

PERFORMATIVE MODELS AND PHYSICAL FICTIONS: DIALOGIC PERFORMANCE AS SOCIAL COEVOLUTION. A CASE FOR ARCADIAN THEATRE (MODELLING THE WORLD THROUGH PLAY)¹

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Abstract: Arcadian Theatre is a concept for performance practice that uses fictional scenarios to engage participants in autotelic play that facilitates intercultural (inter-epistemological) dialogue. In so doing, the performance models of Arcadian Theatre

¹ This essay started as a keynote lecture “‘Arcadian Theatre’: Dialogic Performance as Social Coevolution. Performative Models on the Edge of Intercultural Chaos” at the *Culture as Interface and Dialogue: An Interdisciplinary Conference* (KREAS Project, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic, 27-28 May 2022). I am grateful for the honour and the opportunity. Everything we write is a result of dialogues with others. This is doubly true of an essay on doing and thinking with others. I am grateful to all my colleagues, students, and friends who have worked, debated, disagreed, and thought with me. Much of this essay’s argument stems from the discussions and workshops in our Centre for Performance, Technology, and Aesthetics (CPTA) and my students on the BA Drama and Theatre Practice and the MA Theatre Making in the School of the Arts, University of Hull, UK; from the work with Prague Quadrennial (PQ); and from the discussions at the KREAS conference in May 2022 after my keynote lecture. In no specific order but with great thanks: Cat Fergusson Baugh, Lucy Fielding, Amy Skinner, Kira Curtis, Luke Dankoff, Russell Gilbert, Adam Railton, Jaye Stark, Chukwuemeka Onuoha, Kanyin Erikotola, Leo Asomugha, Soraya Hussain, Josh Asbrey, Matthew Booth, Will Oakley, Lin Cao, Sherin Francis, Zhenquan Yu, Siobhan Ashton, Beth Mohun, Joe Beckett, Jenny Smith, Chloe Quinn, Jazmine Blackah, Cas Latham, Emma Smith, Michaela Ellis, Christian Billing, Gary Mitchell, Peter Elsdon, Mark Slater, M.A. Katritzky, Alba Graziano, Pascale Drouet, David Drozd, Kateřina Jebavá, Barbora Příhodová, Markéta Fantová, Josh Overton, Pamela Howard, Hana Hložková, Lubor Pokluda, Hana Pavelková, Daniela Čadková, Martin Procházka, Tracy Davis, Peter Marx, and of course Ondřej Kyas.

enable the cultivation of interaction and social coevolution. Drawing on theories of theatre and scenography, theory of models, philosophy (speech act theory), anthropology and social psychology, the article proposes the use of scenographic environments with its created and curated spaces and performance objects to create performative models and *physical fictions* capable of engendering novel ecologies with their autonomous epistemologies and ethics that build on the affordances of the spaces, objects and social behaviours within the fictional worlds.

Keywords: theatre theory, models, performative models, play, autotelic play, applied theatre, scenography, intercultural dialogue, epistemology, worlding, cosmopoiesis, Forum Theatre, Arcadian Theatre

“Will you play with me? Shall we play together?” asks your hosts’ child a few moments into the visit. Why? Is the child bored? Are they trying to win attention? Are they competing for it with the parents? Are they trying to negotiate relations with you? No matter how we rationalize the motives, intuitions, and instincts of that well-known invitation to play, there clearly is an impulse that drives children towards playful interactions with strangers. I am no developmental psychologist and my essay is not trying to uncover the motives for these interactions. The point of departure and one of this essay’s overall arguments is that playful interactions with strangers are valuable cognitive activities that enable social coevolution not only for young humans but also for adults. I would also argue that *the lack* of clear answers about what motivates these interactions plays a key role. For play to remain an *autotelic* activity – one that is purposeful but lacks a conscious teleological anchoring – is one of its necessary preconditions. Play’s ecology is a specific, negotiated environment: it is a space of physical propositions that open up potential meanings without asserting them. What makes such play possible is its *existence on the edge of epistemological chaos*. This playful epistemological chaos is based on potential rather than fixed conceptual frameworks, and on propositional social interactions that operate outside of specific, received cultures, ideologies, and their morals.

The child that invites you to play – you, a stranger they may well have not known just a few moments ago – probably does not insist on a specific game, a favourite one or an “ice-breaking” activity; they want to take the things around them and think about that reality with you. Especially for young children, there is no such word as thinking or doing: the two activities fall under the one word, *playing*. The child’s invitation is driven by a curiosity to *think-and-interact with others*: to play with the stranger.

This essay argues for the importance of *playing with the stranger* as a crucial cognitive activity of social coevolution. If curated well, *think-and-interact-with-*

others plays have the potential to facilitate intercultural dialogue and cultivate real-world social rapport and interaction. In what follows, this essay reflects theoretically on the autotelic qualities of play and its capacity to operate outside specific epistemologies (structures of thought, knowledge systems, cultures). Building on my theory of *performative models*² – interactive propositions that constitute social reality – I propose a concept for *Arcadian Theatre*: a type of performance that curates *scenographic environments* (or propositional ecologies) firmly rooted in physical spaces, objects, and ostensive action that enable participants to engage in autotelic performative interactions in physical fictions. I argue that these interactions, unyoked from specific objectives and teleologies, are an organic way of engendering intercultural dialogue and enabling social coevolution across epistemological divides. The practice of *scenography* as the art of envisioning, curating, and creating physical, ostensive spaces for performance and interaction plays a central role here. It carves out propositional environments – fictional worlds with their specific ecologies – that may serve as blueprints for possible futures.

Et in Arcadia Ego

Arcadia among all the provinces of Greece was ever had in singular reputation, partly for the *sweetness of the air and other natural benefits*, but principally for the *moderate and well tempered minds of the people* who (finding how true a contentation is gotten by following the course of nature, and how the shining title of glory, so much affected by other nations, doth indeed help little to the happiness of life) were the only people which, as by their justice and providence gave *neither cause nor hope to their neighbours to annoy them*, so were they *not stirred* with false praise to trouble others' quiet, thinking it a small reward for the wasting of their own lives in ravening that their posterity should long after say they done so. Even the muses seemed to approve their good determination by choosing that country as *their chiefest repairing place*, and by bestowing their perfections so largely there that the very shepherds themselves had their *fancies opened to so high conceits* as the most learned of other nations have been long time since content both to borrow their names and imitate their cunning.³

² Pavel Drábek, "Heterotelic Models as Performatives: From Speech Acts to Propositionality," *Litteraria Pragensia* 30, no. 60 (2020): 100-117.

³ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 4. Emphasis added.

Arcadian Theatre borrows its name from Sir Philip Sidney's experimental novel *Arcadia* (c1582). The novel also served as an inspiration for a practical exploration of some of the concepts presented here. In May 2021, during one of the periods of loosened restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, I worked with my Drama students at the University of Hull on an improvised adaptation of selected scenes from Sidney's *Arcadia*.⁴ The fictional and often fantastical situations gleaned from Sidney offered performative models that allowed actors to experiment with their actions and reactions, without a need for a particular outcome and without serving a narrative. That practical experience triggered the following theory of Arcadian Theatre. I have adopted the name in acknowledgement of its origins in Sidney's inspirational narrative and in the traditional framing of pastoral fictions that take Arcadia as "their chiefest repairing place" (to quote Sidney), as well as in the practical exploration of 2021.

