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# Performance, Learning Disability and the Priority of the Object:

## A Study of Dialectics, Dynamism and Performativity in the Work of Learning Disabled Artists

by

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requirements for the degree of  
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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	i
Declaration .....	iv
Abstract .....	v

### Covering Document

Introduction.....	1
Performance, Learning Disability and Dialectics: A History .....	3
Literature Review .....	11
Performance Studies and Disability Studies .....	11
Disability in Contemporary Performance .....	14
Learning Disability and the Performance Object .....	16
The Dialectic of Stasis and Dynamism .....	26
Negative Dialectics and the Priority of the Object .....	31
Conclusion .....	40
Reference List .....	42
Bibliography .....	49

### Publications

- Publication 1: Calvert, Dave (2009) 'Re-claiming authority: the past and future of theatre and learning disability'. *Research in Drama Education* Vol. 14 (No.1), pp.75-78

Publication 2: Calvert, Dave (2010) 'Loaded Pistols: the interplay of social intervention and anti-aesthetic tradition in learning disabled performance'. *Research in Drama Education* Vol. 15 (No.4), pp.513-528

Publication 3: Calvert, Dave (2014) "'A person with some sort of learning disability': the aetiological narrative and public construction of Susan Boyle'. *Disability and Society* Vol. 29 (No.1), pp.101-114

Publication 4: Calvert, Dave (2014) "'Actual Idiocy" and the Sublime Object of Susan Boyle' in Chow, Broderick and Mangold, Alex, eds. (2014) *Žižek and Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan pp.178-195

Publication 5: Calvert, Dave (2015) 'Mind the Gap' in Tomlin, Liz, ed. (2015) *British Theatre Companies: 1995-2014*. London: Bloomsbury pp.127-154

Publication 6: Calvert, Dave (2016) "'Everything has a fucking value": Negative Dialectics in the Work of Back to Back Theatre'. *Contemporary Theatre Review* Vol. 26 (No.2), pp.134-152

## **Appendix**

Appendix 1: Full list of publications

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disabled performance at the centre of contemporary theatre internationally; and Mind the Gap, whose constant artistic experimentation and nurturing of the skills and opportunities for learning disabled performers has been fundamental in redefining how British theatre might work.

Many of these companies and artists have generously given me their time in conducting this research, for which I am extremely thankful. All of them have given me tremendous inspiration for which I am eternally grateful.

## **Declaration**

The material submitted here is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Work. Accordingly, much of the submission consists of work that has previously been published. These publications are clearly identified as Publications 1 – 6 of this document.

I declare that the published material and the covering document that constitute this thesis are my own work, and that no part of the thesis has been submitted for a degree at another university.



## Abstract

This submission draws together six publications and a covering document to set out an original contribution to knowledge in the field of learning disabled performance. Critical attention has been relatively scarce in this field, and the publications gathered here offer the only extended study of learning disability and performance that covers a range of artists across the artforms of theatre and music.

Following an initial provocation which outlines the emergence of theatre and learning disability, the publications focus mostly on detailed studies of specific artists, exploring their aesthetic practice along with discursive and audience responses to their work. The article on Heavy Load considers how the integrated band, in its negotiation of punk's anti-aesthetic, reappropriates the image of learning disability already inherent in the form.

Two publications on Susan Boyle explore how her successful audition for *Britain's Got Talent* contradicts medical and discursive attempts to contain learning disabled people, and also reveals the traditional place of learning disability in what Slavoj Žižek (following Jacques Lacan) calls the symbolic order.

A chapter on Mind the Gap critically assesses the company's various projects and explores the notion of the learning disabled actor. The final article on Back to Back theatre opens up post-Brechtian dialectics operating in key productions by the ensemble.

The covering document sets out the core arguments that underpin my publications, forming a cohesive approach to reading learning disabled performance with significance for the social and aesthetic understanding of cognitive impairment. I contest a dominant approach that positions learning disabled people as non-performative and singularly non-dialectical. My original readings draw particularly on Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics and I propose a specific dialectic of stasis and dynamism. In doing so, the combined research generates new possibilities for understanding such performance encounters beyond the historically sedimented constructions of learning disability.

# **Covering Document**

## Introduction

This commentary seeks to draw together the publications that constitute my PhD by Published Work submission, which focuses on the field of performance by artists with learning disabilities. Despite encompassing a range of practices established over several decades, such performance has only recently attracted critical attention from the academy. My publications consider a range of artists and ensembles, each with an international profile, working across a variety of art forms and media. They explore the ways in which learning disability, as a concept, is constructed, challenged or reimagined through artistic performance and, in turn, how learning disabled artists contest normative expectations of performance. The provocation 'Re-claiming Authority: the past and future of theatre and learning disability' and the chapter 'Mind the Gap' establish the artistic, social and political context for recent developments in learning disabled performance. The discussion of Mind the Gap also allows for some critical consideration of the company's work. The remaining publications form detailed critical studies of the integrated punk band Heavy Load, the singer Susan Boyle and the theatre company Back to Back.

In exploring learning disability through performance events, my analyses draw on disability studies as much as performance studies for their frameworks. Each of the publications sit comfortably within what Dan Goodley (2011) calls 'the cultural model of disability'. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson clarifies this perspective in which disability 'is a pervasive, often unarticulated, ideology informing our cultural notions of self and other' as well as being 'a concept that pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment' (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.335). The theoretical approach of the publications is also closely linked to what Goodley (2011) describes as 'radical humanism' – which is in turn closely linked to the cultural model of disability – in which disability and impairment are understood 'as ideological categories that are

culturally produced and negotiated'. Learning disability in this approach is specifically produced by 'wider cultural constructions of in/competence, mal/adaptive behaviour and intelligence' (Goodley, 2011). The cultural model and radical humanism both employ ideology critique to consider how non-disabled society 'promulgates its own precarious position through demonising dis/abled bodies' (Goodley 2011).

The publications, accordingly, open up new ways of thinking about learning disability, recognising that the emergence of learning disabled artists contests longstanding dominant ideas about intellectual impairment. My critical analyses of the performances under discussion pursue the specific conceptual challenges to learning disability presented by each artist or ensemble, and also offer an innovative approach to reading learning disabled performance, employing dialectics to examine the political framework that over-determines learning disability in both social and aesthetic terms. These dialectical readings are not simply methodological but also reflect the dialectics operative in the performances, which in themselves contradict historical perceptions of learning disability as non-dialectical.

In the commentary below I will outline the common ideas that unite these publications as a singular contribution to knowledge in the field, and establish the ways in which this research extends and complements existing critical appraisal and understanding of performance work by learning disabled artists. This overview is organised around inter-connected themes. The two opening sections propose a historically negotiated relationship between learning disability and performance, which, I argue, is contested within disability politics, learning disabled performance and related critical studies. The following two sections focus on original aspects of my critical approach: the interplay of stasis and dynamism as significant concepts in definitions of learning disability; and Adorno's theory of the priority of the object as a foundational principle of negative dialectics.

## **Performance, Learning Disability and Dialectics: A History**

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson proposes that “staring” is a particular way of looking that constructs ideas of disability within a performative structure. Her project to ‘bring forward the generative rather than the oppressive aspects of staring ... leans more toward Erving Goffman than Michel Foucault’ (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.10). Staring ‘marks bodies by enacting dynamic visual exchange between a spectator and a spectacle. Staring, then, enacts a drama about the people involved’ (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p.31). Such encounters with learning disability, infused by performance and spectacle, extend to official contexts as well as everyday settings and performance events. The discussion below considers how ideas of performance circulate through the public history of learning disability, establishing a dominant conceptual understanding of it. I argue that, historically, the generative potential of disability that Garland-Thomson advocates is exploited theatrically by non-disabled performers, which in turn affirms a social understanding of learning disability as non-performative and non-dialectical.

Patrick McDonagh traces the emergence of legal conceptions of “idiocy” in England to the thirteenth-century document *Prerogativa Regis*, in which the ‘need to define certain parameters of mental aptitude is directly linked to the social and political parameters defining land occupancy and ownership’ (McDonagh, 2008, p.81). This was concerned with preventing weaknesses in the gentry’s management of estates, which fed into the royal revenue. Three categories of incompetence existed: minors, who would be placed under supervision until they came of age; lunatics, who might be cognitively incapacitated on a temporary basis and so, like minors, would be temporarily absolved of their managerial duties; and idiots, whose mental inaptitude was deemed permanent and irrevocable.

