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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

Theater of the Oppressed and Social Media-Induced Learned Helplessness

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THEATER ARTS

by

Stephanie Kemple

June 2026

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	V
Acknowledgements.....	VI
Introduction.....	1-3
Historical Context.....	4-11
Methodology.....;	12-21
Procedure	22-31
Evaluation.....	32-40
Conclusion.....	41-42
Appendix.....	43-58
Appendix: TO Workshop Flyer.....	43
Appendix: Post Workshop Feedback Form.....	44-46
Appendix: Workshop 1 Digital Itinerary.....	47-50
Appendix: Workshop 2 Digital Itinerary.....	51-52
Appendix: Post Workshop 1 Digital Journaling.....	53-55
Appendix: Excerpt of Participant Voice Recording.....	56-58
Bibliography.....	59-61

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Aristotelian Story Structure.....	9
Figure 2: D's image of social media.....	25
Figure 3: B's image of "losing one's soul.....	25
Figure 4: L's image of social media.....	26
Figure 5: Workshop 2's unified image.....	28
Figure 6: Workshop 2's second unified image.....	29
Figure 7: Participant I's image.....	30
Figure 8: Participant I's ideal image.....	30
Figure 9: Participants carrying off.....	31

ABSTRACT:

Theater of the Oppressed and Social Media-Induced Learned Helplessness

By

Stephanie Kemple

Feelings of overwhelm and despair are common products of frequent social media use and are directly linked to the onset and amplification of learned helplessness (LH). In this thesis, it is hypothesized that Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (TO), a theatrical technique designed to empower participants to manage difficult situations, could help combat feelings of learned helplessness. Through a practice-as-research methodology, this essay focuses on 2 workshops that utilized TO Image theater to first communicate and analyze participants' relationship to social media, and second to create images of upheaval and/or revolution against posts that triggered helpless feelings. The workshops were highly successful when Image Theater techniques were used to analyze participants' internal frustrations with social media, as they allowed the exploration of subconscious thoughts and feelings that had previously remained hidden. However, there was a point of contention when it came to imagining ways of revolution and/or upheaval because of the discrepancy in the distance of oppressing forces between the Theater of the Oppressed methodology and social media. TO is a technique that centers oppressors as individual people who impact their participants in real time, while social media affects users through distant or indirect systems of oppression. This point of contention, however, rather than a marker of failure, signals the complex systems at play in today's technologically advancing world and reminds us of the invisible modes of stress that have become part of our everyday lives.

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INTRODUCTION

I have been addicted to the internet and social media since my childhood. Ever since I was given a mini iPad at 12 years old, I have spent an average of seven hours on YouTube every day. In high school, my understanding of systemic injustice and corruption deepened, and my social media started reflecting my newfound interest in political justice. I started following political and human rights accounts, and my exposure to news about social injustice increased. I became a prime target for social media-induced anxiety and despair.

I can remember the way my heart raced seeing a short clip of U.S. police brutality for the first time. My adrenaline shot up at the shocking display of violence, and I had a sudden fight or flight reflex. I couldn't sit still and felt like I needed to do something. But what could I do? I was living in Macedonia at the time, 5,000 miles away. I reposted, commented, liked, disliked, engaged with some accounts, argued with other accounts; anything but tangible resistance to the real problem. Finally, I scrolled, hoping to distract myself from what I just saw, as the small pit in my stomach deepened. This was the first of many instances like this, where the bad news of the world started to overwhelm my nervous system. Now, with our current administration stripping away human rights one day at a time, a disturbing headline on the news seems ordinary. Social media, designed for limitless scrolling and addiction, emphasizes this effect. In today's modern world, a short video can be watched by millions across the globe like a movie. This is important because when our mind engages in a film, it follows the emotional journey of the characters on the screen, and the subcortical sector of our brains, the more primal, subconscious

sector, the limbic system, is triggered. As a result, our nervous systems become agitated by the images on the screen (Sandlin, 78-79).

It is no wonder, then, that the large amount of short-form content one consumes daily, each created to be the most eye-catching, attention-grabbing version of itself, affects the mental health of social media users. It is hard not to feel trapped when bombarded with a myriad of information, some of which seems so far out of one's control. I have definitely felt my fair share of those feelings, so I found myself channeling them into something productive. Around this time, I was introduced to Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed. Theater of the Oppressed (TO) is an interactive, community-based theater form developed in the 1960s aimed at transforming passive audience members or spectators into "spect-actors"—people who become actors on the stage themselves. This philosophical transformation of passivity to social change seemed like the antithesis of learned helplessness. So I asked myself, "Can using Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed techniques help battle feelings of learned helplessness?" My thesis project set out to explore this question through a practice-as-research methodology, centering two workshops that used TO Image Theater techniques to analyze participants' relationship to social media and to rehearse revolution against posts that triggered feelings of helplessness.

In the Historical Context, I trace Boal's two largest influences; Fiere and Brecht, to the TO methodology and identify ways he incorporated and evolved their ideas. In Methodology, I explain the research on social media, LH, locus of control, and self-esteem, and argue that TO is a possible solution. In my Procedure, I explain what I did in each workshop, and in my Evaluation, I assess the results and

implications of the workshops. Finally, I summarize and draw conclusions on the workshops' successes in my Conclusion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (TO) is a form of applied theater, a term used to describe educational and community-based theater that strives to improve individuals' lives and create better societies. Applied theater encompasses a diverse range of drama, from verbatim plays to devised works, each with specialized practices that set them apart (Nicholson 4). Theater of the Oppressed's specific practices are greatly influenced by 2 sources: philosopher Paul Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and theater practitioner Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater movement. Both Freire and Brecht centered their work on upending existing hierarchies; for Freire, it was in the education system, while for Brecht it was in the writing and performance of theater. Drawing on the principles of equality present in Freire's pedagogical strategies, which emphasized an equal, reciprocal relationship between student and teacher, and in Brecht's plays, which portrayed systemic injustices to spark outrage, Boal creates a new technique that applies these principles and pushes their boundaries. It is important to unpack these two foundational influences on Boal's methodology because they provide a better understanding of the Theater of the Oppressed's values and goals, which informed the creation and leadership of the two workshops.

Augusto Pinto Boal was a Brazilian theater director, playwright, and essayist, and considered one of the greatest figures of contemporary international theater. He received more than 30 awards and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2008 for his work with TO (Jose dos Santos 3). His work was largely influenced by other contemporary theater practitioners, as a professor from a class of mine had once said, "Augusto Boal is if Paul Freire and Brecht had a baby" (Chemers). *Theater of*

the Oppressed is a book inspired by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paul Reglus Neves Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was a successful Brazilian educator and philosopher who received many awards for his views on restructuring modern education and was named Patron of Education by Brazil in 2012 (“Collection Educator Paulo”). In an interview with *Revisita Fórum (Forum Magazine)*, Boal revealed that Freire’s book inspired his title, stating he was choosing between *Poetics of the Oppressed* or *Theater of the Oppressed*, and decided the latter (Santos 6).

Their connection goes deeper than a simple book title, however, as both Boal and Freire published their respective works after their exile from Brazil under its then-military dictatorship. Boal once said in an interview that he admired Freire’s work because of its’ inclusion of the oppressed and the oppressor dynamic (5). Given this shared historical context, it is no surprise that their works build on one another. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paul Freire introduced the concept of the “banking system of education”. A type of system where the teacher acts as the depositor, and the student as the receptacle; a passive receiving object: “Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking’ concept of education...” (Freire 7). Paul Freire rejected this accepted hierarchy of the classroom, and posited that, “The teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students’ thinking,” claiming that both student and teacher existed in the same community, and were thus reliant on the other to maintain their functioning (7). It is through this idea that Freire leveled the status of the student and teacher in the classroom. This anti-hierarchical attitude is the same one Augusto

Boal brings to theater, rejecting the line of separation between actor and audience member and believing that elites created it to establish hierarchies within the theatrical space. This quote below summarizes that belief:

In the beginning, the theater was the dithyrambic song: free people singing in the open air. The carnival. The feast. Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators... ("Theater of the Oppressed" 119)

Freire posits that students are dehumanized in the "banking system" of education, "The banking approach masks the effort to turn women and men into automatons—the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human," (Freire 74). This dehumanization is an important step in maintaining the status quo of the oppressors in modern society:

The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed (73).

In short, it is in the best interests of the oppressors to maintain the "banking system" of regurgitation, to assimilate the student into current society, and prevent their creativity from imagining revolution or upheaval.

According to Boal, the feeling of catharsis—which he defines as the purging of unlawful behavior—serves a similar function to society in Aristotelian philosophy. Boal states that the Aristotelian structure is a machine of intimidation, "...working to carry out its' basic task: the purgation of all antisocial elements'" ("Theater of the Oppressed" 40). In this case, anti-social elements are those that threaten the laws and norms of Greek society. But in Aristotle's time, where slavery was considered lawful, "...we come to the conclusion that justice is not equality: justice is

proportionality. And the criteria of proportionality are given by the political system actually in force in a particular city,” which in this case was dictated by free, wealthy men of the same race (20). Thus, “lawful” behavior, according to Aristotle, is really just behavior that doesn’t threaten the status quo of the oppressors. Through this logic, traditional Aristotelian theater keeps the oppressed at bay in the same way that Freire’s “banking system” of education dehumanizes the students. Thus, both Freire and Boal build their methodology against implicit systems they identify as supporting oppression.