In his influential 1935 study *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson analyzed a typology of fictional worlds whose central semantic gesture is a retreat from the real world towards fantasy, allegory, hyperbole, or other kinds of heterotopic settings.⁵ In no way does such a retreat entail a lack of relation and relevance to the lived experience of objective reality. The distancing by means of fiction enables enhanced critical engagement, freed from immediate real-life concerns. Fictional distance extricates the mind from pragmatic concerns and makes space for focused reflection, and possibly self-reflection and reassessment.

The theatrical setting plays a crucial part in Arcadia. It allows the participant to engage with the situation holistically – intellectually and emotionally, as well as haptically, through their embodied involvement. Patrick Duggan, in his book on trauma performances, adopts the term *cathetic* to refer to psychosomatic engagement that does not split the experiencer's integrity into intellectual, emotional, or bodily aspects.⁶ I will use the term *cathetic* to comprise the individual's engagement in its entirety – from logical reflections and rationalisations,

⁴ The exploratory performances took place as outcomes of the intensive Year 3 module Exploratory Practice 2 on the BA Drama and Theatre Practice programme (Drama, School of the Arts, University of Hull) in the Gulbenkian Centre on 27-28 May 2021. Supported by Mx Hester Chillingworth (Drama Industry Fellow) and my PhD student Adam Railton, the company comprised the following 15 students: Oliver Bainbridge-Steeves, Matthew Booth, Sophie Clarkson, Jemima Corbett, Jessica Cusick, Matthew Green, Jae Harwood, Aaron James, Abby King, Georgina Kivelehan, Krysia Milejski, Athanasios Papadopoulos, Jaeben Watkinson, Geraldine Willcock, and Annabel Wilson.

⁵ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935).

⁶ Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

through the free play of emotions, associations and day-dreaming, to emotive bodily responses (heartbeat, breathing, perspiration, or muscular agitation). As recent psychological research suggests, the dualistic division of the intellect and emotions is no longer tenable – let alone the popular fallacy that believes in genuine, “authentic” feelings; such beliefs are socially pathological and essentialize emotions irrespective of how culturally and socially constructed they are.⁷ It is specifically the process of constructing cathetic responses (intellectual, emotional, bodily) and habitualizing them that is at play in a theatrical setting.

As Otakar Zich argues powerfully in his seminal work *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* (1931), the material theatre is *vespolné jednání osob* (the interaction of personas) and *časově prostorová pospolitost* (shared presence in time and space), not a narrative, a fiction or script.⁸ This is a crucial aspect of performance as it exists on a physical, empirical, and *non-conceptual* basis; any concepts, notions, ideas or mental images – let alone narratives and ideologies – are causal consequences evoked in performance. They are products, not the substance or preconditions. A situation that rolls out in the shared presence of participants is *ostensive* (available to the senses) without principally operating on the level of language or even *logos*.⁹ A physical gesture, a movement, or a physical interaction calls for understanding and cognitive responses, but does not *a priori* presuppose them. This is what constitutes the unique quality of theatre and performance, and

⁷ On constructed emotions, see Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (London: Macmillan, 2017). For the philosophical and political history and implications of the dictate of feeling, see William Davies, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).

⁸ Otakar Zich, *Estetika dramatického umění: Teoretická dramaturgie* [Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy] (Prague: Melantrich, 1931) 66, 185. The English translation, by Pavel Drábek and Tomáš P. Kačer, is forthcoming at Karolinum (Charles University Press) in David Drozd's edition.

⁹ I am using the concept of *ostension*, *ostensive* and *ostensive action* in keeping with Otakar Zich's theory, which was later formalized by Ivo Osolsobě. Zich, in Chapters 3, 6 and 7 in particular, theorizes the notion of *názorný* (in German *anschaulich*), i.e., directly available to sensory perception (visible, audible, and/or tactile), as the defining quality of theatre and performance. Performance crucially rests on its externalization, the ability to present action in a manifest, sensorially direct way. Ivo Osolsobě elaborated *ostension* thoroughly within semiotics and cybernetics, particularly in his *Divadlo, které mluví, zpívá a tančí: teorie jedné komunikační formy* [A Theatre That Speaks, Sings, and Dances: A Theory of a Communicative Art Form – Semiotics of the Musical Theatre] (Prague: Editio Supraphon, 1974); his detailed encyclopedic entry “Ostension,” *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1986) 656-60; and summatively in *OstENZE, hra, jazyk* [Ostension, Play, Language] (Brno: Host, 2003).

differentiates it substantially from literary arts. It is in this sense that I am referring to *physical fictions* – possible worlds that take place in the shared presence in performance.

Theatre's empirical basis also enables an ostensive interface that does not necessitate language for interaction. With language, speaking and cultural habits as only a component of its potential, theatre draws on a wide range human actions and interactions that, despite its cultural differences, do not depend on specific epistemologies – such as gestures of giving, physical movements and behaviours (running, sitting down, kneeling, lying down, sleeping, breathing, eating, etc.). This interface, loosened from culture-specific structures of thought, opens a propositional space for a dialogue that spans different kinds of *logos*: it allows for a genuine *dia-logue*, an encounter between different (*dia-*) outlooks and epistemologies (*-logos*).¹⁰

In Arcadia, shepherds are unschooled and lack civilisation's sophistication, and yet – as Sidney fabulates – they have “their fancies opened to so high conceits as the most learned of other nations have been long time since content both to borrow their names and imitate their cunning.” Retreating into the propositional spaces of Arcadian Theatre does not only free the participants from immediate real-life concerns but also from the epistemological confines towards an immediate, ostensive engagement with pre-conceptual physical fictions.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, today's prominent philosopher of intercultural understanding, highlights the importance of literature and the arts in bridging the intercultural divides. During a Q&A following a talk at the University of California Santa Barbara on his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), he suggested to those interested: “every month you should watch at least one movie which has subtitles. [... A] movie could give [you] a concrete sense [of the lived experience from another culture].”¹¹ Appiah's suggestion reflects on the special power of fictions and works of the dialogic (dramatic) arts to activate effective intercultural dialogue. For Appiah, “the point of conversation isn't consensus. It is understanding.”¹² That, however, is only the point of departure:

¹⁰ For a theoretical discussion of performance as intercultural dialogue with historic case studies, see my forthcoming chapter “Transnationality: Theatres of Curiosity, Covetousness and New Horizons,” *Handbook on Theatre and Migration*, ed. Yana Meerzon and S.E. Wilmer (London: Palgrave, forthcoming 2023).

