

# CLARE HAMMOOR & EVELYN WALKER

## The Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy

### Abstract

Apophenia is the very human capability of making meaning out of the chaotic data of the world. It's pattern recognition: Jesus on your toast. But Carl Jung advocated for careful attention to the phenomenon of coincidence. John C Lilly takes it one step further, saying coincidence should be read as a cue from the cosmos. Artists Clare Hammoor and Evelyn Walker celebrate apophenia, reflecting on their recent collaboration—a remounting of John Gilbert's opera *Rotation*. This essay looks at instances of meaning making, deliberate mystification, and lateral leaps; what they've come to call a parasociative process.

### Prelude

Directing the revival of John Gilbert's *Rotation* gave Clare discretion in finding production team members. That's where Evelyn came in. While we had collaborated in creating performative work before, the challenge of creating a multidimensional, multimodal space through which this opera would be seen posed a new series of confrontations and inquiries in our artistic relationship. The temporality demanded by this project coincidentally intersected with a number of our own arts practices and obsessions. Stunned, delighted and fascinated, we began a process of writing as inquiry. The exploration we share in the essay below is both artifact and living object. It is an attempt at unpacking our work by writing it into a new existence.

The written process, which will unfold in the following chapters of this essay, is one of many necessary and interconnected parts of meaning making. We do not consider the essay to be a survey at arm's length of our collaborative process. Instead it is a functioning organ in the body of work manifested within the recent revival of *Rotation*. We consider the digital, sculptural, and performative manifestations of that work to be essential tools in the inquiries we establish here. We consider the writing about such to be an extrusion of those musings, an entanglement and a re-weaving.

### Introduction

Just as the language of the essay provides a tool for that extrusion, the opportunities afforded by language appear throughout our process. Take the following observations about language as our starting place:

Under the circumstances of an argument, the identification or even employment of certain cognitive biases and logical fallacies is at work in the minds of the debaters, as well as those to be swayed. Linguistic functions become the semi-material code by which the conceptual and perceptual structures are designed, coded, and then re-processed by the minds of both the orator and their audience. The process is in fact an active

shaping and bone-setting of our experience of reality. By manipulating language, we manipulate our translation of the observed world into our understanding of the reality of that world. In the context of a rhetorical exchange, language creates a synthesis from the observed, to the abstracted, into the 'true', and then back into the real. Linguistic structures and other expressive communications become the generative programs of belief, all of which are oriented towards the apprehension of truth.

Within rhetoric, we also find the intentional employment of a catalog of cognitive biases and logical fallacies. When occurring by accident, these cognitive distortions are errors in logic, signs of imperfect reasonableness. When these cognitive biases are employed intentionally and rhetorically, they are capable of derailing, and swaying the opinions and perspective of the audience. Red herring, *reductio ad absurdum*, rhyme as reason, rosy retrospection, Occam's razor, the IKEA effect, pooh-pooh; all are potential weapons in the arena of the real.

The titular Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy sits primary amongst a family of fallacies most relevant to our purpose within this text. In the Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy (Grufferman, 1977) a few shots in the side of a barn are nothing until the 'sharpshooter' paints the center of a target over them. Like the sharpshooter [1], we aim to achieve an intentional manipulation of the self-fulfilling prophecy and other forms of confirmation bias. We propose to complicate the arena of the real by entering the overlooked middle ground between right and wrong. We suggest that to do so, one can de-weaponise these linguistic manipulations. And that in an era allegedly 'post-truth' one can ground oneself by becoming familiar with the sensation of vertigo while learning to navigate under its influence. And we suggest that an aesthetic, para-sociative, environmental theater of the real is exactly the place to do so.

## Definition

The para-sociative process is an appliqué. It is a process of navigating the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) while concurrently constructing it. Just as in a pirouette, the player is bodily immersed in a rhizomic map, and through the act of self-repetition and rotation, we begin to see patterns emerge. Concepts become rhyming anchor points and a self-created, reflective belief system begins to accrue, built by mis-firings, significant coincidences, and parallel thought. What results—in the experience of the authors—is immaterial, invisible, and likely subconscious. At its heart is a tactile inquiry into the nature of the boundaries between the external and internal, real and unreal, reason versus random.

