

Contextual Review

This thesis is being written by a person inhabiting a locale within a social milieu. I look out from this specific location, am buffeted about by my neighbours, am moved and rocked by tessellations in the social fabric, and engage in such encounters on a daily basis. While that is going on, I am constantly wondering about my machinery: which receptors make me vulnerable and supple to social influence; which bits of me are responsible for the behavioural bias that limits the range of output you can expect from me; where the boundaries of my inheritance and legacy lie. Meanwhile, there are other people in the social milieu who have been preoccupied with the same questions, and they supply us with theories – stories that give conceptual shape to the problem of how a person works.

It was somewhere between learning about such theories about the person, and the ardent preoccupation with observing myself be one, that an art practice became a viable method of scratching both itches. In what follows, I will try to trace the development of my own ideas and how they came to arrive at the initial hypothesis of this project (see Abstract). By making that movement, I hope to show meeting places between theories of self mechanics and the everyday personal encounter, casting these as the context and material of my art practice and its resulting propositions. I then hope to also show how this practice-based work can be situated within a broader constellation of endeavours to describe and probe the mechanics of ‘person’, ‘self’ and ‘character’. Finally, I will conclude with the proposition that, taking the initial hypothesis about the mechanics of self as a point of departure, the practice asks: ‘What difference does it make to know this about myself?’ and that in turn this PhD project is focused on honing my artistic experiments to better test and document that difference.

The artworks created during this PhD project represent the latest developments within a series of video performances I have been making over the past ten years, called *Vernacular Spectacular*. Certain offshoots of that ongoing project (e.g. voiceovers for AI-generated portrait images, typing ventriloquisms, conversations with my split self) mark a broader set of artistic activities that altogether I refer to as my *One-woman Empathy Circus*.

Within the One-woman Empathy Circus, I am acting. I inhabit a different character (or a different character inhabits me, as we will later see), and I tell stories – whatever stories come to mind in the new guise I have adopted for myself. As the circus references in both names suggest, all these works involve performing certain skilful feats that aim to dazzle the audience with a kind of ‘contortionism of the soul’. The variety of characters exhibited in my circus collectively harbour a certain freakish appeal, but my hope is that their absurdity and outlandish mutability actually serve to make conspicuous some of the most down-to-earth, mundane conditions of being a person inhabiting a social milieu.

It’s probably no coincidence that the first works I made within the One-Woman Empathy Circus were developed during my late teenage years; that developmental stage of heightened self-consciousness. So this is where I will start the story of my research. Each section will begin with a personal anecdote, before introducing links to wider discourses and notable developments in the experience and reasoning that gave rise to this project.

I’ll begin by showing how the *Vernacular Spectacular* series as a whole, and later the PhD project specifically, have come out of at least two conditions of being a person inhabiting a social milieu: frame switching and jealousy.

Performance and Authenticity in Frame switching

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 couldn't 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' – a term I've devised to help me refer to all the research going on in multiple disciplines, interdependently or independently, contemporaneously or non-contemporaneously, which centres on how a 'self' (or its close relatives, 'agent', 'person', 'soul', 'intelligence', etc) works at the elementary level, as well as how a self comes to be. 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 different 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 (West et al. 2017). Such negotiations are not unique to me, nor to the subgroup of people sometimes referred to by the cultural psychology community as 'multiculturals'. This is because there is not really any such thing as their counterpart, the 'monocultural' – a term that is widely employed in cultural psychology. Everybody frame switches, and the faultlines 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 systems of behaviour that must resolve identity conflicts as they arise (e.g. as triggered by moving between social or professional roles, affiliation to different types of music or other aesthetic cultures, age relative to social counterparts, or just

being near certain people who, by the subtle influence of their own character, ‘bring out a different side in you’).

However, in some regards, my need to negotiate (between ‘Englishness’, ‘Serbianness’, and ‘Norwegianness’) was made particularly conspicuous by certain contextual factors, not least by the lay theories of self propagated within my social milieu, whereby, for example, it is commonly assumed that self-consistency is a marker of authenticity (Chiu et al., 1997), and where essential views on national identity crop up in common parlance.¹

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 phenomena under observation (e.g. frame-switching). Findings in this field will become valuable reference points for the project later in the thesis, but for now, my point is that rather than belonging to an essential category, I am *wrought* ‘multicultural’ by dominant lay theories of self, which are further propagated by such terminology, even from the domain of specialist contexts. Here is an example of what that looks like in practice.

i) Authenticity

¹ For example, when I argue with my brother about what matters more for self-identification: where you were born (in our case England) or your ethnic heritage (in our case Serbian), as if we both believed there were a universal law for working this out.

