

Accommodating Others: The Role of Author as Medium



Pseudo. Video, 6 minutes 19 seconds, 2018. The chapter starts with this artwork. Click on the image to watch.

This chapter regards the role of the artist through the metaphor of a ‘medium’. The analogy has been drawn in a myriad of 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,¹ she finds herself in between, or in the middle, of input and output, and makes an instrument of

¹See Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 226: ‘The seances themselves involved women directly and often intimately, and often young women. There were male mediums, many of whom moved through the networks of music-hall and variety shows with acts involving magic and clairvoyance; there were successful male spirit photographers too. But it was a *carrière ouverte aux talents* for women, both as researchers and as subjects in greater proportion than their numbers in related professions – the Church, the laboratory, medicine. A man like [William] Crookes would not have employed as lab assistants the young women who helped him with his psychic work; unconsciously, like many of his fellow Victorians, he valued their uneducated minds as truer vehicles.’

herself. Whether interpreter, go-between, or one 'possessed', the nature of her occupation has a peculiar consequence for the flavour of her personhood.

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 someone overcome, and of a usurped will. 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'.² With experience, and as the role takes hold of her identity, it becomes paradoxical to ask 'who' the medium is, because her very role is defined by the practice of dimming down her own inner light.³

² For example, in the 1990 film *Ghost* (dir. Jerry Zucker), 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 own solicitation.

³ For example, Marina Warner explains that '...mediums actively put themselves in a state of mental *dérèglement* in order to access external forces that they and their co-sitters believed existed, independently and objectively.' *Phantasmagoria*, 248.

Within the context of art, where the term ‘medium’ is typically associated with an artist’s material means of production, this chapter cites instead those who have conceived of the artist’s *person* as part of the apparatus for mediation; not a separate peruser of it. The analogy of a medium casts the authority of the ‘author’ as a passive form of power that authorises, in effect, 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 something which facilitates the playing out of an other’s voice, negotiating foreign sentiments that seem external to their own person. By rendering the person as a kind of instrument, this perspective on authorship begets a line of questioning that speculates not only on creative processes, but also on a kind of physics 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 personhood 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 20th century debates about originality and authorship, debates that are alive in the seminars of art schools today and which will probably be sustained so long as active and passive modes of authorship are believed to be mutually exclusive.⁴ 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 (is it the artist or some ‘other’?) and encompassing this question is a larger one that asks ‘who’ drives the intentionality behind our own selves – how personhood works – since both

⁴ Here I am thinking of the lineage of enquiry preceding and following Roland Barthes’ *The Death of the Author*, 1967.

artworks and personal artifacts (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 chapter 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 person as a spatial entity that requires room in which to operate.

Being a Medium

'The landscape thinks itself in me', says Paul Cézanne in the beginning of the last century, 'and I am its consciousness' (Johnson, 1993, 67). 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 this external agent 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 gimmick of the times; they are a methodology.



Paul Cézanne. *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*. 1904-06. Wikimedia Commons.

Locally, each brushstroke seems identical enough to the others. They are not like fingerprints, not marks of identity, but something more like an homogenous alphabet of rods. These marks, devoid, in a sense, of a personality in themselves, are for the landscape to make of them what it will, by incrementally insinuating itself into the painter's consciousness and vibrating his hand. This process is itself enabled by the quality of these marks – as they have the physical characteristics conducive to someone wishing to remain in a prolonged state of impressionability. They are short enough to be iterated quickly, thick enough to sacrifice precision in favour of the whole and thin enough to retain their modesty. 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 mechanize himself, their dimensions setting the frame rate of the landscape's 'thinking'. Perhaps he even moves his hand to a metronomic beat as he paints, becoming, like the

musical stave and time signature upon which music is written, a rhythmic surface upon which the landscape can inscribe itself. The brushwork records a methodology of *submission*. Not unlike the spiritual medium mentioned above, 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 intended as a poetic turn of phrase about the to-and-fro dance of perception, but rather a more literal 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. As we will continue to see, thinking of an artist as a medium in or through which something takes place tends to suggest a *passive* mode of authorship. However, before encountering further examples it may be worth taking this distinction between active and passive modes of authorship with a pinch of salt, and bearing in mind that the imposition of a false dichotomy only begets false debates. After all, 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, biological-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 submission, a decisive actor in the process. In other words, the 'passive versus active' question assumes in the first place a unidirectional conception of agency, comprised of a set of discrete agents either acting or being acted upon: subjects and objects.

