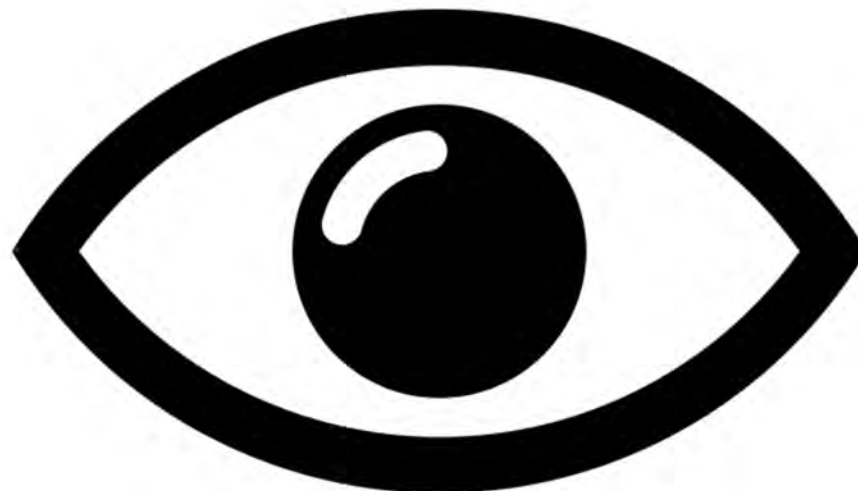


“Experiment: Abstract experimentation” by Steven D. Brown

Following slides attempt to reflect on the history of experimentations in art, theatre and social psychology.

Some of the examples and images are additionally added to elaborate more on the notion of abstract experimentalism.

In order to read the full chapter please see: Inventive methods: Happening of the social, Ed. Celia Lury, Nina Wakeford, Routledge, 2012, pp.62-75





“Formats like Big Brother are . . . referred to as ‘reality TV’, although a more suitable name would be ‘experiment TV’. Big Brother is a social (Darwinist) experiment . . . With the right casting and proper impulses and restrictions, this social laboratory will produce ‘real life soap characters’ that quarrel, insult, bond and seduce each other in front of large television and internet audiences . . . On one level it is dramatizing and normalizing our lives as fully surveilled and incarcerated. On another level it pushes the interrogation of authenticity on from the level of the image and onto the subjects photographed whose ‘authenticity’ is strongly thematized by the participants themselves as well as marketed by producers.”
(Fetveit, 2003: 554)

Stanford prison experiment

The Stanford prison experiment (SPE) was a social psychology experiment that attempted to investigate the psychological effects of perceived power, focusing on the struggle between prisoners and prison officers. It was conducted at Stanford University on the days of August 14–20, 1971, by a research group led by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo using college students. In the study, volunteers were assigned to be either "guards" or "prisoners" by the flip of a coin, in a mock prison, with Zimbardo himself serving as the superintendent. Several "prisoners" left mid-experiment, and the whole experiment was abandoned after six days.



Throughout the history of psychology, there are innumerable instances of experiments that have blurred the line between media and science. The ‘bystander apathy’ experiments conducted by Bibi Latané and colleagues (Latané and Darley, 1970), for example, were inspired by newspaper reporting of the violent sexual assault and murder of Catherine Genovese in New York in 1964.

As Frances Cherry (1995) argues, it is telling that the experiments which followed focused on a single abstract dimension of the case – the behaviour of bystanders to the assault and murder and why they did not intervene – rather than the concrete particularities of gender, class and race that were so clearly at stake in the way the case was originally reported (see also Manning et al., 2007).

The bystander effect, or bystander apathy, is a social psychological claim that individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present; the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that one of them will help.

Several factors contribute to the bystander effect, including ambiguity, group cohesiveness, and diffusion of responsibility that reinforces mutual denial of a situation's severity.



**“37 WHO SAW
MURDER DIDN'T
CALL THE POLICE”**

- The New York Times

March 27, 1964

In 1964 a woman named Kitty Genovese was chased down, sexually assaulted, and murdered just feet away from her house. During these events Kitty was able to scream for help, and 38 witnesses were aware that it was taking place yet chose to do nothing to help the dying woman. After the case, psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané were curious how so many people were able to just stand back and wait for authorities to handle it. They devised an experiment called the ‘Bystander Apathy Experiment’.

device noun

de·vice | \ di-'vīs  \

That device has the basic structure of creating a situation of ‘ordinary people being challenged’ in order to facilitate some form of learning experience. More precisely, we might say the device is a kind of social technology, a practice of identifying and organizing persons in such a way that certain aspects of human experience can be induced in isolation from what are typically thought to be their natural environments.