The two share the idea of the spectator as passive and disconnected from one’s true desires. Freire wrote, “Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator” (75). Here, Freire clearly demarcates the difference between spectator and re-creator. To be a spectator is to be separated from the happenings of the rest of the world, in the same way the fourth wall of a play separates an audience member. To be a re-creator is to engage with the world around you, to think critically about the existing systems, and imagine ways things could be different, in the same way a spect-actor intervenes in the action of a play. These two definitions align with Augusto Boal’s spectator-versus-spect-actor distinction.

Freire’s alternative to the “banking system” mirrors Augusto Boal’s alternative to Aristotelian theater. Freire proposes a “problem posing” mode of education that values communication between student and teacher as opposed to a one-way transference of knowledge; “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being

taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (80). This two-way communication is a driving principle of TO, where Boal emphasized dialogue between actors and audience members, through the use of spect-actors. In his view, in a traditional theater, the spectator is treated as an object, and to shed that identity, the spectator must learn to express themselves in the theater, which will liberate them to do as they please. Below, Boal explains this more deeply:

Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive. Then he will be able to practice theatrical forms in which by stages he frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, [and] is changed from witness into protagonist (“Theater of the Oppressed” 102).

As spect-actors, one can step into the action and change the course of the story, inviting a different ending or perspective into the “conversation”. In this way, both Boal and Freire emphasized two-way communication between equal partners in their respective practices.

Boal had other influences aside from Freire, of course. Brecht also influenced Augusto Boal’s work. In preparation for my thesis, I spoke with PPD lecturer Robert Gordon, who teaches a TO course and who drew the figure on the next page for me to illustrate Brecht’s plays in comparison to Aristotle’s.

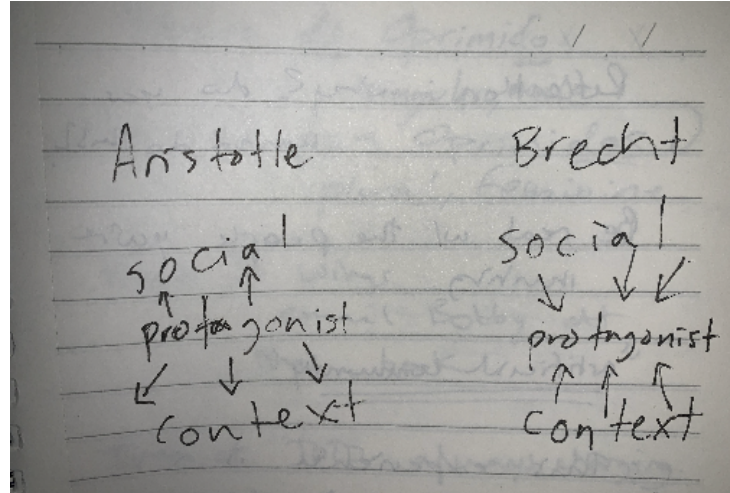


Fig. 1 Aristotelian story structure vs. Brechtian story structure

Figure 1 serves as a segue to Brecht's main principles and outlines the differences in story structure between Aristotelian and Brechtian stories. In Aristotle's plays, the protagonist is given complete freedom to choose his own destiny, and the obstacles he faces are a direct result of his own mistakes. To put it simply, Aristotelian story structure is based on the "you get what's coming to you" principle. These are the most common types of stories we see in movies and TV shows, where the protagonist shapes the environment around them through acts of bravery or cruelty. Brecht's plays, however, are inverted, with the social context imposing itself on the protagonist, highlighting how an unequal society shapes individual lives. Brecht's protagonists were often stuck between hard decisions, each involving sacrifice, and no easy answers. This complete reversal between protagonist and social context is purposeful. Brecht critiqued Aristotelian aesthetics of drama, calling it an "opium of the masses" (Curran 173). By placing the story's consequences entirely on the protagonist's shoulders, it ignores the role that existing societal

structures play in creating the challenges these protagonists may face in the first place. Augusto Boal notes this element within Brecht's stories as well, when he describes his plays, "The main clause is always an interrelation of economic forces. The character is not free at all. He is a subject-object" ("Theater of the Oppressed" 92).

A well-known example from Brecht's work that illustrates this principle comes from a scene in *Mother Courage and Her Children*. In this famous anti-war play, Mother Courage attempts to profit from the Thirty Years' War by selling bread to support her family, while also trying to protect her children from being enlisted in the war. There is a scene in which, while selling bread, her children are being enlisted right before her eyes. Either choice she makes has a sacrificial consequence: if she stops selling bread to keep her children safe, she loses profit, which the family depends on; if she keeps selling bread, she may very well lose her children to the war. "Through this focus on Mother Courage's social role and the kinds of relations with family and others this occupation entails," the theorist Angela Curran from the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, writes, "the story prompts reflection on what social relations must be like, during war and peacetime, in a society structured around a system of private profit and individual gain" (173). In this way, Brecht highlights the social inequalities and everyday oppressions that working-class people faced from existing structures. In summary, Brecht worked against Aristotelian structures in the same way that Augusto Boal did.

Though Brechtian thought can be traced in Boal's methodology, Boal takes it a step further. Despite Brecht's disruption of traditional theatrical structures, the spectators remain seated and do not influence the predetermined story. Boal evolves

Brecht's emphasis on instilling in the audience the need to think critically by giving the spectator the power to join the story themselves. For Boal, it was important for the spectator to become the protagonist of their own story, both literally and figuratively. The priorities of these two practitioners thus diverge here, highlighting the potential empowerment that TO wishes to imbue in its participants.

In conclusion, drawing on Freire's principles of equality, Boal turned theater into a place of dialogue rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge. This highlights the importance of participant autonomy during TO sessions and rejects the assumed facilitator hierarchy, which informed how I led my workshops. While Boal rejected the Aristotelian catharsis effect and, like Brecht, sought to instill in his participants an urge to act, he evolved this principle by literally placing them in positions of power that have tangible effects on the story onstage. While for Brecht, critical reasoning and recognition were the end goal, for Boal, this approach wasn't enough. This contrast highlights the importance of the participant's physical activation in the TO technique, which influenced the types of warm-ups and exercises I included in my workshop. By tracing how influences from Freire and Brecht were adopted or adapted by Boal, TO's central values emerged for me as a primary inspiration.

METHODOLOGY

Theater of the Oppressed's (TO's) two fundamental principles rest on, "Help[ing] [the] spect-actor transform himself into a protagonist of the dramatic action and rehearse alternatives for his situation," and "extrapolate into his real life the actions he has rehearsed in the practice of theater" ("The Rainbow of Desire" 40). These principles summarize the ultimate goal that TO wishes to instill in its participants: a sense of control in difficult situations. In this chapter, I will first analyze the foundational series of experiments that coined the term Learned Helplessness (LH) and discovered that locus of control and self-esteem can reduce the level to which it is felt. Secondly, I will unpack multiple studies that correlate the use of social media with the increase of LH feelings, passive spectatorship, and conformity. Thirdly, I will argue that TO's fundamental principles prime it to increase the participant's internal locus of control through risk-taking and the encouragement of creative self-expression, which has the potential to boost long-term self-esteem as well, thereby lessening LH feelings. I use the practice-as-research methodology to explore my thesis question through 2 workshops I lead that use Boal's spectator-to-spect-actor system exercises, with data collection methods including photography, journaling, post-workshop surveys, and voice recordings (see Procedure and Appendix).

The term Learned Helplessness was first coined by psychologists Steven F. Maier and Martin E. Seligman through a foundational—and unfortunate—series of experiments on dogs, other animals, and humans. Learned helplessness (LH) is a symptom of an uncontrollable adverse event where one believes their actions have no effect on the environment around them (3). The first experiment was conducted

on three groups of dogs. All the dogs were placed in a box that induced shocks, while one group of dogs had a lever they could push on to end the shocks; group number three experienced the shocks no matter what they did. When the dogs were given the shocks again, this time in a different apparatus with an easy escape opportunity, the three dogs in group three simply lay down and whined. In comparison, the control group and the two dogs in group two quickly learned to escape (6). In a different series of experiments, college students were given 25 anagrams to solve, each with the same pattern. The students who were exposed to a series of inescapable sounds before this task struggled far more: they failed to solve 10 of the 25 anagrams within the allotted 60 seconds. In contrast, the other group, which wasn't exposed, solved all 25. Through these experiments and many others, the researchers concluded that these deficits in behavioral coping and associative learning were due to Learned Helplessness (38).

The researchers also found that uncontrollable aversive events create "greater emotional disruption" than controllable ones. The "uncontrollable event," as they defined it, is when a response (the event/stimuli) exists independent of the reinforcer's (the participant's) actions, whether it's refraining from doing anything or trying to do something to change the outcome, the response does not change (6).