Suspected idiots were brought before the Court of Chancery and public “inquisitions” took place in which government officials tested the defendant before a jury. Richard Neugebauer details that:

the ability to recognise coins, and to perform simple numerical functions in relation to these coins or in the abstract, was particularly common ... Knowing one's own age or kin, for example, also formed part of these tests. Comments on the physical appearance and health of the individual were also introduced as the basis for arriving at a diagnosis.

(Neugebauer, 1996, p.29)

These tests are not designed to examine abstract notions of intelligence but the practical abilities required of landowners. Additionally, the emphasis on physical appearance and health is also significant. C.F. Goodey comments that:

[t]he key to a courtier's professional knowledge (*scienza*) was knowing how to imitate natural grace. He had the ability to *perform* as a member of the honour society, and only as a result to *be* one.

(Goodey, 2011, p.85; emphasis in original)

Idiocy is therefore identified as a functional and mimetic failure to perform the required role of an aristocratic landowner. Those subsequently declared idiots would have the management of their lands reclaimed by the Crown until their death, at which point the title and lands would revert to their heir.

The mechanism for determining idiocy is a staring encounter in Garland-Thomson's terms, in which a staree appears as a spectacle before starers in order to establish the meaning of the encounter. For Goffman (1959), 'when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey'. Managing this successfully would be generative in Garland-Thomson's sense, allowing the disabled staree to establish the terms by which disability is understood. Goffman adds that 'when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have' (Goffman, 1959). This, for

Goffman, is the purpose of everyday performance. Being designated an idiot by the Court of Chancery, however, is unlikely to be in the best interests of the defendant. An unsuccessful appearance is therefore not merely a failure to perform an aristocratic role but indicative of a deeper failure to perform at all: it is the spectating jury and inquisitors who become the *de facto* performers as they ultimately define the situation. The staring encounter here is oppressive rather generative, imposing a definition of idiocy on the defendant which characterises learning disability as socially non-performative.

At the same time, the generative potential of idiocy is appropriated by non-disabled performers to develop a convention within theatrical performance. This reaches its culmination in Elizabethan performance when, William Willeford notes, 'a distinction came to be expressed between the "natural" and the "artificial" fool, the latter being the person who "professionally counterfeits folly"' (Willeford, 1969, p.10). Artificial fools predominated as playhouse clowns, with non-disabled comedians taking on these roles.

In one sense, it is the failure to perform a given role that is being utilised here. These clowns, as Tim Prentki notes, are distinct from tragedians such as Richard Burbage who 'in some sense disguised himself to play Othello or Hamlet, but Will Kempe was always himself whether he played Bottom or Dogberry' (Prentki, 2012, p.19). This is not a mere inversion in which the clown's personality obscures the character. Rather, the performer appears alongside and in a relationship with the character, as suggested in Prentki's later discussion of Kempe's performance as Jack Cade in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 2*: 'here there is both Cade [the character] and Kempe [the actor]; within Cade both the clothier and the pretender to the throne; within Kempe both the actor performing the role of Cade and the *extempore* stand-up comedian' (Prentki, 2012, p.41; emphasis in original). The fool in performance, therefore, always appears doubled, subject to an irreducible gap between the self and the represented object. My analyses of learning

disabled performers Kevin Pringle, Susan Boyle and Mark Deans, discussed in later sections, suggest that they too maintain this gap in performance.

Of course, the key difference here is that Kempe is assuming the mantle of idiocy as an important trope. While the non-performative idiot in the social realm is positioned as inescapably singular, Kempe's doubling, in which he imitates idiocy and enacts its theatrical function, marks the artificial fool as fundamentally performative. This particular distinction between artificial and natural folly intensifies in the seventeenth century in two ways. Theatrically, Prentki notes a shift from the improvisatory Kempe to his successor in the King's Men, Robert Armin. A writer himself, Armin 'developed the poetics of folly away from stand-up comedy towards ... a verbal wit firmly integrated into the thematic structures of the play as a whole' (Prentki, 2012, p.103). McDonagh suggests that by this time, 'the world is increasingly divided into natural idiots, artificial fools and the observers' (McDonagh, 2008, p.142). In his own play *The Two Maids of More-Clacke*, Armin plays two roles: Tutch 'a witty fool' implicated in the central action of the play; and Blue John, 'the natural fool, who appears on occasion in the play as an "interlude" but otherwise remains apart from the main current of the action' (McDonagh, 2008, p.146). Where Kempe's clown moves in and out of the dramatic world, in Armin's theatre the natural fool and artificial fool are explicitly set apart from each other, with the former excluded from the dramaturgical structure (just as legally identified idiots were excluded from the social hierarchy) and the latter implicated within it.

The identification of idiots as non-performative intensifies further in the latter half of the century. Goodey suggests that, within the hierarchical framework of the honour society, the legal application of idiocy only extended to those in positions of public power. Informally, the term also referred to those 'distant from the centres of power and ability' (Goodey, 2011, p.137), including peasants and women. The diminishing of royal power and establishment of a more authoritative citizenry in the Restoration required formal recognition of idiocy to be extended to continue managing the exercise of public power.



Goodey proposes John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in the post-Restoration context of 1689, as establishing the dominant modern conception of learning disability. Locke bases his political argument that human beings are worthy of liberty on the grounds of the rational faculties gifted to all human beings, as opposed to specific forms of knowledge: 'It is not the actual *content* of the common ideas, [Locke] says, but the *operations leading there* that are innate and can be known with certainty' (Goodey, 2011, p.346; emphasis in original). If idiocy in the honour society was recognised as the failure to perform the specific role of landowner, the Lockean conception of idiocy focuses on a more general failure to perform designated intellectual operations in any given context. Under Locke's claim that rational capacity is the defining characteristic of humanity, this failure to perform marks idiocy as non-human.

Locke's philosophical ideas come into practical effect in the scientific and liberal social order of the nineteenth century. The empirical explorations and classifications of learning disability by educationalists such as Eduard Seguin and physicians such as John Langdon Down establish idiocy as an essential and identifiable state of being, rather than a fluid identity relative to social values. Qualitative approaches also emerge, such as the eugenicist principles of Francis Galton which follow Locke's claims about the inhumanity of idiots. While the substance of the concept may change with historical and social circumstances, the mechanism, now shifted from a legal framework to medical and educational assessment, remains consistent. Learning disability is still identified through a double failure to perform: an explicit failure to perform according to particular normative criteria; and an implicit performative failure to define the assessment situation.

Historically, this non-performativity underpins centuries of exclusion of people with learning disabilities both socially and theatrically. My research focuses on the recent emergence of learning disabled performers and its significance for our understanding of both learning disability and

performance. The context of this development is primarily set out in my provocation 'Reclaiming authority: the past and future of theatre and learning disability' and my chapter about the theatre company Mind the Gap. These publications connect learning disabled performance in Britain with the increasing visibility of people with learning disabilities in the 1980s, arising from the historical closure of long-stay hospitals and the Conservative government's community care policy, and posit an emerging wave of learning disabled theatre companies engaged in the identity politics of political theatre at that time. The work is thus socially motivated in its engagement with a specific political context and renegotiation of dominant perceptions of learning disability. A second wave of theatre and learning disability consolidates this social orientation as arts funding under the New Labour government becomes linked to social inclusion. In practice, as I note in 'Reclaiming authority', this produces an emphasis on people with learning disabled people as actors, rather than occupying other creative or productive roles in theatre. A connection is therefore established between learning disability and performativity that, in the historical context outlined above, is inherently radical.

The combination of learning disability and performativity remains contentious, however, in its troubling of the normative criteria of theatrical performance. Mind the Gap's training programmes and aesthetics seek, I propose, to authenticate learning disabled performers as conventional actors, whose discipline and technical skill manage restored behaviours in order to define the performance context. Yet the discussion in 'Reclaiming authority' of Jonathan Lewis' performance in *Coming down the Mountain*, in which concerns are raised about his vocal ability, suggests a continuing gap between non-disabled expectations of theatrical performance and the technical impacts of impairment on the performer.

