

THE ART AS RESEARCH: THE CASE OF HISTORICAL FANTASY “MECHANICAL VEIDENBAUMS”

Dr.phil. Andrejs Balodis

*Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Philosophy
and Sociology of University of Latvia*

Mg.phil. Andris Hiršs

*Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Philosophy
and Sociology of University of Latvia*

Msc., Mg.phil. Ainārs Kamoliņš

*freelance artist and playwright,
radio personality at Latvijas Radio 6 (NABA)*

Abstract

This article is artists' statement. It deals with several theoretical questions surrounding the art performance *Mehāniskais Veidenbaums* (“Mechanical Veidenbaums”, 2017). The performance was based on E. Veidenbaums' (1867–1892) “Discourse on Mechanics” (*Apcerējumi iz mekānikas*, 1894). An introductory remark about relations between research and art is given in the first part of the article. The second part argues about historical fantasy and its application in historical and philosophical research. The final part describes historical details used in the performance.

Keywords: *art as research, performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums”, historical fantasy, hauntology, failed future.*

General remarks on “Mechanical Veidenbaums”

Eduards Veidenbaums (1867–1892) is one of the most famous poets in Latvia. Veidenbaums' poetry was always quite popular with general audience mostly because of relative simplicity of his verses and topics: he often described drunken bacchanalia, desperation and suicides, and also occasional revolutionary outbursts. In spite of popularity he was not always seen as a serious poet.

Mehāniskais Veidenbaums (“Mechanical Veidenbaums”) was a multimedial performance created by three philosophers – A. Balodis, A. Hiršs, A. Kamoliņš. It was

made specifically for annual Latvian poetry festival which celebrated Veidenbaums' 150 years anniversary. Usually focal point of the festival is poetry readings with or without musical accompaniment in different urban settings. We decided to make two substantial deviations from the usual format. First, the focus would be on his scientific works and his student life in Dorpat (now – Tartu, Estonia). Our main source material was Veidenbaums' *Apcerējumi iz mekānikas* (“Discourse on Mechanics”, 1894). Thus we were able to contextualize his body of work within historical and scientific framework. It enabled us to show that we would not make clear distinctions between poetry and other works. Second, our presentation would be multimedial – utilizing music, theatre and live puppet performance (fig. 1, 2).



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

“Mechanical Veidenbaums” was presented four times in three months in different Latvian cities. We also recorded and performed a song *Radioaktīvais Veidenbaums* (“Radioactive Veidenbaums”) in later two performances. The song was basis for our next performance “Radioactive Veidenbaums” at radio Naba 15 years anniversary celebration.

Conceptually “Mechanical Veidenbaums” consisted of three layers. The first one described Veidenbaums’ departure in train from Dorpat to Cēsis and his subsequent death at home. The second one described suicides in former Russian Empire in general and Dorpat in particular. In our presentation we unravelled the impact of suicide culture on Veidenbaums’ poetry and scientific works. The third layer introduced the concept of historical fantasy. We brought in deceased Dorpat professor Gustav Teichmüller (1832–1888) who followed Veidenbaums on his last journey home. It helped us to make allegorical narrative about tensions between materialists and idealists at the time in Dorpat. We made it clear in interviews and public presentations that the first two layers were based on our research and facts. Apart from reading and interpreting Veidenbaums’ works we also decided to go to Tartu and his family home near Cēsis. Although the trip did not provide us with substantial new information, it can be seen as a necessary step to gain experience needed for creating artwork.

Art as research

Most research-based art projects come across similar dilemmas and questions. Should our project be art-used-as-illustration of the research? Or should one treat his/her research as a reality effect to the performance? That is, facts are just a background in order to push forward artist’s narrative. These questions are especially apparent in many art and science projects. Art is almost always used either as illustration of scientific results, or sometimes results are faked in order to demonstrate a theoretical point. The same goes for pedagogical aspects of presentation: is it always necessary to make an art object in order to provide information or provoke discussions? Without doubt we were concerned with the above-mentioned questions. On the one hand, lectures and articles are better tools in order to give insight into Veidenbaums’ mechanical philosophy. On the other hand, artwork sometimes is better for pedagogical purposes. Instead we decided to recontextualise Veidenbaums’ body of work. Firstly, we defined ourselves as historical fantasts, but our task was not just to fill missing pages with more or less improbable fantasies and narratives (more on the method see below). Secondly, we tried to define our stylistic approach.

