

The Heritage of Contingency and Mutuality: Performance, Agency, and Ethics in Prompted Realities

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Introduction

The practitioners and audiences of the performing arts have been quick to tap into the potentials that innovations in virtual and mixed reality technologies and artificial intelligence (hereafter AI) suggest or bring about. Serving as concrete testbeds in flux, live arts productions offer tech and media corporations a relevant and at times unruly platforms for developing and refining the social and functional foci of their products and services. This relationship not only embodies the social and ideological economy of the 'technogenesis' of contemporary communication and interaction, the orientation to facilitate and generate reality in accordance with given technological affordances and limitations (Simondon 2017; Stiegler 1998; Hayles 2012); it also hints at a certain social 'specter', the motivation to uphold and promote a human mutuality that should operate through machinic or human-machine exchanges. The question of addressing the peculiar and millenia-old

form of concrete social gathering and reciprocal identification of the performing arts (Guénoun 2007) still reverberates within the latest innovations in technologically supervised mutuality and artificial agency. The technologies and media of sensory and experiential influencing and the machines that learn and evolve with social statuses thus partake in reconfiguring the communities of art, performance, and memory. But their increasing reliance on meanings forgetful of contingent, living interventions may turn them into advocates of a larval and dead language (Agamben 2013: 476) that may stop making sense or complicate the chances of reconfiguring what sense-making is.

This essay discusses the potential effects of contingent materiality on the representational constitution and accumulation of knowledge characteristic of machine learning, chiefly in the context of how the social heritage of the performing arts may inform our conception of meaningful reality amid the rise of socially capable technological systems. The emerging era of AI increasingly invests in prompted reality or realities; the recurrence of representational (e.g., linguistic)

meanings and structures, their prevalence and incidence, and the conceptual norms they thus create as elements of the evolving LLMs (large language models) – along with the risk of knowledge and meaning becoming nonsensical over generations of generalized and thus potentially ignorant and biased data (Shumailov *et al.* 2024; Gibney 2024). If a machine learning process lacks or misses the material and proportional effects of situational dependency and the contingency characteristic of corporeal interaction, some essential factor or factors that are underrepresented in language itself may fall out, potentially prompting (*sic*) a communicative downhill slide. The conditions of concrete reality and interaction can surely be simulated in an LLM environment in times ahead, but if and when the representational features of classifying and structuring reality overdominate the process, the risk of its incoherence, irrelevance or senselessness becomes high.

It is then worth noting how for AI, as for human learners, remembering should constitute the creation of a contingent and context-dependent representation of the material and ideological substrate of contemporary, lived reality – and all meaningful evolution of this activity requires the past, the present and the potential effects of material, “agential realism” extensively discussed by Karen Barad (2007: 33). Neither humans nor machines fully master this process, of course, and thus we operate and make choices in a universe of flawed or preferred memories and of futures engaged through subjective and collective emphases.

The arts, in turn, add a peculiar dimension to said evolution, characterized by what we could call necessary randomness (and related choices), the intertwining of the materiality of creativity and action with representation, causing the prevalence and the occurrence of meanings and norms to waver, strengthen or weaken through and between the witnesses and reminiscers of the encounter with artistic meaning. Through their in-depth account of the dynamics of creativity, Celis Bueno, Chow and Popowicz (2025: 340) anticipate this dimension in connection with Titus Lucretius Carus’ (c. 1st century BCE) Epicurean discussion of *clinamen*, the term denoting an indeterminacy and unpredictability that also facilitates volition and crafting of new meaning based on existing and past realities. Creative agency has the capacity to revisit past contingencies to (re)introduce their perhaps critical influence on present and prospective functions of human-centered or AI-assisted interaction (the latter often guided by an agenda of effectiveness and goal-oriented ethos).

By consequence, the arts are equipped to participate in a materialist tradition of creativity, which, as a principle of diversifying or disrupting established conceptions or unfoldings of our universe, may cover all non-human and non-living agencies as well (*ibidem*).