The other publications outline further difficulties in reconciling learning disability and performativity. The two analyses of Susan Boyle explore the ways in which spectators and commentators struggle to synthesise her

celebrity with her impairment. The discussion of Back to Back identifies several moments in which audiences see learning disability as either reducing the creative potential of the performer, over-determining theatrical representation, or restricting the spectatorial perspective to 'freak porn'. The observation of Heavy Load's audiences suggests something different, however, as the initial confusion at encountering learning disabled performers resolves into familiarity. The band does, in effect, enact a Goffmanesque definition of the situation here that draws the audience into this familiarity through the successful invocation of a recognisable punk form.

This points to an additional dimension to learning disabled performance that runs throughout my analysis and is the basis of my contribution in the field, which is the exploration of learning disability as dialectical. The punk form already deploys "moronism" as a recreation of the artificial fool, with the non-disabled punk persona adopting a caricatured performance of learning disability, exemplified in the vacant stare. Idiocy is utilised as a performance strategy for exposing the superficiality of normative values, both socially and aesthetically. Prentki sees the fool as drawing on a Socratic and Pauline intellectual tradition in pursuing 'some kind of dialectical relationship where folly is an indication of wisdom lurking within and the only language that wisdom can speak through is that of foolishness' (Prentki, 2012, p.15). Willeford similarly suggests that there is an elemental dialectic at play in which 'we see the fool interacting with folly and nonfolly, linking them and transforming them into each other' (Willeford, 1969, p.32). Accordingly, Prentki concludes that Will Kempe, performing idiocy in order to expose the incoherence of the dramaturgical structure, maintains 'a consistent function as the purveyor of contradictions between the ideal and the real' (Prentki, 2012, p.81). It is this dialectical aspect of the artificial fool that Armin abandons and that I argue punk reawakens.

The performance of folly is therefore intrinsically dialectical and the doubling of the artificial fool (whether the distinction between Will Kempe / Jack Cade or John Lydon / Johnny Rotten in The Sex Pistols) establishes a space for

this dialectical interplay. The non-performativity of the natural fool, in its inescapable singularity, is accordingly and implicitly conceptualised as non-dialectical. My analysis of learning disabled performance seeks to contribute to the understanding of learning disability, and the aesthetics of learning disabled performance, by re-establishing this dialectical quality as intrinsic to the specific performativity of learning disabled artists. The approach taken reflects the distinct practices being discussed, and varies from a Hegelian model of dialectics in the analysis of Heavy Load, in which the performance synthesises punk and learning disability through its re-appropriation of the artificial “moronic” image, to the use of unresolved negative dialectics in the considerations of Back to Back and Susan Boyle. At the base of my analyses is the proposition that there is an ongoing dialectical relationship between the concepts of performance and learning disability themselves, in which both of these terms are contested, troubled and reimagined.

## **Literature Review**

### **Performance Studies and Disability Studies**

My negotiation of the interplay between the concepts of learning disability and performance is concordant with the cultural model of disability studies, in which the cultural representation of all forms of impairment (physical, sensory and hidden as well as cognitive) is critiqued. This model began with a predominantly literary emphasis (see, for example: Garland-Thomson, 1997; Mitchell and Snyder, 2000; Stoddard-Holmes, 2001) before turning its attention to performance, in both its theatrical and social forms. Colette Conroy has noted that questions of representation and identity form the link between artistic practices and the political realities of disability:

Disability politics is concerned with the representation of disability and disabled people ... [T]he present state of Disability and theatre has emerged from concerns with positive and negative imagery, the notion of disability as a political identity rather than a bodily description, and the concern with disabled people as actors or non-actors in society.

(Conroy, 2009, p.8)

The theatrical metaphor of actors and non-actors points to a particular motivation straddling social and aesthetic approaches to the performance of disability, which is the assertion of individually determined action. This approach, in which formal choices rest with the performer, adheres to Marvin Carlson's observation that Goffman's definition of social performance 'places the responsibility of performance, and its agency, squarely back upon the performer' (Carlson, 2013, p.38).

The political basis of disability activism in the UK is the social model of disability, which argues that the causes of disability lie in the social structures that produce physical, systematic or attitudinal barriers which, in turn, exclude disabled people from normative opportunities and experiences.

These barriers are therefore understood as a source of oppression which deprive disabled people of individual agency as they require support and assistance to navigate society. It is for this reason that autonomy and independence have been central goals of disability rights. Such concerns about the status and agency of disability as an identity category have motivated both academic and artistic explorations of disability. Kirsty Johnston (2016, p.21), noting that 'the disability arts and culture movement sprang from disability rights activist programs primarily in the UK and USA', observes that this activism operated on two fronts as 'disability theatre artists engaged in both critique of dominant modes of performing disability and explorations of new ways to put disability on stage'.

These new ways of (re)presenting disability in theatre, developed by artists with disabilities, became an increasing topic of critical discussion, notably in the work of Petra Kuppers (2003, 2011). Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander's influential collection of essays *Bodies in Commotion* (2005) also opened up direct connections between Disability Studies and Performance Studies, arguing in their introduction that while the 'notion that disability is a kind of performance is to people with disabilities not a theoretical abstraction but lived experience' (Sandahl and Auslander, 2005, p.2), it has, 'unlike race, class and gender, escaped recognition as an important identity rubric for performance scholars', since the discipline 'has generally assumed the body it studies to be a normative one' (Sandahl and Auslander, 2005, p.7).

Learning disability has occupied an uneasy place within this wider interdisciplinary discourse between disability, cultural and performance studies, primarily because learning disabled performance has hitherto involved non-disabled collaborators, and so is distinguished from disability arts (as forms of practice which rest on the absolute authority of the disabled artist) by the term arts-and-disability. Giles Perring has argued that the 'tacit application' of non-disabled agendas in such collaborations has potential consequences for 'the meaning of arts-and-disability practice and its ability to foreground the subjectivities of people with learning disabilities' (Perring,

2005, p.186). The perceived lack of agency in arts-and-disability has put learning disabled performance at odds with the activist project that links disability arts and disability studies.

Recently, however, perspectives on the social model have become more nuanced as scholars have argued that the politics of disability do need to take account of the real impact of physicality and pain on the lives of disabled individuals. In part, this involves a renewed appreciation within disability politics that dependency is an inevitable feature of impairment at an individual level. Furthermore, there has been a growing awareness that the outcomes of pursuing a social model of disability may be counter-productive. Tom Shakespeare has argued that:

there may paradoxically be negative outcomes of the emergence of disability rights. For example, the disability movement may not be welcoming or inclusive to all disabled people, and there have been claims that minorities or those with particular impairments are not always equally represented or supported. Moreover, the rights discourse may encourage a political identity which is rejecting of non-disabled people, and promotes hostile and self-segregating responses.

(Shakespeare, 2014, pp.197-198)

Perring's questioning of the tacit agendas of non-disabled artists resonates with this model of political identity, and, in its pursuit of learning disabled agency, runs the risk of a strategy which fosters the very exclusion it seeks to combat.

Shakespeare argues that there is scope for appreciating, and encouraging, relationships between disabled people and non-disabled people that are more 'mutually satisfying' (Shakespeare, 2014, p.208), allowing learning disabled artists a greater degree of agency as creative collaborators than Perring does. While Shakespeare proposes that such reciprocity would require investment from both disabled and non-disabled people, Jasbir Puar

takes a wider view that distinctions between disability and non-disability are increasingly irrelevant in a neoliberal context that demands an impossibly ideal conception of the self as independently and autonomously capable:

all bodies are being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, enhanced capacity. And there is no such thing as an “adequately abled” body anymore. However, it is precisely because there are gradations of capacity and debility in control societies – rather than the self/other production of being/not being – that the distinction between disabled and non-disabled becomes fuzzier.

(Puar, 2011, p.182)

While disability arts has not disavowed the identity category of disability in this way, there has been a shift in both practice and critical analysis towards a concern with how performances by disabled artists, while still inextricable from disability as a theme, are more concerned with modes of engagement and relationship than the direct examination or reconstruction of disability as a discrete identity category in itself.

