The Shape of a Thinking Thing

Katarina Rankovic

What do we imagine when we think about the shape of a thinking thing? It's 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 neurons 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 most hitherto 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. The concept of a round Earth came to be a radical transformation, or transcendence, of that debate.

It is revealing to observe in so plain an example how a question can contain within itself a misleading vocabulary ill-fitted to the phenomenon at hand. This is because it is a question that prematurely answers itself by way of an underlying assumption, curtailing access to a more enabling inquiry. 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? 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.

The Vessel

In *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998), 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 some 'inner light'. 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 appropriate symbols. Yet there is a cross-cultural design feature common to all of 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 is achieved in abstract figures 'so long as the crucial feature of concentricity and 'containment' is preserved.'[1]

The vessel has arguably been the most historically successful 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? 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 – but a homunculus model like this only perpetuates the problem of locating intelligence by infinite regress. The vessel:

1. Does not take into account the social milieu into which self is steeped, and attempts to account for self without others.
2. Doesn't provide a mechanism for memetic contagion.
3. Shrouds the ghostly properties of a self in mystery, by relegating self to a vanishing point by infinite regress.

When thinking about alternative shapes, artists have sometimes tried to participate in this philosophical inquiry by aestheticising alternative models of thinking things. Thus, they have begun to form a vocabulary or intuition about something formally not intuitive.

Distributed Person

The following is a passage from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (2007), close to the end of the novel:

> *...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 anyone, 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.*[2]

In this meditative moment, Mrs Dalloway fancies that she is *distributed*, inflected in others, subject to memetic contagion, and therefore much more expansive and larger than her habitual representation of herself permits – an idea that even seems to suggest the possibility of over-coming death. 'The distributed person' is a model of the person that shows it always unfolding, a time-based phenomenon; never apprehendable as a tangible whole at any given point in time. In Woolf, the thinking thing is here expressed as a reverberation across the thickness of a distributed expanse. Its consciousness is diffuse and sometimes sleepy, and blind to its own machinations.[3]

The model of the distributed person foregrounds an anxiety which has perhaps always lived with humans, namely, that without the centralisation of Cartesian '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. However, it provides a promising counterpoint 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 instantiat-ing them. By virtue of always already being distributed and embedded within a social milieu, a 'self' or a 'person' is a communal object or site, even when there are no other people around.

In one of my recent performances, I split myself into two characters and had a conversation between the two, alternating between them. The conversation did not feel wholly different to a conversation with another person. For me, it seemed to hold potential on a practical, everyday level. *I could consult my characters on matters I don't have the answers to.*

In that conversation, my character had an idea. She suggested that there might exist something like a 'politics of inner self', namely that a person has some characters that are more dominant, and some that are less dominant. She lamented that she was inferior to 'me' (the me that writes), which must be true, because I haven't spoken to her since. She brought into being, for the first time in my imagination, the ethics of such a politics. Is it right to subdue her in the name of my own self-consistency?

A String Theory of Self

My proposition for the shape of a thinking thing is a *line*.

I discovered lines as someone who likes to draw. I discovered them on the page, as traces of the places I inhabited in the universe of the sheet of paper. Lines are very subject to contagion. They are characterless entities that soak up character at the lightest touch or the faintest suggestion. Suggestive, they buckle gracefully under the weight of a draughtsman'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 draughtsman's passing strokes. Like a seismograph recording the tremors of the earth, a pen records the tremors of an artist's uncertain change of heart to the task of drawing.

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'. The distinction between wave and field is intuitive and serviceable to theories of physics, yet 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 instance, 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.

Phenomena like light, sound and the waves crashing against a coastline are characterised by their pattern. This persisting 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. The line:

1. Is a shape amenable to memetic contagion, with broad representational range?
2. Broadcasts patterns across its body which are 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.

Are all thinking things something like lines, that quiver to the heartbeat of the world at large, and register in their localities one way of capturing an uncapturable entirety, like a refracted beam in a shattered shard of glass? Do they lie in wait, like strings on a harp, only coming into thought when plucked into a resonating pattern of expression? Perhaps the shape of a thinking thing could be a line, amenable to being waved by distinct frequencies that we recognise as character.

1 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 133.
2 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 168.
3 Cf. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*, 103: 'As social persons, we are present, not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness of our existence, our attributes, and our agency'.