As an ethical project, the above task implies a move from reactive practices of the arts – typical of and resulting from the current, Trumpian reality – to an anarchic orientation and ethics, which suggests a timeless but contingent conviction to bring about changes in our shared existence – a project of resilience,



solidarity, and hope following the potentials of *clinamen* and its activation in the arts. In the context of AI and machine learning, this could mean examining, deconstructing and gaining insight from such complex but contingent issues as multispecies meaning-making, humanity's struggle to conceive and facilitate its inherent functional diversity as well as cultural evolution and heritage with regard to the language models' tendency to disregard and exclude cultural and linguistic minorities and margins.

Mutuality Beyond Innovation

It then seems that the prevalent enthusiasm regarding digital or AI innovations largely runs a show it has not conceived. Embracing the idea of liquid (ideological) cyber-architectures (Novak 2025) through modern, commercial settings already summons the specters of contingent social evolution and accumulation (Agamben 2013) hard to fully appreciate at a time of technological reformation and related learning via representational knowledge, that is, language models (LLMs). Apparent and even banal as prerequisites for the arts, the conditions and the ethics of agential realism and related human mutuality establish a social motivation beyond the digital innovations in augmented (or prompted) interaction.

In October 2024, I was granted the privilege to discuss the above problematic in a city, which the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2013) describes as the city embodying the architecture and the accumulating wisdom of specters – Venice. Agamben speaks of the specters of what and how human and non-human beings

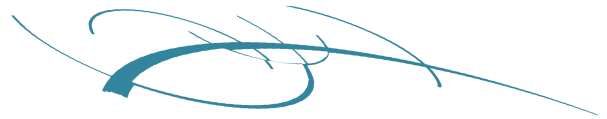
signify as makers of history, as innovators constantly building on what once was, on the social reality of different times; specters *qua* the conscience of the living, as they reveal the accumulation of the sociomaterial life refusing to be extinguished, reminding us of different, living ways of being 'us'. Philosophically, they are akin to "the irremissibility of being" emerging through the temporality and the materiality of those who exist and then do not – whether buildings, human beings, or joint or individual ideologies (Doenges 2010: 173). They sketch out the undying backdrop of social capital and contingent networks of agency the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas detects in Banquo's ghost, in those who «[...] rise again, / With twenty mortal murders on their crowns, / And push us from our stools» (*ibidem*). As such, they may illuminate the agential realism and sociomaterialism that Karen Barad's (2007: 123) intellectual heritage has discussed as a basis for understanding consciousness, sentience, and the evolution of thought integrated into material "intra-action"; something we might also call, for present purposes, mutuality.

The emphasis of Agamben's (2013: 476) account is on architecture, which is the very signature of Venice on intra-action. The masters of this intra-action or mutuality are those who live by and in defiance of the complex but animate milieu that centuries of masonry and exacting design have brought about. They may look past and operate beyond the representational aspiration that often colours the experience of the Venetian tourists who project their acquired knowledge and expectations of the city onto its canals, streets, and buildings as if to synchronize the image of Venice with its

agential reality that is much more nuanced and layered – read: contingent – than any history or cultural status we can assign to it. As these histories – whether verified or betrayed by corporeal encounters – influence and guide future frameworks of how the global, cultural myth of the city is conceived, the problem of making sense of Venice accumulates. Generations of Venetian impressions partake in enriching a cultural heritage that may build a sense of belonging to some shared but fantastic idea of Venice, and this requires a mutuality of embodied and representational elements of experiencing and knowledge.

Environments where shared cultural meaning is accumulated and transformed – whether concrete, hybrid, or virtual by disposition – should carry this mutuality in increasing quantity as our communication relies on proliferating layers of rapidly transmittable information. We have evolved to consider their physical settings as those of «liquid architecture [...] contingent on the interests of the beholder», in the words of Marcos Novak (2025: 284), a pioneer of virtual architecture, suggesting «cities that change at the shift of a value, where visitors with different backgrounds see different landmarks, where neighborhoods vary with ideas held in common, and evolve as the ideas mature or dissolve». This, according to Novak (*ibidem*: 274) – in the 1990s, and I dare to suggest that the vision is not much different today, only more real – is especially so in the contemporary, digital cyberspace, in the techno-cultural move from “it-should-be-so” (of sequential data) to “it-can-be-so” (of cyberspace facilitating countless combinations and rearrangements of the first mentioned). Relocating the scholars and practitioners of