¹¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Ethics in a World of Strangers with Kwame Anthony Appiah,” *You Tube*, 29 October 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esZQ2cf2Gkw>, 54:55-55:50. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

¹² Appiah, “Ethics in a World of Strangers” 58:25.

understanding is not just individual but interpersonal and social. A true engagement with fiction, especially in the dramatic work of art – whether a film, a radio or stage play, an opera or a role-playing computer game – engages the embodied, cathetic mind, not just the deliberative intellect. And it operates in the social dimensions of the human – the “rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation,” to use Richard Sennett’s expression.¹³

The spectating experience is also liminal: social interaction goes hand in hand with an epistemological transformation – a social coevolution, I would argue. The dramatic incidents – or conflicts – bring the participants to the edge of chaos: a space of friction and dissolution where their intercultural confrontation – an engagement with the epistemological and habitual ‘other’ – can only be resolved through a *denouement*; one that untangles the chaos through social coevolution with other participants. This epistemological transformation is a change in habituated cultural understanding and necessarily transcends individual and even cultural epistemologies.

Logocentrism and Drama

Theoretically speaking, considering the edge of epistemological chaos is a syllogism. How can we create a theory of knowledge that comprises different epistemologies? The question may sound naive but I would argue that this is a major philosophical crux we encounter in our daily interactions: How do we talk to people who by necessity live a different philosophy? We do not share values, understanding, languages – in short, we are in a state of inter-epistemological chaos. Let us for a moment consider the possibility of operating and thriving in this precarious place.

Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in his inspirational book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012), offers a helpful opening:

Webster’s Third New International Dictionary defines *delusion* as a “false conception and persistent belief unconquerable by reason in something that has no existence in fact.” As an intuitionist, I’d say that the worship of reason is itself an illustration of one of the most long-lived delusions in Western history: the rationalist delusion. It’s the idea that reasoning is our most noble attribute, one that makes us like the gods (for Plato) or that

¹³ Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

brings us beyond the “delusion” of believing in gods (for the New Atheists). The rationalist delusion is not just a claim about human nature. It’s also a claim that the rational caste (philosophers or scientists) should have more power, and it usually comes along with a utopian program for raising more rational children.¹⁴

This is a precarious situation and one that necessarily causes an obstacle to intercultural dialogue. There is arrogance in the Enlightenment tradition of assuming – consciously, or unconsciously – the intellectual superiority of the Western rationalist thought, not to mention the cultural baggage of Christian morality). The history of Western civilization – down to its post-colonial critical self-reflection – provides countless examples of assumed superiority that soon reverted to sheer obscurantism. The willingness to admit other epistemologies and consider them seriously – in short, to engage in *deep, inter-epistemological dialogue* – may be easier said than done, especially given the habitual nature of cultures and their values.

There are other obstacles for deep dialogue. Cognitive psychologists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber have proposed a convincing claim about the specific qualities of human reason that may enhance these obstacles – for good evolutionary reasons. Human reason, or cogitation, they argue, is good in confirming the status quo and protecting the life we live now; conversely, and also for that reason, it is a very poor tool for changing one’s views. Mercier and Sperber discuss this thoroughly in their 2017 book *The Enigma of Reason*.¹⁵ Haidt offers a helpful summary of Mercier’s and Sperber’s argument:

Anyone who values truth should stop worshipping reason. [...] Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber [...] reviewed the vast research literature on motivated reasoning (in social psychology) and on the biases and errors of reasoning (in cognitive psychology). They concluded that most of the bizarre and depressing research findings make perfect sense once you see reasoning as having evolved not to help us find truth but to help us engage in arguments, persuasion, and manipulation in the context of discussions with other people. [...] This explains why the confirmation bias is so powerful, and so ineradicable. How hard could it be to teach students to

¹⁴ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (London: Allen Lane, 2012) 103.

¹⁵ Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason: A New Theory of Human Understanding* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

look on the other side, to look for evidence against their favored view? Yet, in fact, it's very hard, and nobody has yet found a way to do it. It's hard because the confirmation bias is a built-in feature (of an argumentative mind), not a bug that can be removed (from a platonic mind).¹⁶

This is a thought-provoking problem and a major theoretical challenge. It underscores the question posed earlier: How can we create a theory of knowledge that comprises different epistemologies with the rationalist delusion and without the curse of confirmation bias that we have evolved as human species? This question has an important variant for our engagement with the world: How do we make our action to be more than just impositions of our individual wills?

The history of critical theory can, in this sense, be understood as a history of different *views* or *perspectives* (from the Greeko-Latin *theoria* | *theasthai*, to view, to see), and there appears to be an implicit civilisational drive towards singularities – theories that may compete with one another but make the claim of being universalist in themselves. From early Platonic philosophy, through medieval theology, to early modern and modern rationalism, there is an apparent trend towards a “deistic” reduction of theory to singularities, to one, universal principle. Taking into account what Mercier and Sperber claim, there is a rigorous biological reason for it. Yet, the challenge we are facing is how we can negotiate this apparent obstacle and *evolve* further?

Dialogue and Understanding

Why does theatre matter? Why drama? Because it has been the one artform that takes the *dialogue* – the epistemological confrontation in real life settings *here and now* – for its basis. It is the art of social action and interaction. Or at least it should be, even if theatre history has not always acknowledged it.

At the heart of theatre lies encounter – a confrontation with difference, with a new experience, a world unknown or little understood. This analytical dialogic core of the theatre far too often disagrees with Western theatre historiography. Since ancient Greece, theatre has been promoted and celebrated as a civic institution, a nation-, identity- and community-building cultural apparatus, and much of modern theatre history follows suit. Especially in their political setup and management, theatre has come to follow the logocentric objectives of its cultures. This kind of theatre also always needs to serve an agenda, to be *about* something. It conveys an *idea* or a *political message*; it plays a role in a public political identity,

¹⁶ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* 104-105. Haidt, writing in 2012, is summarizing Mercier and Sperber's research published in journal articles, leading to the publication of their 2017 book.

often national context. (It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into a full justification but I would argue that the assertion about serving a national agenda is true also of periods before the formation of nation states.) Western theatre's tendency towards a singular *aboutness* stems from our cognitive biases: when confronted with other epistemologies (*dia-logoi*) we tend to come to terms with them, reconcile them or ignore them as outliers, and achieve a balance. By the same token, that reconciliation comes hand in hand with epistemic entropy. I would argue that this ideological, Platonic conception of theatre reflects the variety, let alone the cognitive experience with which theatre as a medium can confront its audiences – interculturally and transnationally.

Theatre has played a far more significant role in the history of Western culture than just an entertainment and a knowledge laboratory. Since Athens theatre has taken on a fundamental part in constituting polities and what Jürgen Habermas termed *die Öffentlichkeit* (the public sphere). Not only in classical Athens and in early modern Florence, Vicenza, Rome, Paris, Rouen, Madrid, Seville, London or Gdańsk, but also the municipal theatres and Theatre Royals throughout the Western world and its colonies globally from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, established the modern city as we know it. City theatres have been shopwindows of their polities. Notwithstanding, there is an alternative *theoretical* stance to take: across history, theatres (and theatre as such) have had *intercultural dialogue* – the encounter and confrontation with the other – at its core.¹⁷ Theatres have curated and created *physical fictions* – *material spaces of possible worlds* (to refer to Leibniz's notion that derived from his reflections on festivals and exhibitions of the late seventeenth century). The alternative theoretical view is that theatre is a game of social interaction and *coevolution*.