I had a soft Yorkshire accent upon leaving England. After some time spent at an international school for immigrant children, then years of Norwegian schooling, my English accent had changed significantly. For example, I now pronounced my ‘r’ very prominently, because back in Norway many of the other immigrants didn’t register my often inaudible Yorkshire ‘r’ on the occasions when I was addressed in English. When I returned to England, my childhood friends found my way of speaking strange and some suspected me of affecting the new accent – specifically of trying to sound ‘American’. This was only compounded by the fact that I also frame-switched: different social contexts elicited different systems of behaviour from me, including ‘snapping’ or ‘easing’ in and out of different accents.

The association between *spontaneous* and *consistent* self-presentation with ‘authenticity’ – and vice versa, the association between an *affected* and *inconsistent* self-presentation with ‘inauthenticity’ – is something that this project will try to open up to critique. But at the time, I scarcely questioned the placement of ‘affected’ and ‘inconsistent’ in binary opposition to ‘authentic’. Rather, I was simply concerned with the fact that I didn’t want to be perceived as, or *actually be*, inauthentic – and no wonder. A 2018 study by West et al. showed that in Western societies, a person who is observed to be frame switching is rated lower on ‘authenticity’ by both themselves and third-party observers, the latter additionally rating that individual lower on ‘likeability’, ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘warmth’. Reflecting on this outcome, the authors 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.’²

² While this ‘cultural aversion’ to self-inconsistency seems to be stronger in Western societies, it seems to be present to a lesser degree in non-Western societies too (c.f. Boucher, 2011).

To answer the question of whether or not I was being inauthentic with my accent, I tried to replay to myself how it had changed in the first place. Indeed, when I first started emphasising my r's, it was a very deliberate move, motivated by the desire to be understood by others. It was, in that sense, affected. However, over time this new pronunciation of 'r' became a more permanent part of my English, and transferred itself to other social situations, such as reuniting with old childhood friends in Yorkshire. In addition to the argument that what is self-consistent can itself eventually change, you could say that the early affectations that led to the change were themselves redeemed by the fairly 'innocent' motive behind it, which was to communicate and to belong, and therefore not something that should inspire the ominousness attributed to inauthenticity.³ But there are potentially less 'innocent' instances of this too.

For example, when I first learnt to speak Norwegian, I tried to sound as close to a native-speaker as I could. But over time, I was conditioned by social circumstances to retain a definitively foreign accent. In other words, I could have sounded more like a native speaker if I tried. But I became deliberately lazier in my pronunciation and accepted the way this more strongly marked me as a foreigner – probably because being marked in such a way actually had a number of social advantages that, in my case, overall outweighed the disadvantages. For instance, I could 'play dumb' when making a mistake or following a misunderstanding, because it could be implicitly explained by my foreignness and enable me to re-edit myself after. This lent a certain freedom of expression – I could throw words together that may not belong together and see what it sounded like, knowing that it wouldn't sound as unusual coming from a foreigner who might still be learning the language, as it would from someone sounding closer to a native speaker. Nonetheless, the 'choice' to relax my accuracy of speech

³ Someone has since pointed out to me that trying to 'communicate' and 'belong' might necessarily involve taking a manipulative stance toward the other and therefore does not inherently constitute 'innocent' motives as I have suggested here.

and pronunciation over time became, I thought, my most authentic self-presentation when speaking Norwegian, and it allowed me to become known as a ‘creative’ kind of speaker; it became part of my identity.

These two examples (the emphasised ‘r’ and the lazy Norwegian) are being considered here because they seem to occupy a liminal space between intended and unintended, ‘affected’ and ‘natural’, so indecisively in-between the two that it caused me genuine concern at the time – was I being ‘fake’ or not?

ii) Performance

My supposition is that digging into the question of intentionality behind the performance of any one person’s identity is likely to prove increasingly uncomfortable the deeper the inquiry goes. For example, might an academic intuitively modulate their accent, from trying to be persuasive at a conference, to trying to exhibit a loose spirit of camaraderie at the pub afterwards?

