

Performativity and the Performer-Audience Relationship: Shifting Perspectives and Collapsing Binaries.

Deborah Newton

Abstract: The claim that performance is constituted and best defined by the ‘relationship’ between performer and audience, shifts performance to being seen as an ‘event’ rather than a work of art. This view does not see a one-way channel from performer to audience or position the audience as a distant object to perceive and interpret. Rather, performance becomes a transformation process involving both performer and audience becoming co-subjects, incorporating a metacommunicative reversal of roles, explicated in the term ‘Metacommunicative Performative Competence’ (MPC).

MPC contends that the performativity proposed by performance is not captured in traditional cultural dualities such as transmitter-receiver, active-passive or even performativity-expressivity, but by the collapsing of such terminal binaries. It is this dissolution of dualities, blurring of boundaries and fusion of dichotomous oppositions affecting the creative process that result in the transformative power of performance.

MPC grounds the aesthetic of the performative in performance, determining that all performance settings are performative spaces which open up the possibility for liminal experiences which are considered to be coincident with aesthetic experiences. Both performer and audience experience a metamorphosis - the dichotomous opposition of performer v audience dissolves - the subject becomes the object.

As a new term, MPC makes an important contribution to the lexicon of critical discourse on performance and performativity. It proposes an aesthetic of performativity which lies in its ability to collapse binary oppositions. In this respect, MPC redefines the relationship between performers and audience.

Introduction

Culture manifests itself in many ways and perhaps none more so than as performance. Erika Fischer-Lichte, for example, in her paper ‘Culture as Performance’, in which she claims that there has been over recent years a dramatic change in the concept of culture itself, states: “We do not proceed any more only from the assumption that culture has to be understood as a text, made up of signs that has to be read as the concept of culture will have it that dominated since the linguistic turn in the seventies: ‘culture as text’. We rather have come to understand that culture is also, if not in the first place, performance...It can hardly be overlooked to what an extent culture is brought forth as and in performance...Hence, it follows that the concept of performance...is at the heart of all debates in cultural, social and art studies” (2004, 1).

Widespread agreement with this view is readily found in the work of many performance theorists, researchers and authors such as Richard Schechner (2006), Marvin Carlson (2004) and Dwight Conquergood (1995), all of whom, in seeing it as a matter of increasing concern, emphasise

the importance of the relationship between performance and culture in shifting the perspective of debate to what Dorson (1972) has referred to as, a 'contextual approach'. The importance of this contextual approach in attempts at understanding and conceptualising performance is captured well by Carlson when he says, "The emphasis of such an approach shifts from the text to its function as a performative and communicative act in a particular cultural situation" (2004, 14).

My paper is framed within this contextual dimension of the performative traits of culture and concentrates its focus on the theoretical convergence of both communication and performativity within the performance context. It does so firstly, within an understanding of culture as proposed by Lustig and Koester (1999), who describe it as being a learned set of shared perceptions about beliefs, values and norms which affect the behaviours of a relatively large group of people. Secondly, within an Austinian (1963) frame of the performative, to which I take a Derridian (1982) post-structuralist approach in opposition to both modern linguistic theory and semiotics. Thirdly, as Ben-Amos and Goldstein claim, this renewed emphasis on culture as 'context', rather than 'text', does not depend upon "the entire network of culturally defined communicative events, but upon these situations in which the relationship of performance obtains between speakers and listeners" (1975, 4), or in theatrical performance terms, between performer and audience.

It is this performer-audience 'relationship' aspect of performance that I want to highlight in particular, by taking the cultural centrism of performer-audience and challenging its tendency to produce conformity to Western cultural traditional views of performance, a process of Derridian deconstruction. In addition, I want to incorporate the findings to date of my own doctoral thesis, which sets off in search for a new aesthetic ontology of performance based upon an interpretive and metacommunicative analysis of this perverse occidental binary understanding of the performer-audience relationship.

In bringing together these concepts of culture, communication and performativity, to which I will add the concepts of 'liminality' (Turner 1969) and 'self-referentiality,' I will introduce a new term into the lexicon of critical discourse surrounding performance, which I refer to as 'Metacommunicative Performative Competence' (Newton, 2014) or, as I like to call it, MPC, which I will now briefly expand upon.