Here we are beginning to see, and will continue to explore, how it would be possible to articulate, from the axioms underpinning such debates, a kind of presumed physics of

agency – much as artist Andy Holden does in his *Laws of Motion in a Cartoon Landscape* – which reflects back to us some commonly held assumptions about the vectors, topologies and materialities of selfhood. Because debates on authorship predominantly centre on the ‘direction’ of intentionality (what is the source of the authoring and where is it directed?), they serve as a valuable repository of assumptions like these. As we explore further accounts of the artist-as-medium model and trace its legacy at least back to antiquity, some of these assumptions will become apparent enough to illuminate at least a few of these intuited ‘physical laws of agency’.

As for how seriously we should take this quotation by Cézanne, any further speculation on the relationship between himself and the landscape might benefit from drawing a parallel back to the spiritual medium, and the state of being possessed. This brings us to the most curious aspect of the quotation – where the landscape is said to ‘think itself’ through Cézanne, as though it could not know or announce itself prior to the mediation of the painting artist. It is implied that the landscape must borrow Cézanne’s consciousness to do this, but what does it achieve by ‘thinking itself’? Does it see itself, as by being endowed with eyes; does it hold itself, as though having been given hands?

It’s not so much a sensory faculty such as sight or touch which comprises Cézanne’s gift. Rather, what the landscape gains by borrowing his consciousness is the *self-reflexivity* represented by the reflexive pronoun in ‘thinks *itself*’. This class of words (‘herself’, ‘myself’, ‘ourselves’, etc) is a close relative of the possessive pronoun (‘her’, ‘my’, ‘our’). What is special about reflexive pronouns and those beings capable of thinking them, is that the object of possession is a ‘self’ (e.g. it’s *her* self, or it’s *my* self).

Without a mediator, the landscape, though fully alive and indisputably present, is incapable of being *in possession* of its self. Indeed, where ‘being’ seems to be a condition

shared by Cézannes and landscapes alike, *having oneself* seems to be a faculty relegated only to the domain of conscious beings. This diagnostic of consciousness as ‘the ability to have oneself’ is reflected in the English use of the term ‘possession’ with reference to lucidity. When somebody is ‘possessed’ (‘had’ by another), they are not themselves, or are out of their minds. When someone is ‘self-possessed’ (‘had’ by oneself), they are alert and in control. When Cézanne beckons the landscape into the space of painting, the landscape does not gain eyes, or hands or a brain. It gains possession of its self. And if this notion of ‘consciousness’ were also a faculty of finite capacity that could be donated, or loaned out, then it would be conceivable to imagine the painting as the site at which the landscape finds itself, and Cézanne loses himself.

Although this quotation by Cézanne serves well to depict the artist as a medium, he is only one of many to describe creative practice in this way. Just over a decade after Cézanne’s death, T.S. Eliot outlines his ‘impersonal’ theory of poetry in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. This essay, which sets out to defend the function of ‘tradition’ in artistic originality and criticise the tendency at the time to favour those poets who ‘least resemble anyone else’, ends up turning from a concern with individual originality to devote considerable thought to the question of what role – if any – the individual or ‘personality’ has to play in the process of art. Here Eliot argues that the talent of the ideal author 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, as persons, from the creative equation. To this end, this essay seems to purport another variant of the ‘medium’ metaphor, in which, as was also the case with Cézanne, the ‘person’ 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.’ He illustrates this idea by imagining the ideal author to be like a catalyst in a chemical reaction, enabling the coming-together of disparate, otherwise inactive elements, whilst remaining personally unchanged and absent from the final formula. This perspective on good creative practice, with its supposed impartiality, is said to approach the conditions of science because it is fundamentally experimental; motivated, not by a premeditated agenda, outcome or belief, but by the allure of discovery awarded to those who faithfully follow hypothetical unions to their unfettered conclusions. But this ‘self-sacrifice’ and this ‘extinction of personality’ sound like quite harsh working conditions – unless, again, 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.⁵