I would argue that if we are to look for a possible solution to the rationalist crux, we may start with the theatre, because that's where collective identity with *intercultural difference* at its heart is being negotiated – operating within pre-conceptual ecology that allows for cathetic engagement on a basis that doesn't necessitate a shared epistemology. Mercier and Sperber refer to *interactional reason*. Haidt comes up with a much snazzier expression: *the hive switch*. With my interest in epistemological chaos, I will start with the vertigo: the games that boggle our mind.)

Ilinx, or the Vertigo: The Play is the Thing

Play goes deep. At face value it may seem a simple thing – even so simple that it needs no explanation. Also, play is everywhere and often happens unawares. However, trying to understand what play actually *is* turns out to be a very complex problem. An important trait in the problem's complexity is –

¹⁷ See also Drábek, "Transnationality."

paradoxically – play’s simplicity and ubiquity. It is so simple that even animals incapable of speech or of any more complex intellectual activity take part in play and engage in it as an essential component of their lives. If play is so basic and elementary, what words can we use to handle it? Are we not engaging in a contradiction of terms when trying to rationalize and explain it by our human intellect? Or – to put it differently – is not the concept of *play* and what we as humans are thinking of *as play* just a misleading take on a *basic mode of being*?

Play has so many forms that there is no consensus whether we are speaking of one and the same thing all the time. Johan Huizinga, the founding figure of play/game theory, believed it was one – in his seminal book *Homo Ludens* of 1938 which brings a comparative approach to plays across times, cultures, civilisations, and modes.¹⁸ Huizinga analyzes play as a competitive medium (including games like chess, but also war), as a game of chance, as a social instrument, as a form of divination, as making or becoming – among many other variants. All of this is, for Huizinga, play in its many forms. Huizinga’s admirer and critic Roger Caillois had doubts about these claims: the manifestations of play are too varied (inconsolably so) for a theory to contain its richness and multiplicity in one umbrella term; clear distinctions need to be made.¹⁹

So what really *is* play? When children fight in the playground, is it still only a play? When warned by the serious voice of authority (parents, teachers, or simply the non-playing seniors), they usually say: “That was just a game. We were only playing.” But really? With the bruises? And the tears and fear and heat in the eyes? They were fighting in earnest, though perhaps in excess of what could be called innocent. At the same time: is not fighting also a play of sorts, with its rules and social norms? Among the rules and norms are not only agreements of what means (tools, weapons, wrestling holds) are allowed but also what counts as victory and defeat. – At this point, play becomes dead serious because it is identical with fight and war – if not in its destructiveness and reach, then certainly in principle. Brian Sutton-Smith is one of several theorists who have written on the ambiguity of play – the fact that it is both playful (non-binding) and serious.²⁰ It was in a related sense that Caillois himself wrote of the sacred qualities of play. Although play is apparently – or at least potentially – non-obliging, non-consequential and reversible, it is essentially also binding, earnest and transformational. If not for

¹⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element of Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

¹⁹ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) 11.

²⁰ Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

anything else, play is non-reversible because of the time spent in playing: those moments – be they seconds long, or covering several years – are inseparable parts of our lives. Also: we have enjoyment from play; we experience emotions and intellectual stimuli; we get challenged and tested – and although in our social reality this brings no apparent change, it is profoundly consequential for us as individuals. Using Victor Turner’s anthropological concepts, we can say that play is not only a *liminoid* experience (one that brings us to an existential borderline or limit, a life-changing experience) but it is very often also *liminal* – in that it does transform us in our knowledge, in our self-awareness and identity, and in our emotional and intellectual states.

How is play then related to knowledge and learning? Aristotle, in his foundational treatise on theatre, *Poetics*, opens with a bold claim: “the experience of learning things is highly enjoyable, not only for philosophers but for other people as well.”²¹ This statement is decisive for Aristotle’s own philosophy and for theatre theory in general. It is also, very importantly, crucial for the understanding of play as a mode of being and doing. We learn through play – not only as children but also as adults. (Aristotle refers to children’s play but only in relation to the child’s instinct to imitate; but imitation is only one of the types of play that children engage in.) In regard to play as a cognitive activity, even more can be claimed, however contentious it may appear: we learn *exclusively* through play. It is the playful mind that makes cognitive leaps, progresses and develops in embracing new propositions:

“What if I hide, will they find me?”

“What if I could jump across that stream?”

“What if I tried to say this in Spanish?”

“What would you do if I tickled you?”

But also:

“What if the Earth was round?”

“What if the Sun were not the centre of the Universe?”

“What if light had speed and a physical basis?” or

“What if this excavated bone were a new prehistoric species? Can it be reconstructed?”

²¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018) 101 (1448b).

Allowing those propositions to play out requires imagination and creativity (itself forms of play) but also necessitates that we put our mind in a state of temporary flow – pretending or playing, for the time of the experiment, that the things were different to how we have known them so far, playing with possibilities, playing out hypotheses. From this perspective, new knowledge is conditioned by play as a state of mind that opens itself to the propositional spaces. Understanding and accepting something new comes from allowing an idea to play itself out and from either confirming its truth or its falseness.

This kind of cognitive play is not only a mental activity but is regularly embodied. Giving a body to propositions is at the very heart of play – by means of physical objects (models, maquettes, puppets, dolls) and by means of the material we always have at hand (as the leading Czech semiotician Ivo Osolsobě observed): our own body.²² Children and baby animals imitate what they see around them from very early on: they try out behaviours of their parents, siblings and their kind as well as animals around them. They put their ideas into practice and the risk they are taking is existentially tied with their growth and development: mock-fights, risky enterprises, role-playing – these all contribute purposefully to one's life.

However, animal play (humans included) has developed in evolution as an autotelic activity – one that has seemingly no purpose to it and is motivated exclusively by the joy itself. In other words: evolution rewards the playful with joy. Medical doctor and psychiatrist Stuart Brown in his book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul* (2009) records a dialogue he had with Bob Fagen, a maverick scholar studying animal play, after they watched two young grizzly bears playing together, fighting in the rapids of a river in Alaska:

“Bob, why do these bears play?”

After some hesitation [...] he said, “Because it's *fun*.”

“No, Bob, I mean from a scientific point of view, why do they play?”

“Why do they play? Why do birds sing, people dance – for the... *pleasure* of it.”²³

²² Ivo Osolsobě, “Dramatické dílo jako komunikace komunikací o komunikaci: Variace na téma Zichovy definice dramatického díla” [Dramatic Work as a Communication of Communications about Communication: A Variation on Zich's Definition of the Dramatic Work], *Otázky divadla a filmu* [Issues of Theatre and Cinema] (Brno: Univerzita J.E. Purkyně, 1970) 24.