### **Disability in Contemporary Performance**

Bree Hadley’s book *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship* (2014) focuses on interventionist models of performance by disabled artists that directly engage audiences in the process of constructing disability through performance within everyday public spaces. These artists, Hadley observes, ‘firmly believe it is not just usually unconscious acts of performance, but usually unconscious acts of spectatorship that bring the sometimes unfortunate realities of disability into being’ (Hadley, 2014, p.15). By drawing attention to disability as the interplay between spectatorship and performance, Hadley argues that such interventionist performance seeks to reveal and interrupt the process by which ‘we impose our own culturally determined codes, categories and labels on the other – an imposition that



occurs in the ontological realm, and is influenced by the social, institutional and symbolic practices that prevail in a particular culture at a particular time' (Hadley, 2014, p.7).

Under this approach to disability arts, agency for the construction and meaning of disability in performance broadens to include contributions from audiences and non-disabled collaborators as well as disabled performers. This shift in focus from disability arts as an assertion of rights rooted in challenging individual and collective oppression to a model of performance as an open encounter between disabled and non-disabled people has impacted on the critical attention paid to performance and disability. In particular, the recognition that reciprocal relationships and mutual dependency are necessary aspects of all human experience has liberated the collaborative practices of arts-and-disability from critical suspicion. Puar (2013, p.182) notes that the reconsideration of disability as 'an affective tendency of sorts' means that disability studies has begun 'acknowledging the scope and range of cognitive and mental disabilities'. Accordingly, there has been increased consideration of learning disabled performance in which collaboration is recognised as shared agency rather than an exercise in non-disabled dominance. Each of my publications adopts this perspective of shared agency, in which the creative practice of learning disabled artists is examined alongside the contributions of non-disabled co-performers, audience perspectives and critical commentaries in order to investigate the meaning of the performance events.

There are three distinct emphases on the relationship between the social and aesthetic at play in this recent attention to learning disabled performance. The first prioritises the social implications of the work, considering artistic engagement with learning disabled people as a model of applied theatre (see, for example: Terret, 2008; Leighton, 2009; Kim 2009; White, 2015) in which various pedagogical theatre practices aim at improving the lives of learning disabled participants. The second treats learning disability as a secondary issue and foregrounds the aesthetics of particular companies,

situating its appraisal firmly within theatre scholarship and away from disability studies. This scholarship centres on the work of particular companies who have an established international profile alongside non-disabled companies, and includes edited collections on *Back to Back* (Grehan and Eckersall, 2013) and the show *Disabled Theater*, a collaboration between choreographer Jerome Bel and Swiss company Theater HORA (Umathum and Wihstutz, 2015). *Back to Back* also features in studies on immersive theatre (Machon, 2013) and postdramatic theatre (Schmidt, 2013) which do not have a predominant disability focus. *Mind the Gap* similarly forms a substantial case study in a volume which introduces and critically examines the work of Augusto Boal (Babbage, 2004).

My own analyses of *Back to Back* and *Mind the Gap*, along with my other articles, belong more to a third category, which investigates the aesthetic significance and innovations of learning disabled performance, while also considering cognitive impairment itself as inextricable from the aesthetics, as well as the thematic considerations and making practices of the performers. This critical approach maintains the connection between performance studies and disability studies to look at the ways in which artists with learning disabilities challenge received ideas about performance, while simultaneously reflecting on the challenges these performances present to the conventional understanding of learning disability in the social field. Other key studies that maintain a focus on the interplay between aesthetics, performance and learning disability include Jon Palmer and Richard Hayhow's *Learning Disability and Contemporary Theatre* (2008), Anna Catherine Hickey-Moody's *Unimaginable Bodies* (2009) and Matt Hargrave's *Theatres of Learning Disability* (2015).

### **Learning Disability and the Performance Object**

Palmer and Hayhow share a general approach with Hickey-Moody in proposing that performance aesthetics are a product of learning disability itself. For Palmer and Hayhow, this is linked to their perception that a

learning disability permits greater access to authentic humanity, a way of being that is liberated from the usual constraints of socialised behaviour. 'As such', they comment, 'the lack of highly sophisticated and fully assimilated social behaviours will naturally tend to produce a more (though not, of necessity, completely) authentic mode of engagement with performance practices' (Palmer and Hayhow, 2008, p.42). This authentic mode of engagement emerges from three factors, the first two of which ground aesthetics in deficiency: 'a lack of self-consciousness on the performers' part; a lack of overt technique; a sense of being truly in the moment' (Palmer and Hayhow, 2008, p.41). Palmer and Hayhow, as former Artistic Directors of the companies Full Body and the Voice and The Shysters respectively, see their own practice as leading devising processes that facilitate this liberated, authentic form of performance.

Their approach, which foregrounds learning disabled identity as the generator of performance material, may appear to fulfil Perring's stipulation that 'the subjectification, rather than objectification, of all the artists in an arts-and-disability project must be facilitated' (Perring, 2005, p.186). Perring rejects the idea of learning disability as pre-socialised authentic behaviour, however, noting that, 'art can act as a means of constructing the self' (Perring, 2005, p.186). Subjectivity is a social and artistic construction as a consequence of individual agency. Palmer and Hayhow's theory, on the other hand, rests on the *a priori* objectification of learning disabled actors as somewhat primitive, a mode through which learning disabled artists must pass in order to realise the directors' vision of authenticity. Insofar as this allegedly authentic self is effectively presented as the performance material, the performer becomes further objectified – and, accordingly, constructed – as their seemingly intuitive behaviour is the focus of the audience's attention.

My approach is distinct from both Perring's and Palmer and Hayhow's. While following a social construction model in relation to learning disability, I do not (as suggested above) contend that agency for this lies solely with the learning disabled performer, the non-disabled director or the spectator. What

is at stake here is not the individual agency to determine one's own subjectivity, but the collective agency involved in negotiating meaning through performance. The artists I discuss are less concerned with establishing personal identities than with the creation of the performance event. Heavy Load's concern with identity only exists at the collective level of the band, as established through its music, just as the emphasis on technical skill and aesthetic form motivates Mind the Gap's work. Similarly, Susan Boyle's performance of *I Dreamed a Dream* is focused on overt technique and a demonstration of virtuosity, while Back to Back's devised work is constructed through collaborative processes in which original contributions – from either disabled or non-disabled artists – become lost, developed and transformed in the process. For this reason, my primary emphasis is not on individual subjectivity but on the object produced in, and through, performance: the formal construction itself which mediates the combined (and often conflicting) perspectives of artists, spectators and commentators. I refer to this throughout this document as the *theatrical object* or the *performance object*.

Anna Hickey-Moody's analysis of Restless, an integrated Australian dance company, is more fully aligned with Perring's perspective. She discusses the company's practice of 'reverse integration', the principle that the dancers with intellectual disability initiate and lead the aesthetic direction, which depends on 'those "without" [impairment] fitting in with the styles of people with intellectual disability' (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p.xvi). The non-disabled directors and choreographers are therefore positioned as responsive to the artists with disabilities, who take the lead in constructing the performances and, consequently, the self in, and through, art. The analytical framework employed by Hickey-Moody draws heavily on Deleuzoguattarian theory, proposing that the processes of Restless, and her commentary on them, aim 'to reterritorialise intellectual disability; to effect a becoming-other within thought' (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p.xx). As such, her commentary is rhizomatic, producing 'texts that have multiple entryways, that employ the power of open connections and are expansive in nature' (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p.xviii).

This turn to Deleuze and Guattari is reflective of a recent poststructuralist trend in studies of disabled performance. Petra Kuppers has also proposed a 'rhizomatic model of disability' which draws on the 'vibrational power' of Deleuzoguattarian terms that 'are not fixed items or categories, but ways of thinking' (Kuppers, 2011, p.92). The driving force of Kuppers' approach is to establish a means of allowing for 'disability' as a social-political and collective identity and '*disability*' as the lived experience of the individual. 'At the core of the argument', she writes, 'is the concept of the haptic, the touch, as a way of thinking through different positions and bringing them in contact with one another' (Kuppers, 2011, p.92). The rhizomatic model she proposes accordingly fosters 'non-dialectic connection' (Kuppers, 2011, p.92) to produce:

an abundance of meanings that do not juxtapose pain and pleasure or pride and shame, but allow for an immanent transformation, a coming into being of a state of life in this world, one that is constantly shifting and productive of new subject / individual positions.