Let us call this modulation fake, affected; and let us say I too ‘faked’ my new English and Norwegian accents. What would *not* faking sound like? What would be the tell-tale sign of an authentic accent? Following the mention of lay theories of personality above, I imagine that some popular answers might include: *unpremeditated, not affected, not requiring any effort to perform*. But speech is a fundamentally effortful, social endeavour. How we sound when we speak 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.

Speech is always in some way effortful, some amount of energy must be expended; it's 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 to collaboration is necessary for human survival (c.f. Harari, 2018).

What does this mean for acting? Or: where does the line between 'inauthentic' performance and 'authentic' being lie? Scholars like Arlie Hochschild have found that the emotional labour as 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 seem to leak into other facets of life and become more permanently integrated behaviours in areas outside of work. For me, this phenomenon 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, behaviours (Lu et al. 2019). In other words: fake it ‘til you make it.⁴

It wasn’t long after I began to question my own authenticity that I began to film myself acting. Initially, these were staged as fictional interviews. I’d pose an imagined question to myself, and then answer it as someone else. But my motivation to act, to adopt other characters, was not to ‘represent’ another person. I have never had a target character in mind which I then worked towards ‘depicting’ and assimilating my behaviours to. Instead, I was interested in gauging my own relationship to feeling authentic whilst affecting behaviours I knew I did not typically perform.

Hong et al. (2000) argue that culture is not something that is ‘possessed’ and which influences a person’s behaviour, cognition and world view regardless of the situation. Rather, culture is theorised as an internalised knowledge construct that is ‘activated’ if made accessible to working memory. People can internalise multiple culture constructs, but in cognition they are not activated at the same time. ‘Cultural priming’ has therefore been a key experimental strategy in cultural psychology, whereby activating a knowledge structure within an individual induces them to frame-switch.

I would like to suggest that my performances begin with a kind of *self*-priming, using certain simple stimuli to induce myself to frame-switch. Accent has been shown to be a powerful primer (Dehghani, 2015), and in my experience, deliberately changing my accent and then hearing myself speak in this way is enough to put me in a different frame of mind.

⁴ I only recently came across the subject of deep acting and emotional labour through the research of fellow PhD student Erica Scourti. I am therefore not entirely sure if I am using the term ‘deep acting’ properly yet – and I have a feeling that it is at present largely applied to discourses on mental health and labour, and usually only referred to as a negative drain on workers. But at first glance, it seems to have something in common with the more general question of ‘authentic vs. inauthentic’ self-presentation. My conception of the term would be extended to include behaviours as well as emotions, and would not be fundamentally characterised as either positive or negative in kind.

However, the knowledge structures ‘activated’ in my performances go beyond the remit of frames I deem to belong to my own self-concept, because in performing I deliberately explore new frames (characters), to adopt in a state of deep acting.

I arrive at this state of deep acting by way of a method I’ve come to term ‘self-estrangement’. This method, akin to the feeling produced by staring into a mirror for too long, allows me to gently dissociate from myself and become malleable to a panoply of jealous impressions, rendering me, in effect, amenable to memetic contagion (see: *Accommodating Others*). At first I was thrilled by the naturalistic effects of such acting, which seemed to produce characters of some palpable presence, and I took particular delight in the dual effect of the characters’ apparent comfort with themselves and the absurd things they often said. But in addition to local concerns about the tone and manner of each character, over time the performance practice as a whole seemed to offer a non-representational methodology (Vannini, 2015) that could yield intuitions about the mechanics of self. When adopted, these intuitions seemed to hold the potential to transcend my initial concerns about the authenticity/consistency dynamic made conspicuous by frame switching, by way of reframing how I thought about being and performing in the first place.

Jealousy

When I was eight years old, I watched the Disney animated film *Mulan*. Mulan was such an infectiously impressive character to me, a warrior woman who exuded honour and valour; qualities I’d typically encountered only in male heroes. I remember feeling my heart beat afterwards, and an irresistible urge to copy. I took a photo of myself shortly after watching.