Even more interesting, the study involving students added an additional variable into the experiment: perceived locus of control. Locus of control, as they defined it, is how much one believes one's actions have an effect on the reinforcement of certain outcomes in one's life. Those who were labeled "internals" had a high locus of control, meaning they believed their own actions directly impacted reinforcement, while "externals" often attributed reinforcement of outcomes

as a result of luck or an external force separate from them. These labels were created based on a personality inventory taken by each of the students. Those labeled “externals” were found to adopt LH feelings faster than “internals”. Meaning the control one perceives to have over one’s life impacts the degree to which LH is felt (10).

This conclusion is taken a step further by a study conducted in 1982, which assessed the elimination of LH effects as a result of induced positive self-esteem. Self-esteem can be defined as the level of confidence one has in one’s own worth and abilities. In the study, participants were given a task to complete: calm down a confederate by talking to him (a confederate in this instance is a participant who is secretly working with the researchers). They could not see him, but they saw his anxiety graphics on an oscilloscope. One group was given an oscilloscope that was pre-programmed to show high anxiety waves despite the action of the participants; an uncontrollable treatment, while the other groups were led to believe their talking was successful. After the study, it was discovered that when participants received positive feedback on their personalities, such as compliments or encouragement, even those who were given the uncontrollable oscilloscope showed more correct answers and faster response times on later word recognition tests (Orbach et al. 511). This study suggests that perceived self-esteem could have a significant impact on reducing or reversing feelings of LH. Thus, locus of control and self-esteem can both play a part in a person succumbing to feelings of LH, which are important variables to consider in the effectiveness of my workshops.

Social media has become an important trigger for LH feelings. According to Rahime Eymen Bakir and Muhammet Enes Vural, researchers who conducted a

2015 survey on LH's connections to social media, "Social media use has a high potential risk for secondary traumatic stress because the news is timeless, unfiltered, and supported by effective images and videos" (240). They defined secondary traumatic stress as "natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other, the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (248). In this cross-sectional study of 397 surveyed adults, aged between 18 and 50, secondary traumatic stress has been found strongly linked to LH (248). Participants responded to 17 items relating to secondary traumatic stress symptoms, and rated them on a five-point Likert scale, for example, "Things that remind me of what I see on social media make me sad"; 1=never, 5=very often." The same Likert ranking system was used to collect responses to 15 items relating to LH, for ex. "I have difficulty finding solutions to difficult problems"; 1=never, 5=very often" (244). The higher the score on each of these surveys, the stronger the degree of each of these conditions. Those who responded with symptoms associated with secondary-traumatic stress were much more likely to respond to having symptoms associated with LH as well. This indicates that watching bad news on social media, and wanting to help when not being able to directly intervene, increases stress for the individual and their likelihood of developing the condition of LH, similar to what I often experienced in high school.

An important variable in this study is the subjects' perceived quality of life. Participants were asked to self-report their quality of life (social and economic standing) from a scale of 1-5 (1=very bad, 5=very good) in the survey. The higher they ranked their quality of life in the surveys, the less likely they were to be affected

by LH from social media. The researchers concluded this may be because “individuals who evaluate their lives positively and find themselves more advantaged economically or socially may find that they are less likely to experience these hardships” (251). Thus, perceived quality of life also plays a role in feelings of LH, another important variable to consider for the effectiveness of my workshop.

The American Psychological Association has also found links between LH and “media saturation overload,” the act of consuming too much bad news on any platform (Huff). The COVID-19 pandemic was an important era for researchers studying the effects of social media on mental health. Before the pandemic and its subsequent shutdown, research on connections between the news and traumatic stress response focused on “acute time-limited” specific events such as the 9/11 attacks or the Boston Marathon shootings. However, the emergence of the pandemic and lockdown expanded the possibility for the examination of social media’s connections to trauma and stress profoundly. One of the studies mentioned in this article was the difference in depression and PTSD symptoms from watching the news on social media, versus traditional sources such as the newspaper or television. Higher reports of depression and PTSD symptoms were linked to social media consumption (Joanne et al. 88-93). Researchers attributed this to the way social media is designed to keep our attention. Doctor Matthew Price of the University of Vermont commented on this feature, “They’re designed to be limitless scrolling,” he said. “When there’s a big [news-related] topic of conversation that’s negative, it can dominate what you’re seeing. It can give the impression that this is the only thing that’s happening.” Another way to identify this is with the term “doom scrolling,” coined during the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to describe the “transient

state” one reaches by constantly watching the news related to the pandemic (Huff). Another survey administered during the pandemic identified around 30 percent of adults experiencing stress while making basic decisions, such as what to wear or what to eat—symptoms of LH (“Stress and Decision Making”).

Another subliminal threat that sociologists are noticing in the long-lasting effects of social media is the passivity it induces in users. In an interview with The New York Times, Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the N.Y.U. Stern School of Business said, “Years of consuming short videos during childhood and puberty seem to disrupt the development of executive function, which refers to the cognitive processes that support goal-directed behavior” (B. Edsall). Our attention spans, Haidt argues, decrease through the overconsumption of short-form content on social media to the point that we become passive and cannot handle “anything hard” or that needs persistent effort. These characteristics also seem akin to that of the passive spectator that both Brecht and Boal fight against.

Another trait akin to that of the passive spectator comes from a study conducted by the Becker Friedman Institute for Economics on college students' social media use. They administered an online survey to approximately 1,000 college students, asking about the value of social media in their lives. The results indicated that students care less about social media for themselves than for others. In one response, they said it would cost around 40 to 50 dollars for them to stop using social media for four weeks while their peers continued to use it. However, in response to another question, they stated that they would be willing to pay between 10 and 28 dollars for both themselves and their peers to stop using social media. This shows that the perceived value of social media is tied more to the fear of

missing out (FOMO) than to its actual value to the individual. “Taken together, these results imply the existence of a “social media trap” for a large share of consumers, whose utility from the platforms is negative but would have been even more negative if they didn’t use social media” (“When Product Markets Become”). The pressure social media users feel to conform to the status quo is exactly the mentality Boal hopes to discredit through TO. This finding is also reflected in one of the exercises that was created during the second workshop, which I will address in my Evaluation.

Psychologist Charlotte Huff from the American Psychological Association writes that children are more vulnerable to LH as they are still developing their sense of place in the world. As a coping mechanism, Huff suggests creating problem-solving solutions to some “what-if” scenarios that children might be scared of. Although crafted in different circumstances, this solution sounds eerily similar to Forum Theater, a branch of TO in which a problem is presented, and spectators are asked to intervene and experiment with different solutions. The similarities between a psychologist’s solution and the strategies of TO support the hypothesis that these techniques can help reduce social media-induced LH.

To summarize, LH can be enacted through the consumption of social media via the secondary traumatic stress effect. Social media has been found to worsen this condition compared with news or TV because of its attention-grabbing features, which can render users passive and overwhelmed. A high locus of control and self-esteem can reduce the extent to which LH can be felt. This positions Boal’s theatrical form as a potential strategy to battle feelings of LH, because it provides an environment that is designed to induce the participant to have control over a difficult situation. Next in this chapter, I will argue that TO can increase the participant’s

internal locus of control through controlled risk-taking and creative self-expression, which can also boost the participant's long-term self-esteem, lessening the degree to which LH feelings are experienced.

TO purposefully targets problems that do not have an easy solution because it encourages a variety of problem-solving approaches. Through exercises and workshops, this methodology encourages participants to confront difficult problems, which can lead to a greater sense of self-worth. According to Doctor Jessica Koehler, a school psychologist at the University of Maryland, our brains translate the world around us based on past experiences, biases, and context, so “when we avoid uncertainty, we reinforce the idea that the unknown is dangerous.” Thus, taking small risks can be beneficial because they reinforce our brain’s neural pathways, expanding our ability to adapt and eventually succeed. Growing new neural pathways, adaptability, and chance of success can be linked to higher locus of control ratings because one becomes more adaptable to stressful situations:

When individuals regularly engage with new experiences, their brains become better at handling the unknown. This explains why those who have taken risks in the past—whether in career, travel, or personal pursuits—often become more comfortable with uncertainty over time (Koehler).

Meaning that controlled risk-taking can prepare one to navigate uncontrollable adverse events by increasing locus of control and preventing the formation of LH. She goes on to say that:

...play isn’t just for children—it’s a powerful tool for thinking more flexibly. Engaging in creative, low-stakes experimentation, whether through improvisation, brainstorming, or artistic expression, can make adapting to uncertainty feel more intuitive.

This quote highlights the importance of artistic expression in strengthening neural pathways that help one adapt to uncertain or uncontrollable outcomes, suggesting that creative expression can help resist LH. This is significant because TO also encourages play. Boal believed play led to better self-expression, as illustrated in his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, which contains hundreds of exercises that serve as warm-ups for his workshops. The warm-ups include games like “the one-legged race” and “musical chairs,” meant to activate different muscle groups of the participants, who may be used to repetitive, monotonous movements at their jobs (8).