Metacommunicative Performative Competence (MPC)

MPC is derived from a number of premises and strongly reflects the performative turn of the 1960s, from textual to performative culture, which promoted attempts at the reconceptualisation of the

relationship between performer and audience, as well as dissolving the boundaries between them. MPC does, what it seems few others have seen the importance of doing, and picks up on Schechner's questions of, "What about audience participation?" (2006, 104) and "performances whose metacommunication...demands a blurring of the boundaries separating audience and performers" (2006: 104-105). Schechner sees this evidenced in a wide range of performances and particularly so in Augusto Boal's (1985) 'Theatre of the Oppressed', which he feels Boal considers, "is most effective when the boundary between spectators and actors is blurred or entirely effaced" (2004, 105). This blurring of boundaries is at the heart of MPC and is at the core of my attempt at deriving a new ontology of performance, resulting from a metacommunicative analysis of the performative within an understanding of the aesthetics of performance borne out of the unique performer-audience relationship.

So, before outlining a brief understanding of MPC, I will highlight the central premises from which it is derived. Firstly, the prevailing conditions of any performance are those in which the performer and audience become dependent upon one another, creating a culture of interdependence in which both are expected to operate as co-creators of whatever meanings and experience the event generates (Carlson 2004). In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that performance is always situated in a particular context in which its performativity is not fictive but an enactment of reality.

Secondly, the reality of performance cannot be grasped in binary opposition (Fischer-Lichte 2008e). In a postmodern frame, performance desensitises the binary performer versus audience and deconstructs the binary both in identity and relations of power. This spotlights the shifting perspective that performance is primarily constituted and defined by the relationship between the performer and the audience; a shift in perspective from seeing performance as a work of art to being experiential and process-oriented and is, in and of itself, an event (Roman 1998). In essence, the bodily co-presence of performer and audience are constitutive as well as enablers of the liveness and reality of performance.

Thirdly, there is a close relationship between performance and postmodernism in that it is considered to be a primary unifying mode of the postmodern in respect of its instabilities as a complex, contested, ubiquitous and ephemeral phenomenon. "In performance, aesthetic experience and liminal experience coincide" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 177; Turner 1969). Any performance has the potential to create liminal experiences which liberates participants from conformity to the general norms of society as manifested in terminal cultural binaries. Performance encounters always stimulate physical, intellectual, social and emotional interactions between all participants, even if

their occurrences are not evidently observable, as manifested in Watzlawick et al's dictum that you cannot not communicate with others; you cannot not react to them (1967). In short, MPC speaks to the liminality, performativity and metacommunicative competence of performance in respect of its capability to desensitise and eventually collapse cultural centrisms, in the form of binary oppositions, which "philosophy and the history of ideas so ardently insist on" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 172).

In embedding these pivotal assumptions, my description of MPC published on the PSI Manifesto Lexicon website provides the following explanation:

Metacommunicative Performative Competence (MPC), like performance, is an elusive, ephemeral and contested term. Epistemologically, MPC raises questions about how performance is currently theorised and practiced. MPC approaches performance from a communication's perspective that views performance as a meaning-making system that helps structure the socio-cultural environment in which it takes place. It describes the role that performativity plays in the social construction of reality. It also acknowledges that performance is created in one cultural-historical context, but is interpreted in another. It is this metacommunicative dislocation that makes interpretation necessary (Newton, 2014).

In using these words, I am clarifying how MPC also articulates the ways in which performers and their audiences navigate their relationship. Thus, central to the metatheorem of MPC is the collapse of the binary distinction between performer and audience to highlight their symbiotic relationship. Framed within Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1975) 'historical consciousness', MPC explains that performance as a tradition-forming construct cannot be understood apart from its dependency upon that relationship and its social context. Therefore, it is critical to take into account the situational processes and culturally performative conditions essential to effecting embodied communicative exchange and meaning-sharing that establishes the performer-audience relationship.

Thus, as I see it, the theorization and continual transformative understanding of this ephemeral relationship is essential to how performance will be conceived and practiced in the future. MPC implies that both performer and audience go beyond meaning-sharing to re-define their roles as participant co-constructors and, in so doing, arouse one another's senses to achieve the performative state of co-experience in the here and now. In this respect, MPC may be used by performance theorists and performers to understand and establish the democratic relationship between all participants as co-subjects.

Shifting Perspectives and Collapsing Binaries.