We can illustrate the concept with the notion of a vortex; an organised chaos at the center of which is the dizzied para-sociator. The vortex consists of three parts: the player, the expansive map of the vortex body, and the para-sociative means of interaction and navigation within the vortex. The result is a three-part *almost*-environment indistinguishable from the real world, with the exception that it has been intentionally curated by the curiosities of the player.

The para-social process and the vortex that accrues in its wake (and concurrently; the para-social process responds to the vortex) can only be experienced as an individual virtual environment, informed and populated by codes of the real. Its material is the aesthetic, emotional, internal, cognitive, conceptual web spun by the psyche of the player.

In this way, the initiation and application of this process becomes interwoven and inseparable. Similarly, the act of noticing our own noticing, and noticing *that we are noticing*, provides an example of the interchanges of what become self-fulfilling prophecies. If the para-socialist can learn to deliberately manufacture a self-fulfilling prophecy, or any other fallacious enactment for that matter, this should be considered not only a fool or a victim of irony, but also as a successful magician.

### **Distortions and Activations**

It is worth taking note of the different parts of thought that are at work here. However, just as the process is not acquisition oriented, neither is it prescriptive or uniform. The para-socialist's associations will follow a unique programming scheme, subject to their own context and processing. The vortex, as its form suggests, is a multiplication machine, an entropy accumulator. There are, however, common distortions enacted by the para-socialist.

Distortion one, coincidence and convergent evolution: The para-socialist may find that there is a repeating code. If a singular knock at the window might be mistaken for a stray tree branch, the second and third serve the purpose of forming a pattern and signifying meaning and intent. Repetitions, synchronicities, and similarities are taken to mark the presence of meaning.

Distortion two, literalising the figurative: Linguistic forms are held to resemble that which they represent, and are therefore both an abstraction as well as an opportunity to uncover an underlying truth. A similar model is the observation of convergent evolution within evolutionary biology. A fish and a seal are unrelated evolutionarily, yet both have fins. Their physicality is formed in direct response to the qualities of their environment. The same could be said of the human psyche, our linguistic codification of reality. If 'all the world's a stage', can we go further than our understanding of metaphor, to discover some common principle of stage-ness, or the phenomenologies of space and performance?

Distortion three, Texas sharpshooting: The template of the oracle and the self-fulfilling prophecy has followed us throughout our inquiry into the vertiginous. At its core is the murkiness of causality, one's relationship with the sublime, intention, fate, and time. Since the establishment of the enduring archetype of Cassandra, we have splintered the concept into phrases like the 'placebo effect', confirmation bias, apophenia, agentivity, patternicity, the Oedipal complex, and so on. These measurements and quantifications are not wrong, but for our purposes they are beside the point.

## **Purpose**

The para-social process is set apart from scientific, rhetorical, and other cognitive standard operations for two reasons. The first is that it is self-aware; we are noticing what we notice, we are engaged in a cinematographic experience. We have created an aesthetic immersion in which we forget, and then remember ourselves.

The second is impractical, anti-goal-oriented, and a-logical by design. It is strange-ifying, playful, wrong-headed, mis-directed and misleading. There is a long tradition of engaging in illogical and pointless meaning-making, even when the makers are aware of the falsehood or foolishness of their practice. Theater, dance, children's games, spiritual practices, ritual and routine all engage with this sometimes purely abstract, 'unproductive', aesthetic experience. There are volumes written on the value of the archetype of the fool, the cognitive science behind the imperative of play, and the biochemical drive towards spiritualism.

Therefore, rather than engage in a redundant defence of nonsense, we embark on another fool's quest. We wonder instead how we can carve out a practice that frees us from our hunger for accreditation. Can we engage in the para-social process not just with an academic curiosity in the value of play, but also with a re-sutured bond between artist and object, para-social and vortex? In other words, how might we shift from a mindset that engages with the world like a first-person shooter bent on acquisition, and instead move towards a new generosity; a willingness to lose?