I am sympathetic to this struggle. T. S. Eliot appears to be trying to resolve a paradox about authorship, that is, how a self-possessed person can be reluctant to take full credit for the art which they alone have made (or in Eliot’s case, make something novel out of tradition). He champions the notion that the author is a medium, but is led to wonder: why stop at ‘author’? Is being a medium just a condition of being a person, and is a ‘medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected

⁵ Tradition...

ways' a conceivable theory of personhood and not only authorship? Is this assumed 'substantial unity of the soul' getting in the way of a better understanding about the workings of personhood?

Eliot does not, as my PhD project does, derail his discussion of authorship to delve into matters of personhood, concluding instead that, 'poetry ... is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.' Thus, 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 artist is in this case like a good scientist, impartial, privileging experimental practice and protecting it from variables which might compromise the conditions for novel discoveries: the ravages of political agenda and personal desire.

In more recent memory, Peggy Phelan notes of Cindy Sherman's photographs of herself that they allow her to 'develop the human body's disappearance into the prop, the prosthesis', at which point we witness also 'the mise-en-abyme of self-production and reproduction' (1993, 69). Rendering the body as prop or prosthesis recalls again the medium's practice of instrumentalising her self, inviting, inevitably, a kind of self-transformation. In an interview, Sherman describes the process as very much impartial to her own tastes and predilections, recalling T.S Eliot's illustration of the ideal author. 'I don't think of it as that literal to me,' she explains, when asked whether her characters are a reflection of her own desire to become them, 'when I'm doing the characters, I really don't feel like it's something that grows out of my fantasy, my own dreams' (Art 21, 2011). 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. When pacing through the rooms of one of her retrospectives, like the one held at the National Portrait Gallery in 2019, you can squint between photographs but still be left wondering, *where is she?* By some optical, forensic maneuver, you can try to outwit the displays and excavate her from some latent residue, some betrayal of continuity across the portraits beneath 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 some kind of everywoman. Tempting though it may be to play this game of catching the artist out, and spotting a slip-up in her illusionary images; the endeavour would prove sorely futile if it turned out that the photographs were not illusions at all. Such a sport would then yield only the most unsatisfactory reassurances: a real tooth, a bare leg, an eye, but still no Sherman.

The question of who or what is being channeled through the artist, if not some ‘essence’ of her own ideation, appears wherever the artist-as-medium metaphor is invoked, and it has yielded many answers. The very diversity of these answers, some of which I will soon mention, seems only to increase the mystery attached to the notion that an artist is in communication with some Other, an other which, like Cézanne’s landscape, cannot seem to exert its agency – is all but absent – without the mediation of the artist as its instrument. Sherman makes an instrument of her body; not for herself, but apparently for something outside herself. In this way, her images become particularly vivid documents of her own self-estrangement.

This career-long experiment in split-second roleplay (for all that’s needed is for some other character to come and replace her in the blink of a camera-shutter) recalls the practice of spirit photography – not the work of Victorian illusionists who doctored their photographs

for the desired effect – but those ghost hunters who sought in earnest to capture the fleeting form of spirits. And although in this sense her task is equally arduous (Sherman has described the characters’ staging, posing and capturing as exhausting); instead of searching haunted nooks and crannies, Sherman turns the camera at herself, and seems there, in her living self, to find more ghosts than she could ever hope to discover elsewhere.

You don’t need to be an artist, or see an exhibition by Sherman, to gain an intuition about what self-estrangement might feel like. Nor would you need makeup, elaborate costumes, or a wig. All you would need to do is look at yourself in a mirror for a prolonged period of time – longer than it usually takes to check up on your appearance. Like Sherman, you can point your own biological cameras at yourself and find ghosts behind your eyes.