A lot of artworks are result of researching in archives. These artworks often deal with what we might call futures that have been lost or **failed futures** [Foster 2004]. In a sense, Veidenbaums failed in many ways to finish and implement his ideas in society.

Failures were often beyond his control, for example, after Veidenbaums’ death the unfinished “Discourse on Mechanics” has not been chosen to be a school material.

Sometimes we could connect the concept of failed futures with the concept of **hauntology** [Derrida 1994]. Namely, spectres of the past somehow hauntingly represent themselves in the present. Every now and then hauntology is represented as a style – literally haunting sounds of music, eerie images and so on [Fisher 2012]. We soon understood that our conceptual style should be steampunk, because it imaginatively fantasizes about Victorian and the 19th century technologies. Obviously the time frame was right for our purposes. The concept of steampunk allowed us not only to recontextualise simple mechanisms mentioned in “Discourse on Mechanics”. It allowed us to invent our own imagined technologies, for example, steam-bidet.

Hauntological facet was represented through retelling true stories about suicides in Dorpat. These stories literally were spectres of the past – either forgotten suicides or reanimated brains of prof. G. Teichmüller. Thus, stylistic choices and haunting stories allowed us to avoid simple lecturing on Veidenbaums or using his works and biography for independent artistic purposes. As a result, our research and performance could give another look at failed future.

Methodology

In the history of thought, unlike other areas of historical research, it is often necessary to rely on indirect references and marginal side-notes because historical texts or sources may give incomplete and inaccurate picture of ideas presented in them. It is therefore much more challenging to learn what people thought in the certain age *x* than to find out what they ate, wore, practised, pursued, etc. Due to this difficulty in regard to history of human thought it is often claimed that there are no facts, only interpretations.

Our research departs from the opposite stance, it is rather hermeneutical than postmodern. By combining hermeneutics, intellectual history and history of problems methodologies, we developed a method of **historical fantasy**. The key premises of this approach are following: (i) it is necessary to respect the distance between researcher and the object of research and by doing so to admit the problem of interpretations that arises from two distinct horizons of meanings; (ii) it is not the case that any attempt is seen as “one of the interpretations” but there is standard that makes some interpretations more reasonable and viable; (iii) appropriate research needs to reject two extremes – radical constructivist or the belief that our knowledge of the past is constructed [Hacking 1999: 6–7] and presentism or the belief that evaluates historical facts from today’s point of view; (iv) to recognize the main challenges of any research in the field of intellectual history, namely, how to accurately assess the origin, the sources, the influence and the significance of ideas,

their role in formation of other ideas and the impact on social and political realm.

This problem (iv) is faced by many historians, and our project concerning with late 19th century ideas and context is no exception. As the reconstruction of age-specific beliefs, ideas and biographical facts became seemingly unsolvable issue, we developed a method of **historical fantasy** as a special tool for this special study.

The method of historical fantasy within our project serves as a creative research method, i.e. it has both a research and an art function. First of all, this method requires quite scrupulous work in archives, thorough study of correspondence, attentive reading of footnotes, comments and references that may have gone unnoticed in concurrent studies, collection of testimonies of contemporaries and complete examination of private documents such as diaries, journals, notebooks, etc. Secondly, the method is used in creation of art performance. When the new historical facts had been discovered in our study, we compiled them to make short stories about Eduards Veidenbaums, Latvian poet and thinker, object of our research and the main character in the multimedial performance. These stories became a backbone for dramatic plot and directly influenced the direction and the production of performance "Mechanical Veidenbaums". Even though we found out plenty of facts and reliable information that helped to reconstruct past events rather accurately, some areas were still lacking. Hence the method of historical fantasy was introduced in order to fill the "blank pages" in history books and make events of the past comprehensible for the potential audience.