(Kuppers, 2011, p.95)

This sense of becoming also underpins Hickey-Moody's analysis of Restless, notably in the discussion of Angus Goldie-Bilkens' 'dinosaur dance', a self-choreographed exploration of his masculinity. In her account of 'Angus-becoming-"masculine"-becoming dinosaur', Hickey-Moody quotes Deleuze and Guattari's observation that '[w]hat is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes' (Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Hickey-Moody, 2009, p.57). To apply fixed terms to such becoming would be to root it in history which is 'static' (Hickey-Moody, 2009, p.xix). The notion of becoming, then, exists in the intricate and unprocessed encounter itself and, in its rebuttal of fixed terms performs resistance as an act of movement outside of history.

There are resonances between my own dialectical contribution to the field and this non-dialectical influence of Deleuze and Guattari, which I will discuss in the later sections. At this stage, I would like to note several interrelated reasons why the haptic model is not adopted in my approach. First, Kuppers and Hickey-Moody focus their rhizomatic analyses on projects in which they were intimately involved, as collaborators, researchers and performers. The haptic contact at the core of this model requires a 'smooth space of close vision ... [O]ne never sees from a distance in a space of this kind' (Kuppers, 2011, p.91). A degree of close vision forms one layer of my research, having seen each of the artists and ensembles I discuss in live performance on several occasions. There are further layers of engagement to my research, alternatively, that inevitably augment this experience of the live performance by adding distance. I have encountered the performers' work in various video recordings which move beyond the immediate and haptic and, in often featuring the audience, widen the frame to produce a new event that includes spectators' reactions as part of the documented object. Often, this is further supplemented by other first-hand reactions to the performances in various forms: online comments, newspaper articles and reviews, and academic papers.

Second, drawing on the critical distance and consciousness that these layers produce, the significance of history in my publications differs from Hickey-Moody's approach. This is partly connected to the focus on learning disability, which I conceive as historically marginalised through the processes outlined in the chapter above. Anne Digby (1996, p.1) has noted this marginalisation reflected within historical studies, as 'when the "new social history" ... made visible a number of social groups previously neglected by historians, people with learning disabilities at first did not come into view'. The recognition of learning disability as both belonging to wider history and having its own history is, not coincidentally, contemporaneous with the emergence of learning disabled performance. A Deleuzoguattarian approach which positions learning disabled performance as an act of becoming which is outside of history, paradoxically reinforces the historical position of

learning disability. My theoretical framework draws alternatively on Adorno, who perceives that an object has a 'sedimented history' which must be drawn out through critical intervention in order to appreciate those extra-historical dimensions of the object. Accordingly, my research investigates how learning disabled performance reveals both its historical and its ahistorical dimensions.

Third, my dialectical approach considers the simple opposition of a dynamic becoming and a static history as unsatisfactory. The historical positioning of learning disability hinges on a complex and dialectical interplay of stasis and dynamism which plays out in both the social and aesthetic fields. In the sections that follow, I will elaborate further on these ideas around the dialectic of stasis and dynamism specific to learning disability, and the relevance of the performance object's sedimented history.

In an earlier work, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*, Kuppers (2003) connects a Deleuzoguattarian response with performances that observe an Artaudian 'attention on the living quality of encounters, on the quality of disabled bodies as carriers of live energy' (Kuppers, 2003, p.82). She contrasts this with other performance models in a Brechtian tradition in which 'alienation techniques are used in order to allow structures to become visible, to undermine the "common sense", the "natural", or "what everybody knows"' (Kuppers, 2003, p.50). Encouraged by critical distance, the performances I discuss, and the dialectical approach I take, belong more to this tradition than the visceral experiences of Artaudian theatre of cruelty (without wishing to negate the visceral aspects of Brechtian theatre, or the work of *Heavy Load*, Susan Boyle and *Back to Back*).

In my analysis of *Back to Back*, I propose that the productions discussed are compatible with David Barnett's distinction between the post-Brechtian and post-dramatic, in which the former still maintains a dialectical motivation which shapes both form and content. It is not simply that the work is politically discursive, but that the making process actively pursues points of

contradiction. By leaving these contradictions unresolved, post-Brechtian theatre resonates with Adornian negative dialectics rather than the conventional Brechtian / Hegelian dialectic which overcomes the tension between thesis and antithesis through a process of synthesis (Barnett, 2014). Nevertheless, Heavy Load's post-punk performances and Susan Boyle's *Britain's Got Talent* audition hardly qualify as Brechtian by design. Adopting a consciously dialectic critical approach to these performances, as opposed to an Artaudian / Deleuzoguattarian rhizomatic one, draws again on the non-haptic factor of distance, in a very particular way.

Learning disabled performers, I argue, inherit the same doubling that characterises the artificial fool. Heavy Load and Susan Boyle, for example, occupy spaces that are simultaneously inside and outside of the formal frameworks of punk rock and celebrity respectively. Consequently, they appear as both the punk / celebrity persona being performed (which I frame as the performance object) and the learning disabled artists that create these objects. This doubling is the basis of my discussion of Mark-playing-Hitler in Back to Back's *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*, which I will open up in greater detail in a later section.

Matt Hargrave, in his wide-ranging analysis of theatres of learning disability, notes the gap in learning disabled performance between audience expectations of formal coherence or normative virtuosity and the noticeable idiosyncrasies of the actor with learning disabilities which:

opens up the possibility of intellectual impairment as both a formal device and an aesthetic quality ... This is *ostranenie*, which the Russian formalists saw as the primary function of art: 'laying bare the device' or de-familiarising normative assumptions. What if learning disability – in its complication of intention, timing, virtuosity – could be *ostranenie*?

(Hargrave, 2015, p.51)



Brecht et al (2014) point out, significantly, that Brecht's '*Verfremdung*' is the standard German rendering of the Russian Formalist term *ostranenie*'. The consistency of *ostranenie* with *Verfremdung* is productively complex. They propose that the translation of *Verfremdung* as, 'distanciation, or the distancing effect' (Brecht et al, 2014) is misleading, as Brecht's own terminology did not consider the spectator's relationship to the stage as distanced, but decentred. The term 'distance' alternatively is used 'to characterize the actors' relationship to their roles' (Brecht et al, 2014) compatible with Hargrave's reading of *ostranenie* in learning disabled performance. Synthesising these ideas would suggest that learning disabled performance produces a visible separation of the performer and the performance object, which also decentres the audience's perception of either form or disability.

Accordingly, Hargrave and I both claim a generative aesthetic function for learning disability which opens up non-normative possibilities and dimensions of performance. At the same time, we also draw attention to audience difficulties in recognising this potential. Reflecting on audience responses to Mind the Gap's production *Boo*, Hargrave concludes that 'the "surplus" sign of "disability" overshadows other signs at the actor's disposal' (Hargrave, 2010, p.503). Similarly, my publications note different responses in which audiences are distracted by the appearance of learning disability: the bewilderment that initially greets Heavy Load performances; the widespread mockery of Susan Boyle; and the uncertainty Bruce Gladwin observes in audiences who cannot decide if the character, like the actor, has Down's syndrome. This indicates that in the performance event two separate frames are operating simultaneously: a social frame which foregrounds the performer's learning disability; and an aesthetic frame which is troubled by the appearance of learning disability. The audience responses noted above view the performance through the social frame, obscuring the aesthetic frame and, like Palmer and Hayhow, framing the subjective being of the learning disabled performer as the object of performance.

Hargrave contends that aesthetic and social frames:

cannot be collapsed or synthesised. Paradoxically, it is only through separating out the fields of politics and art that art can be politically useful ... [I]t is precisely by tackling questions of 'quality' and 'aesthetic value' that the underlying reality of the political is revealed.

(Hargrave, 2015, p.81)

Accordingly, Hargrave foregrounds aesthetic analysis, aiming at 'articulating a poetics of theatre and learning disability' (Hargrave, 2015, p.8). Tobin Siebers has sought to 'elaborate disability as an aesthetic value in itself' (Siebers, 2010, p.3) and this goal lies at the heart of Hargrave's project. He draws on a range of theories to examine learning disabled performance as a multifaceted, complex phenomenon through which the 'contested and unstable category' (Hargrave, 2015, p.75) of learning disability can be 'aestheticized but not classified' (Hargrave, 2015, p.63).