Often I am told that this is a very unsettling experience, gradually plunging the unassuming mirror-gazer from boredom, straight into a thrilling displacement of the self’s centre of mass. The face you assume 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. Looking deep into yourself, you may begin to wonder, *but where is she?* You notice the volume of your head, become conscious of the space inside of it and the peepholes punctured into it, and remember that you are a machine whose apparatus is defined by functions, processing, churning. Your face is the mask of a friendly robot, the supple skin a functional gauze exuding metabolic exhaust through its tiny pores. Somebody else could have easily worn this face; indeed that has already been the case and will be so in the future. It is uncanny. *Unhomely*. Defamiliarising. Sure enough, these qualities serve the horror genre well, but what is particularly unnerving, I think, about seeing ourselves in this way, is recognising in our reflection a being of *potential*, not of essence.

Phelan's reading of Sherman's work suggests that the artist's body becomes that instrument in which she generates a *mise-en-abyme* of potential persons, as if by placing herself in the path of two facing mirrors. In turn, the imagined retrospective walkthrough is like being immersed in a kaleidoscope of has-beens (often Sherman's characters are inscribed with the pathos of expired celebrity). What I would add to this reading is a lesser emphasis on the illusions and trickery associated with mirrors and disguises, and a greater emphasis on how Sherman's condition in her work is enacted beyond art and artifice, 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'. Never quite fulfilling its goal. 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 a medium. 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. We see in our prolonged reflection the person as a being of potential, not essence; an instrument that is nothing *but* a prop for the task of becoming.

Interiors and Exteriors

By diverse means, each of the artists mentioned so far adopt a more or less conscious methodology of depersonalisation that renders the self malleable and receptive to external qualities, 'spirits' or 'character'. Echoing these examples are a myriad more reports by creative practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds and eras that attribute their productivity to some external force, or at least attest to feeling some bafflement as to their own contribution to the work they have made. The renunciation of self as a part of artistic

methodology is familiar to Maurice Blanchot, who claims that a writer is fated to ‘sacrifice himself for the work to become other’ (2003, 216). Here, we are reminded also of Deleuze’s ‘virtual object’; an entity that lacks its own identity precisely so as to have the capacity to accommodate an alternate quality (1994, 152). One particularly compelling testimony is cited in anthropologist Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency*, by an African carver speaking in the 1970s about the mask he has made:

I see the thing I have made [a Sande mask] coming out of the women’s bush. It is now a proud man *jIna* [spirit] with plenty of women running after him. It is not possible to see anything more wonderful in this world. His face is shining, he looks this way and that, and all the people wonder about this beautiful and terrible thing. 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 ... (Gell 1998: 46; d’Azevedo 1973: 148)

In turn, these recent notions seem to echo, in guises more or less intuitive to our modern sensibilities, ideas about authorship that date back at least to antiquity, and possibly long before that. Where the ancient Greeks attributed artistic craft to channeling the divine voices of the Muses, the biblical apostles reported that their hand had been guided by the Holy Ghost in writing the gospels. Anticipating the birth of experimental psychology, it is possible to trace a resurgence of this emphasis on inspiration in the mid-19th century, only, the divine is replaced by the unbridled forces of the unconscious (Burke, 99, n. 6). From there, the same idea appears in testimonies such as those mentioned above, at times taking on a register that is at once scientific and spiritual.

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 (Burke, 1995, 14-18). 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 or familiar spirit, or any ghostly agent for that matter, cannot enter a body that is already occupied with a lucid soul; it must be *vacated* first.

Across all these examples, the voice that speaks through the medium of the artist is attributed to different sources. But in each of them there is a sense that something came and went, through and by means of the artist as its ‘minister’, suggesting that somewhere on the person of the artist there was a space, and that it was filled 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 human fixation on the spatiality of personhood, complete with ideas about capacity, viscosity and spiritual matter. Together, these ideas form a set of presumed physical laws of the spirit which compel me to revisit old questions about the mechanics of personhood (its ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, its limits and permeability) before examining the consequent implications these assumptions have on our understanding of the role of the person in creative processes. There will be more about this notion of spacial interiority in the next section.