Historical fantasy is an original, collectively developed method by the authors of this project and it combines elements of several humanities methodologies: hermeneutics [Gadamer 1999; Ricoeur 1981], intellectual history [Gilbert 1971; Mandelbaum 1965] and history of problems [Canguilhem 2007, During 2004]. This method grants access to the historical context of ideas in cases when the textual sources and biographical data are rather scarce to make any unambiguous conclusion. It is important that fantasy here is not understood as the invention of history, but rather as a creative and a resourceful reconstruction of given historical texts, events or facts that provides justified and reasonable explanation.

Our project consisted of two activities: scientific research and producing the content for the art performance that was based on given research. The starting point of the project was the study of E. Veidenbaum's article "Discourse on Mechanics", in order to discover its context and the main themes by using the methodology of intellectual history. Intellectual history is approach that explores the relationship between ideas and human activity with emphasis on individual cognition, groups and communities, ideas and their sources and connections. Essential part of intellectual history is a genealogical approach, including focus on personalities in history, evolution of their thought and contribution to society (as in our case).

Several intellectual historians (Mauritius Mandelbaum, Ulrich Johannes Schneider, Frederick Beiser, etc.) note that the advantage of this approach lies in the effort to avoid artificial teleological constructions such as: a) triumphalism or a tendency to see past periods and cultures as the stages of development to the present moment, b) presentism, which is manifested in the tendency to select some historical facts, the connection of which is nowadays evident and to give up on others because their effect on today's thought is not obvious.

In our study the approach of intellectual history has been complemented by the methodology of the history of problems, which examines formation of ideas through emphasis on the “blank spots” in history and the interruptions of discourse and knowledge. According to the history of problems, it is the disruptions in knowledge and confused and obscure problems that may give rise for the most effective explanation of the emergence and genesis of the ideas in the history of the humankind [Foucault 2007: 14]. The traditional approaches in the field, such as the history of ideas [Lovejoy 1933], fail to grasp this concept as they mainly are occupied with established, well-known, “grand ideas” and simply connect them in “the Great chain of being”.

Two images that illuminate intellectual setting of the late 19th century became the key elements in our study and played a crucial role in the production of the art performance. The one is the **phonograph** as an analogy between the human brain and memory, an archetypal metaphor of human mind in the era which appears also in Veidenbaums' texts. The other is the fact about the frequency of **suicides** committed in the academic circles in Russian Empire in the late 19th century shedding light on metaphysical, existential and socioeconomic aspects of the phenomena. Thus, our research, which was originally intended as an academic enterprise, later had remarkable effect on artistic form and aesthetics of the performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums”.

I. Phonographic mind

At the beginning of the article it was mentioned that the performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums” displayed our attempt to imagine poet's final and homecoming journey from studies in University of Dorpat (now Tartu). His return was overshadowed by his eventually fatal illness, depression, setbacks in private life and struggle with his studies because of the lack of resources he needed for graduation. A phonograph is a key metaphor we use in the performance in order to portray the poet's mindset, streams of thought found in his verses and essays, flashbacks and recollections presented in letters and in a diary.

A phonograph is a device for the mechanical recording and reproduction of sound and was invented in 1877 by Thomas Alva Edison. By the late 19th century phonograph was employed as a metaphor to describe human mind and memory. In

1888 Jean-Marie Guyau published an article *Le mémoire et le phonographe* (“Memory and Phonograph”) where he presented the analogy of sound-recording device and workings of memory [Guyau 1880].