### **A Para-social Simulation: The Rectangle Repetition**

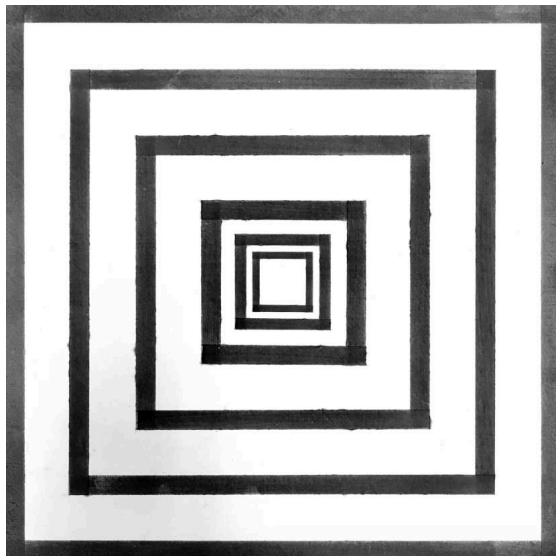


Figure 1: Rectangle Repetition. By Evelyn Walker.

The para-sociative simulation now titled *Rectangle Repetition* begins as a fascination with designated space, and specifically the convention of the stage space. As we continued to reflect upon the qualities of the stage—that it automatically implies a fourth wall, that it acts as a vessel for the enactment of fiction, that it suspends disbelief, and so on – a refraction began to occur as well, splintering our ideas about the stage into a repeated pattern of other rectangle spaces that share qualities with the stage space. We begin to fixate upon forms that appeared to 'rhyme' with the initial space of the stage. Suddenly the cinema, television, computer, box, frame, grave, sensory isolation tank, orgone energy accumulator, and body all share the qualities of the stage, and add their own to the nature of the rhyming rectangle pattern. They all act in their own way as designations of space that allow for the carriage of some internal essence, or transformation of story to take place. If Heidegger's *Ereignis* can be understood in terms of 'coming into view (Polt, 2006)' or 'things coming into themselves by belonging together (Dryfus, 1991)', then this is certainly something very close. Or if it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, a like-ness creator, then that is an aesthetic practice, too. The refraction, or para-sociation is a domino effect, and continues to splinter and grow. This simulation highlights the establishment of a programmatic feedback loop: a rotational extrusion process in which the real passes through the unreal, and back into the real. As players, artists, thinkers, what do we put into the para-sociative extruder? What do we expect to come out the other end? For Descartes (1641), the input is sensory, which is translated into experience, which is then passed into the immaterial soul: In goes matter, out goes the spirit.

For Baudrillard, the input is the output, and the output is the input. Neither is origin, or imitation, neither is real or unreal. There is now only the hyperreal:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials — worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra (1994: 2)

What would Baudrillard say of our opportunism, warping the 'malleable meaning' to shape our co-creative 'combinatory algebra'? Would he say that it is not a process at all, but simply the way of things?

## **Rotation**

The bloom of thought is often initiated with a primary and relatively specific starting point, which seems to volunteer itself impulsively and inexplicably. The para-sociator is unable to explain the attraction between these elements yet feels their magnetic draw as intersections in the world just beyond everyday cognition. This is the space we found ourselves in as we began the process of collaborating as director and projection designer for a 2016 re-mounting of John Gilbert's 1969 multi-media opera *Rotation*. In working to develop abstract and literal spaces for this production, our conversations de-

veloped imagery that could be projected across a series of broken panels floating in the stage space while interacting live video feeds, the performers, the audience and production of space itself.



Figure 2: Production still from *Rotation* by John Gilbert at IMPACT Presents taken by Angela Lau. Featured is projection design by Evelyn Walker and live-feed cameras orchestrated by Diarmid Flatley. Directed and designed by Clare Hammoor.

Early in the collaboration, inspired by Henri Bergson, we began to literalise the words of Henri Bergson, discovered in Virno's *Deja Vous and the End of History*, as he writes that:

Our actual existence [...] whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every aspect of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting (2015: 15).