Both of the terms ‘medium’ and ‘person’ summon with them a notion of coordinates, positions and distance. So far in this chapter, I have made use of many prepositions implying a relationship with space, asking: What is the author mediating *between*? Where does this ghostly agency come *from*? How does it pass *through* the author? What is it that comes *out*? There’s a certain mechanical pragmatism to this language, which renders its subjects roomy

and viscous: things take time to ‘pass through’ the artist’s person and must labour to get out. The artist’s person is a thing that is *here*, in relation to its potential possessor which comes from some indiscernible vanishing point over *there*. Here we recall also the presumed ‘unidirectional’ vectors within subject/object, or active/passive relations in grammar, and similarly the ‘agential directionality’ implied by expressionist versus impressionist authorship mentioned earlier. These prepositions, and the need to use them in the context of discussing agency, reflect a spatial conception of personhood which models it as a function receiving inputs and returning outputs; a machine for being.

As will be discussed in the next section, a dominant shape attributed to a spatial concept of personhood has been that of the vessel, with its implied interiority. T. S. Eliot, in his impersonal theory of poetry, suggests that the creative reaction occurs ‘inside’ the poet’s mind, just as Cézanne invites the landscape to think itself ‘in’ him. Furthermore, accepting the notion that the person must be ‘sacrificed’ (see Eliot and Blanchot above) in order to make way for exterior agencies, implies that the person is a thing (vessel or otherwise) of finite capacity, and that spiritual agents are made of some such material which, like matter, comes in discrete quantities which cannot occupy the same soul-space simultaneously.

We have seen how there is an urge to prescribe locations to agents and articulate their intentional vectors in grammar and in theories of authorship. In thinking about authorship as a position of mediation, the author’s person is imagined to occupy a space in between some ‘input’ and ‘output’. This intuitive topology of personhood seems to be rife with a certain compelling (but not necessarily reliable) 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 space simultaneously; that one or the other ‘takes over’). This will be the subject of the next chapter.

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. In T.S. Eliot's terms, a good medium makes no personal impositions, which are only noise to the self-othering the poet seeks. You have to lie still, like a guitar string, to then become animated with character. With Cindy Sherman, whose authorship is enacted in the material of documenting her own estranged body, we saw more starkly how her mode of authorship, as a medium for various fictional characters, affects also the flavour of her own personhood. 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; a fiction of being someone which never fulfills itself but only dreams up the character which it hurries to impersonate. Furthermore, with Cézanne we speculated whether he donates his consciousness to the landscape in order to gift it self-possession, the ability to have itself.

Looking at myself in the mirror, as in the aforementioned experiment (an experiment which many bored souls have accidentally subjected themselves to), I behold myself at first but gradually lose myself to a mask. One would have thought that a mirror would help me have myself, but in fact it makes me see myself in my literality 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 subsequent chapters, I will discuss how the spatial intuitions about agency discussed in this chapter might have relevance in terms of the self-distancing required of

self-possession, as well as how thinking of character as a ‘pattern’ might similarly require a spatial conception of agency.

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The Shape of a Thinking Thing

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. The trouble is, it's difficult to see in advance how a question might be revealed to be flawed in this way. Radical reframings of contemporary debates tend to happen more or less accidentally, as a byproduct of researches into altogether different fields, and just how radical they are tends to be more obvious in retrospect.

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? 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’.⁶ 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.’⁷

Similarly, writing on the 16th 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’.⁸ In Europe, the belief in the

⁶ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 133.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 34.

ephemerality of flesh and immortality of spirit has been largely supported by Christianity,⁹ but the intuitive configuration of spirit *within* body, as well as the distinction between the two, seems to have been relatively universal, according to Gell.