In the same way as the phonograph records sound vibrations by engraving them on wax or metal plates, the human memory registers oscillations of outer world and carves them incessantly into the brain cells. Guyau described mechanism of memory as analogous to that of phonograph. Phonograph makes recordings of sound by the means of a small copper disk that is designed to do both, i. e. to engrave lines that correspond to uttered sounds on metal plates and to reproduce already imprinted lines and replay them as voice, words, and melodies. Human memory according to the philosopher performs in a similar manner. Cerebral stuff of the human brain stores the physical vibrations in forms of impression, but memory serves as tool to recognize recollections or existing impressions from newly formed ones.

This is quite common for philosophers to address a difficult and hard problem of mind and consciousness by modeling it in accordance with some most advanced technological equipment of the time. In the texts of the 19th century philosophers there are great deal of such examples. Jean-Marie Guyau refers to two similes that have been used to understand mental abilities and functions. Herbert Spencer compared human brain with player-pianos that can reproduce infinite number of melodies. Hypolite Taine made of the brain a kind of print shop that produces and stores innumerable images or clichés [Guyau 1880: 319–320]. There are plenty of such widespread technological metaphors in the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries. For example, Henri Bergson, one of the most notable philosophers of the time, mentioned some more – analogy of the human brain as the bureau of telephone exchange [Bergson 2008: 26], or the telegraph office [Bergson 2008: 111], or the camera and the photographer [Bergson 2008: 148]. According to Friedrich Kittler, with the invention of phonograph take on memory represents clear break from the previous tradition in the history of thought [Kittler 1999: 33]. Instead of describing memory as the innate capability of the soul that operates by some obscure spiritual and mystical powers, phonograph serves as a plain and an obvious yet quite suitable model for the mechanism of remembrance. It incorporates two indispensable features of any functioning memory: retention of the present and recollection of the past. A phonograph is a machine that is capable of both activities at once “writing and reading, storing and scanning, recording and replaying” [Kittler 1999: 33].

This is an astonishing fact that E. Veidenbaums made use of this metaphor in a letter to his brother Kārlis Veidenbaums. His letter expresses somewhat exaggerated sense of guilt and attempt to apologize for disappointment he brought to the family due to insufficient efforts in studies and indulging in entertainment. E. Veidenbaums admitted that in his periods of drinking bouts and debauchery he had been like “a

sleeping man”, but he still relied on his mind where “his thoughts as in a phonograph will engrave in the cerebral matter and that will resolve his issues overnight” [Veidenbaums 1926: 94]. Despite his very unrealistic evaluation of powers of phonograph, since it is just a hardware and it does not solve any existential problems but can only file and record them, the use of the analogy by E. Veidenbaums is still striking. Hence came our decision to make this resemblance of the human mind and the phonograph as a leitmotif in the performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums”, where the story of a poet and a thinker is seen through one of the most powerful metaphors of his time.

II. The Darkness of Dorpat

The University of Tartu is one of the science centres in the Baltic States. In the 19th century, the University attracted students from all over Russia [Dhondt 2008: 115]. In the mid-19th century, an increasing number of Latvians started studying at the University of Dorpat. The first generation of Latvian intellectuals were educated there, such as linguist and poet Jēkabs Lautenbahs-Jūsmiņš (1848–1928), the first Latvian philosopher Jēkabs Osis (1860–1920), theologian Jānis Sanders (1858–1951), etc. Nevertheless, in the opinion of Veidenbaums Dorpat was quite a dark and depressing place.

The young poet was deep in debt during his years of studies. Veidenbaums was struggling to survive, and he criticized some aspects of University life. For example, he had a negative attitude towards student corporations because of boozing [Veidenbaums 1961: 287]. However, according to a close friend of the poet Aleksandrs Dauge (1868–1937), Veidenbaums himself took to drinking because of his depression. The reason was one of the suicide cases in Dorpat.