Boal also placed importance on the use of aesthetic space in the participant’s creative self-expression. The aesthetic space is the accepted separation between the actor and the spectator, the imaginary environment of the performance, within the existing, real environment (“Rainbow of Desire” 18). It is an important step in the transformation of the spectator into a spect-actor, because the aesthetic space is the manifestation of the participant’s experiences. Boal writes: “...theater does not exist in the objectivity of bricks and mortar, sets and costumes, but in the subjectivity of those who practice it, at the moment when they practice it.” Here, the term “subjectivity” refers to the aesthetic space (19). The aesthetic space has three fundamental qualities: plasticity, it can be anything at any point, dichotomy, it occupies two spaces, the concrete and the imaginary, and finally, telemicroscopy, it brings an event closer through performance (20-27). The plasticity allows the participant to present any dilemma, the telemicroscopic element allows for deeper analysis, and the dichotomy of the space splits the participant’s actions into two: “desiring” and “showing the desire through acting” (21). This dichotomy provides

opportunities to change the way that participants' desires are presented/acted upon, creating alternatives to their experience; "a process is therapeutic when it allows – and encourages – the patient to choose from several alternatives to the situation in which he finds himself, the situation which causes him unwanted suffering or unhappiness" (25). The aesthetic space is utilized by different forms of TO, such as Image theater. Image theater involves creating static images using other participants and objects in the space. The creation of images allows for a more universal communication that transcends words, which is important when words can hold different implications for people ("Theater of the Oppressed" 115). Another way Boal stresses clear communication in TO is by differentiating between objective and subjective commentary. Objective commentary is commentary based on fact, based on the indisputable observations of one's eyes, while subjective commentary is feelings or thoughts that are triggered within the individual ("Rainbow of Desire" 70). With this distinction, and an emphasis on visual communication, confusion within the workshop is minimized, creating a structured and encouraging space for creative self-expression. Thus, because TO challenges its participants to take controlled risks, which helps them become accustomed to uncertainty, and because it fosters play and creative self-expression, it exhibits great potential for locus of control growth and, as a result, a decrease in social media-induced LH.

PROCEDURE

This chapter presents my approach to creating a workshop and gathering evidence to support my thesis. I will review the processes for recruiting participants, creating and leading the workshops, and gathering post-workshop information. To ensure participation in both workshops, I relied on email notifications, sign-up forms, flyers, and classroom presentations to maximize awareness of the workshops.

To confirm space for the workshops, I reserved the C100 space for the Saturdays of the 14th and 21st of February. After consulting with my MA cohort, I created a flyer to clearly communicate the workshop's message and distributed it around campus; a sample is included in the appendix of this thesis. Initially, I debated making this a workshop Barnstorm students could receive credit for because I wanted to encourage “non-actor” participation.¹ Augusto Boal opposed the separation of actor and non-actor, believing that everyone was an actor at their core. However, this workshop already amplified the elitist aesthetic Boal opposed by taking place in the theater department of a relatively expensive institution. Additionally, a majority of my connections were in the theater department; therefore, to encourage more participation, the workshop was allowed to count toward Barnstorm credit. The workshop information was sent out to the general PPD department and the Barnstorm email chains.

To gauge the topics that participants of my workshop would be interested in discussing, I created a survey and linked the QR code to it on the poster. This survey consisted of questions involving how they learned about the workshop and their background information: what made them join this workshop, their date availability

¹ “Barnstorm” is a class students can take for credit when participating in a Barnstorm theater company show.

for both workshop 1 and 2, (because initially the workshops were meant to build on each other), background information such as their focus at UCSC, their year of study, their age, where they grew up, what ethnicity/racial group they identified with, and whether they have a social justice topic they are passionate about. I hoped this information would prepare me to tailor the topics we chose to discuss in the workshop. I reminded the participants that this was a thesis project and thus documentation would be a part of the process. I visited six classrooms, encouraging students to sign up. This method proved more effective for the second workshop, with a total of six people joining, compared to the three who joined the first workshop.

During my workshops, my data collection methods included journaling, voice recordings, photography, and post-workshop surveys. Photos of the different participants can be seen on the next pages, with their faces blurred to preserve anonymity. Some post-workshop survey responses will be shared in the Evaluation, with the full form and responses available in the Appendix chapter. The workshop itinerary notes, journaling, and an excerpt of the voice recording are included within the Appendix as well.

My first workshop was organized into three sections: the warm-up, the First Main Exercise, and the Second Main Exercise. The first workshop included three participants, whom I will refer to as L, D, and B. Despite the small group size, my itinerary was carried out in full. The warm-up introduction included a memory game that prompted participants to recall how their morning began that day and to engage their muscle groups with each activity, all while sitting on a chair. I then presented a five-minute slideshow about TO, introduced Boal, defined Image theater, and outlined the differences between objective and subjective commentary. I introduced

my main thesis research question: “How can Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed battle feelings of learned helplessness induced by social media?”

Afterward, we circled up and introduced ourselves while doing a stretch. As an additional warm-up, we played a tongue-twister game called “Whisky Mixer,” which is similar to Zip Zap Zop. I intended to encourage the participants to start thinking about creating stories with their bodies, so we played an image game where participants shaped an environment, giving a clue as to what it was, and the others joined in, filling in the gaps of the image. For example, one participant went first and started lifting imaginary weights, and then a second one joined, pretending to run on a treadmill: the environment became the gym. In this way, the participants created stories with their bodies, already working with Image theater.

The First Main Exercise was based on Boal’s Image Theater, called “image of the word,” which is used as a medium to indirectly express the feelings of the participants about a given topic, in this case, “social media”. Based on this “social media” prompt, participants were asked to create an image with their body. In their images, participants were on their phones, slumped over, cross-legged, or on a block, and overall disengaged from the world. The images they created were very similar to one another, and to encourage more visual creativity, I had the participants make larger images using each other. On the next page is the image participant D created.



Fig. 2 D's image of social media

In D's image, the person on the left and the person in the middle stand, their hands clasped in front of them, as they look away from the person on the right, who has their hands open.

Below is the image B had created. This image represented, as B had described, "what it was like to lose your soul to social media." The participants sat in a circle, facing each other, yet each of their heads was pointed downward toward the imaginary device in their hands.



Fig. 3 B's image of "losing one's soul to social media"



Fig. 4 L's image of social media

On the bottom of page 24 is L's image of social media. Their chairs are all turned outward; "the bus stop" is what L had called this space. Again, each participant is looking at their own screen.

In the image above, an additional exercise was added, titled "interior monologue" ("Rainbow of Desire" 79-80). In this exercise, each participant was given one minute to speak out their character's desires and feelings in an unfiltered stream of consciousness. This exercise is similarly meant to reveal deeper feelings/desires that may not seem obvious on the surface. We then began a discussion of the images presented, using subjective and then objective commentary (results are discussed in the Evaluation section below).

The Second Main Exercise involved creating improvised scenes based on social media posts that left the participants feeling helpless. The initial idea was to identify an oppressor in a chosen social media post and link that oppressor to a person in the participant's everyday life who, whether directly or indirectly, supports the oppressor's agenda. For example, a gas station employee of Shell, a company

that was charged with murdering environmental activists overseas (“Was Shell Complicit in Murder?”). The character playing the oppressor was meant to earnestly commit to the oppressor's desires.

Initially, the second and first workshops were meant to build on each other; however, because the second workshop had a majority of participants who hadn't attended the first, it was treated instead as a separate but similar workshop. The itinerary for the second workshop was structured similarly to the first: Introductions, First Main Exercise, and Second Main Exercise. The Introductions for this workshop were modified compared to the first: there was no memory exercise, and new actor exercises were added. The Mirror exercise, in which a pair of people followed each other's movements like a reflection in a mirror, was added to stimulate body awareness. Then, an exercise in which one partner led the other around the room with their eyes closed was conducted to stimulate certain sensory awareness. Other parts of the introduction section remained.

In the First Main Exercise, creating an image based on the prompt “social media” was modified to “show your personal relationship to social media.” This modification was made to encourage a more personal reflection on how social media affected one's life, rather than creating a stereotypical or accepted image. The participants first created individual images, then paired with another participant to expand their images, and finally created a single group image that included everyone's interpretations of the prompt. This time, the group was also tasked with creating a group image of how they wished their personal relationship with social media to be. When both of these images were created, the group was meant to transition from one image to the other, on the sound of my claps. One movement

was allowed per clap of my hands. This exercise was meant to highlight the change necessary to create better outcomes in one's life. Below is the picture showcasing the first unified image:



Fig. 5 Workshop 2's unified image to the prompt "What is your relationship with social media?"

In this image, Participant D sits in the center, body caved in, with their face in their hands, representing what seemed like being overwhelmed. The rest of the images with their differing poses revolved around them. With more participants, there was a greater variety in responses to the given prompt. The participant on the far right of the image above created a far more abstract representation than the other participants, who showed themselves staring at a phone. This participant will be referred to as E. Their individual image showed them standing in the same pose, bent forward with one hand outstretched to the sky. For the two-person images, they paired up with another participant, the one closest to them in the image above, who was lying on the floor staring at their phone with their legs crossed behind them; participant U. In their paired image, participant E was looming over participant U, an

implication which will be discussed in the evaluations chapter. Below is the second unified image showcasing the “ideal” relationship to social media:



Fig. 6 Workshop 2's second unified image to the prompt, “What is your ideal relationship to social media?”