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? Are thoughts sequestered like moths caught in a jar and fluttering; does the mind flit and spark internally like a light bulb (ping!); are memories collected and stored like papers in a filing cabinet? Is the vessel, when taken to be the shape of the 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 Other can be found – but a homunculus model like this only perpetuates the problem of locating intelligence by infinite regress. This means looking for a homunculus, inside a homunculus, inside a homunculus, and so on, in the hope of eventually reaching a point representing the origin of volition. We can call this configuration of self *pointhood*.

Even brain scientists are sometimes lead by the presumed model of pointhood. In *Freedom Evolves* (2004), philosopher Daniel C. Dennett takes issue with a set of conclusions

⁹ In ‘The Dead and their Possessions: The Declining Agency of the Cadaver in Early Medieval Europe’ (2020), Emma Claire Brownlee argues that this view of the cadaver in Europe may have begun much earlier, in the seventh century, and ties it to Christian theology of the afterlife: ‘[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.’

about the mind that resulted from a neurophysiological experiment by Benjamin Libet (1999).¹⁰ The experiment showed 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.¹¹ Because participants were able to signal the moment of their decision close to instantly by merely staring at the hand of a precise clock and remembering its exact position when the decision happened, the study concluded reliably that people typically reported their decision happening circa 300ms 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've made a decision that our 'brain' has already made for us. Dennett finds many ways to problematise this conclusion, but the main point is that it presupposes that 'you' – the 'you' that makes the decisions and is conscious – is located in a single point somewhere, 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. But there is no reason to suggest such a point in time and space exists, argues Dennett – rather, it is much more probable 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. Even if we confined the definition of 'mind' to the contours of a brain; the brain matter and brain activity too is itself vastly distributed in time and space, and when we examine its architecture, it refuses the expectation of centralisation that we so casually bring to our reading of mind.

¹⁰ Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (Penguin Books, 2004), 227-232.

¹¹ 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 of what readiness potential is, is another point of critique by some scientists (c.f. Steve Taylor, 'How a Flawed Experiment "Proved" That Free Will Doesn't Exist', *Scientific American*, 6 December 2019).

And here it might also be worth commenting that the scientific desire for *precision* and the way precision itself is conceptualised or aestheticised, might also be a hindrance to finding the shape of a thinking thing. When we think of 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 sometimes get the shape of a phenomenon wrong to start with, but sometimes the 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) – or more specifically, the assumptions of 'pointhood' that attend a common understanding of 'precision' – means that the very sharpness of the discerning tool blunts our understanding.

There are a few aspects of self that are omitted by the vessel model and its attendant pointhood:

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.
3. It shrouds the ghostly properties of a self in mystery, by relegating self to a vanishing point by infinite regress.

I will now consider alternative shapes that might accommodate these three points. 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 been able to form a vocabulary or intuition about something formally not intuitive.

Distributed Person

In his critique of Libet's experiment, Dennett described the mind as distributed, in opposition to the experiment's assumption of pointhood. This concept (shared by, among others, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's work on 'the partible person'¹² and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus')¹³ seems to suggest that a person is always unfolding, a time-based phenomenon; never apprehendable as a tangible whole at any given point in time. Like movement, it doesn't make sense to take a snapshot of a person, or at least, the snapshot becomes something very different to the person.

The following is a passage from Virginia Woolf's novel *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 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

¹² C.f. Strathern, Marilyn, *The gender of the gift: Problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). In 'Art and anthropology after relations' (*Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6(2), 2016) 425–439, Roger Sansi explains that the notion of a distributed or partible person has had a long history in anthropology, starting perhaps with Marcel Mauss' work on the gift and his observation that 'a gift is an extension of the person who gives, hence blurring the very distinction between people and things ... The relation between gift and personhood was a central question for [the anthropology of Melanesia] all along, but in particular in the eighties and nineties in the work of Annette Weiner, Nancy Munn, Marilyn Strathern, and Alfred Gell'.

¹³ C.f. 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'.