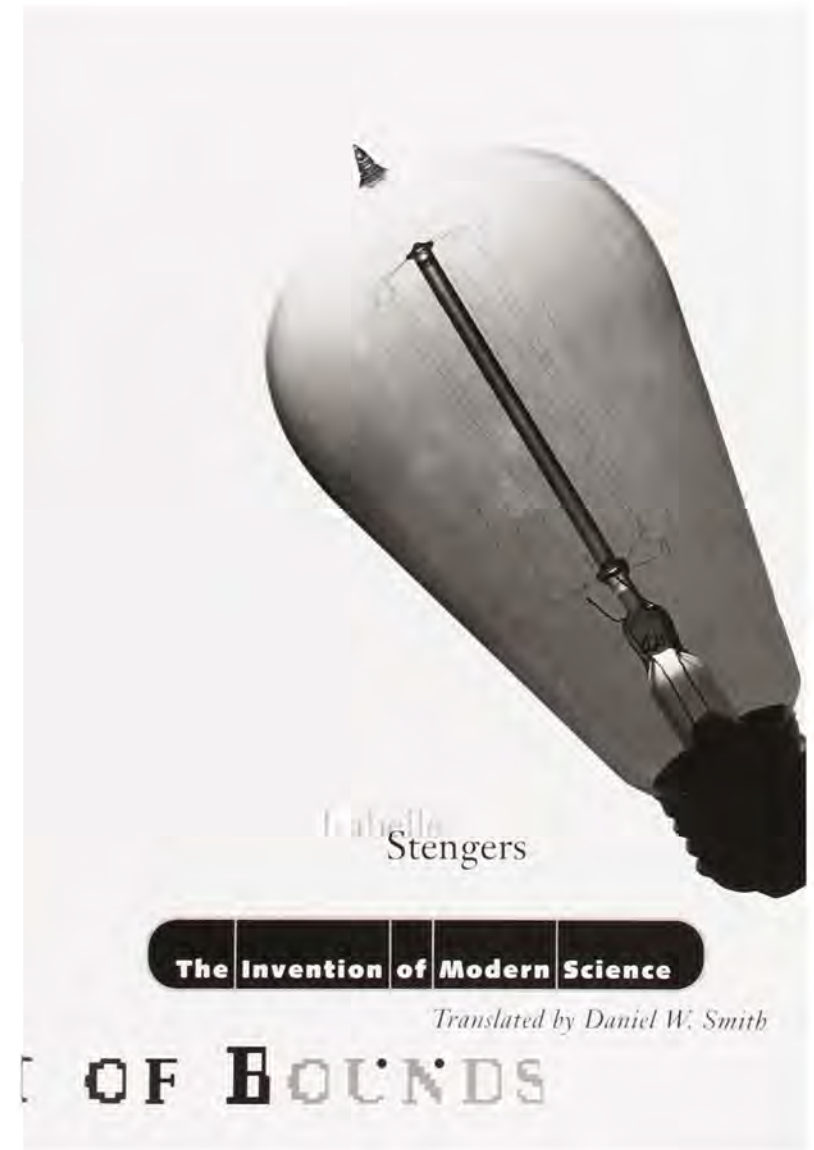
The device, however, makes it possible for them to be repeated on demand and in isolation from any concrete particularities. It also renders what then occurs as relatively open for coding, such that what may be learnt from the experience is rarely as straightforward as those who articulate the challenges (i.e. the experimenters) may intend or those who enact the challenges (i.e. the participants) experience at the time.

