

# Scripting for Agency

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# Abstract

*Scripting for Agency* uses performance, storytelling and the cultivation of relationships with fictional characters, to estrange a set of popularly held assumptions about the “mechanics of self”. These include unconscious assumptions which may be underpinning pertinent debates about identity within the public sphere today, such as the ethics of appropriation, self-identification, belonging, identity taxonomies, the recent worldwide rise in nationalism and xenophobic sentiment, and related issues. Rather than focusing of specific subject positions or identities, the project responds to more elementary studies of self, 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. In service of this focus, the project intentionally employs methods that suspend value judgments on the ethics of identity and positionality, with a view to exploring instead the possibility of radically reframing these same debates by way of experimentally examining their foundations.

The project begins by identifying self mechanics as a field devoted to theorising on the 'architecture of agency', bringing together examples from art, psychology, anthropology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, metafictional literature and evolutionary theory. It then proposes a set of performance art experiments as potent instruments for yielding new knowledge in this area, not only theoretically, but empirically. The thesis forms in turn a provocation on how art can infiltrate theory making in fields outside itself.

Embarking from the well-documented psychological phenomenon of frame-switching, where it has been shown that ‘multicultural’ people switch their behaviour, personality, and cognitive mechanisms depending on which cultural frame they situationally adopt, my project expands this phenomenon to consider the role of 'character' in the mechanics of self. It is especially concerned with troubling the perceived relationship between ‘self-consistency’ and ‘authenticity’, through *performance, reading and writing*.

These three activities are conducive to troubling that relationship because they all depend on turning a human being into a 'substratum' across which a text is played out, allowing for a kind of exchange of consciousness (e.g. performer → character; reader →

text). 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.

In parallel to the project, I am writing *Anomaline*, a novel in which I negotiate the dynamics of an author-character relationship, forming the ‘unconscious’ or ‘background radiation’ of the visible practice. The novel will be submitted as documentation, along with a series of performance works and a written dissertation exploring the following three hypotheses, all of which were yielded by the practice itself:

1. Character is a pattern which ‘plays out’ across a substratum that is embedded within a social milieu. A person is that which is capable of playing out characters.
2. Character both enables and demarcates the limits of what is thinkable to a person at a given time.
3. The line might serve as a better visual model for ‘the shape of a self’, than the traditional ‘vessel’, which foregrounds interiority as a mark of agency. This hypothesis forms the beginning of a kind of ‘string theory of self’, where the self is figured as a field which ripples to the energy of memetic contagion.

## Where I'm At

Please first take a glance at my [research timeline](#), where you can get a quick impression of where I'm at.

Because I'm nearing my upgrade exam, I'd like to use this panel to show the structure of what I've done and where I'm headed, rather than look at individual artworks.

This year I:

- Made 3 new video performances
- Found a new avenue in my performance whereby I 'split' myself into multiple personas and presented this for my research seminar
- Wrote a dissertation section about frame switching
- Finished writing my novel, *Anomaline*.

I am now in the process of contextualising, or framing, this work in writing. The following text is a partial attempt at this, and is written specifically for this Annual Review Panel. It bridges some of the thinking between Years 1 & 2.

# The Shape of a Thinking Thing

People like to think about the shape of a thinking thing. And 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, but our models of it have had to shift and iterate over time to accommodate new knowledge about its behaviours. The brain, an organ of no particularly interesting size or shape, seemed insignificant to a study of mind before the architecture of neurons and their galaxy-scale interconnectivity was revealed. The study of something so elementary as shape even has the potential to make some of the most heated debates redundant. For example, people used to debate long and hard over 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 was a radical transformation, or transcendence, of that debate.

It's a story we all know, but it's revealing to observe in so plain an example how a question (*Is the world finite or infinite?*) can contain within itself a misleading vocabulary ill-fitted to the phenomenon at hand, 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.

However, it would be interesting if something like what the 'round earth' concept did to the finite/infinite question, could be applied to today's debates about agents, selves, or thinking things. These are current debates which manifest diversely, from discussing artificial intelligence, to negotiating politics of identity. And just like the flat/round 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*, Alfred Gell writes that all around the world and in numerous different places and epochs, artificial objects have been made not only to represent spiritual entities, but also to instantiate them. These objects, often used in rituals or otherwise consulted on important matters, are or have been assumed by their human counterparts to be thinking things, to be in possession of a soul, to have some 'inner light'. So what do these man-made avatars of spirit look like?

There is of course, a lot of diversity: some are shaped anthropomorphically, figuratively representing the deities or spirits that they incorporate. Some are more abstract in form: spherical, cylindrical, or cuboid, sometimes adorned with appropriate symbols. Yet there is a cross-cultural design feature common to all of them, and that is that they tend to be hollow, or have some sort of orifice. Gell calls this the 'homunculus-effect', suggesting that animacy is achieved in abstract figures "so long as the crucial feature of concentricity and 'containment' is preserved."

Similarly, writing on the 16th century 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'. In Europe, the belief in the ephemerality of flesh and immortality of spirit has been largely supported by Christianity, 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.

It is perhaps then the *vessel* which has been the most historically successful shape used to model self in the human imagination, underpinned by the instinct that an 'inner life' requires interiority - some interior 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 the homunculus, inside the 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*, philosopher Daniel Dennett takes issue with a set of conclusions about the mind that resulted from a neurophysiological experiment by Benjamin Libet (1999). 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> The point at which the action is initiated in 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.

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 presumes 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 vision.

A couple of other significant problems regarding the vessel, or 'pointhood', model is that:

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

I will now consider alternative shapes that accommodate these three points. When thinking about shape, especially ones less commonly associated with self, artists have sometimes tried to participate in this philosophical inquiry by using their artistic methods to aestheticise alternative models of self and thus begin to form a vocabulary and 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, amongst others, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's work on 'the distributed person' and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus') 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.

In the following passage from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, from close to the end of the novel, Mrs Dalloway is thinking about what constitutes her self:

... 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 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.

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 is in fact 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.

The second hypothesis of my project (see Abstract, above) suggests that 'character' is something which both enables and demarcates what is thinkable to a person at the time. This came out of my character performances in my art practice, where I observed my own retroactive surprise at the things I end up saying and doing when I start 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 "multiculturals" 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). As someone who grew up in different countries speaking different languages, I believe my performance practice is a ready result of being such a frame switching multicultural myself. However, there cannot really be any such thing as a '*monocultural*', a term sometimes used in cultural psychology to distinguish more or less conspicuous instances of frame switching. Everyone frame switches.

My performance practice involves a kind of self-induced frame switching, but not between 'cultural frames' as demarcated by national borders or language alone— 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.

In my research seminar earlier this year 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 observation that a mind is always 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 this still I am being 'myself', responding to the 'character'.*

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 interesting potential on a practical, everyday level: *I could consult my characters on matters I don't have the answers to.*

The conversation also yielded a new idea in my research – and it was the 'fictional character' that came up with it, not 'me'. To explain: 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. However, it was this second, affected character that had the 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 claimed that my 'habitual self' was dominant, and that she was subordinate, which must be true, because I haven't spoken to her since. And for the first time in my imagination, she brought into being 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 summon 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, essentially, characterless entities that soak up character at the lightest touch or the faintest suggestion. They are incredibly suggestive, and 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 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 (like graphic shapes drawn by a computer program) 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 literally 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 persisting pattern is what gives a phenomenon like a wave coming towards the shore the minimal requirements of a

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

personality: 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 (expressiveness)
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 by distinct frequencies that we recognise as character.

### **Leitmotif (an Epilogue)**

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. 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.*