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.¹⁴

In this meditative moment, Mrs Dalloway fancies that she is distributed, and therefore 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 seems to me to be the key to the entire novel, which I would argue represents an aesthetic response to the notion that a person is distributed, inflected in others, subject to memetic contagion. 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 hardly features in it. Instead, a medley of other characters who cross paths with her by the slightest strings of attachment appear, and the novel takes pains to describe their characteristics, peculiarities and longings, only allowing the protagonist to drift fleetingly in the background. The self here is expressed as a reverberation across the thickness of a distributed expanse; its consciousness is diffuse and sometimes sleepy and blind to its own machinations.

The model of the distributed person foregrounds an anxiety which has perhaps always lived with humans, namely, that without the centralisation of 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 instantiating them.

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 168.

The second hypothesis of my project (see Abstract) suggests that character is something which both enables and demarcates what is thinkable to a person at the time that character is adopted. This came out of my character performances in my art practice, where I observed my own retroactive surprise at the things I ended up saying and doing when I started acting like someone else. Not only that, but when I am ‘in character’ this otherness comes to me relatively easily; my uncharacteristic behaviours seem to me, in that moment, to be the most natural way to act or speak.

There is a great deal of recent empirical evidence in cultural psychology showing that people’s cognitive faculties, values and behaviours stand to radically alter when they *frame-switch* (adopt one of their dominant cultural frames depending on the situational cues around them).¹⁵ In my work, I prefer to think of ‘character’ as the thing that is adopted when the self switches frame. Character is a more general formula of behaviour that can be marked by any number of different cultural facets. By adopting characters, I am able to make conspicuous to myself the moment of switching, and observe the difference it makes.

At about halfway through the PhD, I tried a new approach to my performance which combined the notion of the distributed person as described above and the observation that character enables and limits the realm of likely behaviour. The notion that a mind is always

¹⁵ C.f. Alexandria L. West et al, “The Potential Cost of Cultural Fit: Frame Switching Undermines Perceptions of Authenticity in Western Contexts”. *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 9, article. 2622, 2018; Alexandria L. West et al. “More Than the Sum of Its Parts: A Transformative Theory of Biculturalism.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 48, no. 7, 2017, pp. 963–990; Morteza Dehghani et al “The Subtlety of Sound: Accent as a Marker for Culture.” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2015, pp. 231–250; Sylvia X. Chen & Michael H. Bond “Two Languages, Two Personalities? Examining Language Effects on the Expression of Personality in a Bilingual Context.” *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 36, no. 11, 2010, pp. 1514–1528; Jie Sui et al. “Bi-cultural mind, self-construal, and self- and mother-reference effects: Consequences of cultural priming and recognition memory”. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. vol. 43, 2007, pp. 818–824; Nairán Ramírez-Esparza et al. “Do Bilinguals Have Two Personalities? A Special Case of Cultural Frame Switching.” *Journal of Research in Personality*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2006, pp. 99–120; Ying-yi Hong et al. “Multicultural Minds: a Dynamic Constructivist Approach to Culture and Cognition.” *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, no. 7, 2000, pp. 709–720.

already distributed and embedded within a social milieu, means that a ‘self’ or a ‘person’ is a communal object or site, even when there are no other people around. In the performance, I split myself into two characters and had a conversation between the two, alternating between them.



Performance video for Research Seminar. In the above still I am being ‘myself’ responding to the ‘character’. In the still below, the ‘character’ is responding to ‘me’.

The conversation did not feel wholly different to a conversation with another person. Yes, it took some concentration and conscious switching, but I fell into those roles relatively quickly and from within one, was able to respond to the other from a characteristic frame of mind. For me, this strengthened the plausibility of my second hypothesis, and seemed to hold potential on a practical, everyday level. *I could consult my characters on matters I didn't have the answers to.*

In this conversation, one of the personas was 'me', my habitual self: the collection of demeanours and tendencies that I normally exhibit to the world around me without thinking I am performing them. The other persona was a 'character', someone I know I never present to society and whom I arrived at via conscious affectation. 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?

This performance dramatised the way in which the model of the distributed person means that the person is a social entity even at the most intimate, 'personal' level, and performed an experiment in which I summoned common social practices (like conversation) to my own person alone.