The Second Main Exercise was also slightly modified. The initial prompt was to create images based on a social media post that made one feel helpless, using any person or object in the room to represent that post. Then the main participant had to position themselves within this image, asking the question: where do they fit in? Then, in slow motion, they were meant to act on their desires in the moment, until it was felt that the image had reached completion. This exercise was meant to create connections between the participant and the triggering event in the post and to simulate acts of resistance. Participant “I” chose a social media post announcing the US government's declaration of war on Iran as their scenario of choice. They created an abstract image with participant L, a returner from the last workshop, as the representative of the oil industry, sitting atop a block above the rest of the participants, who were lying on the floor, as seen below on the next page.



Fig. 7 Participant E's representation of the U.S.'s war in Iran



Fig. 8 Participant E's ideal image of the U.S.'s war in Iran

The juice in this image represents the oil that participant E feels is the true reason for this war. They emphasize the cost of this oil with the lying bodies beneath participant L. Figure 9 is the ideal image, showing the land's resources shared equally. There was a slow-motion transition that happened between the first and second images. Participant L, as instructed, did not let go of the juice box until it was

pried from their hands. They would not leave their box until they were carried off by the other participants, as shown below.



Fig. 9 Participants carrying off participant L during transition

After the workshops, I sent out an anonymous post-workshop Google form that included questions such as, “Did you have a specific emotional response to any of the exercises? Please describe this experience if so.” The full Google form is cited in the appendix. All in all, I was able to create a collegial and collaborative environment that felt productive for both myself and the participants. The implications of these exercises, as well as participants' post-workshop responses, will be analyzed in my next chapter.

EVALUATION

The two Main Exercises from the two workshops yielded different effectiveness results. The First Main Exercise encouraged participants to analyze their relationship to social media. Through both images and the internal monologue exercise, the participants' feelings and thoughts were revealed, leading to a deeper analysis of the topic. In this way, the First Main Exercise for both workshops proved successful. However, the Second Main Exercise of the workshops, which included the rehearsal of revolution/upheaval, yielded mixed results compared to the traditional TO measuring stick, due to social media's ability to bring distant oppressive forces to the user's forefront. The way the aesthetic space was used in the Second Main Exercise in both workshops also contributed to the distance, creating an abstract environment that reflected the participants' feelings rather than specific, fully realized experiences with an oppressive person. TO prizes proximity to realism, and thus, this point of contention reveals itself in this evaluation.

Looking at the images the participants created during the first workshop for the First Main Exercise (Figures 2-4), the perceived personal relationships with social media can be discerned. Disconnection and disengagement from one's surroundings were prevalent themes in each participant's image. None of the images even made eye contact with each other. It was clear that the participants felt that social media kept them distracted and disconnected from their surroundings/other people. For example, in Figure 3, the person on the right wanted to talk to the people next to them, showcased by their outstretched hands, but the others ignored them, staring ahead blankly.

Image theater was also developed as a tool for analyzing oppressor-oppressed dynamics. In the First Main Exercise, there is no one who could be categorized as the oppressor. However, one could argue that the device holds the power in most images, given that each participant's attention is focused solely on the phone. Therefore, the phone is the oppressor in those images.

The interior monologue exercise from the first workshop was also successful in revealing the participants' feelings. Participant B's interior monologue included the repeated phrase "I need to look busy." We discussed this with B after one minute had passed, at which point we posed the question: "Why do we feel the need to look busy in front of everyone?" B had highlighted how they felt in today's society: there seems to be pressure to be constantly productive, which could be a secondary symptom of capitalism, where profit is prioritized over everything else. The pressure we feel to portray an image of productivity is equated with success in a capitalist society, B had noted. With this conversation, we effectively linked the internal pressures B was feeling to the larger systemic pressures emblematic of our country. This can also be referred to as analogical induction. Analogical induction is the practice of linking personal experiences to systemic modes of oppression, a practice encouraged in the TO methodology ("Rainbow of Desire" 40).

Participant D offered a different interpretation of the exercise and, during their monologue, created a fictional life for their character within the image. The monologue included this story: "My mom is struggling with her job and is sick, my kids and wife are at home depending on me for my support, and I'm out here watching Instagram to distract myself." Based on this phrasing, one could surmise there is a degree of shame associated with "doomscrolling" on social media when

one has so many other responsibilities in their life. This could connect back to the idea present within B's internal monologue, the need to be constantly productive. Additionally, despite experiencing these negative feelings from doomscrolling, the character remained glued to their screen. Again, the phone wins the battle of control over the participant. Although D did the exercise differently, they still revealed their attitudes about social media and the feelings they experience when engaging with its platforms. Additionally, D later revealed in their workshop that their mother had called them the other day for support regarding an upsetting experience she had with an employer. The fact that D's first thought included their "sick mom" in this fictionalized account is no coincidence when paired with this new context. In this way, the exercise also succeeded in revealing subconscious thoughts, feelings, and desires for this participant.

Participant L also did the exercise differently; instead of a continual internal monologue, they acted the part of a zombie, repeating the phrase, "must keep watching." This motif, L later said, represented their hypnotic state induced by social media, again harkening back to the phone's control over the participants. Although this interpretation did not reveal as much information as the other participants, it still reaffirmed a shared feeling among the participants about the control the phone seemed to have over their lives. The fact that each participant did the exercise differently may highlight the need for clearer instructions in the future.

In the second workshop (Figure 6), the unified image the participants created suggested the all-encompassing quality of social media. In the first unified image, the participants sat positioned all around participant D. Altogether, the images around participant D can be interpreted as contributing to D's overwhelm, "perhaps even

representing different social media posts,” one participant noted. Additionally, the theme of disconnectedness in image creation appeared similarly to that in the first workshop. In the image, all the participants stood positioned away from each other, none of them making eye contact. However, in the second unified image, the one responding to the prompt “What is your ideal relationship to social media?”, the participants gathered in a circle and engaged with one another.

By comparing the first unified image and the second—ideal—unified image, one can surmise that the biggest obstacle the participants believe social media poses is the disconnect it creates with others. Additionally, it shows that participants believe the ideal would include a shared connection with one another. The Becker Friedman Institute for Economics study, whose results indicated that people feel pressured to use social media for others rather than themselves, is reflected in these two unified images. Especially considering the ideal image, Figure 7, does not involve the use of social media or technology at all. Each participant in the ideal image is sitting on the floor at a similar eye level to the others, unlike the first image, which had some people standing or sitting. This could represent everyone being at the same social-media-free level.

Although I made sure not to influence any of the image-making, other variables could have skewed the results. For example, peer pressure may have played a role in the creation of the unified ideal image; some participants may have felt the need to conform to the overall vision rather than disturb it. This is something to take note of in the future. However, given the benefit of the doubt that the participants represented themselves to the best of their ability, these images reveal a subconscious need for interpersonal connection and the exclusion of social media in

their lives. In conclusion, both workshops successfully employed Image Theater to analyze and reveal perceived power dynamics and relations with social media as a whole. The Second Main Exercise of the workshops, practicing modes of revolution, however, had more mixed results.

During the Second Main Exercise from the first workshop, deeper insight was gained, rather than brainstorming practical problem-solving. The participants were asked to choose a social media post that made them feel helpless, and create an improvised scene based on it that imagined resistance/revolution. Participant B's chosen post was the recent casting announcement for *Maybe Happy Ending* on Instagram, in which they announced that a white man would be playing the role of a main character previously played by an asian-american man. As an asian-american themselves, the participant expressed feeling discouraged after seeing the announcement, stating, "it feels like no matter how hard I try, I will still not end up being chosen". For their given improvised scene, they wanted me and another person to stand in front of them every time they tried to speak—a representation of their feelings. We carried out this improvised scene to its completion at a point where advancement in front of the other was no longer possible. This exercise provided interesting insight. When the participant and I were physically no longer able to advance in front of Participant B, who ended up a step and a half behind me, they asked, "Am I being heard?" to which I instinctively reply, "Yeah I'm pretty sure you're being heard." Participant B had noted this as interesting given my positioning in front of them, symbolizing the place of privilege I am making this offhanded comment from, reflecting a potential lack of awareness from those with privilege in society.

Participant D's scenario also lent some insight. They wanted to focus on the way certain UCSC institutions supported ICE funding, which they learned about on Instagram. They were given an improvised scenario for a revolution involving protests in front of one of the UC administration buildings. Participant L had played the part of the worker passing this protest, and the rest of the participants and I attempted to engage with them as they crossed. Participant B asks participant L, "How can you support such an evil business?" to which participant L responds, "I just need a job to make it through the day, I am tired." The participants found this interesting because it inadvertently highlighted the privileges of having the time and/or energy to protest in the first place. During the closing reflection at the end of the first workshop, participant B compares this type of privilege with white class privilege, voice recorded and transcribed below:

It definitely makes it a much more complicated issue than I think most people might realize...it's like, this is a statement that's somewhat unrelated, but it's like, a lot of like, art majors and artists in the world are white because they have the money and support behind them.

In these ways, the Second Main Exercise provided new perspectives into social justice advocacy—in the case of participant D's chosen scenario, and ignorance of the oppressor—in the case of participant B's chosen scenario. The free and creative use of the aesthetic space in both examples helped solidify these discoveries. However, the original goal of the Second Main Exercise, which was to rehearse palpable ways of revolution against the oppressing force haunting the news, was not achieved.