²³ Stuart Brown, with Christopher Vaughan, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul* (London: Penguin, 2009) 28.

This answer did not satisfy Brown and he pressed Fagen more:

“Tell me, why do animals play?”

After a long, tolerant silence, during which I felt as if he were a sensitive artist having to explain a sublime painting to a tasteless dolt, Bob relented.

He answered reluctantly: “*In a world continuously presenting unique challenges and ambiguity, play prepares these bears for an evolving planet.*”²⁴

Such *rough-and-tumble plays* (as Brown calls them) also prepare for situations where pre-set rules are broken and an element of unaccountable and unexpected danger occurs. Being ready as much as can be becomes a question of life and death. “Bending rules and pushing through limits should happen within the realm of play. They aren’t the dark side of play – they are the essence of play.”²⁵ These are also the limits that people are testing when engaging in extreme sports, in adrenaline-inducing pastimes and in seeking adventures that carry a significant element of danger in them. Some people probably also make a living out of it – warzone journalists, spies, hazard players, and also stunt actors, circus performers and extreme performance artists.

Probably the most refined kinds of play – that is, the most developed cultural tools for modelling worlds – are theatre, film and since relatively recently also computer games. Game designer Jane McGonigal, in her influential book *Reality is Broken* (2011), makes a powerful argument for the power of computer games to instigate positive change to our lives – both on an individual level, but also in the real world.²⁶ Playing, modelling, imaging, imagining, creating, hypothesizing – all of these are crucially linked. Such activities are integral to the theatre and other ‘modelling’ arts and they are also decisive in every society and every economy. In this way, dramatic arts prepare us for a life in a continuously changing environment and for an evolving planet. The mechanical, the repetitive and the routine is no longer the sole domain of us, humans. Such tasks can be delegated to machines, computers and robots. What is still uniquely human is the *joy* and *fun* of playing – the *heat* of the play. Machines, computers and robots – even the most refined versions of artificial intelligence – are terribly sober: and boringly so.

²⁴ Brown and Vaughan, *Play* 29. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Brown and Vaughan, *Play* 193.

²⁶ Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2011). Discussing computer games in this context would require another separate essay. Here, I have to omit all the notes and observations on McGonigal and the world of gaming, but must acknowledge the inspiration found in her book.

AI can beat humans in chess, but can AI invent chess or any new game? The creative mind is a human mind – the only one capable of the state known as *flow*, to use the term of Mihály Csikszentmihályi, the late Chicago-based psychologist of Hungarian origin. The state of *flow* is one in which we abandon all purpose: creativity is an *autotelic* activity; it is an end in itself, says Csikszentmihályi: we lose track of time, of ourselves; rules are loosened and we engage in an activity we enjoy and that in a heightened awareness. The state of *flow* is – Csikszentmihályi says – also the state of happiness.²⁷ It is unsurprising that the state is also the most creative and enriching one.

In November 2019, during the KREAS conference “Performativity and Creativity in Modern Cultures,” Andreas Mahler very importantly discussed *ilinx* – one of Roger Caillois’s game types. Caillois, in his 1958 essay *Les jeux et les hommes*, refers to four types of play:

- 1) agon
- 2) alea
- 3) mimicry
- 4) *ilinx*.²⁸

Ilinx, or the vertigo, is the one type to associate with our journey to the edge of epistemological chaos. It requires that one lose control of their *rational* support and enter an enhanced, fluid state of mind. Caillois discusses this play type almost exclusively from an individual perspective: how an individual feels and perceives the game. However, there is an alternative, social perspective to it. Jonathan Haidt calls it *the hive switch*.

The Hive Switch

Haidt cites the military historian William McNeill and his experience of military drill when he was drafted as a soldier into the US Army in 1941:

Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused in the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.²⁹

²⁷ Mihály Csikszentmihályi, *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

²⁸ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* 12.

²⁹ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* 256.

As Haidt says, McNeill theorized that:

the key innovation of Greek, Roman, and later European armies was the sort of synchronous drilling and marching [and that] the process of ‘muscular bonding’ – moving together in time – was a mechanism that evolved long before the beginning of recorded history for shutting down the self and creating a temporary superorganism.³⁰

Haidt further elaborates on this human ability to switch from the individual to the collective mind:

We are descended from earlier humans whose groupish minds helped them cohere, cooperate, and outcompete other groups. That doesn’t mean that our ancestors were mindless or unconditional players; it means they were selective. Under the right conditions, they were able to enter a mindset of “one for all, all for one” in which they were truly working for the good of the group, and not just for their own advancement within the group.³¹

Haidt calls this ability *the hive switch* – from the primate’s individual mindset to the mindset of a beehive.

Citing Barbara Ehrenreich’s cultural study *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, Haidt gives various cultural practices of the *collective mind*, as well as the Europeans’ judgmental reactions of disgust at encountering these apparent signs of ‘savagery.’ But Western cultures have known such practices too: this kind of collective bonding was common in the Dionysian cults in ancient Greece, and in early Christianity, which was a “‘danced’ religion until dancing in church was suppressed in the Middle Ages.”³² Nowadays it is sports and choral singing. In Czech culture, the phenomenon of the *Sokol* – the non-competitive Czech gymnastic mass movement, created in the 1860s by Miroslav Tyrš inspired by the German *Turnerbunds* of the nineteenth century. As the late Eva Stehlíková and her student Tereza Konývková have shown,³³ the *Sokol* movement traces its roots to

³⁰ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* 256-7.

³¹ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* 258.

³² Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* 260.

³³ Eva Stehlíková, “Obřadní a divadelní prvky v sokolském hnutí” [Ritual and Theatrical Features in the Sokol Movement], *Divadlo v české kultuře 19. století* [Theatre in 19th-century Czech Culture] (Prague: Národní galerie, 1985) 161-6. Tereza Konývková Frýbertová,

the classical Greek philosophy of *kalokagathia* (a good/healthy spirit in a good/healthy body). It regularly involved professional theatre makers to organize the mass assemblies (counting tens of thousands) in which *society was embodied*.

Haidt's and Ehrenreich's reference to Dionysian cults is significant for my argument. Comedy as the social, collective genre *that is almost coterminous with the city* developed from the Bacchanalia of the Dionysian rites. There is also a dangerous element to the collective mind and the mass vertigo or frenzy – as the history of warfare and nationalism painfully document. Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae* places this issue centre stage. Dionysos manipulates his followers into a state of *ilinx* – a mass hysteria (in Greek called *enthusiasmo*) – and the ensuing violence results in a ritual murder of a prominent figure. This is what Euripides is presenting: a fictional play about a collective mind that forgets to correct its acts. (This is not a moralistic play, and while it asks ethical questions, it is way beyond the antithesis of good or bad.)