the performing arts back onto an introductory course in performance studies, the liquid architectures of Novak suggest and entail a mutuality that activates the very definitions of performance and performativity (as influentially woven by the thoughts of Marvin Carlson, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Diana Taylor, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and many others). They are about the cultural and social conventions, roles, rituals, and expectations we not only repeat and enforce, but (thus) bring into question. Making variations of them takes part in the evolution of meanings: modes and forms of cultural action – contingent but representational – are translated onto other modes and forms of cultural action and media. This evokes transgression and transformation of the assumed and commonly recognizable meanings (of conventions, roles, rituals, and expectations). Whether named as practices of intertextuality or, perhaps, of “interembodiment”, in today’s immersive realities and experience economies (Roihankorpi *et al.* 2023: 59), we are constantly produced and reproduced as agents and providers of agency, composing a Foucauldian diversity of individuals largely governed by available and potential systems of representation. Much like that of liquid architectures (of cyberspace and the tangible realities facilitating it), and moving from conceptions of ‘as-ifs’ to ‘is’ to ‘what-ifs’ in reality-making (Taylor 2016: 6, 133), the political impact of (a) performance or performativity is then in their capacity to suggest or produce, through affective engagement, a reality different from the one perceived in all its familiarity, reliability, banality, and restrictions (unequality etc.). Such impact then serves



as a potentially recognizable basis for all future performances or performativity. But as Barad's theory suggests, this might mainly suffice to appealing to our understanding of the representational reality as per Foucault (1989), not necessarily or extensively to that of the agential reality, whose relevance to digitality, augmented realities, and AI is significant. It is no news to the arts or to academic practice that the representations and meanings we enforce through choices related to our viewpoint, words, expressions, background, ethical orientation, and aims all partake in constructing our prompted realities, and that their tendency to miss or ignore essential or critical pieces of information has its effects. The condition and the ethics of mutuality then do establish a social motivation beyond the digital innovations of augmented interaction, despite all our persistence to grasp the new methodologies and the philosophies that support them as if they had some esoteric, ahistorical qualities that the most innovative members of our communities can fathom and translate to us. Their modes of learning – their agential reality – is heavily influenced by the representational reality, and by the LLMs in the case of AI.

If one wishes to relocate this problematic back onto a platform of performance and performativity, and especially one of liquid architecture, at the root of its conception there is the Greek *polis* and its theatre based on mutual awareness and presence, a public gathering of a diversity of (free) individuals with the potential to negotiate their collective and individual governance through systems of representation. Such is the social function of early theatre in the eyes of Denis

Guénoun (2007/2010) in his *Philosophie de la scène* (Philosophy of the Stage). In this setting, the evolution of norms and conventions of mutuality – of its representational reality – takes place in a circle-like arrangement, utilizing in full the form and forum of a social or communal gathering, human gathering, which is also the originary shape of the theatres of democracy, the concrete and ideological architectures where physical togetherness reflects the ideology of discussing the affairs of the polis, *ta politika* – the politics of the past, the present, and the future. The social function of the stage, the very scene of this discussion that completes the circle-like arrangement, is to present the community to itself, but otherwise, through translation and transformation. It has the function of the village eccentric, s/he or they who or that which suggests agency that goes beyond established norms, defies conceptions of capacity, equality, rights, responsibilities and diagnoses, exhibits the potential of functional diversity (Roihankorpi 2010: 97). As a representative of this human gathering, one is trained by its spectral history with all its details and overlooked peculiarities. In Guénoun's (2007: 14-15) theatre, the negotiation of the 'us', the gathering of a diversity of discursive practices and materiality – exhibiting degrees of contingency, subliminality, agential contexts, otherness, irony, discrepancy, incongruence (and all for a community of free individuals of the time, mind you) – takes place through the fact of mutuality, but a mutuality coloured by the very frailty of the meanings related to humanity, a disturbance in the representational reality which tries to grasp the slippery diversity we are made of. This is the very show – the social

function – that empowers the *skene*, the stage completing the liquid architecture of the circle-like arrangement of Greek and many subsequent theatres, even when transformed, rebelled against and scorned by the darkened auditoriums of capitalism and anonymous scheming of today's social media. Such frailty appears to fit poorly to our contemporary understanding (or the cyberspace) of performance, which embraces ideals such as effectiveness, swift calculation, and simultaneous co-presence of different layers of knowledge and affect, all still imagined and processed by the frail human agency, the social spectre in and of the machines that learn.

