

111. UNIVERSAL THEATRE MACHINE (FOR LEIBNIZ, TURING, BRECHT, AND BOAL)—ANNIE DORSEN

This performance will end war, religious conflict, economic injustice, and metaphysical confusion.

Making literal the notion of theatre as a space for rehearsing the world, the Universal Theatre Machine is a universal problem-solver. It is a performance for 7 billion (and counting). It actualizes Gottfried Leibniz's imagined *calculus ratiocinator* (*rational calculus*), a machine for settling disputes of all kinds: philosophical, ethical, geopolitical, social.

If we had it, we should be able to reason in metaphysics and morals in much the same way as in geometry and analysis (G. VII. 21). If controversies were to arise, there would be no more need of disputation between two philosophers than between two accountants. For it would suffice to take their pencils in their hands, to sit down to their slates, and to say to each other (with a friend as witness, if they liked): Let us calculate (G. VII. 200).

(Gottfried Leibniz, translated by Bertrand Russell)

The machine is both mechanism and means. It uses as data the whole history of the world—all human knowledge and experience—and converts it into manipulable symbols, available for calculation.

Each performance of the piece ends when, inevitably, it all goes horribly wrong. When the irrationality that hides in the center of the rational re-asserts itself, when the machine fails to find a solution for fear.

This performance is offered every day.

Back in 1991, Brenda Laurel published a book called *Computers as Theatre*, in which she applied theatre theory (especially Aristotle's *Poetics*) to the art of interface design. No one has yet written its counterpart, *The Theatre as Computer*, but this playlet might serve as the lead epigraph for such a book. The theatre, after all, is a place of simulation, so what's stopping us from using it to run simulations—say, a million or two per second? Well, obvious answers aside ...

And Dorsen doesn't settle for obvious answers. She doesn't protest that the theatre is only concerned with the singular—present bodies, palpable sensations, instant emotions. She doesn't dwell on the small bounds of theatre, nor does she gape at the scope of the dataset. Instead, she thinks to herself, *A stage is quite big enough, thank you very much, for Big Data*. In fact, porous to the world, already obsessed with “manipulable symbols,” and compelled always to repetition and permutation, the theatre is practically the perfect place for a calculation: “great reckonings in little rooms,” indeed!

What Dorsen objects to is only the mood we insist on attaching to our candidates for Universal Machine. The cheerful actuarial science of Leibniz, the gee-whiz promises of the TED Talk, the endless sunshine of Silicon Valley—none of these makes room for pain, doubt, and fear. So what in the world do they have to do with the theatre? (And what in the world do they have to do with the world?)

The *Tractatus Coislinianus*, thought to summarize a lost sequel to Aristotle's *Poetics*, would, I think, please Dorsen very much. It gives fear pride of place: “Tragedy ... wishes to have a due proportion of terror. It has pain as its mother.” Dorsen offers us precisely this: no, not just terror and pain, but due proportion. For once, a tragic computer.