

Art Research Introduction Presentation

I am interested in fictional characters, and how they size up as autonomous agents. I regularly confront fictional characters through reading, writing or acting them, and these encounters have thrown up a lot of questions for me about my own status as an agent. Encountering fictional characters from multiple perspectives like this, as an author, reader and actor, has lent me a strange new intuition that doesn't quite match my common-sense assumptions about the boundaries between me and my character. In fact, the imposition of those boundaries has become increasingly questionable to me, over the years.

I find it most effective to talk about my research interests through my art, but with the recent change to the format of this event, I've decided to omit images entirely. Not showing you images feels a bit debilitating to me but in my case I found the single, representative image to constitute a greater violence to my characters than to show you none at all. One day I hope to show you how I 'make' characters, either by performing, writing or reading them - and how when I make them it is difficult for me to distinguish myself from the character, how I don't recognise my intentions and decisions in the work because I'm being transformed by being other, this other that in fact I created, yet which nonetheless feels external to me. And yes, when reading characters, it is also the case that we create them, and the very ambiguity between writing and reading in the case of the strange dichotomy between characters and persons, is of particular interest to me.

What I keep returning to in my encounters with the relative ontological status of characters and persons, is a correlation with a recurring feature of recent theories on the subject of personhood, from AI and the life sciences, to psychology and critical theory. That is, that a person may be thought of as "written" or inscribed, albeit in a manner that results in unpredictable, autonomous behaviour.

But to what extent can we intuit this recurring observation, that something as close to home as the human mind, is in some sense *written* – inscribed by ancient grooves of genetic memory, articulated by chains of DNA text and ventriloquised by a culture of stories?

As a storyteller, who works variously in writing a novel, theatrically performing, or making short films, the aim of my thesis is to focus on this 'scripted' or algorithmic aspect of personhood, and in particular on that peculiar duality of a code and its 'expression' - for example, the existence of a code and 'running' it, a gene and its phenotype, 'codes of conduct' and behaviour. Each of these examples manifest as a dual system of writing/reading, and they also characterise those parameters typically believed to form a person, or subject. In this view, we can imagine that an individual is a script that is 'playing out' its cultural and genetic designations, along with any creative deviation implied by iteration and mutation. But what does it mean to 'run' or 'play out' a script, anyway? To actualise, perform or invoke a code?

I intend to undertake a comparative study of characters born under vastly different circumstances, be they genetic, literary or computational, and examine how the virtual

properties of narrative fiction may be manipulated to probe and exacerbate the trembling boundaries between 'authentic' and 'fictional' beings in light of contemporary AI research.