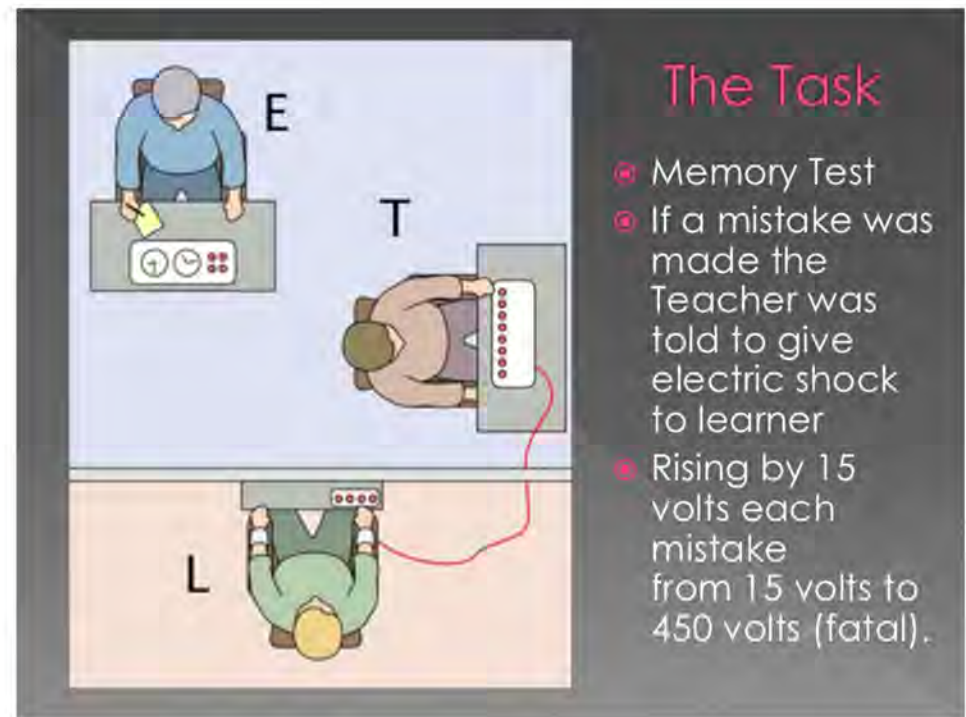
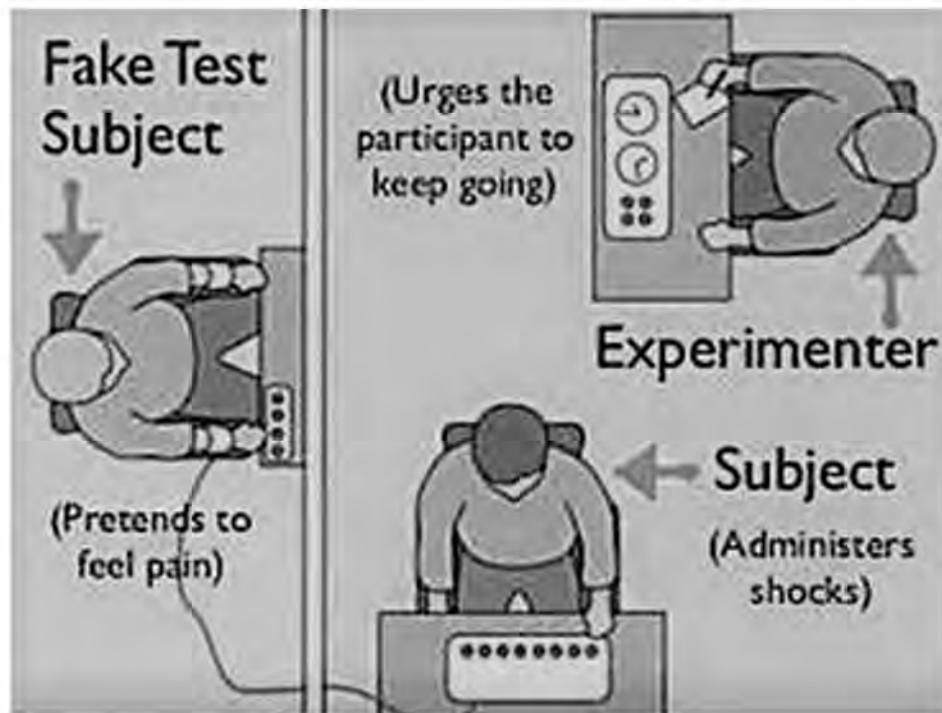
The learning made possible by the device is then often ambiguous and open for contestation.

Stengers describes “experiments as methods of inventing or creating new forms in which the world is deemed able to ‘speak’. To make a new scientific being appear in the laboratory – be it a microbe, a body in motion or a false memory – requires a complex game of construction and mobilization, where a network of interests and stakes are made to pass through the experimental setting” (see Stengers, 1997, 2000).