In examining this 'splitting', our collaboration began to develop systems of dichotomies that may be placed into categories of the actual and the virtual. By reading the splitting of moments in a literal way, this production began to examine its concretisation in a theatrical space. As such, we began to notice the ways in which we were both players and facilitators of play. The duality of these roles is an important distinction in our ritualistic and playful understandings of this work, which are developed below.

Actual	Virtual
Perception	Memory
Ritual	Playful
Literal	Figurative

Experience	Memory
Body	Cyborg
Practitioners	Parasociators
Presentation	Production
Project	Practice
Designers	Collaborators

Inspired by Donna Haraway's taxonomies (2016) and Bergson's interactions with Virno (2015), these dichotomies began as sites of wonder and developed across the gaps visible in the table above to form exploitable paradoxes. By forcibly colliding these notions, we began to develop a system of imagery for the production as well as a formulation of reflexivity about its practice. Our formulation is best seen in its willingness and ability to step into the mess of these notions without working to develop clear delineations between them. By refusing to see what is clearly in front of us, we have situated our noticings as active engagements with ideas rather than passive reflections on their existence.

This dialogic relationship was mirrored in the usurped identity markers of our traditional theatrical roles as director and designer. In developing a system of production that was equally motivated by the bodies (and their sounds) in the rehearsal room as well as the multimedia that shaped that same rehearsal room, we worked to actively subvert expectations of power and linearity in the theatrical process. In this way, we developed glimpses of para-sociation throughout the production's development and run and empowered performers, designers and crew member alike to situate their own roles as those of para-sociators. As such, our ensemble was challenged to think beyond the expected possibilities of rehearsal and repetition with a specific goal as outcome. Instead, we developed a challenge of inquiry that was both the output and the input. Production and possibility; the actual and the virtual, both literally in the room with its multimedia/multimodal connections and in the theorisation of the space written in these words.

### **Para-approaches**

In examining the act of para-sociation as ritual, we create the opportunity to employ a project of thinking, feeling and doing with a hazily defined ultimate aim. In defining ritual in the tradition of Geertz, as many have, as an 'as if' (Bell, 1992) space (as if the world

ran in the way we are empowering through ritual) we open ourselves to experience the magic of this process without the judgements of its detractors who demand scientific answers and responsibilities. In choosing to step over these responsibilities, we situate our understandings in what Jodorowsky refers to as a 'sacred trap' (Jodorowsky, 2010). This trap is self-set and requires a certain knowingness of itself in order to repeatedly function. The ultimate goal is for the experience of sacridity to somehow become a natural element of consciousness that no longer relies on the supports or the trappings of initial belief. While this could undoubtedly represent the underpinnings of a deceitful cult, this practice also presents us with a convenient way of navigating the 'chicken or the egg' conundrum the para-social process can provoke. By suspending the operational order of these events, we continue the challenge of ending with the beginning and beginning with the ending.

This turnabout is nowhere more important than in the theorisation of play. While some, notably Huizinga (1972), struggle to delineate between ritual and play, we are working to hold up the features of these different activities as an important contradiction of the process we propose. In examining the defining qualities of ritual the ultimate expression or goal of a ritual comes to mind as a key difference between itself and the capriciousness of play. This is not to say that play is somehow not serious (in fact, its seriousness has been investigated by many scholars) but that its ultimate aim is play itself rather than a clearly defined intergalactic, metaphysical goal. The messiness of this distinction is a site for our process' application as one can note many of the distortions highlighted above are available in both ritual and play terminology, theorisation and practice.

Undoubtedly, elements of our processual practice are play-full but situating them in play categorically would be a mistake. Our project is not to squeeze these understandings into the voluntary rapture-without-goal translation of play. Instead, an investigation of playfulness leads our thinking to be challenged and enriched by contemporary understandings.