Performative Models: Ostensible Epistemologies

The notion of *model* is commonly and loosely used as an abstract form that is intended to represent a certain pattern (physical or immaterial), or to serve as a master for future replication. In the most general sense, model is a figure (abstract or physical) of another thing. Commonly models are seen as principally dual: models *of* something, and models *for* something, and as such are made with a specific *telos* – as models-*of* or models-*for*. They offer a certain affordance and by their ostensive qualities *propose* a potential for use: they invite the user to work with that potential.³⁴ Very importantly, the pragmatics and ethics of models – the ways in which models are worked with, how they are deployed and put to new use – are *permissive* and *open*, rather than restrictive and prohibitive. I would argue that models' pragmatic and ethical openness is a central quality for which they are made. For instance, a maquette of a future building construction affords engagement and use that could not be foreseen at the design stage: How will the building fit into the environment? How will proportions, sightlines, daylight,

Tělo v pohybu: performativita sokolského hnutí v období formování moderního českého národa [The Body in Movement: Performativity of the Sokol Movement during the Formation of the Modern Czech Nation] (Brno: Masaryk University, 2020).

³⁴ I am using the term *affordance* in the sense of James Gibson's anthropological theory. First published in J.J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

access points work? How will people relate to it in the physical space?³⁵ The model *in its reified reality* asserts its own ecology and invites novel use and novel understandings. Their eventual use necessarily constantly shifts between the two designations of models-*of* and models-*for*. I argue that it is their defining feature that models are repurposed in their use: they are *heterotelic*.³⁶ In this, models are phenomena that incur and operate on the edge of epistemological chaos.

Thea Brejzek and Lawrence Wallen have theorized how more elaborate models have the potential (affordance) for generating entire worlds with their idiosyncratic epistemologies. They are capable of *cosmopoiesis*, world-making.³⁷ This observation complements Juri Lotman's incisive observation that connects models with play – where the word *play* is used in the sense of Brown's notion of play as an autotelic heuristic activity as well as in the intuitive child's sense of "Will you play with me?": "Play is a model of reality of a special kind. It reproduces some of the features of reality by translating them to the language of its rules."³⁸

Models' ostensive nature can operate outside the constraints of pre-existing systems of thought; they operate within their own reified ecology – a physical fiction with its own epistemology. They invite the participant's mind to play along within this new fictive world. Ivo Osolobě has theorized theatre as a principally model-making activity. Following his detailed discussions of a variety of performative and ostensive activities – from traditional theatre, through staged realities, Potemkin villages, exhibitions, to zoological gardens or sightseeing – theatre operates with a set of ostensive models: bodies, objects, behaviours, movements, images – but also words and meanings, and stories. Active participants as well as spectators are invited to play with them as models.

In an earlier essay, I have offered the concept of *performative models* as a replacement of J.L. Austin's and John Searle's speech act theory, which I argue to be no longer tenable. Searle, following and elaborating on Austin, has excluded

³⁵ For a detailed theory of models as performance, see Thea Brejzek and Lawrence Wallen, *The Model as Performance: Staging Space in Theatre and Architecture* (London and New York: Methuen, 2018) 3, 24-39.

³⁶ For a more detailed discussion of my theory of models, see Pavel Drábek, "Modelling the World through Play," *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) 400-401.

³⁷ Brejzek and Wallen, *The Model as Performance* 3, 24-39.

³⁸ Juri Lotman, "The Place of Art among Other Modelling Systems" (1967), trans. Tanel Pern, *Sign Systems Studies* 39, no. 2/4 (2011): 251.

a theory of language from a theory of action.³⁹ In so doing he locked speech act theory within the logocentric epistemology that forecloses *dia-logos*. Being trapped in language and its rules substantively differs from engaging with the physical fictions of performative models.

What then happens when we engage with performative models – that is, when we are present to the event? There is clearly an epistemological step to take from the initial situation, through the transformation (as part of the event and its collective mind), to the concluding consensus. In that process, we clearly move not only beyond cogitation, but also beyond the production of presence – as sociologist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls it.⁴⁰ There is a certain visceral presence that requires a *hive switch* towards a collective self. In that process we not only ponder the propositions, but we also unhinge our own held views – received beliefs, habitual assumptions, as well as conventional behaviours. The transformational *coevolution* has taken place *by virtue of engaging with the performative model*. A performative model presents what I would call *an ostensive epistemology*: a world of knowledge that is made available to participants in the model. By *playing* with that model, we coevolve into this new world of knowledge.

How could we apply this in the real world? How can we curate spaces and encounters where this playful, social coevolution may take place?

Performative Models: Rituals and Scenarios

Arcadian Theatre follows a long and varied history of practices that use performative models as triggers for cognitive activities. Classical law education used fictional situations to train students in public behaviour, oratory, argumentation, and ready responses to the opponent's assertions. Law colleges and schools of rhetoric drew on a collection of scenarios known as Senecan *controversies*, a set of declamations by Seneca the Elder, published in *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*.⁴¹ The roles of defendants and prosecutors would be distributed among the students, and a court proceeding would take place on that fictional, and often paradoxical, prompt. Enacted dialogues were standard fare in early modern schools on both sides of the Reformation – in Lutheran as well as Jesuit and Piarist schools. These served not only theological purposes but also in

³⁹ See Drábek, "Heterotelic Models as Performatives" 102ff.

⁴⁰ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Matthew Leigh, "Seneca the Elder, the *Controversia Figurata*, and the Political Discourse of the Early Empire," *Classical Antiquity* 40, no. 1 (2021): 118-50.

learning languages and memorizing subject knowledge. That tradition developed into TIE (Theatre in Education) and the broad field of Applied Theatre due to theatre's unique ability to incur a cathetic engagement.⁴² Applied Theatre of sorts is in operation also in corporate staff training and its many varieties. All of these – from Senecan controversies to staff training play-out scenarios – are rooted in its objectives. In Mercier and Sperber's sense, they consolidate and refine the incumbent epistemology and teach the participant to operate within a predefined noetic structure.

A special case is Forum Theatre – also referred to as Theatre of the Oppressed – a political method devised by Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal. Forum Theatre explicitly frames itself as “a rehearsal for revolution” (meaning a revolution in a Marxist sense). Forum Theatre presents situations for “the spectators [to] intervene directly in the dramatic action and act.”⁴³ In the first chapter of *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, “Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy,” Boal criticizes the prescriptive notion of imitation and argues for the Socratic concept presented in Plato's philosophy of the *logos*. He pleads for “[t]he idea” as “the intuitive vision we have, and precisely because it is intuitive, it is ‘pure’ [...the] idea is perfect.”⁴⁴ On account of the cognitive activity involved in the theatre, he stipulates:

Knowledge consists in elevating ourselves, through dialectics – that is, through the debate of ideas posed and counterposed, of ideas and the negations of those same ideas, which are other ideas – from the world of sensible reality to the world of external ideas. This ascent is knowledge.⁴⁵

Forum Theatre specifically – and the Theatre of the Oppressed generally – make use of model situations. TO practitioner and scholar Ali Campbell uses the concept of models to refer to:

⁴² The body of literature for TIE and Applied Theatre is far too wide. For a helpful transnational overview see Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (eds.), *The Applied Theatre Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009). A leading journal in the field is *RiDE: Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, <https://ridejournal.net/>.