My paper thus far has outlined a number of important shifts in perspective. For example, seeing performance as a performative and experiential event rather than a piece of cultural art work and

replacing the emphasis of the study of performance from text to that of context. Proposing the performer-audience relationship and their bodily co-presence as the main constitutive and enabler of how performance should be perceived, attaches to an understanding of the performance experience as essentially an aesthetic one involving a particular form of liminality which suggests that performance should not be seen in dualistic 'either-or terms' but rather in 'as-well-as' terms. Shifting from a theorising to a metatheorising approach to performance helps lead towards the development of a new aesthetic ontology of performance, captured in the term MPC, emphasising the momentous nature of the performer-audience relationship in any attempt at describing, explaining or defining performance.

With this clarity of approach to a particular cultural occidental understanding of performance, MPC grounds the aesthetic of the performative in performance, determining that all performance settings are performative spaces which create the potential for liminal experiences of an aesthetic kind. This line of attack vehemently rejects any understanding of performance which privileges the performer, by seeing a one-way channel of communication from performer to audience, or indeed, its implications for positioning the audience as a distant object to do nothing more than perceive and interpret. Rather, in MPC terms, performance becomes a cultural process of 'transformation' as Fischer-Lichte (2008, 174-175) would have it, or, as Schechner prefers, a 'transportation' (2006, 72-74) process, involving both the performer and audience becoming co-subjects in the performance, a metacommunicative reversal of roles, which "all participants experience as a metamorphosis" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 23), the subject and object become one, an important central tenet of MPC.

In building on Van Gennep's (1960) concept of the liminal, Victor Turner (1969) introduced the term 'liminoid' into the critical discourse surrounding performance. This was his attempt to explain the state of labile existence in any performance, as well as to emphasise its 'in-betweeness', which he describes as a place between places rather than a place itself, which also sets in motion a dynamic which degrades and collapses dichotomous oppositions and fuses traditional cultural dualities. Acknowledging Turner, Carlson suggests that liminal performance marks sites where conventional structure is challenged and provides "a site for social and cultural resistance and the exploration of alternative possibilities...seeking a strategy of social engagement not offered by the more culturally-bound structures of the conventional theatre (2004, 20).

Thus, liminality may be otherwise explained, in MPC terms, as a state of metacommunicative performativity, which rejects current claims to divisions between audiences and performers extant in much of the literature. In doing so, it throws down the gauntlet of rejection to long standing

sterilising dichotomies including, mind versus body, subject versus object, passive versus active and, of course, performer versus audience. MPC, in this sense, is the basis for an emerging aesthetic ontology of performance centrally concerned with emotion and somatic sensation rather than intellectuality and causality.

By metatheorising the performer-audience relationship, which I have argued is fundamental to an understanding and re-definition of performance, the contextual state of 'competence', as implied in MPC, applies not to performers or their possession of a practical skills base, or indeed audience members, but to the ability of the performance event to create an existential project (Sartre 1958; Merleau-Ponty 1962) in which both performers and audience alike are engaged, which allows them to escape from hiding behind separate identities that they normally create for themselves. MPC adds to our understanding of performance and the aesthetic of the performative by transcending Cartesian dualism but leaves the project unfinished.

So, before discussing how MPC brings about this dissolution of boundaries, this collapsing of problematic dichotomous oppositions, it is important to reiterate the Pontyidian philosophy I have been applying to performance, which is that the body is not under the control of the mind. As Trevor Butt informs us, "It is not as Merleau-Ponty calls it 'Descartes Dummy'. Neither, as Skinner (1974) claimed, is it under the control of the environment...Rather the body interacts with the world... constructing meaning within it" (2004, 98).

Taking this constructivist approach (Berger and Luckman 1967) of 'both/and' or 'as-well-as', rather than the 'either/or' approach found in cultural binaries, the social reality of performance can be viewed as both a construction *and* a discovery: "When people [performer and audience] are the object of study the subject and object merge into one" (Butt 2004, 94). It is this rejection of the idea that the mind does not exist in opposition to the body but rather is part of it, that results in the embodiment concept (Merleau-Ponty 1962), which explains that since the body is always already connected to the world through its flesh, "any human grasp on the world occurs through the body; it must be embodied" (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 83).

The importance of embodiment to performance is captured by Kisliuk when she states, "embodiment...disrupts those centrism that are served by dualistic thinking...performance in which mind/body dualisms are disassembled, and by consequence...become blurred or collapse. When dualistic thinking shifts to multiplex thinking, there is no longer one centre but many, ever shifting centres" (Kisliuk 2002, 107). In this respect, embodiment is a central concern of MPC, which intentionally shifts the perspective from inhibitive, categorised cultural binaries which, as Goody,

(1977) points out, are often value-laden and ethnocentric, with an illusory order and superficial meaning, to shared meaning and inter-influence between performer and audience. Furthermore, as Pieter Fourie (2001) suggests, binary oppositions have a deeper or second level of binaries that help to determine and reinforce meaning: performer and audience involves secondary binaries – speaker and listener, active and passive, involved and uninvolved, empowered and disempowered. MPC provides the basis of understanding for how the liminality of performance liberates all its participants, performers and audiences alike, from the restrictions of these cultural perceptions, or Cartesianisms, through the autopoietic conditions of performance.