In breaking from Huizinga's popularised idealisations of play, Miguel Sicart points us to a key understanding of playfulness — appropriation — as he writes: 'To be playful is to appropriate a context that is not created or intended for play (2015: 27).' The resonations of this categorisation within the possibilities that excited us are loud. In response to popular notions of The Texas sharpshooter, not only have we appropriated the role of its marksman in this essay, we have worked to occupy the bullet-riddled barn itself from those who might otherwise see the nonsense splatter of bullet holes. In declaring this occupation and production, we are offering a speech-act realisation for your consideration and kidnapping.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the words and ideas of this essay imply process and the in-process notion of our excitement that is driving the production of the para-social process. Its visualisation as a vortex and its application to our own collaborative artmaking are but two sites of its meaning-making potential. It is our hope to continue to engage deeply with these



concepts across mediums and disciplines as we develop its theorisation with other practitioners, scholars and players. Please: Kidnap the concepts we've played with and hold them hostage for the ransom of your own imagination.

[1] By completely altering the essence of these marks with a new one, the marks-person demands a new understanding of the artifact. The Matrix (written and directed by the Wachowski sisters, 1999) portrays déjà vu not just as an uncanny, false sensation of familiarity, but instead as a sign that the fabric of the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994) has been altered. Déjà vu is a sharp sensation in relation to our understanding of reality. It is vertigo: the reality of the body in defiance of the principle of gravity. Its cousin is coincidence. Carl Jung defined synchronicity as an 'a-causal connecting (togetherness) principle' or 'temporally coincident occurrences of a-causal events (1973: 8).' The phenomenon and experience of the coincidence is liberated from the stodgy logician's measurement and dismissal, and the realm of inquiry expands to include external and internal compulsion, symbolism, and meaning-making. Coincidence becomes an aesthetic experience. In this paper, we build and inquiry into, and advocacy of, the sensation of vertigo. We are not lead by logic, but instead seek a sublime and aesthetic experience. Whereas the logician considers cognitive bias and logical fallacy a misstep or a rhetorical weapon, we take issue with this adversarial and acquisition based approach. We propose the immersive and vertiginous experience of the para-social process as an alternative.

## References

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bell, C. M. (1992). *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Descartes, R. (1641) *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes*, trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, vol. 2, pp. 1-62.
- Dryfus, H. (1991). *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. London: MIT Press.
- Geertz, C. (1974). *Myth, Symbol, and Culture*. New York: Norton.
- Grufferman S. (1977). Clustering and Aggregation of Exposures in Hodgkin's Disease. *Cancer* 39: 1829-1833.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Huizinga, J. (1972). *Homo Ludens*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Jodorowsky, A. (2010). *Psychomagic: The transformative power of shamanic psychotherapy* (R. LeValley, Trans.). Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.

Jung, C. G. (1973). *Synchronicity; An acausal connecting principle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lilly, J. C. (1972). *The Center of the Cyclone; An autobiography of inner space*. New York: Julian Press.

Polt, R. F. (2006). *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's Contributions to philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Sicart, M. (2014). *Play Matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Virno, P. (2015). *Déjà Vu and the End of History* (D. Broder, Trans.). London: Verso.

Wachowski, L., & Wachowski, L. (Directors), & Silver, J. (Producer). (1999). *The Matrix* [Motion picture]. Unites States: Warner Bros.

## **Biographies**

Clare Hammoor is a theatre practitioner who collaborates with young folks and adults in public spaces, schools and prisons. He has presented at national U.S. conferences including the American Alliance for Theatre Educators and the Progressive Educators Network and international conferences including the NYU Forum on Educational Theatre and the International Multimedia Performance Artistic Collaborative Technology. Clare facilitates theatre and drama with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated folks as a college instructor with Hudson Link and as the Artistic Director of (re)emergent theatre. MA in Educational Theatre from New York University. EdD candidate NYU.

[clarehammoor.com](http://clarehammoor.com)

Evelyn Walker is an artist, performer, and writer in San Diego, California. Her work is trans-disciplinary, operating with a dynamic range that includes classical rendering techniques, kaleidoscopic research practices, bricologic sculpture, and concept synthesis via the routes of humor, immersive theater, and improvisation. She received her BFA from Indiana University and is currently an MFA candidate at the University of California, San Diego.