Boal uses TO to explore solutions to specific lived experiences. It is through different participants sharing their experiences of a similar struggle that systemic

oppression reveals itself, and a collective consciousness is achieved (“Rainbow of Desire” 45). By focusing on social media’s connections to LH and anxiety, a broad topic that could include anything, this type of specificity is not allowed. Because the prompt was so broad, participants often felt intimidated about choosing a specific scenario, with one participant stating in a post-workshop survey, “I wish we were given some example posts to choose from instead of thinking of one on the spot.” Furthermore, many social media posts that made one feel helpless were not experiences the participant had themselves, making them inaccessible to explore. Augusto Boal often quotes the phrase, “solidarity means running the same risks,” so creating an imaginary scenario about a war in Palestine, for example, would be inappropriate (3). No such scenarios were portrayed, of course, and all the topics chosen pertained to the participants in some way, but the degrees of distance from the oppression were still greater.

For example, in workshop 2, participant “I’s” war on Iran image was fun to do and highlighted the level of force necessary for a revolution; the participants had to forcefully remove participant L from the block for the desired change in the image to occur. However, none of these participants have been drafted to the war, and although their government’s decision will undoubtedly affect their lives in the long term, direct oppression via Trump’s rule does not exist for them in this scenario. A participant had noticed this discrepancy in their post-workshop survey, stating, “It was unclear if we felt uncomfortable because the topics we were addressing were difficult, or if it didn’t feel like our place to speak about them.” Additionally, Augusto Boal used theater as a platform to wholeheartedly rehearse acts of revolution that can be replicated in real life. In *Theater of the Oppressed*, Boal states:

The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. While he rehearses throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown; acting out his attempt to organize a strike, he is concretely organizing a strike. Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one (119).

This type of realism was not present in the exercise. Although the abstract representation of upheaval is liberatory, it cannot be replicated in real life. In fact, it can even be constituted as problematic, because it could lead to a pleasurable catharsis effect, releasing any burden of responsibility from the participants; the direct antithesis to what TO is trying to achieve. As mentioned before, this exercise was fun to do, but was it too fun? An easy solution presented itself in participant “I”’s oil image, which is otherwise a complicated and deeply-rooted political problem. Boal was against the catharsis effect, believing that TO provided the opposite result, “the practice of the theatrical forms of revolution sets an unease in the participant, who wants the rehearsed action to be brought to reality” (120). In abstracting acts of revolution in my workshop, this intended effect dangerously reverts to Aristotelian catharsis.

In conclusion, the challenges presented in applying the TO methodology to social media lie in its ability to make distant traumatic events more visible and devastating. The distance inherent in social media makes the usual specificity required in Image theater hard to achieve. However, the feelings that arise from social media use are indisputably real and damaging. This was no doubt the reason the aesthetic space was so useful in this exercise. Augusto Boal developed TO before the emergence of the fast-acting applications of Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, and their mental impacts are a new and unexplored territory for the methodology. Although the workshop was less successful at practicing a real,

repeatable act of revolution, it succeeded as an internal exploration of one's relationship with social media.

CONCLUSION

This thesis asked the question, “How can Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed help battle feelings of learned helplessness induced by social media?” I hypothesized that TO would be a powerful tool in battling this condition. It provides a controlled environment designed to give the participant a sense of control over a difficult situation, which can then increase the internal locus of control and, perhaps more broadly, the participant’s self-esteem. Internal locus of control, self-esteem, and perceived quality of life were variables that affected the degree to which LH feelings were felt. These variables were not controlled in my workshop, leaving a gap in participants’ understanding of the results.

Part of my original argument was that because TO encouraged tackling difficult scenarios, the participants’ own resilience to challenges, and thus locus of control and self-esteem would increase, leading to a decrease in LH. However, the exercises in my workshop involved abstract representations isolated within their own aesthetic space. While I successfully utilized this element of the TO methodology, it led to easy problem-solving. The exercises were ingrained in the aesthetic space and represented feelings and wishes rather than lived experiences. Doctor Charlotte Huff of the APA, who was previously introduced, presented strong arguments for the use of theater in coping with LH, because it offered the possibility of crafting practical solutions to imagined catastrophes, which were absent from my workshops.

Asking the prompt “What was a specific moment in your life when you felt like social media took over?” could have been a good way to center lived, specific experiences personal to the participants. I avoided asking this question because I felt social media addiction required long-term habitual changes that couldn’t be

addressed in the short duration of one workshop. In future studies, this prompt could prove useful to experiment with.

The most successful parts of the workshop were the exercises centered around the participants' relationship to social media. The methodology's Image Theater and supplemental exercises proved successful in helping participants analyze their feelings, thoughts, and relationship with social media, creating a therapeutic exploration. *Rainbow of Desire*, a book by Boal on the methodology, explores the more therapeutic aspects of the form, emphasizing both internal and external oppressive forces. The "must look busy" internal monologue that participant B performed in the first workshop was a good identifier of some of these internal oppressing forces; the need to perform productivity in a capitalist society. For future studies, it could be beneficial to explore the coercion and manipulation involved in social media addiction.

The social media user is often put in a dichotomous position: both emotionally affected by a catastrophe and yet having no direct link to it. Under a strict interpretation of the TO methodology, one cannot rehearse acts of revolution against a mode of oppression one does not directly battle, themselves ("Rainbow of Desire" 3). But the secondary-traumatic stress effects of social media intake are a real threat to the mental health of a large demographic. By gathering evidence and analyzing my workshops, this thesis highlights the dichotomy and complexity of navigating our globalizing, technologically advancing world.

APPENDIX

HEY!

Is looking at the news on social media making you feel helpless?

Do you want to do something about it?

If you answered **yes** to one of those questions...

Sign up to this **2 weekend workshop** of the
THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

Learned helplessness, the belief you're powerless against your environment, is tied to exposure to bad news on social media.

Augusto Boal's theater techniques try to empower people by practicing resistance in the rehearsal space.

Fill out this form in QR to join!!

Saturday, Feb. 21st 12-2 p.m.
Saturday, Feb. 28th 12-2 p.m.
Theater Arts Center, C100

Did you have a specific emotional response to any of the exercises? Please describe this experience if so.

There were times when the discussion of our daily scrolling habits made me aware of how much our country is actually falling into a shit show.

I remember the "eyes closed" exercise being notable for me since I'd never done it before, it's certainly scary, especially since I myself messed up leading my partner a couple times... changing subjects, after participating in this session with 4 more individuals, there certainly was a lot more mental space to lock in an abstract feeling that there is a lot more going on in the tableaus we created. The scope was larger.

yes, I found them exciting and clever, especially with the movement pieces between current mentality and the ideal one

I think that more than emotional responses, i was prompted to reflect. The poses, especially about social media made me really think about my relationship to it.

Were there exercises in this workshop that changed your sense of agency? Please describe this experience if so.

The exercise where we created a group tableau about an issue we felt passionate about helped me realize we have the power to create art with a meaning.

Really only the "eyes-closed" exercise because it put a lot of responsibility towards someone I don't know, and trying not to mess up and get them to run into something. Additionally, being in their same position after switching roles.

not particularly, the last one reminded me of this exercise that unions used to do where they practice advocating for their members, but it really helped me visualize things that I knew already

The mock conversation with housing about mold was a good example of how to keep pushing for things. I'd say it reminded me of my agency.

Were there any exercises that you found challenging or confusing?

It was difficult drawing the line with our art on whether it was just uncomfortable because it was hard to talk about, or because it seemed disrespectful to create one single image out of such a nuanced issue. Like how we weren't sure if we could do something related to the Palestinian protests because it was so recent.

None of them.

the one about what we would have done differently was a bit tricky, just because it is such a personal thing to share. I feel like the initiator going first might be useful to making others feel comfortable.

I don't think so.

Is there anything you would have changed?

I would have come with specific ideas or posts on social media to do our pieces on, instead of trying to find it on the spot.

For the time I was there, nothing!

having that pre set person going first in the what you would have done differently exercise

I really enjoyed it, I would've loved to keep exploring the different types.

From 5 being, high, and 1 being low, rate how helpless you felt before coming to the workshop:

4

3

2

3

Was there a difference in your learned helplessness feelings after the workshop? If so, what helped create that effect?

It's always nice being able to work with others no matter the venture, and considering the fact we had more people, the experience felt more fulfilling, I felt good overall by the end of my time at this workshop, certainly better than before.

not really, but it was interesting to visualize ways to make the world better

Yes, I think that the more practical things inspired me to remember that I can make smaller change, and don't always need to go so large scale and get overwhelmed.

Closing Thoughts?

I appreciated this workshop! I'm very bad at all things improv so I was kinda nervous going in, but it wasn't daunting at all. I wish there'd been more people but it was all in all, a good experience with who we had. Thank you!

I liked this a lot, I appreciate the attention Boal is getting and I think he would have agreed with the application of his theory

WORKSHOP 1 DIGITAL ITINERARY:

FIRST THING:

Memory exercise→ to get all the senses awakened, and focus their attention on bringing up the past. Everyone sits on a chair, and focuses on moving a part of their body at a time; remembering yesterday. How did you start off your day? Where did you go? What did you do? How did you do it? With ease, with difficulty, with tension in your body? 5 minutes-7 minutes.