MPC and Autopoiesis

MPC may be considered a transdisciplinary metatheorem of enacted perception in performance which captures ‘moments of truth and reality’, as perceived by both performer and audience, resulting in a contingent encounter of metacommunicative influence, which is fundamentally different from what happens before the start and at the end of the performance, irrespective of whether the performance was designed to incorporate audience participation. In short, as Fischer-Lichte implies, whatever the performers do has an effect on the audience, and whatever the audience does has an effect on the performers (2014, 19), a process I refer to as ‘symbiotic performativity’.

The condition of self-referentiality of performance is aligned to symbiotic performativity in that it is an outcome of the performative turn of the 1960’s which advocated a redefinition of the performer-audience relationship (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 20). In as much as performance is both poietic, in that it is an act of meaning-making and producing something specified (Sinclare 1991), and self-referential, in that it designates what it is doing and constitutes reality of action (Austin 1963), it reflects its own performativity. In performance, audiences cannot not participate, they cannot not react, to reiterate Watzlawick et al’s dictum. As Fischer-Lichte maintains, they are not distanced from the event but, as active participants, they “generate meaning in a performance by virtue of the fact that they themselves partake in creating the process they wish to understand” (2008, 155) and “in the autopoietic feedback loop, all participants always act both as subject and objects” (2008, 172); the binary of performer-audience collapses and dissolves the fundamental subject-object opposition - subject and object become one. This fusion of oppositions results in liminality, Turner’s ‘in-between’ transitional state, in which participants in the performance find that “recourse to conventional patterns of behaviour is pointless” (2008, 176).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the performance works of Marina Abramovic, the distinctive features of which are transformation or transportation of the audience into performers. In her performance 'The Lips of Thomas' (1975) for example, her uncompromising self-inflicted painful abuse of her body so powerfully disturbed the audience that the defining moment of the performance became the point at which the audience members intervened and brought the performance to an end – breaking all previously established conventional behaviours expected of audiences. They no longer remained distanced, detached, passive, disempowered observers; the performer-audience binary broke down. Members of the audience could not willingly watch what they considered to be unethical behaviour thereby becoming guilty of voyeuristic behaviour. The binary opposition between ethics and aesthetics was collapsed, as were the binaries of performer-audience and art and reality. Both performer and audience were transported into a liminal zone, "a place between the inside and the outside", where conventional behaviours were suspended and which "placed them in a limbo that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then returned them, changed in some way, to mundane life" (Roach 2002, 38). And, as Roach maintains, "A limbo is a very lively place to be" (Roach, 2002, 38). This confirms the view that performance is not an art but an event, "in so far as no individual participant controls it completely ... the perceiving subject is overcome by an oscillation between two different orders of perception, and is placed in a state of liminality" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 42).

So, in centralising the importance of the performer-audience relationship as the main constitutive criterion of performance, and integrating the concepts of embodiment, poiesis, self-referentiality and performativity, MPC expands upon and contextually develops the concept of 'autopoiesis' (Maturana and Varela 1980) as described in the 'autopoietic feedback loop', which, as used within performance theory by Fischer-Lichte, "allows all participants to experience themselves as co-determinate participants of the action...everyone experiences themselves as involved. Herein lies a fundamental component of aesthetic experience that enables the autopoiesis of the feedback loop" (2008, 165). MPC therefore, may be seen as an overarching metatheorem incorporating the occidental culture specific, cognitive, conative and affective concepts of perception, edging towards a new ontology of performance, which shifts the perspective from 'art doing' to 'art experiencing' (Carlson 2004, 153). This is evidenced in much of Vito Acconci's performance work (1972). Acconci is a legendary figure in the art world who has explored the relationship between the artist and the viewer, challenging the very nature of the artistic experience. In a number of performances in the 1970's, Acconci set out to test the question, 'How do I prove I'm concentrating on myself?' to show that he was not just 'doing' art but actually 'experiencing' it.