“But in the case of psychological experimentation, Stengers argues that all too often experiments are, by definition, not creative since they do not bring about anything new. They merely repeat what is already known under the guise of the apparently scientific.”

Stengers, Isabelle. (2000) *The Invention of the Modern Sciences*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press



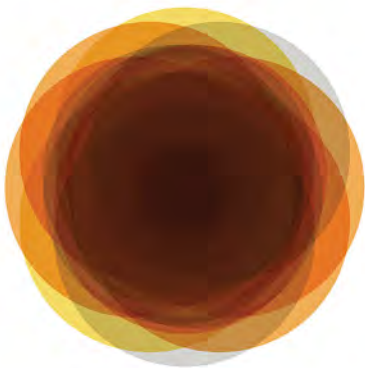


During the 1960s, Yale University psychologist **Stanley Milgram** conducted a series of obedience experiments that led to some surprising results. These results offer a compelling and disturbing look at the power of authority and obedience. They measured the willingness of study participants, men from a diverse range of occupations with varying levels of education, to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts conflicting with their personal conscience. Participants were led to believe that they were assisting an unrelated experiment, in which they had to administer electric shocks to a "learner." These fake electric shocks gradually increased to levels that would have been fatal had they been real.

In describing the famous obedience studies conducted by Milgram (1962/2005), Stengers writes:

“In the name of science’ Stanley Milgram has taken on the responsibility of ‘repeating’ an experiment already realized by human history, and has shown that torturers could be fabricated ‘in the name of science’ just as other have done so ‘in the name of the state’ or ‘in the name of the good of the human species’ . . . ‘In the name of science’ Milgram submitted them to an apparatus that put himself in the position of Himmler or Eichmann.” (Stengers, 2000: 23)

Cosmopolitics I



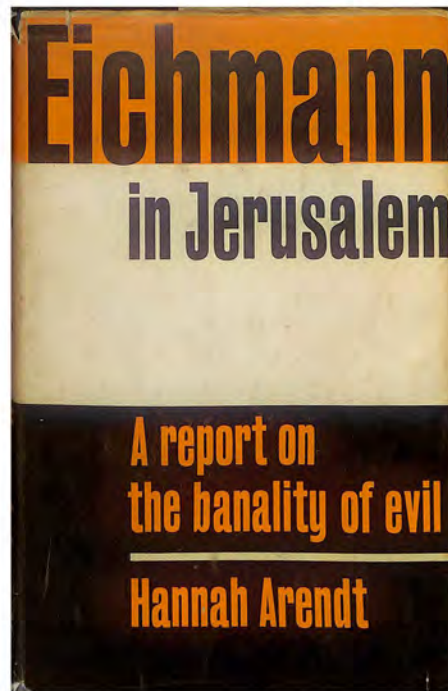
1. The Science Wars

2. The Invention of Mechanics

3. Thermodynamics

ISABELLE STENGERS

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BOSONNO



Experimentation as theatre

psychological experimentation render the practice as thoroughly theatrical.

A drama is carefully worked out in advance, scripted minutely and then performed in a dedicated space by the cast using an array of props. Some members of the cast – i.e. the research subjects – may not be fully briefed on their performance, which is therefore to some degree ‘improvised’. But this improvisation is already structured in advance by the complex work of setting and enacting the experiment, and repeating it over numerous ‘performances’ (i.e. trials).



The Trial of Lucullus, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)



Selective Attention / Invisible Gorilla Experiment, Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, 1999

“Theatre has a didactic purpose; it should aim to educate the audience to a better understanding of their social and historical conditions. As such, it is critical that the audience is aware at all times that what they are witnessing is not social reality itself, but rather an artifice that enables that reality to become an object of conscious reflection.

Brecht rejected entirely a ‘psychological’ model of the theatre where the audience are lured into emotional involvement (and resolution) with the performance, and are thus able to dispose of what they witness as passive entertainment”.

The device deployed in Brechtian theatre to address this problem is known as *verfremdungseffekt* (‘distancing effect’). This consists of a set of techniques for reminding the audience of the relative artificiality of the performance.

These include performers directly addressing the audience, maintaining the house lights on throughout the performance, minimal stage designs and interruptions to the dramatic action through songs (ibid.).

