhood to a number of natural features and ecosystems around the world)³⁷¹ and human lives (as in cases where natural threats have been given a name).³⁷² What is at stake in the mechanics of self and its attendant aesthet-

³⁷⁰ Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 287.

³⁷¹ See for example Isabella Kaminski, “Laws of nature: could UK rivers be given the same rights as people?” *The Guardian*, 17 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/17/laws-of-nature-could-uk-rivers-be-given-same-rights-as-people-aoe>.

³⁷² Hannah Cloke suggests that more timely evacuation and mitigation may have been mobilised ahead of the July 2021 floods in the Ahr valley, Germany, and more lives saved, had the pending floods been given a name, as is already common practice with storms and hurricanes. See Hannah Cloke, “Failure of Imagination,” *New Scientist*, 26 February 2022, 25.

ics, which govern our everyday relation to it, is how we authenticate agency, personhood and selfhood (whether in humans, machines, animals or natural phenomena), as well as how we manage and instrumentalise the assumed purity and clean-cut categorisations of identity, which form the basis of much political debate today.

7. Conclusion

We have explored a way of looking at the “self” that involves dividing it into two parts: what I have called “character” and “the human being.” This view of the self borrows its imagery from computation, imagining the relationship between “character” and “the human being” to be analogous to the relationship between “software” and “hardware.”

Within this particular framing of the self, “the human being” can be defined as “that which is capable of playing out character.” It is the machinery which enables the encoding and decoding (or the “writing and reading”) of character. As such, it is a being of potential, not of essence. On the one hand, the individual human being has a certain universality about it, like a universal (character) computing machine, in that it is not essentially beholden to any particular character, and has the mechanisms available to run a great variety of “character programmes.” The human being can also transmit and receive character with other human beings. By virtue of being able to read and write character and being steeped in social context, it can be thought to “contain” within itself all the possibilities of human character, which we envisioned in the holographic relationship between the human being and the social milieu. The human being is a conspicuous node through which the unintelligible bulk can flash a glimpse of itself, through the continual performance and rehearsal of character.

On the other hand, like any machine, the human being is composed of real bits and pieces that, like the obstacles in a pinball machine, channel the flow of character input somewhat specifically and idiosyncratically to other human beings, leading to individual variation every time a character is copied. Each human being is a supple memory machine carved

by habit and arcs of intent—the grooves of its surface deepen over time, making it more receptive to certain inputs over others.

And then there is character. Character is different to the human being in kind. It is a system of behavioural formulas that can be encoded and decoded by human beings. If we are to think of character as something like a computer programme, then what sort of things does it *do* when run by the human being?

Following the “Thought Shift Performance Experiment,” this thesis frames character as that which determines what is thinkable to the human being at the time of adopting it.³⁷³ It is the very shape of thinkability. Using a meteorological metaphor, we have likened character to a climate, and behaviour to weather. Where weather is the actual output of a climate system, whether rain, sunshine or storm, climate is a landscape of weather probabilities that morphs and reshapes itself over time in response to actual weather events. Similarly, character is like a climate in that it is the shape of behavioural probabilities and is morphed and reshaped by actual behaviours through the practice of everyday being: character is an attractor in behavioural space.

Something interesting happens when character changes, and is replaced by a different character. The landscape of behavioural probabilities has changed, and the new character comes complete with its own, *different* internal logic. Character change in the performance practice is analogous to what psychologists call “frame switching,” since it activates a different knowledge structure within the individual’s cultural education, a knowledge structure that now guides the human being in a suddenly alternative way, making it appear to have snapped into an altogether different “gear.” The mechanics of character switching active in

³⁷³ Ranković, “Thought Shift Performance Experiment,” 2022, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-4.

the performance practice was unearthed through the “Introspective Performance Experiment” discussed in Chapter 1.³⁷⁴

In the context of cultural psychology research, frame switching usually manifests as a more or less unconscious shift in behaviour, motivated by social pressures and conflicting contextual demands. This thesis has considered character switching as a skill which one might deliberately practice for various reasons *beyond* that of social coping, such as:

- Gaining a different perspective on an issue through a temporary “tilting” of the mind.
- Bringing into phenomenological observation character as a free-floating script, relatively independent of the human being.
- Using it as a creative engine in the crafting of stories and artworks.

Although I was interested, right from the beginning of my research, in exploring the creative possibilities potentially enabled by “diversifying myself” through character play, what I did not expect was to further discover certain hierarchies of character in my investigations. These hierarchies were first pointed out by one of the alternative characters played out in my performance practice, specifically in *Politics of Inner Self*, an experimental dialogue with myself in two characters. As I increasingly gave voice, or “soul-time,” to characters I have never inhabited before, they proportionately began to complain about their marginal status within the family of characters I was able to adopt and my general negligence towards my own diversity. This matter seemed important to some of the characters I encountered, leading me to ask which character ought to be writing up all this research in the first place, and whether the research character I had relatively thoughtlessly adopted was

³⁷⁴ Ranković, “Introspective Performance Experiment,” 2022, katarinarankovic.art/scripting-for-agency-appendix-2.

affecting the type of academic “contribution” I was able to make, by way of prematurely framing my view. To even begin to talk about such “hierarchy,” “status” or “class” emerging between my characters, it became necessary to name these distinctions. At first, I distinguished between “dominant” and “subordinate” characters within my repertoire of being.

