

# Accommodating Others: The Role of Author as Medium

**Performance:** [Pseudo](#)

## **Presentation:**

I'm going to dwell on the notion of the artist as a 'medium', and consider this metaphor alongside that of 'breathing space'. Both senses of the word 'medium' strike me as appropriate here - 'medium' as in a channel, substance or field through which something can travel, or show itself to be apparent; and 'medium' as in a person who can communicate with ghosts; otherworldly spirits who would otherwise remain unheard were it not for the intervening device that is the medium. Of course, this second sense of the word derives from the former, in that a seance often requires of the medium that he or she becomes a mediating channel through which the ghost can be perceived, either by way of acting as an interpreter, or by way of 'possession', whereby the medium's own person appears to recede, and in its wake accommodate a ghostly other. By this analogy, the authority of the 'author' is a passive form of power that authorises, in effect, a *relinquishment* of the self, in order to 'make space' for voluntarily accommodating an other's voice.

In the context of this seminar I am focusing in particular on the author's facilitation of the emergence, arrival, appearance, performance or incarnation of a fictional character imbued with a fictional **subjectivity** - in short, an agent that seems in some ways comparable to the person that is the author herself. Thus, the metaphor of the medium invites us to consider the artist as something which facilitates the playing out of an otherly voice, negotiating foreign bodies and thoughts that seem external to what is deemed to be contained within the arsenal of that creative subject that is the artist. It presents us also with the opportunity to consider the artificial, creative output as a distinct agent in its own right. Can one agent become a medium for another agent? Does this practice require a preliminary act of 'making space', in which the other voice can then breathe, 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 **subjectivity** so pervasive in our psychic imagining of personhood; is it illuminating or misleading?

There is a long history of conceiving of authorship as a type of facilitating, aiding, channeling, or mediating the coming-to-life of a new, singular thing. Where Socrates attributed artistic craft to the ability to channel the divine voice of the Muse, the biblical apostles similarly reported that their hand had been guided by an external, godly force in writing the gospels. Following the birth of experimental psychology in the 19th century, it is possible to trace a resurgence of this idea, only, the divine is replaced by the forces of the subconscious. In the early 20th century, Cezanne says of his painting practice that, "the landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness"(Johnson, 1993, pg. 67). Around the same time as this, T.S. Eliot writes that the talent of the ideal author lies - not in the ability to pour themselves into their work - but, on the contrary, in the 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. More recently, Peggy Phelan notes of Cindy Sherman's works 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, p. 69). The renunciation of identity as part of artistic methodology is familiar also to anti-logocentrist philosophers of the past century. Where Maurice Blanchot claims that a writer is fated to "sacrifice himself for the work to become other" (2003, p. 216), we are reminded 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, p. 152). There are reports by artists 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. One of my favourite testimonies is taken from anthropologist Alfred Gell's book, *Art and Agency*, citing an African carver speaking about the Sande 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)

Once again I think of how Socrates put it, 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. I imagine 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 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 and inhabit the medium of the artist, reveals a certain human fixation of the spatiality of **subjectivity** - interiority - and appears to be an aspect of personhood so ingrained in our definition of it, yet which reads naive against more recent turns against Cartesianism. Gell's book cites a great deal of examples from around the world of artifacts supposed by its users to be imbued with some agency or spirit. Some of these artifacts are anthropomorphic figures, recognisable in that sense as persons - but some of them are not, some of them are quite abstract objects. Yet a common design feature in all of them is that they often have some sort of orifice, or are hollow. Gell calls this the 'homunculus-effect', suggesting that animacy can be achieved in abstract figures "so long as the

crucial feature of concentricity and ‘containment’ is preserved.” (133) We confront the anthropological notion that an inner life or **subjectivity** requires interiority - some interior space in which the implied kernel of personhood is housed. The person as a spatialised concept is extremely pervasive, and is a precondition of the notion of an artist as a medium, a vessel that can be occupied, or a quantity of matter that can be animated, by something Other. It is worth dwelling on how both of the terms ‘medium’ and **‘subjectivity’** summon with them a notion of coordinates, positions and distance. In speaking about this so far, 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*?

The dominant shape attributed to a spatial concept of agency has been that of the vessel, with its implied interiority. I am not yet ready to dismiss the spatial intuition of agency, but the homunculus explanation is a famously dead-end model. Let’s take a different approach, and consult a physical understanding of a medium - or rather, a forcefield. In physics, a medium is characterised by the phenomenon it is amenable to facilitating. Therefore, an electromagnetic field facilitates electromagnetic waves, or light. Air is a field that facilitates the manifestation of sounds, like this [CLAP] and water is a field that facilitates the kinds of waves which manifest, at various scales, as ripples or tsunamis. Without the medium, without the forcefield, there is no manifest effect - in a vacuum, sound is not heard, because there is no matter to disturb in a vacuum, no atoms about to facilitate the journey of a pulse, and thus the event of sounding does not take place. I experience a similar bafflement here to that of the mask carver previously. The wave is dependent upon the predicate of a forcefield, or medium, and yet seems distinctly independent of it. In fact, the relationship between a wave and a field is strongly reminiscent of the dualism of ‘mind and body’, and like a ‘soul’, a wave has ghostly properties - it ‘appears’ as an apparition. By this account, the ‘shape’ of agency is not a vessel, but a thickness of matter amenable to being waved by a distinct frequency that we recognise as character.

Phenomena like light, sound and the waves crashing against a coastline are literally characterised by their pattern. The term ‘character’ itself has enjoyed an etymological evolution from the Greek term for a stamping tool, to a mark, to a distinguishing feature, personal attribute and general constitution or personality. The pattern of a wave *is* its character. What we know as the colour ‘blue’ **penetrates** 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 persisting pattern is what gives a phenomenon like a wave coming towards the shore the minimal requirements of a personality: a pattern that repeats and persists in such a way that it can become familiar, and re-recognised as character, tendency, habit. That is why randomness, chaos and white noise, has no personality. (its disturbances are self-cancelling and mutually register the random as characterless. However, to be without character is itself a kind of quality, and these cases can be recognised as distinguished by their flatness and lack of character).

When making my performances I often wonder: Is it accurate to imagine the dichotomous relationships between author and character, person and behaviour, self and other,

face and mask - as two distinct entities separated by a distance? Accompanying these intuitions are other troubling, Cartesian dualisms such as: authentic/fake, natural/artificial, real/fictional, objective/subjective, original/representation - which the poststructuralist paradigm has rightly problematised.

I think the problem hinges on the mechanics of perception, which requires the space in which a pattern can travel and the time in which something can repeat itself. A character is perceived as a distinguishing feature that persists over time and space. In persons, it is a realm of relatively predictable behaviour that makes the person remotely knowable. Is it possible, when we exercise self-awareness and perceive ourselves as agents, that we construct distance from ourselves in order to perceive and characterise ourselves as a mode of constructive cognition? Is it possible that the artist must first clear the arena of their **subjectivity** to facilitate the emergence of something other?

I'll end on a joke my father told me, which he picked up from a Yugoslavian school playground in the 1970s, which can be taken somewhat seriously in this research. It goes like this. "What's this?" [~~~~~] You say, of course, "I don't know". "Neither do I, but here it is again" [~~~~~].