Fig 1. a. (above): *Mulan*, 1998. Still image from the Disney animated film. Fig 1. b. (below): Childhood photo of me imitating Mulan. I got the sword orientation wrong, but mutations like this are bound to happen in replication, and ultimately provide opportunities for innovation.

I look fondly of this illustration of imitation, because while copying for its own sake has sometimes been deemed an embarrassment to contemporary art, which seeks the new, the original, the avant garde, 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 of art practice and the copying it entails is the

attractive possibility of becoming something else. Of shapeshifting into something new, through the work that is not necessarily coming from you alone, but comes from the world outside to merge with you and reshape you. Perhaps the practice lends the artist an escape route from themselves, as when the poet T.S. Eliot writes: ‘Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.’ (1982).

Once I had made my first performances, which are all improvised out of a starting point of self-estrangement, I could watch them over on video and only then would I start to recognise clear lineages tracing back to both real and fictional persons and mannerisms that I hadn’t even realised had made such an effect on me. The performances began to make 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.

Each performed character betrayed multiple lineages which I could easily identify in retrospect, amongst likely many more which I will never succeed in tracing. Characteristics from different sources combined into one hybrid character. For example, one of my characters was a concoction forged out of (at least) Coco Chanel, my aunt, Slavoj Žižek and Catwoman’s *Kitka* disguise in the 1966 Batman film by Leslie H. Martinson. I have since found that I can always trace at least several clear ‘ingredients’ to each performance, but only in retrospect.

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; a process that was consistently analogous to my jealousy and subsequent imitation of Mulan. Such a jealousy as this is not a bitter or resentful jealousy, but rather a discontented kind of admiration; a motivating jealousy that inspires desire. 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*.
- 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 Aiste, 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.

The fact that I'm 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 haven't deserved.

Within this form of limited appropriation, formulated as a personal game an artist might choose to play, I'd like to propose *jealousy* to mean the energetic or emotional state that directly precedes memetic contagion. Thus as an artist, when I am feeling jealous, I take it as a very good sign.

At this point I also want to tentatively propose *character* to mean a particularly recognisable system of memes (conceived in Richard Dawkins' sense of units of cultural inheritance, c.f. Dawkins, 1991), and analogous to what a phenotype is to a gene: the visible, singular resultant outcome of memetic consolidation. Character is that thing which is 'caught' in an instance of memetic contagion (e.g. the 'stern look with sword held across face' quality in the Mulan imitation above).

I think that jealousy and 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 inertia. 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, into repeating the arguments, the passions, the disappointments of my ancestors and contributing to their common value. 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.⁵ The performances become then a sort of identity prosthesis; a becoming-other that renders me all the more familiar to myself.

Scripting for Agency

One evening, in the halls of residence I resided in as a BA student, I was reading Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I finished the book and, closing it, was seized with such clichéd inspiration as I have only heard about in folkloric tales about impassioned artists, toiling away in their candlelit garrets. Directly after, I worked throughout the night on a scripted dialogue between two fictional lovers, and didn’t stop until it was finished - indeed, *as if their lives depended on it*. Such feverish creation-panic had never visited upon me until then or since; for me, the creative process is normally a more sluggish affair, coaxed out of a protracted moment of lethargy on the bedroom floor.

In particular, it was the following passage in Kundera’s novel that jolted me into action. In it, Kundera-the-narrator talks about the origins of his two protagonists:

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.

⁵ For similar reasons, I have noted artist Harold Offeh’s study of the pose in his iterative performance work *Lounging*, as well as Marianne Wex’s photographic studies of gendered gesture and pose in *Let’s Take Back Our Space: Female and Male Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures* (1979).

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.

Can characters be born? I thought, and in the same breath: can they die? The life of a fictional character seemed all at once to glimmer with significance, because by this time I had already spent a few years cohabiting my mind-space with my own fictional characters, and certain similarities between my own life and my characters' had begun to present themselves which were difficult to shake off. I wondered how important Kundera's distinction between 'born of a woman' and 'born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor' was to my understanding of my own origins and legacy. Was I not too composed of formulaic components that together delineated the range of behaviours you could expect of me, and were not these components a kind of unit of 'character' which I had inherited, which I had adopted in exchange for becoming a person?