While I agree with Hargrave's insistence on 'art's irreducibility to the social' (Hargrave, 2015, p.10), I argue that, in the specific case of learning disabled performance, the underlying reality of the political governs both social and aesthetic performance. If theatrical performance, as Victor Turner (1982) proposes, occupies the same liminal plane as ritual in which regular social identities and relations are suspended then the appearance of the learning disabled performer should not provoke the difficulties in spectatorship that Hargrave and I observe. In these encounters, as audiences struggle to reconcile the social frame of learning disability with the aesthetically-framed performance object, I propose that it is the historical identification of learning disability as non-performative and non-dialectical that ultimately makes these frames appear mutually exclusive.

In restoring the performative and dialectical potential of learning disability, my critical analysis reconfigures the concept in both the social and aesthetic realms. This approach employs two strands. The binary opposition of stasis

and dynamism underpins the historical conception of learning disability, while my research offers an alternatively dialectical and complex negotiation of these terms. This develops towards a critical reading strategy predicated on Adorno's negative dialectics and the priority of the object. The following sections shall expand on each of these ideas in turn.

## **The Dialectic of Stasis and Dynamism**

Licia Carlson (2010) has outlined several pairs of oppositions that are continually in play in the understanding of learning disability, including: organic and non-organic definitions (focused on biological and environmental causes of impairment respectively); productive and protective approaches (the education or containment of people with learning disabilities); visibility and invisibility (the social highlighting or cloaking of learning disability); and quantitative and qualitative (the perception of intellectual development as either different in degree or different in kind when measured against normative human development).

In this section, I would like to focus on Carlson's remaining binary opposition between stasis and dynamism. Static refers to:

conditions believed to be incurable or not improvable by external influences or treatment; "dynamic" conditions are changeable (curable or at least improvable) through medical intervention, physical and/or psychological therapy, training or education.

(Carlson, 2010, p.36)

As with quantitative and qualitative distinctions, stasis and dynamism are measured as progress towards a claimed human normativity. While the perception of dynamism claims that some progress is possible, an emphasis on improvement over cure is symptomatic of learning disability which could never realise a fully normative state without dissolving. Learning disability is defined by this inability to demonstrate normativity, which again returns us to its ultimate non-performativity. Stasis is the perception of absolute non-performativity, while dynamism admits limited performativity.

Notably, this opposition does not question the normative claims that are implicit to it. Elsewhere, however, Carlson offers an alternative definition of dynamism in relation to disease, rather than disability. To be dynamic in this

context means to cause ‘a disruption of the general equilibrium of human beings’ (Carlson, 2010, p.28). This is not concerned with the linear development of the individual but with unsettling its normative stability. Extending this notion of dynamism, each of my publications explores the dynamic potential of learning disabled performance to disrupt the equilibrium of normative assumptions in both social and theatrical contexts. Indeed, this is the source of its performance value insofar as it is the same capacity demonstrated by the artificial fool to expose the incoherence of the dramaturgical framework. Learning disabled performance, and its reception, involves a particular and complex interplay of the static and the dynamic.

In the chapter ‘Mind the Gap’ I offer a comparison of Kevin Pringle and Robert Ewens, the two learning disabled actors who played Lennie in the company’s production *Of Mice and Men*. Ewens’ performance is more conventionally dramatic in that the actor, like Richard Burbage, is largely obscured by the character. In Pringle’s performance, by contrast, the actor is visible alongside the character as certain features of his disability – the static elements of his impairment – make his negotiation of the theatrical form more explicit. In the first instance, Pringle’s limited vocabulary is accommodated by writer Mike Kenny who restricts Lennie’s dialogue to a handful of words, creating space for a more physically expressive performance. Yet even with this pared-back text, Pringle’s struggles with articulation and fluency are evident to an audience. This gives rise to a dynamic performance in which the normative conventions of dramatic performance are exposed through being in conflict with the performer. In this instance, where a learning disabled actor is attempting to realise a non-disabled representation of a learning disabled character, the validity of the form is more questionable than the technical proficiency of the actor.

At the same time, the interplay of stasis and dynamism becomes theatrically productive. In an analysis of Jez Colborne’s performance in another Mind the Gap production, *On the Verge*, Hargrave describes the incongruous *ostranenie* of performer and form as ‘the eloquence of *dis-precision*’

(Hargrave, 2015, p.167; emphasis in original) through which the observer 'see[s] the joins, the tears in the fabric of performance' (Hargrave, 2015, p.161). This disruptive potential is one source of the aesthetic value of learning disability for Hargrave, offering something distinct from normative performance which can be appreciated in its own right. In the dis-precision between Pringle's speech difficulties and Kenny's text, however, performer and form re-establish a connection on a deeper level as Pringle's genuine frustration to articulate as an actor makes Lennie's sexual frustration more immediately affective for an audience. Pringle's static qualities produce a disruptive dynamism that is peculiarly generative within the performance, even while it disturbs the equilibrium of the form.

Just as the static / dynamic interplay between performer and form is different for Pringle, Colborne and Ewens, my analyses of Heavy Load and Susan Boyle open up other variations. Each of these musical acts is perceived as dynamic in Carlson's original sense, as they appear to move within performance from being outside normative expectations to fully realising their respective forms of punk rock and musical ballads. This apparent movement is somewhat illusory, albeit for different reasons in each case. Heavy Load's adoption of punk exploits a learning disabled identity that is already structured into the form: in this sense, the form comes to them as much as they move towards it. Any disruption is thus fleeting and trivial as the spectators' resulting sense of recognition restores the equilibrium.

Boyle's performance of *I Dreamed a Dream*, by contrast, involves a more complicated battle of stasis and dynamism. In the first instance, she appears dynamically improvable (or even curable) as she realises the demands of a normative form that is anticipated as profoundly beyond her reach. In doing so, the scale of her success is disruptively dynamic, as it destabilises the historical social equilibrium built on the performative distinction between learning disabled and non-disabled people. It is Boyle's dis-precision in the earlier, social elements of the audition – her personal appearance, her difficulty answering questions, leaving the stage before the judges' verdict –

that locates her in the non-performative space occupied historically by the idiot even before she is explicitly framed as learning disabled. Her technically skilled performance, which closely observes a non-disabled form, cannot be readily reconciled with this social non-performativity and so, I argue, unsettles the assigned place of learning disability in the symbolic order. The interplay of stasis and dynamism in learning disabled performance may therefore disturb the equilibrium of both social and aesthetic realms.

The media responses to Boyle, as outlined in my analysis of the discourses surrounding her impairment, attempt to restore equilibrium by imposing stasis on her. The aetiological explanation of her unidentified disability, a biographical confinement to her childhood home and the attempts to contain her in live broadcasts all serve to construct learning disability as resolutely non-dynamic and so restrain its capacity to disturb social equilibrium. Exemplifying Goodley's (2001, p.211) observation that learning disabled people are 'consistently underwritten ... [c]losed in, isolated, and confined, by a "mental impairment" devoid of meaning and history, presocial, inert and physical', this reveals a further dimension to the interplay of stasis and dynamism, as these static aspects of learning disability are as much a consequence of social and discursive practice as individual impairment.

Ultimately, Boyle remains static as the irreconcilability of her social and musical performance means she is suspended between the wholly incompatible spaces of learning disability and superstar. This immobility is one reason that my approach moves away from a Deleuzoguattarian model of becoming, which Hickey-Moody (2009, p.xix) posits as the dynamism of the learning individual seen against a static historical background, to pursue a more dialectical negotiation of stasis and dynamism. David Barnett neatly summarises dialectics as 'a mechanism that accounts for why things change in history and society' (Barnett, 2014) which marks both dialectics and history as fundamentally dynamic, in contrast to Deleuze and Guattari. Where disabled performance unsettles the equilibrium of history, society or

performance itself, its dynamism extends beyond personal notions of becoming.