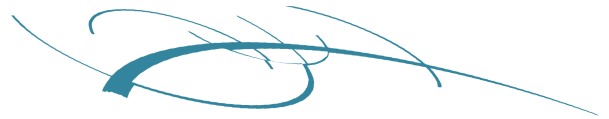
On the Social Function(s) of Performance in the Age of Prompted Realities

I have often witnessed my peers – artists and researchers – speak positively about interacting and collaborating with digital agents and related conceptions of intelligence, as they may ideate things better – read: faster – than human companions; they possess larger pools of knowledge and are able to connect these pools intriguingly and through endless variations. These artificial agents then do approach and problematize the social functions of Guénoun's theatre, suggesting that the diversity of agency reserved only or mostly for the human animal is reformed and transformed by artificial agency and intelligence in ways unforeseen.

The inconvenient truth performed by these agents is that of human *hubris* and *anagnorisis*, the realization of our failure not only to construct a representational reality unique to humans in all their materiality – or to some humans, as of

course there are norms governing what kind of agency is contained within the concept of humanity (what is considered valid or invalid, able or disabled) – but also the failure to let our very diversity and interdependence, our mutuality, to be the pool of knowledge that encourages the evolution of meanings. Yet there may be nothing new under the sun here, even though there appear to be new, efficient ways of hooking us onto certain models of productivity, profit, power, and efficiency, models whose beneficiaries may have already ensured their position and prosperity in the related future. The evolution of digital and artificial agency and intelligence falls within the capitalist continuum of automation, the (also creative) continuum of reducing and streamlining mechanical labor that runs from prehistoric times to the present day, sometimes grotesquely, if one thinks about the ways in which early industrialization increased the amount of mechanical labor for some – many – so that others – relatively few – would be able to reduce it. A recent report by Goldman Sachs (2024) on generative AI anticipates that current forms of mechanical, low-income labor may stay largely the same, whereas a related upheaval – a radical redistribution of work, productivity, and agency – will take place in relation to expert positions and roles, replacing, optimizing and surmounting human activity in accordance with an agenda of efficiency.

At the same time, artificial agency and intelligence still bear the norms of the power relations that facilitate automation, they draw on the norms that benefit some at the cost of others – from the prehistory to the present. The evolution of artificial intelligence keeps up the traditions of misogyny, racism, aesthetic



commercialization and the able, functioning body and mind, which are easy to retail as matters of fact. For the Evangelical sphere of Christian culture this setting may be more than convenient. The givens of artificial intelligence, the knowledge and the cultural material that make sense and are acceptable as facts (while drawing on our knowledge and cultural material) become one with an understanding of humanity that encourages us to assume and accept our incomplete status in the face of a powerful, God-like entity. If God does complete the earthen, human vessel of St. Paul, the idea of second coming is not too far removed from the imagery and the discussions on artificial intelligence. Such a mythical, commercially stimulating mental image is upheld by the public meta-level discussion on AI. Something sci-fi is about to emerge, something utterly convenient and available for all – available, yes, but through the norms of the power relations between human cultures and individuals: artificial agency is colonialistic (or parasitic) not only in terms of its own agency, but also in terms of its availability. The diversity of individuals who are preferably able, digitally interconnected and socially privileged by status await an artificial Messiah that makes creative, representational sense amid the inconvenience and the randomness of materiality and functional diversity.