Conclusion

Ethnocentrism teaches us that the common response in all societies to other cultures is to judge them in terms of the values and customs of their own familiar culture, preferencing an individual's culture over the cultures of any other group. For most people, it is as if their learned behaviour was biologically inherited. It is usually only when they come into contact with people from another culture that they become aware that their patterns of behavior are not universal. The important point, however, is that ethnocentrism is one of the features of culture and, like the rest of culture, it needs to be evaluated in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of social order and the promotion of social change.

In investigating the performative traits of culture in my paper, it seems reasonable, perhaps, to claim that nowhere are they more manifest and explicit than in the highly contested (Strine et al 1990), complex, ephemeral, elusive and ubiquitous phenomenon of performance. Putting this into MPC terms, performance is firstly, truly culturally metacommunicative. It is, as Bateson (1972) suggests, a difference that makes a difference. Secondly, performance is unequivocally performative, in that it involves an enactment of reality; it is about meaning-making, social sharing, and not fanciful pretence or make-believe. Thirdly, it is about cultural competence, in as much as creating those dynamic conditions of social interplay which are essential to communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.

Performance, like culture, comes into being through the social encounters of people. As active participants in performance, a dynamic interplay of performer and audience is created, and captured in the autopoietic feedback loop. In its ability to collapse pervasive cultural centrisms and challenge prevailing Cartesian dualisms (those dichotomous oppositions which inhibit and control our everyday behaviour) this activating loop liberates us to live a life of multicultural decency, integrity and respect. Nowhere is this revealed more than in the aesthetics of the performative in which we are all immersed.

I leave the final word with Grotowski's trepidation, "The elimination of the stage-auditorium dichotomy is not the important thing – that simply creates a bare laboratory situation, an appropriate area for investigation. The essential concern is finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements" (2002, 19-20). I hope MPC helps us progress along this path.

Bibliography

- Acconci, Vito. *Seedbed Performance*. New York: Sonnabend Gallery/Gallery 15, 1972.
- Abramovic, Marina. *Thomas Lips Performance*. Austria: Gallerie Krinzinger, 1975.
- Austin, John. *How to Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.
- Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co. 1972.
- Ben-Amos, Dan, and Kenneth S. Goldstein Eds. *Folklore: Performance and Communication*. The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1975.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1966.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.
- Butt, Trevor. *Understanding People*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Of Caravans and Carnivals: Performance Studies In Motion." *The Drama Review* 39, no. 4 (1995): 137-141.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Dorson, Richard. *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "Culture as Performance: Theatre History As Cultural History." *ACTAS/ PROCEEDINGS*, 2014.
http://ww3.fl.ul.pt/centros_invst/teatro/pagina/Publicacoes/Actas/erika_def.pdf (accessed April 28, 2014).
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika, and Saskya Iris Jain. *The Transformative Power Of Performance*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *Theatre And Performance Studies*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Fourie, Pieter Jacobus. *Media Studies: Volume 2: Content, Audiences And Production*. Juta and Company Ltd, 2001.
- Goody, Jack. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Growtowski, Jerry. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Kisliuk, Michelle. "The Poetics and Politics of Practice." In *Teaching Performance Studies*, edited by Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer, 99-120. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.
- Lustig, Myron W, and Jolene Koester. *Intercultural Competence*. New York: Longman, 1999.

- Mariotti, Humberto. "Autopoiesis, Culture, and Society." *Oikos*. 1999.
<http://www.oikos.org/mariotti.htm> (accessed May 18, 2014).
- Maturana, Humberto R., Francisco J. Varela, and Humberto R. Maturana. *Autopoiesis And Cognition*. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Pub. Co, 1980.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology Of Perception*. London: Routledge, 1962.
- Roach, Joseph. "Theatre Studies/Cultural Studies/ Performance Studies." In *Teaching Performance Studies*, edited by Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer, 33-40. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.
- Román, David. *Acts of Intervention*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Satre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. London: Methuen, 1958.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* 2nd Ed. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Sinclare, John. *Collins English Dictionary* 3rd Ed. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991.
- Strine, Mary Susan, Beverly Whitaker Long, and Mary Frances Hopkins. "Research in interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities." *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association*, edited by Gerald M. Phillips, and Julia T. Wood, 181-204. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.
- Stucky, Nathan, and Cynthia Wimmer. *Teaching Performance Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.
- Skinner, B. F. *About Behaviourism*. London: J. Cape, 1974.
- Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1969.
- Gennep, Arnold van. *The Rites Of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.
- Watzlawick, Paul, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D Jackson. *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York: Norton, 1967.