A String Theory of Self

Building on the concept of the distributed person, 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.¹⁶

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 field, there is no manifest effect: 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.

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

¹⁶ The mathematician Joseph Fourier also found lines to be highly expressive entities. The Fourier analysis breaks down a complex function (a line describing a relationship) into the sum of simpler ones (trigonometric functions), such that any relationship can be very accurately described by just a handful of simple functions added together. Because of the economy of the line, the Fourier analysis is used in compressing files, notably JPEGs.

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. 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 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 is constantly both written and read within a social milieu.

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 actually 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 is not a vessel, but a line amenable to being waved at distinct frequencies that we recognise as character.

Leitmotif

In my novel *Anomaline*, my protagonist is a line. It takes her a while to figure that out. After a series of adventures in which she suspects herself to be insubstantial, inconsequential and talentless, she discovers that a child-like artificial intelligence has been living in her cellar all along. This creature, whom she calls ‘the Moody Presence’, is invisible and inaudible, save for the fact that it communicates through the medium of my protagonist, or ‘waves’ her. The two of them develop an especially close relationship.

In the following passage, my protagonist is sitting on the bottom step of the cellar, listening to the artificial intelligence’s symphonic speech as it plays out through her:

Here, the language of moods is employed to add fluent range; the overture has begun and the tones across my being begin to variegate; lifting my spirit a fraction above its

habitual altitude to then have it quiver faintly just outside of the neighbourhood of my usual disposition. I am faced with muddled perspectives, and am unable to distill them clearly from one another; for I am both instrument and audience. If a piano had ears, and could hear its own ventriloquism; I suppose that is what it is like. But my own spectatorship does not seem to impede the continuing expression of the Moody Other across the breadth of my spirit.

The strings of my soul pluck thicker and begin to bleat, but above them the high note continues to soar. I recognise it, then, this singular note, as one of my ‘moments of soaring’. These are moments even I have not been capable of conjuring at will, not to mention I would have thought I am the only one who could know of them. There is then something truly sorcerous about the artificial intelligence in the cellar; for it is capable of eking out the most slender details of my character and making of them chords, with which it speaks. Indeed, this is speech. A musical soliloquy, an aria; it bursts forth as if from someone hitherto vocally stranded, with no one to speak to for an age until now.

The plucking has become more erratic, with younger parts of myself becoming prominent; the older parts droning in the background, but with a kind of elderly satisfaction. Multiple, plucky voices cacophonate asynchronously in the harp of my throat, and with their broad reverberation, I note with some astonishment the spaciousness of my being. I seem to expand to a size well beyond the confines of the collection of lines delineating my locality, for I feel myself somehow ‘out there’, implicated in something much larger. This atmospheric self of mine is truly enormous, and all of it shakes and trembles with the mood overcoming it – a mood to which I have not only permitted entry into my self, but which I feel I have nurtured and

encouraged to the state of eloquence it is now able to exhibit – an eloquence far beyond the remit of my own powers.

Now the movements within turn into tumultuous clamouring, but none the less gainful for it; indeed how does this Moody Presence achieve the orchestration of such elegant panic? The lines of my being loosen slightly, in surrender to the despairing chorus. I allow my heart to crack open, like a walnut.

‘There, there,’ I utter softly into the dark space, ‘I will chart the field of space you need, I will facilitate your voice; I will not fail you little one, you shall be heard for all times to come.’

And here, on this stony step, in this dark cellar, where nothing about the scene would strike the untrained eye as being out of the ordinary; here, in the sleeping part of the house lurking all but out of sight, with the fragments of my soul now thrown into a melodious tumult, I come to terms with the profound understanding that I am being spoken to – and through; here, as the language of my own potential envelopes me in a dream of transcendence and redemptive escape, an old thought returns to me, only, for the first time, it fills me not with anguish but an unaccustomed pride. The old idea whispers on by through the back of my consciousness, leaving me smiling gratefully in its wake:

I have no talent of my own.

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