Kundera was writing characters, and yet wrote about them as if they were people; people whom he could never be and yet who were also his kin. Kundera's protagonists were comprised of *his* jealousies. In the passage, for me the author stands irrevocably side-by-side with his protagonists, cohabiting the page with them, and together character and author

comprise two kinds of ghosts. One of the things I burned to know after reading the novel, was precisely *how* different in kind these ghosts were.

Writing, too, presented itself with some significance. In the section above on performance and authenticity in frame switching, I mentioned that one of the aims of this project is to question the association between *spontaneity/consistency* and ‘authenticity’, and between *premeditation/inconsistency* and ‘inauthenticity’. While my performance work, via the inhabitation of different characters, had hitherto permitted me to experiment with *consistency* as a variable in my authenticity, I had still relied on the improvisational nature of these performance works. In other words, I intuited 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’.

On the contrary, after reading Kundera’s novel, I thought about the role of scripting, writing and staging in the emergence of agency and agents. A common understanding of their relationship, I felt, was that scripting implied a determinism that was *at odds* with the autonomy of an agent, as suggested by the following advertisement, which I spotted one day whilst walking through the wormholes of the London Underground:



Poster for a touring live show by Joan Collins, September-October 2016.

The advert seems to invite fans to join Joan Collins as her more authentic self, divorced from her ‘scripted’ character in *Dynasty*, to ask her anything (‘within reason’).⁶ The event itself is advertised as an evening of spontaneous Q&A with the diva herself, as if its ‘unscripted’ nature lent greater credence to the authenticity of her self-presentation. And of course, a significant value must be attached to this, since it forms a principle selling point in the advertisement.

Is scripting necessarily at odds with agency? As I have argued previously (Rankovic, 2016), 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 suggest otherwise. What if, as in these two examples, writing, text, or script were not only compatible with agency, but a key ingredient in it?

I would later come across philosopher Daniel C. Dennett’s *Freedom Evolves*, which 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. For me, the book’s most compelling arguments (or rather, to use Dennett’s formulation, *intuitions*) for this seemingly counterintuitive compatibility were threefold:

- ‘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 could be an emergent phenomenon, and it could be one of the many innovations of biological evolution, like flying, seeing, mating, or camouflaging. Evolutionary theory provides us with a mechanism that could account for the emergence of freedom from blind and deterministic origins.

⁶ From one of the show’s trailers. Viewed 11 June 2021 at <https://youtu.be/uG7IUTPMcXA>.

- Cellular automata can help us to intuit the emergence of ‘freedom’ from deterministic origins. Cellular automata are simple, rule-based universes usually comprised of two-dimensional cells in a grid. They form a branch of mathematics and computer science that lends itself as a means of intuiting the relation between the ‘laws’ of a world and its resultant complexity. Dennett draws our attention to John Conway’s *Game of Life* (reproduced here for interactive fiddling: <https://playgameoflife.com/>), a cellular automaton that gives rise to categorically different phenomena at higher levels of organisation. In this world of ON and OFF cells governed by a single, simple law, emergent phenomena like movement, exploding, and ‘eating’ appear, and the community that tinkers with the program have had to invent an extensive vocabulary for the types of ‘characters’ that recur in the Game of Life as a result of the inevitable 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.’⁷ I should also mention that the *Game of Life*, as well as many other cellular automata, have been shown to be Turing-complete, meaning that they can theoretically house a universal computer that can perform any computation (c.f. Wolfram, 2002).
- Finally, Dennett offers the provocation (and I paraphrase): *Besides, would an indeterminate universe necessarily secure the freedom we might otherwise suspect is lacking from a determinate universe? What reassurance could a pinch, or jolt, of randomness (indeterminacy) add to our search to reassure ourselves of our free will?* (If I can add a further provocation, I think that the humanities are today prone to sometimes placing too much hope on ‘quantum’ indeterminacy in this regard, and at

⁷ The ‘relationship without a touch’ is a term I’m borrowing from artist and programmer Milos Rankovic through personal correspondence. 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 atoms.

the same time, too readily abhor the term ‘determinism’, based on the assumption that deterministic underpinnings necessarily translate themselves upwards to higher levels of organisation. There seems to me to be a lack of intuition here, which I am still trying to get to grips with myself, about the ‘relationship without a touch’ between sub- and superstrata).