Circle Time:

Stretch, Name, Pronouns, What was that meditation like? 10 minutes.

TOTO Presentation:

What TOTO is used for, supposed to be about
Identify vs. Recognize vs. Resonate
Body as language vs. verbal language
Objective vs. subjective commentary 10 minutes.

Warmup Ice breakers/Exercises:

Whisky mixer game!!

Image Improv Game→ quick, someone stands in the room to create an image. 10 minutes.

PART 1 UNDERSTANDING OUR FEELINGS: HOW IT IS NOW

Image of the Word/Image Theater Combined Into One: *definitely wanna take pictures of the poses* 30 minutes

1. Theme is: social media.
2. Okay, now that we have a theme, everyone makes an image with their body showing/presenting this theme, using any object, person in the room, in groups of 3/4/5 for each person, taking the time to construct this image. Then, each group will take turns showcasing their images to the rest of us. Maybe 10 minutes for people to do this max?
3. Remember the image as language→ What are the patterns in positions people are noticing? What are the differences? Objective commentary first? Then subjective: what thoughts/feelings arise in you from these images?
4. Now we try to combine these all into one image, we should find a central focus, and build from there→ into an all encompassing image: are some

things missing from this image? We should consider different stakeholders in these images: what characters can we add? What are the people owning the media platforms? Who benefits from the media? How does this affect others? If your pose is symbolic/ what character/stakeholder can we attribute to them from our daily life that have/are representative of these qualities?

5. Dynamising images:
 - a. Who identifies with the image/character they're presenting?
 - b. Who recognizes some characters here?
 - c. Who finds resonances with some of these characters?
6. Interior Monologue:
 - a. 1st. 3 minutes of less, each person gives a stream of consciousness/monologue showcasing their desires, thoughts, feelings of the character—not the actor!-- in the moment. This might feel uncomfortable and hard at first for actors, important to let them know that that's okay, and there are no dumb ideas. Let them try their best. They cannot move from their image at this moment.
 - b. Then the characters can get into dialogue with each other or someone not present in the image discussing again their desires. Again, they cannot move from their image at this moment. Also around 3 minutes.
 - c. Then, slowly, basically slow motion, each character acts on their desires in the scene.
7. When everyone feels their character's desires have been met, freeze, and look around you. How has the image changed? What moved you to act the way you did?
8. *Should I do an ideal image for this exercise?*

The point is not to find a solution in this exercise, but to explore our own POVs of the situation, and the system at large

Image vs. Counter Image: Find a post on your feed that makes you feel helpless—read the headline and share it to your copilot: not something that YOU THINK should make you feel helpless, but something that triggers something within you: OR explain what your experiences/relationship is like with social media: is there a significant moment/example you can give that illustrates this?

Illustrate your feelings to the co-pilot when reading this headline

When given enough time, co-pilot and pilot construct images facing away from each other in regards to their internal feelings learning about that post, using anyone and anything nearby.

The images are presented to the wider audience, and we make objective/subjective observations: what's different? What's the same?

3 wishes example: if you could make 3 changes to these images, what would they be?

Image of the word: Illustrating a Subject using Other People's Bodies

1. One person is asked to sculpt an image of the theme of social media: again not verbal but physical sculpting, using anyone else, object in the room
2. People are consulted on what they think? Do we think this is completely representative? Or is something missing? Can be added or subtracted? People can come up and change, alter the image.
3. When it is completed: first dynamisation:
 - a. rhythmic movement - each character chooses to add a rhythm/repeating movement that's unique to this character.
 - b. Utters a phrase—in character! Whatever that could mean for the person
 - c. Another action—where do they go from here?
4. Is there a better, ideal image to the one we've created?

PART 2: HOW WE CAN CHANGE THESE FEELINGS TOWARDS CHANGE: HOW IT CAN BE

Imagine Oppressors from these Social Media posts: Is this too didactic? 20-30 minutes

1. Find a social media post that makes you feel helpless, again, something that affects something deep within you, not something you THINK you should care about. The more affecting the subject matter is, the more invested you will be in this exercise.
2. Identify the oppressor within this post —a person or entity—often representing a dominant group or system—who exerts power over another to create a monologue, restricting dialogue and enforcing submission. Take on this character, what image does this person/entity create?

3. How do these systems of oppression come about in your day to day life? If you're not sure→ go down the food chain. For example, if Shell is the oppressive entity, then a character who you could be in direct contact with is an employee at the local Shell gas station you live by. But other examples could include, your state representatives, Santa Cruz Mayor→ which characters in your life are supporting these oppressive systems. How can you show acts of resistance against this character in your life? Who shows up in your life that could have a remote connection to this oppressive entity/ OR who can you have easy access to communicate to? Was there a time where you wished you stood up to a moment of oppression?
4. Everyone can take time to research, and look up these people, find out more about who is around in the Santa Cruz Area, who could have a connection with the topic, subject. Maybe 15-20 minutes for this phase?
5. Use research to set the scene of your improvisational game: the character playing the oppressor–must earnestly commit to the desires of the character. We will have a volunteer go first.

BUT HOW DOES THIS WORK IF WE HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED THESE THINGS. It's all a game of imagination I feel in this sense.

WORKSHOP 2 DIGITAL ITINERARY:

Circle time, stretch, ice breaker
Presentation

Warm up exercises:

Mirror exercise

Finger, face has to be close to finger at all times, following exercise around the room, switch leaders

Image of the word Exercise

Hopefully we get an even number of people to do this exercise: 2 pairs and then group of 4, orrrrr hopefully if theres more: 1 pair of 3 1 pair of 2

But what if there's 3 people like last time... we could have people join in one by one

"What is ***your personal*** relationship to social media?" Everyone poses

Okay, now pair up with someone in the group and see how both of your images can fit in together

- a. Observation: how did your images change? Physically, what new story is it telling?

Okay, won't be that many people but, are we able to get everyone into one image?

- b. Observation again

Now, can we craft an image all together of what we ***would like*** our relationship to social media be? Need to choose one protagonist. But please keep in mind the original image and we will come back to it.

- c. Observation, okay how was this image different?

Now, I want you to think about how you can transition from the original image to the second one, not just physically, but also symbolically.

I will clap my hands and with every clap of my hands you will make ONE move towards changing to the second image. The clapping will go on until everyone's changed to the second one.

d. Observation

SAME EXERCISE – different prompt

Scroll on your phone, on whatever app, until you find a post that you are okay with representing in an image that relates to you in some way, with some bad news on it, in whatever sense of the word, does not need to be literal news, that affects you negatively emotionally in some way. The image also needs an antagonist/oppressor in this scenario. ***You are yourself in this image, everyone else is playing characters, how do you fit in this representation?***

Use everyone in the space to take your time to each craft an image from this bad news, using other people/objects in the space, no talking but sculpting or showing with your body.

Once an image has been created:

1. Think of your character's desires in this moment, what they want, what their feelings are, what their thoughts are, stream of consciousness monologues! 3 mins or less... All this can happen at once! Does not need to be complete sentences, or have any rational through line, the point is word vomit, and not interesting things to say...
2. Now you can put yourself in dialogue with other people in the image or someone not present 3 mins or less also...
3. Then slowly, in slow motion, each person will act on their desires in the scene stay true to your characters, stop when everyone seems to have completed their desire → remember the final image
 - a. In this final image, is this a good ending or bad ending?
 - b. If this is a bad ending, what actions can you take in this image to prevent that during the slow motion sequence?
4. Try a slow sequence again, but with alternative action from the protagonist/sculptor trying to stop a bad ending from happening. Antagonist I encourage you to not give in too easily, and stick to your desires until you maybe physically cannot anymore. Can try multiple variations!
 - a. Are these variations realistic?

OBSERVATIONS:

- What literally happened to your character at this moment?
- Did anything surprise you in this scenario? **Can this be created into an improvised scene? Scenes, step by step**, directed by original image sculptor.

POST WORKSHOP 1 DIGITAL JOURNALING:

Meditation Exercise: Had to encourage them to use other parts of their body, not just their arms, not sure if this exercise was useful to them in the long run, went through their day pretty quickly, and used their arms mostly. Perhaps I won't use this exercise in my second workshop.

Presentation: Good to give a sense of context for this workshop, don't know if it was helpful.

Image Theater Game:

Only 3 people showed up, so the things we could do were pretty limited:

- Everyone showed an image of what **they thought of** social media: everyone was on their phones; seemed less personal image, and more broad, which is also good, and a point of the exercise is to subconsciously show what the person really thinks of it, without consciously showing, but as a next step, as a way to get deeper, can ask →: "What is **your relationship like** with social media?"
- We got internal dialogues from each person in this image:
 - B oh I need to look busy → kind of talked about what that meant in today's age. Why do we need to look busy in front of everyone all the time?
 - D: My mom is struggling with her job and is sick, my kids and wife are at home depending on me for my support, and I'm out here watching instagram to distract myself: funny, funny, sad, *turns phone off* You could tell he shared something personal just know, he doesn't have a wife and 3 kids, but his mom—which he reveals later in the workshop to be true! His mom experienced a form of racism just yesterday which was on his mind
 - L: Must keep watching must keep watching *showing someone in his words "losing his soul"

After this we did my invention of the exercise, choosing a social media post that made them feel helpless, and it felt like this was more or less successful

D: Oakes providing support for ICE, protesting, L was the passerby who just viewed the protests without saying anything –I made sure D staged it the way he wanted to! We protested and for the first couple of times, L just passed by and nothing

happened. But then, the third time when we realised our desires as protesters is to draw attention to ourselves, we demanded his attention, and we got into a dialogue about it. We were like “Hey! You!” and L was like, “I have a thing to get to, I have to make sure I’m working! I’m just trying to get by” that’s when we were like “huh, so true” there’s nothing we can say there, and then we were like but how could you support such an institution that’s protecting ICE, L was like, “I just need a job” which was like yeah huh so true. B said she found that interesting.