In the letters he wrote to his brother, Veidenbaums mentioned three cases of suicides among the students. The first one was some Baltic German student who killed himself by hanging. Veidenbaums wrote to his brother: “No one can understand reason behind his suicide. One day before his death, he paid all his debts and visited his friends” [Veidenbaums 1961: 294]. One year later another young man put an end to his life. Veidenbaums stated: “he considered it necessary to discharge himself from life”. One of the most discussed suicide at that time took place in 1889. A Russian student named Vyacheslav Stratonov was found dead with a bullet in his heart. Veidenbaums expressed an opinion that cause of his suicide was his ideological beliefs. Stratonov was a member of the Society of Russian Students. Some members of this group were inclined to marxism. But after Stratonov committed suicide, the society broke up [Исаков 1972: 299].

The Baltic German press reported about “suicide wave” in Dorpat. But suicide statistics showed a slight increase in number of suicides in all parts of tsarist Russia

at that time. Tanya Jukkala, one of the researchers at Stockholm Centre on Health of Societies in Transition, notes that “From the late 1860s onwards, the subject of suicide was given extensive attention in public debate (..) Despite the incomplete and unreliable statistics of the time, the idea that suicide mortality was increasing in Russia, as in Western Europe, became generally accepted in the 1870s” [Jukkala 2013: 39]. In 1897, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), one of the founding fathers of sociology, published a book “Suicide. A study in sociology” (*Le Suicide: Étude de sociologie*, 1897). It was a groundbreaking book in the field of sociology. Durkheim demonstrated how, though it had been previously thought that suicide was an individual experience, it was a social fact. Russian scientists argued about the causes of an outbreak of suicide. Some of them blamed overwhelming studying schedule, also the decline of moral and physical strength. Others noted that this “suicide wave” might have been caused by the spreading pessimistic philosophy represented by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) [Покровский 1892: 33].

Some of Veidenbaums’ poems deal with themes of death and suicide. The poet translated a story “Two Women Or One?: From the Mss. of Dr. Leonard Benary” by novelist Henry Harland (1861–1905). The story revolves around a physician who learns that a young woman is an escaped convict. She suffers from depression and suicidal thoughts. Physician operates on her in an attempt to rid her of her dark past. What drew Veidenbaums’ attention to this story? Veidenbaums as materialist believed that mental states were causally dependent on physical processes. This idea about synergy between physical body and consciousness was used in the performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums”, in an episode where three characters have a conversation that this idea could be a way to find a cure for suicidal tendencies:

A1: Why are there so many suicides in Tartu?

A2: Maybe it’s just part of nowadays trend.

A1: Possible. However, we can save ourselves from this fashion if we drill holes in our heads.

A3: What do you mean?

A: You know, change the physical state to change personality.

A3: Is there any precedent?

A1: Yes, there was this story about a woman who was suffering from suicidal thoughts. Physician drilled a hole in her brain.

A2: Oh yes, I have read this story in newspaper.

A3: So, did it help?

A1: Yes, it did. But you know I’m not sure that it would save us.

A2: Why not?

A1: By changing one person, we are not changing the whole environment.

A3: So what should we do?

A1: We must drill a hole through the whole city, through bars, university, brothels and corporations.”

Concluding remarks

Veidenbaums was influenced by socialism and marxism movements. However, he was not a supporter of radical revolution. Young Russian students who propagated violent revolution were called “criminal idiots” by the poet [Dauge 1927: 885]. Only gradual progress could bring positive change in society. Moreover, an important role in this progress must be played by mechanic science that reveals the right proportion between input and output energy. The problem of right usage of energy is one of the main topics in Veidenbaums’ “Discourse on Mechanics”. If we look at the world as machine, the causes of suicides and other troubles can be perceived as defects of incorrectly adjusted mechanism.