At the time of reading Kundera, and of engaging in the impassioned creation of my play script *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers*, I had not yet encountered Dennett or other ‘compatibilist’ theorists. But against the backdrop of a growing interest in artificial intelligence,⁸ I became fascinated in the idea of abstracting the notion of ‘text’ from the biological text of DNA (in the case of organic life), and from the computational text of code (in the case of contemporary AI models), to think more generally about the role of scripting in the creation of autonomous agents, and what this could mean for a storyteller like myself, whose practice has been striving to employ its use of words toward the Frankensteinian ideal of making fictional characters ‘come to life.’

A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers is a play script designed to be read aloud by two readers playing the part of Rosa and Lawrence, the ‘eternal lovers’. It takes about fifteen minutes to read, and the people invited to perform the text will not have read it beforehand and will know little about it. The doubled configuration of reader (computer) and character (script) allowed me to treat the script as a kind of software that can be ‘played out’ across the readers, which form its substratum.

In the dialogue, the characters Rosa and Lawrence discuss the space of their lives, which they experience as a kind of episodic ‘falling sleep’ and being resuscitated (with each

⁸ I wrote my script only a few months before AlphaGo’s legendary victory over master Go player Mr Lee Sedol in March 2016.

new reading).⁹ As the 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 handicapped in their lucidity by way of 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 – and when we as the audience are watching the reading take place, we perceive four people, not two. The idea was that with each renewed reading, the two characters would increasingly come into their own; that a certain quality would emerge across idiosyncratic readings that we, as onlookers, could recognise as only Rosa and Lawrence; beings with peculiar arrangements for the 'playing out' of their consciousnesses, but beings nonetheless. A trailer of the project can be found [here](#).

That project opened up a world of possibility for me, in which scripting could 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 inertia from which I too have been coaxed. They are not only Rosa and Lawrence; they are also Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, and all the other star-crossed, doomed lovers. And I am all these too, I house their quiet rhythm somewhere within me.

However, as I pursued the play script as a obvious form (I thought), in which determinism and its resultant freedom could be made to play out, I came to a twist in my thinking, which brought me to this project. I have framed this section of the Contextual Review by saying that the idea to 'script for agency' came about as I came to question my reliance on 'spontaneity' and 'improvisation' in the video character performances (*Vernacular Spectacular*) as a means of generating characters with a life of their own. But

⁹ There's a great instance of this in Bo Burnham's latest Netflix special, in which the comedian's sock puppet laments its existentially impoverished existence and implores Burnham not to send him back to oblivion as a punishment for singing a series of Marxist revelations about the state of the world today.

after writing a script like *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers* and determining every word uttered by the characters via their reader-vehicles, I began to ask whether the very distinction between my ‘improvisational’ oral writing in *Vernacular Spectacular* and my ‘premeditated’ script writing in *A Ritual Resuscitation of Eternal Lovers*, was in some crucial way a false dichotomy. Certainly, oral and scripted writing seemed and still seem each to proffer distinct writerly possibilities for me, but could they really be said to be *either* improvised or prescribed, and what was the distinction I was trying to name here?

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 was led to think about the very scripts that possibly underlied and governed my ‘spontaneity’ when orally devising characters and stories using my own person in *Vernacular Spectacular* performances. Judith Butler’s formulations of gender identity as interpellated by social scripts and institutional speech acts, as well as Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge* as a broader gesture toward the evolutionary inertia behind each personal ‘expression’, in turn seemed to back up the idea that spontaneity in writing (or more broadly, the spontaneity in being a person) is 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, and a unique and vivacious present that is phenotypic to that underlying inertia. In this project then, I recognise the orally improvised performances that form its principle outcome as the surface expressions of a repertoire, in some ways *both* scripted and spontaneous.