The aim of these techniques is to demonstrate the plausibility, often the necessity, of the actions taken by performers in response to the unfolding dramatic situation, but with the individual-psychological dimension removed. What is performed is not the travails befalling unique personalities, but rather the dilemmas of ‘everyperson’ in response to particular cultural-historical conditions – these are ‘ordinary people being challenged’.

Please see: Bertolt Brecht, *On Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, new edition, London Methuen.



WER BÜRGERBLÄTTER LIEST WIRD BLIND UND TAUB. WEG MIT DEN VERDÜMMUNGSBANDAGEN!

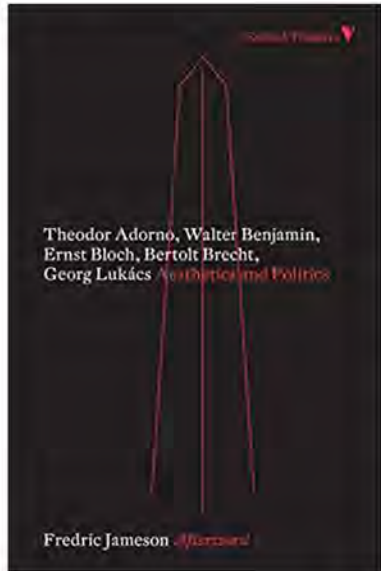


ZUM KRISENPARTEITAG DER S.P.D.

John Heartfield – “Whoever Reads Bourgeois Newspapers Becomes Blind and Deaf: Away with These Stultifying Bandages!” (Wer Bürgerblätter liest wird blind und taub. Weg mit den Verdummungsbandagen!) AIZ Magazine, 1930

“Expressionism offers ‘experiments with disruptive and interpolative techniques’, which include ‘montage and other devices of discontinuity’, all of which in their own fashion ‘strive to exploit the real fissures in surface interrelations and to discover the new in their crevices’ Expressionism seeks to create new worlds through finding and exploiting cracks in the existing world. For example, in John Heartfield’s artwork, commonplace images are multiplied and juxtaposed to construct unreal, unworldly images that nevertheless express the essential character of their subjects”

Bloch, E. (1977) ‘Discussing expressionism’, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso, pp. 16–27.



“For Lewin, what is important is not reducing the complexities of experience to mechanistically conceived component parts. Rather, they sought to refine particular psychological states of affairs to their most focused and concentrated form. This form would then be abstract, in the sense that it would never appear in this way in the course of normative social experience, but it is nevertheless extracted from something, like a ‘real fissure in surface interrelations’. Experimentation of this kind shares with expressionism the desire to uncover the new through a treatment and disruption of the real” (D. Brown : 2012)

Somewhere between Art, Abstract Experimentation and Theatre

Would it possible to consider Schlingensief's Container: a performative and abstract experimental setting that in the word of Stengers enabled "learning" by encouraging the audience to perform, without reducing the experiment into an "experiment TV" like Big Brother? or is it just the continuation of social psychology experiments like SPE?



Foreigners out!(Ausländer raus!), is an art project and television show from 2000 that took place within the scope of the annual Wiener Festwochen. It was created by Christoph Schlingensief and directed by Paul Poet. Realising public xenophobia and the new hate politics in the most drastic ways possible, he installed a public concentration camp right in the middle of Vienna. The film and performance was made in a style that imitated the show Big Brother. It was critically aimed both at certain forms of television entertainment and at a latent xenophobia still thriving in the whole world.

Austria 2000: Right after the FPÖ under Jörg Haider had become part of the government, the first time an extreme right-wing party became state officials after WW2, infamous German shock director Christoph Schlingensief showed a very unique form of protest. He installed a public concentration camp right in the heart of Vienna. Satirising reality TV shows, "Big Brother" especially, a dozen asylum seekers were surveilled by a multitude of cameras, could be fed and watched by passer-by's and two were thrown out of the country through web-voting



“Participants on Big Brother appear to very rapidly learn how a certain kind of ‘microcelebrity’ is accomplished. They learn that the best response to ever more bizarre and artificial circumstances is to perform increasingly more normative versions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or class. They learn to hone and refine their performance so it becomes a single exclamation. Or a particular sort of facial expression. Or maybe a certain kind of bodily movement. All of which are then repeated until they become a tic. Big Brother accomplishes what psychological experimentation could never even begin to imagine: a form of experience that is so relentlessly non-psychological that it is no longer even human.”

-Steven D. Brown