My readings of learning disabled performance therefore pay careful attention to the dialectics of stasis and dynamism and the different ways in which they play out in the diverse aesthetic practices I examine. In the examples of Kevin Pringle and Heavy Load, the interplay produces a Hegelian synthesis between performer and form, which is not the case with Susan Boyle who becomes arrested by the paradoxical status of being a learning disabled superstar. The dialectical operation here is not Hegelian but Adornian, fostering negative dialectics in which the spectator's encounter with learning disability presents a dimension of the performance object that remains irreconcilable with learning disability or performance as concepts. If this is accidental in the case of Boyle, Back to Back theatre actively pursue negative dialectics, as the negotiations of performance content, themes and material seek out contradictions that cannot be synthesised. In doing so, the company aims to exploit the qualitatively dynamic potential of learning disability to radically alter form. In the next section, I will expand on my use of negative dialectics through a consideration of their work, using Adorno's theory of the priority of the object, a theory observed in all of the publications and developed in my notion of the theatrical object of Mark-playing-Hitler.



## Negative Dialectics and the Priority of the Object

Negative dialectics focuses on the discrepancy between an object and the concept(s) applied to it, which Adorno calls non-identity, as the basis of a dialectical claim that:

objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction ... indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.

(Adorno, 2007, p.5)

The 'objective contradictoriness' (Adorno, 2007, p.151) of Susan Boyle, for example, resides in her superstar status which is inconsistent with the discursive concept of learning disability. My analysis of Simon Laherty in *small metal objects* applies Adorno's further notion of the constellation, in which a multitude of concepts that govern his identity at that moment are invoked so that the audience encounters a material, physical remainder beyond its total understanding of Laherty. The entire constellation of concepts that accrue to Laherty forms a 'sedimented history' which 'is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place' (Adorno, 2007, p.163). In one sense, each of my analyses is founded on negative dialectics insofar as proposing learning disability as dynamic, performative and dialectical contradicts this sedimented history as outlined above.

Objective contradictoriness resonates, once again, with a Deleuzoguattarian notion of becoming through which 'personae themselves become something other than what they are historically, mythologically, or commonly' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p.64). John Grant observes, however, that Deleuze rejects dialectics:

as a philosophy of resentment whose proponents define themselves by way of their opposition to power and the powerful rather than according to joyful activity that is independent of others.

(Grant, 2011, p.13)

Grant adds that Deleuze's argument presumes Hegel as 'the ground zero of dialectics' and proceeds erroneously 'as if a complete demolition of Hegel's dialectics ... amounts to the termination of all dialectical thought' (Grant, 2011, p.14). Far from being wholly incompatible, then, negative dialectics occupies some common ground with Deleuze in rejecting the synthesising tendencies of Hegelian dialectics, and is also open to unconstrained joyful activity as in the enthusiastic response to Susan Boyle.

This enthusiasm may be consistent with the close haptic relationship that Kuppers draws on as joyful activity outside of any governing frameworks of power and dominance. Questions of power are intrinsic to an understanding of learning disability, however, and my dialectical reading offers a critical analysis that opens up the power networks that are awakened and subverted by Boyle's success. Historically, the inquisitions at the Court of Chancery assessed the performance of alleged idiots in order to determine whether they were entitled to exercise aristocratic power, while Locke's reasoning that idiocy is non-human is used strategically to advocate for the liberal self-determination of the rest of humanity. Powerlessness is consequently part of the sedimented history of learning disability and this is often acknowledged through performance. In the *Mind the Gap* chapter, I note the influence of Graeae theatre company which viewed performance as a means of lending power to disabled performers, while Giles Perring's caution about non-disabled agendas in arts-and-disability practice is concerned with the relatively weak power afforded to learning disabled performers.

Garland-Thomson's theory of staring also activates power relations as an exercise in control and definition, as Bree Hadley explains:

Staring happens when bodies or bodily behaviours ... do not accord with what we expect to see. When we stare at the disabled body, we are in fact looking for a way to define, categorize and control it.

(Hadley, 2014, p.59)

In oppressive forms of staring, broadly speaking, the starrer exercises power in determining the meaning of the encounter. In generative staring, by contrast, the staree demonstrates more authority over this definition. This generative model is, I propose, homologous with Adorno's emphasis on the priority of the object, a foundational principle of negative dialectics. According to this principle, dialectics arise through a material encounter with the object which, as Brian O'Connor outlines, 'entails that experience has a nonidentical moment in which the irreducible particularity of the object (and not just our concept of it) is a significant or meaningful element of the experience' (O'Connor, 2005, pp.45-46). The contradiction of the concept therefore originates in the unanticipated particularity of the object itself, and not in the thought process of the observing subject.

While the principle of the priority of the object informs all of my readings of learning disabled performance, perhaps the most illustrative example is the exploration of Mark Deans' ability to perform as Hitler in *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*. In the play's metatheatrical scenes, David and Scott debate this abstractly, based on a shared presumption that Mark is categorically non-identical with Hitler. For David, this performance would be theatrically compelling in its absurdity, while for Scott it would be ethically problematic. Simon, by contrast, approaches this at a concrete rather than conceptual level, inviting Mark to improvise a scene in which Hitler kills a Jewish character. In framing the ensuing performance as a theatrical object, Mark-playing-Hitler, I suggest that its effect, meaning and significance cannot be anticipated conceptually but emerges from encountering it in experience.

The central verb 'playing' points to a theatrical quality that prioritizes the produced object over the producing subject. It also distinguishes it from a

Deleuzoguattarian becoming by marking it as a speculative, propositional and excessive object that is only made present within the liminal space of the theatre. At a fundamental level, the object is theatrically constituted through the actor “playing a role” by lending embodied form, or identity, to an abstract character (Mark-playing-Hitler, Kevin-playing-Lennie) or concept (Susan-Boyle-playing-superstar, Heavy-Load-playing-punk). In Brian Sutton-Smith’s terms, such play involves ‘the act of making what is present absent or what is absent present’ (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p.127). Sutton-Smith also implies that this is not the simple realisation of a pre-existing idea but a continually speculative process, integral to the act of playing, which ‘opens up thought. As it proceeds it constitutes new thought or new combinations of thought’ (Sutton-Smith, cited in Shepherd and Wallis, 2004, p.125). In theatrical performance, the actor’s play becomes propositional as this emergent speculation is offered to the judgement of an audience allowing the performers I discuss opportunities to reconstruct and reimagine themselves as theatrical objects beyond the socially defined parameters of learning disability.

Carlson (2013, p.19) suggests that liminoid spaces engage in ‘introducing or exploring different structures that may develop into real alternatives to the *status quo*.’ The actor’s speculative object has the potential for becoming realised through its recognition by an audience. This is consistent with the priority of the object which presents itself to an observing subject who must play a mediating role as ‘the object is determinative, but its determinations are articulated by the subject’ (O’Connor, 2005, p.73). What is critical for negative dialectics, however, is the non-conceptual excess that belongs to the object itself, and so in the theatrical experience appears beyond the speculative proposition of the actor. The liminoid space is again significant here by being ‘more playful and more open to chance’ (Carlson, 2013, p.19). Chance interrupts the capacity to manage presence and absence, so that while the actor’s speculation establishes a propositional relationship with the audience that is enacted through the object, the object itself exceeds the

actor's intention. It is the presence of this excess that renders the object, and not the actor, determinative.

Accordingly, the object of Mark-playing-Hitler exceeds the abstract speculations of David and Scott, as it is experienced neither as theatrically absurd nor ethically objectionable. Yet it also exceeds the attempt to represent Hitler, as Mark's inescapable presence institutes a dialectical negotiation between himself and the character. As I suggest in the analysis of *Heavy Load*, learning disability is conventionally conceptualised as personally vulnerable or dependent rather than threatening. By performing the murder of Laherty's Jewish character with simple brutality, the representation of focused violence unsettles Down's syndrome as the concept that over-determines Mark. From another angle, the brutal simplicity of the objective action invests Hitler with a learning disabled dimension, diminishing his historical weight, his ideological complexity and his iconographic force. These new combinations of thought played out in the object exceed their respective concepts.

If Mark visibly doubles as Hitler, another doubling operates simultaneously which distinguishes Mark from himself. In naming the object 'Mark-playing-Hitler', Mark is recognised as one element of the object, but significantly this element occupies the *subject* position. As the speculative agent who produces the object, Mark is perceived as both the performer and the performed. The production of this object therefore involves an underlying conceptual excess, since it credits Mark with a performative agency that is non-identical with the sedimented history of learning disability. Furthermore, this idea of excess in itself radically confronts our understanding of learning disabled performers at the level of their social identities.