To present the reader a bit of a spoiler, these are the more or less visible themes on the stage of the Australian Back to Back Theatre (2025) in their 2022 (prem.) film production called *Shadow*, based on their stage production called *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes* (2019). The outcome of community filmmaking amid the COVID pandemic, the film and its two-

and-a-half-year creation period of conversations and improvisations present us with questions of individual and collective responsibility and the hardships of collective negotiation in the digital age. (Onassis Stegi 2023) Apart from discussing the themes above, one ethical problematic that Back to Back Theatre invites us to engage is that of functional diversity in the advent and adoption of artificial agency, and an abbreviated reading of their statement could be as follows: Just as those of us with diagnoses of disability have, throughout modern history, been appointed the role of shadows, the status of a weight of dependency in the social sphere and in the hierarchy of the human community (of the cultures of ableness, capability, performance, and efficiency), then those who do not have said diagnoses or who do not identify as having a disability will, by default, become the shadows of AI, burdensome and inconvenient with their all-too-human dependencies and contingencies.

A curatorial note of the *Shadow* production claims that «95% of the people on screen are people with disabilities, and the majority of the crew roles are fulfilled by interns who identify as people with disabilities» (Onassis Stegi 2023). The main scene we witness throughout the production that combines theatrical and documentary-style storytelling is a space where a fictional public meeting takes place, organized in a circle-like seating arrangement. This arrangement is then completed and challenged by a peculiar demonstration of *skene*, the performers' dialogues and monologues emerging from the community, at times occupying the centre of the space and at times moving outside of it.

The liquid architecture thus conceived by the production team bears striking resemblance to Guénoun's archetype of the arrangement and social function of a theatre performance.

Those who do not identify as being disabled are invited (with an impending minority status) to encounter a setting of mutuality that – albeit in a mediated, scripted and rehearsed way – lays emphasis on the co-presence of degrees of contingency, subliminality, different agential contexts, otherness, irony, discrepancy, incongruence; the very *clinamen* of where human innovation and meaning-making derive from to contribute to our representational and agential realities. While the able community is presented to itself as subject to future norms of supernal human capability that derive from its own, privileged status in promoting ever-accelerating efficiency, the intervention – the choices made in the face of *clinamen* by the performers – suggests a reality where the very diversity of our functioning, capacities, and qualities is indispensable for a meaningful and sustainable world ahead.

Conclusions

The point that Back to Back Theatre makes is no minor one. As noted in the beginning of this essay, a recent study by Shumailov *et al.* (2024) suggests that the creation and structuring of reality and meaning characteristic of the artificial learning models – functioning and evolving through the representational reality they are able to conceive – are subject to serious degradation when trained on previous versions of themselves; on recursive data, previous masses of data that compose a

representational reality. Although originally taught with and on massive amounts of data drawn from the human, agential reality, there is a limit to how well the models perform on that still (and perhaps surprisingly) limited data, as contents generated by AI itself occupy the cyberspace in increasing numbers (Gibney 2024). There is a need to teach successive LLMs with previous versions of the models, but this creates a threat of eventual data corruption, leading after several iterations or generations of datasets onto model collapse, gibberish, and nonsense. LLMs trained to create Wikipedia-like entries on text produced by their predecessors, that is, on AI-generated information, “synthetic data”, become polluted by being selective and biased in their learning process, and the models' output finally becomes nonsensical (*ibidem*). One may of course suggest that this move from data to dada is also an example of welcome creativity and chance elements in digital meaning-making, creative innovation even, but it also emphasizes the effects of the lack of subliminal or context-sensitive contents in interactive accumulation of meaning. What may be missing is mutuality: the uneven distribution of matter and information in the universe, which can perhaps be simulated, but cannot be tested by chance and circumstantial quirks in a representational reality, the only reality (or succession of realities) where subliminal disturbance and random mistakes can systematically be surpassed *qua* automation in order to govern meaning and related norms.

If the mutuality of performance, as demonstrated above by Back to Back Theatre, wishes to translate itself onto digital realms that more and more assume



the influence of representational models, it needs to accumulate and subvert meaning at least as intensely as the models of learning. Meaning may understand and teach meaning, but without the contextual history and chance appearance of Agamben's spectres, an ethics and a heritage of contingency and mutuality relevant not only to the living and their lifeworld but also to the dead and the not-yet-born, there is only meaning that degrades into data that learns nothing and teaches nothing.

The social function of performance in the age of digitality and artificial intelligence and agency is to encourage a resilient understanding of this.

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