⁴³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, new edition, trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal Mc Bride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2000) 122, 126.

⁴⁴ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 8-9.

⁴⁵ Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 9.

a short scene or sequence, created by Spectactors from lived experience of oppression and replayed in a Forum Theatre session to challenge all participants to make interventions.⁴⁶

Frances Babbage, in her seminal book on Augusto Boal, presents and analyzes several possible scenarios (or scenes) for Forum Theatre:

[Scene A: The care assistant] shows as a care assistant working in an old persons' home. An elderly and disabled resident insists that she help him to the bathroom even though she has already taken him there twice in the last half hour. But before she can do anything, she is interrupted by the relative of another resident who is worried by her mother's complaints of staff inattentiveness. The assistant is caught up in the conversation with the relative; meanwhile the man tries to walk to the bathroom on his own, but falls over on the way and is hurt.

[Scene B: The teenage daughter] involves a mother and daughter, sitting in a living room. The daughter is ready to go out for the evening, but her mother insists she must be home by eleven. The daughter protests, but mother is adamant; eventually the girl storms up to her bedroom, shouting that if she must be back so soon there is no point in her going out at all.

[Scene C: The husband] takes place at a party, with several people present. A man is pulled into a corner by his wife, who has something to tell him that 'can't wait.' In a rush of words, she reveals she has been having an affair. It's no one he knows, she says, and she doesn't even know whether she loves the other man, but she has decided to leave. She starts to cry, saying how sorry she is, that she knows how he must be feeling, and how much she hates hurting him. Her husband stands there, stunned into silence.⁴⁷

All the scenes depart from a controversial predicament in the tradition of casuistic school drama. They place the participants – referred to by Boal as *Spect-actors* – into the midst of the power setups (or “images of oppression”) and give them an opportunity to negotiate their own position, extricate themselves from the “tyranny” and “experiences of oppression,” and come to “understand that they

⁴⁶ Ali Campbell, *The Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice Today: An Introduction to the Work and Principles of Augusto Boal* (London: Methuen, 2019) 236.

⁴⁷ Frances Babbage, *Augusto Boal* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 128-9.

may be their *own* ‘oppressors’ – they are not obliged to see themselves as the victims of others.”⁴⁸

It is apparent that Boal’s Forum Theatre operates within existing epistemologies and very specifically takes its situations from the sociopolitical predicament. The epistemological basis that frames the practice never steps out of the axiological systems of political hierarchies and regimes, only offers a way of countering them. As such, Forum Theatre – just like the other types of applied theatre and educational performative models mentioned above – is teleologically fixed. It teaches its participants to function more effectively and creatively *within* the epistemological setup and forecloses the autotelic play that enables inter-epistemological interaction.

A socially more nuanced scenario is offered by a sociologist (and an accomplished cellist) Richard Sennett in his book *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012). His “portable” ritual,⁴⁹ as he calls it, provides an inspiring model that is not only based on a collective mind and muscular bonding, but also retains a very distinct sense of individuality as part of a greater whole:

When I once rehearsed the Schubert Octet with the clarinettist Alan Rusbridger, he remarked to me at one point: ‘Professor’ – he is a journalist by trade so this form of address is not entirely a compliment – ‘your top note sounds harsh.’ In practising alone, I’d forgotten how it might sound to him and he made me hear it. But I didn’t soften the sound; I pondered whether it should sound harsh, decided it should, and made it even more so. Our exchange produced, in me, a more conscious valuing of the note he disliked. As in a good discussion: its richness is textured as disagreements that do not, however, keep people from continuing to talk.⁵⁰

Sennett’s example comes from musical performance where the code and the script are given. These serve as a non-verbal *interface* for dialogue. There is a shared plot (the Schubert Octet) that makes individuals surpass their individuality towards the collective mind. Very importantly, the individual’s predicament is negotiated on ostensive performative principles: the particular musical score is arbitrary and does not define the setup.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Babbage, *Augusto Boal* 126.

⁴⁹ Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) 17.

⁵⁰ Sennett, *Together* 16.

⁵¹ Working from my experience as a double bass player, I would argue that the instrument one is working with offers not just an interface with the outer world but also a kind of *social mask*: it is a projection of a possible, *created* entity that we form with our instruments.

Sennett's remarkable performative model could, metaphorically, be transferred to other social practices. However, it depends on the participants' musical competencies. While these do not define the social set up, they set the scene and provide a cultural framework. How can this performative model then extend to *inter-epistemological dialogue* here and now without recourse to music's specific logos? How can performative models enable autotelic play in social settings *on the epistemological edges* of received cultures?

Setting the Scene for Arcadian Play

In her manifesto *Beyond Scenography*, Rachel Hann theorizes the decisive political and philosophical agency of scenography outside the theatre as well as within.⁵² Drawing on a wide-ranging and rigorous body of theoretical work, including J.L. Austin's speech act theory, Lubomír Doležel's fictional worlds, Martin Heidegger's notion of *worlding*, Gilles Deleuze's assemblages, as well as theories of space (Henri Lefebvre, Gay McAuley) and scenography (Arnold Aronson, Dorita Hannah, Joslin McKinney), Hann proposes the notion of *scenographics* as creative scenographic practices outside of the theatre, that constitute "interventional acts of worlding."⁵³ Taking her theory as a point of departure, I treat the cosmopoetic (world-making) scenography in a more radical sense. Hann continues to treat Austin's logocentric theory of performatives as "canonical" and decisive for artwork (citing Dorothea von Hantelmann and Diane Taylor's developments of Austin's concepts). In so doing, her theory of scenographics still operates within the confines of specific epistemologies, artistic traditions and regimes. My understanding of scenography allows for a noetic uncoupling of the created world from the epistemology in which it originated. Scenography creates physical and spatial models that, cosmopoetically, create novel realities: its scenic qualities (dimensions, sightlines, lighting, soundscaping, spatial relations) and its objects have their affordances. The participants – direct agents (actors) as well as observers (spectators as vicarious actors) – play with these realities and from their affordances generate novel rules for the physical fiction they are inhabiting.⁵⁴

⁵² Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁵³ Hann, *Beyond Scenography* 19.