Goodley and Rapley (2002, p.135) have commented that a non-disabled conceptualisation of learning disability ensures that it is '*framed* in terms of the available object of syndrome' in order to 'not only delimit the totality of experience in a field of knowledge, but also, in defining the permissible mode

of being of objects in that field of knowledge, produce the things that are (to be) “known” (Goodley and Rapley, 2002, p.135; emphasis in original). Learning disability is a totalizing concept that governs *all* aspects of identity, even claiming coherence for the impossible contradiction of Susan Boyle as simultaneously knowable and unpredictable. Learning disability effectively admits no conceptual excess, so any element that appears beyond learning disability in the performance object unsettles it as an authoritative social concept. In this sense, negative dialectics and the priority of the object inextricably entangle the social and theatrical performance of learning disability.

In claiming the irreducibility of art to the social, Matt Hargrave draws on Žižek to propose that the two realms are separated by a parallax gap ‘which cannot be mediated or reconciled through the dialectic’ (Hargrave, 2015, p.80). Perspectives on learning disabled performance, he argues, must choose between competing camps such as ‘quality versus inclusion, social value versus value for money, aesthetic uniformity versus heteronomy’ (Hargrave, 2015, p.80). Hargrave particularly cites responses which consider the aesthetic quality, value or coherence of learning disabled performance to be obscured by the social benefits to the performers themselves. Thus for Hargrave, formulating a poetics of the theatres of learning disability requires a Žižekian parallax shift in perspective from the social to the aesthetic.

The negative dialectics in my analyses of Boyle and Back to Back draw explicitly on both Žižek and Adorno, and it is the appearance of excess which connects Adorno’s priority of the object with the Lacanian Real central to Žižek’s thought since, as Robert Bogdan notes, ‘in both cases there is something *non-mediated* which can manifest only in an oblique manner through the very *failure* of the symbolic or conceptual structure to capture it’ (Bogdan, 2016, p.12; emphases in original).

John Grant (2011, p.8) observes that Žižek rejects negative dialectics, however, and instead ‘demands a move from determinate reflection of the

“materialist dialectic” to the reflective determination of dialectical materialism’. Rather than determination originating with the object, it is the observing subject that generates excess:

[T]he subject’s gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its “blind spot,” that which is “in the object more than the object itself,” the point from which the object itself returns the gaze.

(Žižek, 2009, p.17)

This emphasis on the Lacanian gaze could therefore allow for a learning disabled object constituted through non-disabled subjectivity in an effort to constrain its dynamic threat to the symbolic order. The historical construction of idiocy as singular, non-performative and non-dialectical supports the symbolic order in this way, as does Locke’s positioning of idiots as non-human and the Special Olympics which, as I argue in ‘Actual Idiocy and the Sublime Object of Susan Boyle’, promotes learning disability as a static model of inferiority.

Žižek contends that a parallax shift is:

caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight ... [S]ubject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself.

(Žižek, 2009, p.17)

A parallax shift from the social to the aesthetic in considering learning disabled performance implies these intertwined epistemological and ontological shifts, but it remains unclear how this might be mediated. Bound up with the Lacanian gaze, our perception of excess in the object is enthralled by desire and the necessity of masking the Void at the core of the social order and our own being. My analysis of the symbolic function of

learning disability suggests that it is this very necessity that is threatened by Susan Boyle. It is also at play in the historical constructions of idiocy. Yet the enthusiasm that greets Boyle, while indicative of a new line of sight and an encounter with excess, does not produce an epistemological or ontological shift as Boyle remains liminally suspended between two incompatible identities. Žižek himself cannot attain such an epistemological shift. His formulation of actual idiocy in the analyses of Lars von Trier's *Idioterne* and Patricia Highsmith's *The Button* necessarily maintain the singular, non-dialectical and non-performative concept of learning disability by denying these characters real, symbolic or imaginary dimensions. Given the evident social, philosophical and psychoanalytical grip of this concept, the motivation, as well as the mediation, needed for a parallax shift remains elusive.

My analysis of the 'freak porn moment' in *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* addresses this difficulty through a reading of the audience response as documented in existing critical analyses of the production (Grehan 2013; Prior 2013; Scheer 2013). David's accusation that the anticipated spectators are fetishizing learning disability provokes guilt and an attendant desire to be released from this charge. Yet like Boyle, they become suspended between these two states as there is no guilt-free viewing point to move to: no parallax shift appears available. In the performance itself Simon Laherty contradicts David's conceptualisation of the 'imaginary audience', insisting on a reality beyond the determinative accusation of voyeurism. Simon here maintains the priority of the object, as he does in the improvisation with Mark-playing-Hitler. The audience is invited to attend to the complexity of its own material presence as a means of exceeding, rather than identifying with, the framing concept of voyeur. Simon's contribution remains overlooked however, as none of the critical readings of this moment pay attention to this dialectical intervention. The gaze appears to hold them in thrall and again denies the parallax shift that Hargrave advocates.



Here, as in the analysis of Susan Boyle, I maintain an Adornian approach that allows for dialectical progress beyond the arrested spectator or performer. The priority of the object, and its resonance with the stare rather than the gaze, allows for the encounter with the learning disabled performer to be generative rather than oppressive. The critical reading itself provides a necessary supplement, utilising a distance that may be unavailable to the enthralled spectator in order to draw out the excess in the object. Adorno observes that:

The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object.

(Adorno, 2007, p.163)

It is only dialectical readings of this kind that facilitate a parallax shift and allow the learning disabled person to be perceived as performative, exceeding the constraints of the symbolic order, which Adorno calls the social totality. This shift, I argue, is dependent on the priority of the object, and also acknowledges the subjectivity of the performer which is playfully imbricated in the theatrical object.

In recognising the agency involved in producing the theatrical object, the critical readings offered below perceive the performance object as both social and theatrical. At the same time, the liminality of the aesthetic space exposes the theatrical object to chance such that these analyses must be alert to, and articulate, the object's material excess, as experienced in the encounter. It is in this way that the publications seek to draw out radical insights into learning disability from the performance encounter along with an appreciation of what the performer offers aesthetically in excess of disability.

## Conclusion

The publications which follow this contextualisation form a substantial contribution to research in the field of learning disabled performance. While major theatre companies in this field such as Mind the Gap and Back to Back have been established for decades, their productions have received little critical attention compared to non-disabled companies of a similar longevity and status. The studies that do exist tend to prioritise either the social benefits of performance for people with learning disabilities, or the aesthetic value of the work *irrespective* of learning disability.

My work engages with the social and aesthetic dimensions of learning disability as experienced and constructed through performance. The individual publications open up the political and historical frameworks that over-determine learning disability in both the social and aesthetic realms. As such, they explore new ways of thinking about learning disability and performance and so have significance for both performance studies and disability studies.

By taking the performativity of learning disabled artists as a starting-point, my research inherently breaks with the socio-historical assessment of cognitive impairment as essentially non-performative. Similarly, my dialectical readings of such performance contradict the historical framing of people with learning disabilities as non-dialectical, and reflect the dialectical engagements that are active in, or emergent from, the performers' own creative work: that is, the dialectical effects of the performance object. This restores a theatrically potent sense of doubleness to the learning disabled performer, a quality that was historically appropriated by non-disabled performers.

The publications note audience difficulties in reading learning disabled performance and the critical readings I offer seek to address and, where necessary, offer a means of advancing beyond the perceived impasses that such difficulties have caused. In order to achieve this, three vital elements

run consistently through my publications. First, I propose, and pursue, a dialectic of stasis and dynamism which reveals multiple ways in which learning disability and performance are complicated by the performance event and its surrounding discourses. Second, a turn to negative dialectics resists the over-determining concept of learning disability by promoting a critical recognition of its excess, rather than its appearance, in the encounter with the performance object. Third, each of the studies explores how the performances move beyond the sedimented history of learning disability, opening up new understandings of disability and performance that emerge from the experience of the event.

These critical reading principles underpin the originality of my contribution to the field and yield new insights into the relationship between learning disability and performance, recognising and respecting the generative qualities of this work. The publications below focus on a diverse range of aesthetic practices and forms, and the various dialectical readings draw from the work itself to establish new, detailed and rigorous analyses of learning disabled performance.

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