This article gives an overview of the art performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums” that was staged in several culture spaces in Latvia during year 2017. It was an interdisciplinary project that included various activities such as research in the field of intellectual history, collaboration of philosophers, artists and musicians, taking part in academic conferences and communication of the research outcome and its application to the general public. In this paper we have focused mainly on the research work done in the project. First, the article contains a brief resume about the project as a whole, its participants and carried out activities. The centrepiece of the project is art performance *Mehāniskais Veidenbaums*. It was designed in the aesthetics of steampunk in order to represent the concept of failed future which was our vantage point to E. Veidenbaums’ heritage. Second, we described the realization of the project, from its very beginning to the final stages as the genuine case for *art as a research*. One of the prominent research themes was hauntology. Third, we discussed the main methodological guidelines that have been key in this study. And last but not least, this article offers an insight into some of our research findings that provided us with vast material for creative and artistic side of the project. Here we singled out two central figures – the **phonograph** as a metaphor of the human mind and the image of **dark and gloomy Dorpat** of that time that enabled us to embody experiences of E. Veidenbaums and his contemporaries and to present them to the modern audience. The performance “Mechanical Veidenbaums” and its underlying study offers an example how to combine rather diverse approaches of the humanities and arts in a joint art-research project guided by single methodology, i.e. historical fantasy, that serves both purposes scientific and aesthetic.

Sources

- Bergson, H. (2008). *Matière et mémoire*, La première édition critique (eds. F. Worms). Paris: Presses Universitaire de France.
- Brunner, Christoph (2011). Research-Creation//The Generation of Novel Textures. In: R. Smita, K. Mey, R. Smits (eds.). *Art as Research*. Riga: RIX-C, p. 33–38.
- Canguilhem, G. (2007). *The Normal and the Pathological*. New York: Zone Books.
- Dauge, A. (1927). Armiņu grāmata. *Burtnieks*. Nr. 11, 878–892. lpp.
- Derrida, Jacques (1994). *Specters of Marx*. Routledge.
- During, E. (2004). 'A History of Problems': Bergson and French Epistemological Tradition. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 35, Jan., no. 1.
- Dhondt, P. (2008). Ambiguous Loyalty to the Russian Tsar. The Universities of Dorpat and Helsinki as Nation Building Institutions. *Historical Social Research. Elite Formation in the Other Europe (19th–20th century)*, No. 33, p. 99–126.
- Fisher, M. (2012). What is Hauntology? *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No 1, Fall, p. 16–24.
- Foster, H. (2004). *An Archival Impulse*. October, Vol. 110, Autumn, p. 3–22.
- Foucault, M. (2007). Introduction. In: G. Canguilhem. *The Normal and the Pathological*. New York: Zone Books.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1999). *Patiesība un metode*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Gilbert, F. (1971). Intellectual History: Its Aims and Methods. *Historical Studies Today*, Vol. 100.
- Guyau, J.-M. (1880). La Mémoire et le phonographe. *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, T. 9 (Janvier à Juin 1880), pp. 319–322.
- Hacking, I. (1999). *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jukkala, T. (2013). Suicide in Russia: A macro-sociological study. Available: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:608268/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (viewed 01.02.2018.)
- Kittler, F. (1999). *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, transl. and intro by G. Winthrop-Young, M. Wutz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lovejoy, A. O. (1933). *The Great Chain of Being. A Study of the History of an Idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mandelbaum, M. (1965). The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy. *History and Theory*, Vol. 5.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. trans. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Veidenbaums, E. (1926). *Raksti*. R. Egle (ed.). Cēsis, Rīga: O. Jēpes izdevniecība.
- Veidenbaums, E. (1961). Vēstule, 1888. gada 31. martā. In: *Kopotie raksti*. Otrais sējums. Rīga: Latvijas valsts izdevniecība, 294. lpp.
- Veidenbaums, E. (1961). V. Veidenbaumam Cēsīs. Tērbatā 2. okt. 87. No: *Kopotie raksti*. 2. sējums. Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 285–288. lpp.
- Zylinska, J. (2009). *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*. Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press.
- Исаков, С. (1972). Тартуское студенчество 1880-х годов и движение народников. *Учёные записки Тартуского государственного университета*. Вып. 290, с. 266–300.
- Покровский, Е. (1892). Юные жертвы современного пессимизма. *Вестник воспитания*, № 7, с. 32–51.