Later on in the research, I began to suspect that the terms “dominant” and “subordinate” were not adequate when it came to capturing the relations between the different characters I was inhabiting throughout the research, both on- and off-camera, when “doing my art practice” and when “not doing my art practice.” Although, as a percentage of the three years I spent undertaking this research, some characters received more soul-time than others, this could be described not simply as a relation by which some characters “dominated” over others. Rather, my characters could be differentiated by the degree to which they were tethered to the social milieu in which I lived. This introduced the need to name a special character, or set of characters, which I called “the social agent.”

The social agent was the character I typically inhabited when buying my groceries, when presenting my research to peers, or when having the neighbours over for dinner. Although these three activities could further be associated with characters distinct from each other (a more serious and committed version of the social agent when presenting research, a more cheerful and polite version when trying to be an agreeable customer, and a more laid back and happy-go-lucky version when entertaining guests), they share in common a certain fidelity towards an overall coherency with regard to who Katarina is in public. The social agent has a CV that must be updated, chronicling the achievements of a lifetime. The social agent has a reputation to uphold and protect. The social agent feels a civic responsibility to cooperate with fellow inhabitants and is in return rewarded if it does, and penalised if it does not. The social agent is the one who gets promoted, and the one who goes to prison.

In this way, the social agent may indeed “dominate” over other possible characters with respect to hours of soul-time enjoyed, since many daily activities are social and require depending on other people within the social milieu to fulfil our various needs (whether those others are present with us physically or not). The social agent must be present to engage in those social activities. But the dominance of the social agent over other characters comes simply as a consequence of being *tethered* to the social milieu. Thus, rather than a despotic, power-hungry character that domineeringly looms over the rest, we can think of it as a clerkly, administrative character that must fret over the fine print, maintain a reputation and manage its own coherency and behavioural predictability so that it can cooperate with other social agents. The social agent is that character which enters the social milieu as a stakeholder and responsible agent on behalf of the human being.

Likewise, the so-called marginal characters, which have been given some soul-time in my art practice, enjoy a freedom of expression that the tethered social agent cannot afford. These are the *tangential* characters, the characters untethered to the demands of a unified projection of agency necessary to cooperate in the social milieu. They can explore themselves to their heart’s content, perhaps be more *like* themselves than the social agent can. They can run with their hopes, fears and personal expression in one direction, until they exhaust themselves, and even then they burst in style, like a firework. They do not need to moderate themselves, they can fly on the wing of their sensibilities without inhibition or fear of social repercussions.

Thus, we have established a way of looking at the self that introduces a new cast, featuring the human being and characters that are either tethered to the social milieu (the social agent) or tangential (the wider diversity of character discoverable in performance practice). Following Dennett, I have also framed the social agent as a technology for human-to-human cooperation within the social milieu: human beings streamline the range of their public

behaviours, and construct and maintain a unified character when entering the social milieu, as a means of *managing their predictability* so that they make themselves open to cooperation with others. Conversely, when one wants to be uncooperative, combative or sever dependencies upon others, one may act unpredictably, whether one is a rebellious teenager defying parental rule, or a country waging war with another. Then consistency does not matter, and *inconsistency* might even become a strategy. But in normal day-to-day life, when one wishes to benefit from social interdependency, one finds it, on average, advantageous to manage one's predictability so as to become operable by other humans and so other humans can become operable in turn. The maintenance of character consistency is socially regulated through the aesthetic value known as "authenticity."

Curiously, I found I was often still able to derive a sense of authenticity in my inhabitation of unfamiliar characters during a performance session, in spite of the intuitive link between consistency and authenticity. In Section 4.3 I located a possible explanation for this in the way I approached the characters from a position of curiosity, rather than anticipation, by holding space for character in the form of a theatrical seance. This suggests that the authenticity of a performance might not only be correlated with consistency, but also with the degree to which the behaviours of the character projected are anticipated for the benefit of the audience. The more this anticipation is minimised, the more the viewer becomes a witness, rather than an audience member. A performance comes across as authentic when the viewer no longer feels like an audience member, but a seance-participant co-witnessing the emergence of the character's agency with the artist, the medium.

Finally, when I have engaged in character play in my practice and explored the shifts in perspectives I am able to gain by strategically altering an apparently superficial set of outward behaviours, my social agent suddenly seems quite *limited* a creature, carrying the burden of my humanity on its own. I am tempted to ask questions, not only about the be-

enefits of social diversity to society, a matter which has rightly drawn much public discourse in our time, but also about whether personal diversity could bring analogous benefits to the self, and by extension, how the training and development of personal diversity might bear upon social life more broadly.

Although this thesis is far from being able to answer questions about the management of human character variability, what it offers is a vocabulary and aesthetics that makes it possible to ask them in the first place. The performance practice provides a soul-searching laboratory in which everyday models about the mechanics of self can be experimented with and opened up to critique through the method of self-estrangement. It stages alternative models of self for our consideration, and operates as an “intuition gym” for flexing intuitions about the mechanics of self and testing assumptions. It offers artworks which invite the audience to speculate on the movement of their own character through considering their dual status as human beings capable of exhibiting a wide variety of character on the one hand, and social agents playing out a narrower set of recognisable and relatively predictable behaviours on the other. An encounter with these artworks becomes an opportunity for viewers to think about their own condition as machines capable of playing out different characters, and how the bandwidth of possible characters playable by their human machinery relates to their intuitions about self-authenticity.

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