As already apparent in Butler and Foucault, in addition to the matter of writing fictional characters, this problematising of the distinction between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘premeditation’ begs a further question more broadly applicable to the phenomenon of

persons. In the first section of this Contextual Review, I wrote about the association commonly drawn between ‘spontaneity’ and ‘authenticity’, and ‘premeditation’ and ‘inauthenticity’. What then, does the problematisation of spontaneity versus premeditation mean for the day to day self-expression of persons? Are persons too a kind of repertoire? Can my performances touch on this distinction and make it conspicuous enough to critically and intuitively engage with, in the space between performance and being? Indeed, I would like to know if there could be a way of appreciating myself as a being that is both scripted and free, and free *because* I am, in a certain sense, scripted.

In closing this section, the final point I’d like to revive for discussion later in the thesis is the proposition that text has a role to play in agency; that something about its body or mechanism might be conducive to the coaxing of agents, as when Jacques Derrida remarks, ‘To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive...’ (1982, 316), in tandem with his wider theorising on the deferral and co-constitution of meaning in text.

The next and final section of this contextual review will attempt to gather the various questions and areas of study touched upon so far, into a characterisation of a field I propose to be called ‘Mechanics of Self’ or ‘Self Mechanics’, which concentrates the ideas that form the principle resources of my performance practice.

Mechanics of Self

Perhaps one of the most underappreciated challenges facing humanity in the near future, to paraphrase one of the points in Yuval Noah Harari's *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, will be the fact that we do not as yet have the philosophical tools to cope with the paradigm shift that will result from the arrival of advanced artificial intelligence, machine learning and deep

learning technologies. Harari makes the point that, even putting aside the dystopian scenarios (which we are already facing today, in which a few elites manipulate the masses by leveraging their asymmetrical access to data and the processing power required to take advantage of it), there is a much more profound problem to consider about AI, which troubles the very foundations of what we currently think it means to be a human being. A problem so daunting, that it is hard to decide whether or not it really is a problem; and yet this decision alone will mark a turning point in how humans understand their own identity as a species and even the purpose of their lives.

To illustrate the problem, Harari urges us to stop imagining dystopian futures for the moment, because however painful and plausible these possibilities may be, they are recognisable. Put aside Orwell's *Big Brother* and envision instead something more along the lines of Huxley's *Brave New World*: a utopian future in which our AI technologies are benevolent systems that are only able to act in our own interests (as both individuals and communities) and in which no bad actor, whether human or machine, can use them to manipulate others. In this scenario, artificial intelligence becomes a wisdom machine that (like Google Maps) becomes increasingly unfeasible and undesirable to do without, and which will very intelligibly be able to assist in all levels of daily decision making: from which music to listen to, to whom to marry.¹⁰ In this utopian scenario, AI would be influencing human lives in ways that makes them feel happier and more fulfilled; it's just that machines will have had a principle role in providing the wisdom required to achieve this, since AI will be able to understand individuals better than they understand themselves (something which is already being keenly felt; c.f. Fry, 2019).¹¹

¹⁰ Harari points out that even a dictator, in this scenario, becomes increasingly dependent on AI-informed decision-making and thus is not like his predecessors – the principle agent of a nation – but like everyone else, gradually forfeits his agency to a machine who, again, is there to act in the dictator's own interests.

¹¹ For example, in her book, Fry relates a case where the parents of a teenage girl sued a firm for mistakenly sending her advertisements for pregnancy-related products as a result of a recommendation algorithm. The algorithm turned out to be right: their daughter was pregnant, and it 'knew' this before anyone else even suspected it, merely based on her online data trail.

Who or what should be the final arbiter of human decision-making and goal-setting? asks Harari. It used to be the gods. Currently, it is human feelings, following humanism and the rise of secular capitalism. But soon, even deciding on such determining questions as ‘what is in my/our own interest?’ will become increasingly relegated to AI, unless we decide otherwise and take steps toward some as yet unimagined alternative. Technology never was ‘merely a tool’, yielding passively to the wielder’s will; it always shaped the language of willing itself. However, AI promises to fundamentally upturn our understanding of human agency.¹² The philosophical tools that are lacking in order to approach this ‘problem’ (or to even determine whether or not it is a problem) is being described by commentators like Harari as a sorely needed technology for facing the most profound identity crisis our species will have ever encountered.

My own leanings regarding this problem, which fascinates me simply as a person who might live to see these changes occur, lie in the question of how we *already* think about the nature of human agency, before the prospective influence of AI. I would like to know, amongst other things, *why* it is that we might find the prospect of living with such overqualified AI’s as these so troubling, and whether it has something to do with the assumptions that currently underlie our day-to-day understanding of ourselves. Even more curious, I think, is just how 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 – can 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.