⁵⁴ The world-making in scenography is a well-recognized quality; see Pamela Howard, *What Is Scenography?*, 3rd ed., ed. Pavel Drábek (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) 29-32. It is specifically a trend called *action scenography* of the 1970s to 1980s that built on the affordance of the scenic space and its objects created by the scenographer. Among its prominent figures were Jaroslav Malina and Petr Matásek. See Joseph Brandesky (ed.),

The scenographer conceives a performative space – by curating it, arranging the spatial setup for its participants, or by building it from scratch – and fills it with objects for the play. In structuring the space, the scenographer can frame the proxemics: the hierarchical or non-hierarchical spatial relations among the direct agents and the role of the observers. A hierarchical space that has some actors raised over others offers a performative model that can play out as a situation of hegemony or oppression: unlike Forum Theatre, this setup is not determined by a received narrative but by the material, pre-conceptual qualities of the scene.⁵⁵ Similarly, objects that constitute the physical fiction associate certain cultural values – such as, a single chair may play out a locus of power, a throne or symbolize prominence; but that cultural value arises from the affordance of the physical object, not from a framing narrative.⁵⁶ A performance object like a puppet also may originate in a particular culture but its own materiality and autonomous affordance generate its own ecology and ergonomics: a complex performance object may also require a specific kind of operating behaviour and engagement.⁵⁷ The scenographic world becomes a performative model for the play. It should be free from literal imitation (mimesis) and consciously resist anchoring within any epistemology. Its complete, un-real fictionality is its strength and, for Arcadian Theatre, a necessary precondition. For autotelic play to arise, the scenography needs to facilitate the epistemological autonomy of the physical fiction.

Jaroslav Malina in Scenography and Painting (Prague: Charles University Press, 2019); and Miloslav Klíma et al., *Petr Matásek – prostor, hmota, divadlo* [Petr Matásek: Space, Matter, Theatre] (Prague: AMU, 2013).

⁵⁵ For a detailed discussion of the scenic space, see Chapter 7 of Zich's *Aesthetics*.

⁵⁶ A note for practitioners: the use of cultural symbols and any metaphors we live by (to borrow George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's formulation) in the scene will yoke the performative model to specific cultures and epistemologies. While the objects themselves may be innocent, they will associate cultural values for its participants. They are likely to become insurmountable obstacles of the inter-epistemological dialogue: they invoke the irrational. Cultural conflicts are often fought over symbols and metaphors – be they flags, cultural signs of belonging, music, movements (behaviours) or rituals. In Arcadian Theatre, metaphors and symbols should arise from the material affordance of the scenography.

⁵⁷ As part of the Arcadia exploration (University of Hull, May 2021), Shannon Ryle designed puppets inspired by Sidney's *Arcadia* that required two or three operators. The way these operators had to coordinate and interact in order to manipulate the puppet was itself the objective of the exploration: the puppet as a scenographic object engendered its own autonomous ecology and ergonomics.

Playing in Arcadia

It is a received assumption that adults' activities should be purposeful. A strain of Western culture believes in the distinction between labour and leisure (a fallacy, I would argue). While theatre is safely delegated to the realm of leisure (for its audiences) or to labour (for those working in the business of creative industries), it has become one of the unwritten dictates of theatre, as well as the basis of public funding, that it should be relevant, speak to our times and its discontents, engage diverse communities, widen participation, and/or educate – in other words, *be useful*. This utilitarian approach to theatre and performance has done much public good, often having theatre makers do important social work. At the same time, this dictate of applied theatre has reinforced the status of theatre as a manifestation of the incumbent epistemology. As Jane McGonigal has argued, there is much to gain through the “purposeful escape” into game,⁵⁸ without the need to itemize the gains and justify every activity by its direct benefit or impact. The end goal of play is the cultivation of culture – towards openness and adaptability for a diversity of experience that may well lie outside of our own epistemology.

Proposing performative models for play in Arcadian Theatre is a contradictory activity. The method should enable novelty and openness towards diverse experience, so proposing scenarios may suggest an enclosed, teleological system. At the same time, scenarios that may enable autotelic play might come across as random, facile, and – by the inherited standards of our discourse – irrelevant. However, they should allow that autotelic play to engender their own autonomous world with its epistemology: its rituals, pleasures, and politics of cooperation.

Here are a few examples of scenarios that I tested out with my students in an experimental performance in May 2021:

Scenario 1: Dorus and Pamela wish to get rid of an unwelcome witness, so trick the gullible Mopsa into climbing a tree [standing on a chair]. If she hopes to have her own desires fulfilled she has to stay there until she receives an agreed sign. This scenario allows an ostensive modelling of trust and its abuse; self-sacrifice; selfish and altruistic behaviour, among others.

Scenario 2: King Basilius retreats from his seat into self-imposed exile, taking with him his wife and their two maturing daughters. He deliberates what he should do when faced with unexpected events: his

⁵⁸ McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken* 7.

wife's infidelity, their daughters' desire for personal and sexual freedom, his infatuation with another woman, an impending military threat from abroad, his own self-consciousness in his roles (as king, husband, father, man, human).

Scenario 3: King Basilius and Queen Gynecia have spent a night together, believing they have slept with their lovers. It is the morning and they see their mistake.

Scenario 4: Prince Musidorus pays the shepherd Menalcas to travel to his court and report of his whereabouts. That allows Musidorus to assume Menalcas's identity and disguise as him.

Scene 5: Prince Pyrocles has seen a painting of Philoclea and fell in love with her. The passion transformed him and he assumed an alter-ego identity as Cleophila: Philoclea's mirror image. Now the two have met and declared love for one another, but Philoclea wants to know who Cleophila really is and whether she (he) loves her, or her image in the painting.

Scene 6: Gossip: Three personas (any three selected from the narrative) try to make sense of a scene they have just witnessed. They try to rationalize the events, understand the motivations, and in so doing gossip and negotiate the fine relationships between those present and absent.

These scenarios come from Sidney's *Arcadia* and in performance, they were semi-improvised. Actors had agreed on certain principles of interaction – such as taking turns in speaking, asking questions of one another, the approximate duration of the scene, and agreeing on possible conclusions. Otherwise, they were open to spontaneous action – a free play that arose from the performative models. Scenographically, we tried them out in an open space without fixed seating. The actors performed on low platforms (20 or 40 cm high) with spotlights focused on the platforms, only to help visibility. Spectators were free to walk around and watch the action from any place of their choice. The scenarios could further be used to engage the observers by asking them for views, advice or suggestions that could then be tried out, replayed or further negotiated.

Using an existing fictional narrative is only one of endless ways of generating scenarios. Performative models can derive from the affordance of real-world objects, of found or created spaces, from behaviours and movements, or from artworks. The list of scenarios above makes no claim for defining Arcadian Theatre as a method. They are mere prompts for interaction and allow the participants to retreat into the physical fiction and engage in dialogue that builds on the shared presence of here and now – the affordances of the scenographic

spaces, its objects and its personas. If these are to develop into longer narratives, this would be by virtue of the world the performative models engendered, rather than by the dictate of received values or cultural agendas.

Arcadian Theatre is an invitation for its participants to play and think together – on the basis of the physical fiction they come to create as a spontaneous community. Every individual has some agency in the setup and everyone brings their unique epistemology into the interaction. Taking fictional scenarios and scenographically curated spaces as performative models, participants create a possible embodied world that allows them to experience it intellectually and emotionally (cathetically) without being bound by immediate real-world objectives. Participants do not have to agree or come up with a singular version of events; they only need to think with others and build social rapports on the basis of the physical scenographic environment and the performative model. I argue that this practice allows to conceive of and, at the same time, try out behaviours in diverse epistemological situations. In so doing Arcadian Theatre can serve as a blueprint for social coevolution in intercultural settings.

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