B: We did a symbolic exercise, based on the casting of the Broadway show *Maybe Happy Ending* which made them upset. We stood in front of them constantly, as they was trying to get in the front. At one point, they finally wedged themselves between D and I, and sort of got an edge, even though I was a couple of steps in front of them anyways. They asked, “am I being heard?” and I sort of non-committally responded, “yeah I’m pretty sure you’re being heard.”

They noted it was interesting that I had said that, even when I was a couple of steps in front of her anyways, symbolic of me speaking from a place of privilege.

L: I think L’s idea didn’t make much sense. They found this one instagrammer annoying because he kept talking bad about America, and so they said that’s what made him feel “helpless”. And they had a hard time identifying the oppressor in this scenario, “I guess you could say it’s the United States, but that’s kind of broad when you think about it” → makes me think how next time I should clarify the ask better. In this case they said they felt helpless because of this social media activist who always told bad news→ could this be an example of

Then I asked, was there ever a moment you wished you had spoken out against someone/something in your life, any sort of oppression. And this was interesting because it felt like people had to think about it a lot.

D and B had moments, but they didn’t want to stage them in a forum theater like space, because they didn’t want to make anyone say anything racist.

B ended up confronting someone she was talking with at Rachel Carson who kept making racist jokes, even though they were POC. B practiced confronting them, and I noticed how they don’t like to make eye contact, and let them know and they practiced doing it trying to stare them down. That was something I thought that was practical that felt appropriate or in some ways useful at the least! Embodied practice or resistance definitely! Even if it is on a small level.

D opened up about the incident with his mom, but again they didn't feel comfortable staging it. There wasn't anything they would have done differently if being honest.

Interesting draws parallels of oppressor and oppressed, because by the way we're acting it feels like we're a privileged group doing this, which we are, but also had some POC in here that kept the conversation diverse, and acknowledged the other POV.

B and D kind of released, in dare I say a catharsis kind of way where all of their thoughts about the economic and political state of the world just came spilling out. It is noted in the voice recording, but it's just interesting, because they talked about how they couldn't talk about this stuff with their friends a lot. We stood there for an extra 15 minutes because of it.

AUTOMATED TEXT EXCERPT OF PARTICIPANT VOICE RECORDING OF CLOSING THOUGHTS OF WORKSHOP 1:

→ some people like exploded with thoughts impressions ideas→ almost like a catharsis

Okay, so this is here.

So you were saying how sometimes it's harder to care about something. Yeah, I am a person of color, but I am aware I am not like as just the way the world works, like you're darker, it's worse. And I'm half Indian, I'm half Chinese, and

I see the ways that more affects my dad's side than it does my mom's, and it's just the truth of it. Like, when you go to like family gatherings, like, my dad's like, family gathering my mom's side, my dad's the only one who's like, it's just like a funny thought, thinking, like, specifically with like, Chen city, like they are so racist towards each other, it's like, like, you guys are fighting the wrong people. And I can't even imagine, like, if this is my issue, where it's like, I can't it's hard to feel passionate about something.

I can imagine what it's like for like, straight white people who have nothing to affect them. And that's like, why the daily world is because those things are so far, like, you can pay money to have these issues out of your site that it's hard, like, it's not even like, in the back of your mind, it's like, not even thought that affects them. It takes like, like you see celebrities get praised for doing like, donating certain issues, and that's crazy. It's like that's not even a weird thing to ask for. Like, you're taking like, 1 billion of your fortune and putting that money towards like, something that might not affect you, maybe once it affects the Google donate like, especially when people like Palestine Israel, things like, a lot of celebrities were to Israel at first, because all they saw was like, Oh, my God, the hell is like, attacked Israel. Like, that's horrible. They're killing people. It's like they didn't see, like, I feel like a decent amount of celebrities, once time, has realized, but so many didn't, and that's the issue. It's like, they just saw one thing, like, okay,

and it's like, Okay, now it's done. It's like, kind of can't imagine how many issues are that I might not even see, but someone even more like privilege than me does,

it maybe, in a way, social media is helpful. In that way, I really like an issue like,

I guess it's overall questions you guys, was there something that you guys really enjoyed doing in this workshop? Or like, what are your thoughts about it? There's very few of us.

I think I want to do this workshop again next weekend,
your feedback

into I kind of like that they did like the protest line with like Liam arguing for the side of the borders They might see, because it really reminded me, like there is like a dichotomy to it, like it's not so black and white, like you're in the wrong tent industry, like, well, you're supporting this company, like you saw that. It's like

there's so many factors that go into it that you can't even begin to imagine and well, that is an excuse not supporting something. It definitely makes it much more complicated issue that I think most people might realize, and it's like, it's easy to get into like a this, like this is like, what I stand for, without thinking about the fact that like, it's just like, that's great. But you have to sometimes think that the reason people are not nervous is because they have so many jobs to work some of the other things support themselves before they can even

it's like, it's like, this is a statement that's somewhat unrelated, but it's like, a lot of like, art majors and artists in the World are white because they have the monies behind them. Before they have to begin to keep

up. Yep,

especially in

this riches is corrupt in some way. There is no moral billionaire, right as we all say, it's like, yeah, and it's just adds on to like, despite, you know, being like, the majority of like, like, you know, like every a lot of people aren't like that. Like wealthy Lisa still feels small. Like everything still feels so small. It's like all these people with wealth have so much power to just brush off, you know, all these controversies behind your backs and just like, be so blatantly obvious about it. Like, you know, we see the administration like they, they laugh about it. They, they, they, they, you know, the Epstein files. It's like, so bad this whole issue. It's like they talk about it and like, if they treat it like a joke, you know, someone in a person who

works like the Secretary of Commerce, despite reading the files himself and lying about it more times in the past, he nowadays one of the issues addressed to me. Just pause that fact it's like it's very outrageous, because they don't care. They'll lie with a smile on their face because they know no one can do anything about it. And it's like, very It makes me feel weak. And like, yeah, just like, it's humanizing. It's very bad.

Really passionate about this. No, yeah. I've always thoughts in my head that I can really articulate, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's

part of the workshop, hopefully, is to be able to, like, at least get the stocks out. Yeah, those workshops, it did gage money created my my imagination, really, yeah, one thing that, like, I've heard to say earlier, like, when you're doing social media part, when you're sitting, certainly, you're showing some bad news, it's kind of hard to have, like, a shock reaction.

It's like, no like, with degrees of separation, like, I'm looking at bad news through a phone. It's like, it's hard to like, for lack of better term gap when, like, when I'm seeing a horrible issue through a tiny screen where I'm like, 100,000 miles away from where it's actually happening, yeah, and it's like, it's hard to it's like a cereal Oh, okay, I gotta go on another day. And everyone has to go another day. And so you see the bad news different degrees, but it's so hard to care about everything in the map they should be cared about. When you're looking at it through social media, it's like, it's so easy for people to just joke about things behind a screen, like, you see all those Tiktok comments about things, oh, my god. Started like, it's crazy. Like, okay, I'm using this an example, I feel like, obviously, like, like, I feel like people make way more 911 jokes now. And I think back then there was, like, a huge that would be a no, no, yeah, exactly. It's like, back then I actually got wondering,

yeah, it's like, people be like, yikes. Like, that did not just happen.

It's like, back then, like, there's such a huge uprising of, like, patriotism, like, obviously the sparkle racism. But the thing was, no one joked about it. But nowadays, like, the episode files, like that, stuff, like, huge amounts, we just got released, and it's all over. It started as a joke to something exactly like, it's the media. Just like, people make all these memes about this, like, this, this monster and like, not even, like, not even attempt to like, desensitize people to not to like. It's not to like.

They don't need it in like, a, like, a bad way. But like, yeah, it's still, like, you know, it still does something to everyone. It's kind of like, hides the fact, which suppresses the the idea, like, of like, what this guy did, what this monster did, yeah. And like, yeah. It's a very like, what's the word? It's like a post where people just make people just make everything a joke. And it's like, just just to escape with, like, the reality of, like, the situation. I forget about that time there period, post modern. Post Modern.

Yeah, it's like, what you're saying. Sometimes I can't even blame people for joking about issues, because, like, it's so hard to be. I mean, obviously, no matter who the joke is coming from sometimes, but it's like it's so hard to not be dragged under by so much negative news. And it's like social media is an escape. It's like when people see only bad news, it's like, how are you supposed to escape when where you're escaping to also sucks?

END OF EXCERPT

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