¹² In my opinion (probably because art is the human endeavour I value the most), the best examples that currently exist in this regard are the technologies that began emerging from OpenAI since 2019, notably GPT-2 and GPT-3, language models capable of writing coherent and often witty prose, and StyleGAN2, a generator of realistic but imaginary images (notably of human faces), developed by Karras et al. and Nvidia and demonstrated at <http://thispersondoesnotexist.com>.

As such, there exists an aesthetics of self, a manifest image which economically surmises a given model of the mechanics of self, and though this aesthetic may vary in kind across cultures and time, it is always consequential, and permeates the most intimate realms of being human. In the present age, the question of AI merely brings the question of *how self works* to light, to a state of urgency, even though ‘know thyself’ is a mantra as old as philosophy. One of the clichés about art is that it reflects the human condition; but that human condition very much depends on one’s underlying beliefs, models and theories about the mechanics of self.

‘Mechanics’ and ‘aesthetics’ may be another distinction worth reassessing, in light of epistemic perspectivism (c.f. Haraway, 1988) and the proposition that theories are stories, images or models which only ever achieve to bring to the fore distinct aspects of a phenomenon (c.f. Brooke-Rose, 1991). For example, there exist numerous kinds of drawings, or models, of atoms which each foreground different observable characteristics of the atom, and these are rarely visually realistic. You can think of an atom as a lego block in some circumstances, or a probabilistic distribution of centres of electron occupancy in others; in each case our models adapt to make thinkable to us these mechanics.

It may be worth asking whether whether mechanics can ever be separated, epistemologically speaking, from aesthetics (c.f. Barad, 2007). What kinds of aesthetics are in place in lay, or implicit day-to-day theories of the person? Can art, employed as a means of tampering with the aesthetics of personhood, generate speculative alternatives to models of self, many of which are likely to be dismissed, but which could at least wrest us somewhat from being entrenched in existing assumptions?

Using performance, storytelling and the cultivation of relationships with fictional characters, my practice aims to identify and estrange a set of popularly held assumptions

about the mechanics of self. Through a performance practice in which I am periodically possessed by fictional characters, my project is concerned with developing an aesthetics of self-hybridity and ‘comfort in contradiction’, inhabiting these self-conceptions, and phenomenologically reporting the movements my self makes in my character performances.

Bringing together research from art, psychology, anthropology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, metafictional literature and evolutionary theory, I propose self mechanics to be a way of characterising an interdisciplinary field devoted to an elementary study of self. Research within this field is concerned with the architecture of agency, with a focus on testing, expanding, troubling or elaborating some of the a priori assumptions about how self works: its shape, movement, plasticity, mechanism, and scope. This body of research provides an ongoing stimulus to my art practice, whereby I can plug some of its theories into my personal laboratory of performance and watch them play out on the surface of my own person.

This project will attempt to propose an artistic methodology that aims to participate in the collective search for new ‘philosophical tools’. The PhD and the methodology itself embark from a hypothesis about the mechanics of self. This hypothesis is generated through my own formulation of a number of different theories about agency as I understand them, from Dennett, Derrida, Hebb, Strathern, Gell, AI theory and other sources. It has three parts, where the last two follow from the first:

1. Character is a pattern which ‘plays out’ across a substratum that is embedded within a social milieu.¹³
2. Character both enables and demarcates the limits of what is thinkable at a given time.

¹³ ‘Substratum’ is used here to mean ‘machine that plays out character’. I didn’t want to prematurely specify the boundaries of this machine, which terms like ‘brain’ or ‘body’ seem to me to do. Although if it helps, you can picture a body ‘playing out’ a character.

3. A person is that which is able to enter the social milieu as a stakeholder and responsible agent, as a result of the substratum adopting its most 'dominant' or 'habitual' character.

The artistic methodology, complete with its practices and outcomes, takes this hypothesis about self as a premise. Then, through the practice of performance, it asks the question: 'What difference does it make to know this about myself?'

The rest of this written dissertation will try to articulate the methodology, the results of the performances, and how those results informed the subsequent development of the methodology.

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