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Edited by Tracy C. Davis

Excerpt

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Introduction: the pirouette, detour, revolution, deflection, deviation, tack, and yaw of the performative turn

Since the 1970s, we have marked the “linguistic turn” (emphasizing language’s role in constructing perception), the “cultural turn” (tracking the everyday meanings of culture, and culture’s formative effect on identities), and more recently the “performative turn” (acknowledging how individual behavior derives from collective, even unconscious, influences and is manifest as observable behavior, both overt and quotidian, individual and collective). Each “turn” has its principal philosophical inspirations, holding in common an oppositional stance toward more “orthodox” approaches. The “turns” were executed not strictly successively but certainly interrelationally. In league with widely influential social movements – notably feminism and antihomophobia – and the related activist-academic fields of gender studies, queer studies, and cultural studies, the “turns” have had a momentous impact on the arts, humanities, and humanistic social sciences in the West and Western-influenced universities.

As important as the performative turn has been to fields as diverse as anthropology and English – and other erstwhile improbable pairings, including neuropsychology and dance, ecological science and theatre – not everyone acknowledges that performance studies is a discipline in its own right. Is it constituent of all disciplines, an emergent discipline, or an already established discipline undergoing change? One common refrain is the lack of two-way interaction between adherents of performance studies and academics in other disciplines who claim performative territory, making use of the power of “performance” as an explanatory metaphor without regard for the implications of such claims, especially any “limits” to the performative. Yet there is plenty of evidence to the contrary: performance scholars can be found under the mantle of philosophy, ethnography, art history, political theory, media studies, music, rhetoric, theatre, and literary studies, though this is by no means an exhaustive list. Wherever the performance *scholars* are, at this point in time, is of less consequence than what they recognize in common: performance studies has its own pantheon of theorists,

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describes the world in its own image, and increasingly trains students under its own auspices. Thus it is a discipline, though rarely a university department. Practitioners of the discipline are theoretically eclectic, catholic in subject interests, and highly reflexive about methodologies. As the essays in this book show, performance scholars are acutely conscious of who contributes knowledge, and how, both in the history of ideas culminating in what has become recognizable as performance studies and the practices of co-constitutive knowledge derivation, definition, preservation, and interpretation between the ostensible researcher and the de facto subject, audience, informant, art-maker, or a myriad of other terms invoking co-investigative dynamics. These essays challenge reigning concepts while accepting others: sometimes the challenges in one chapter go to the very core of the concepts or thinkers embraced elsewhere in the book. These are the building blocks of disciplinary change, and understanding, upon a well-settled foundation.

The invocation of the “turns” suggests that linguistics, culture, and performance “make heads turn,” or “turn around ways of thinking.” When turning occurs en masse but not universally, it becomes sharply noticeable to anyone still looking straight ahead. But “turn” also denotes opportunity. For those interested in performance per se, our attention has been reoriented, our orbit broadened, and we are newly attentive to the implications of bodies and embodiedness. The greatest effects, however, were upon the *means* to study performance in a truly heteronomous fashion, and the *rationales* for connecting performance to culture. We accepted that performance matters – we saw it, felt it, and knew it – so concentrated on how to describe, document, and account for it.

The performative turn is not accomplished simply by swiveling on one’s heels and facing a new cardinal direction. As goes the body, so goes the gaze, but new conceptions of textuality and the legibility of culture send many people *moving*, functionally and rhetorically, in whole new ways and directions. What I call the pirouette, detour, revolution, deflection, deviation, tack, and yaw of the performative turn are rhetorical devices, to be sure, but beyond metaphor they convey how performance itself is a tool for innovative exploration, flexing under many circumstances, transforming when necessary, and apt to flow from one instantiation to another. It is both the *subject* of study and often the *means*. The performative turn is variously, fluidly, and playfully a turn, yes, but a turn that is alternately a technique of dance (pirouette), leads to an unconventional routing (detour), champions social change (revolution, social or otherwise), bends for new use (deflection), proudly questions the culturally normative (deviation), like a sail propels us forward yet is obliquely positioned to the wind (tack), and though unsteady is wide open (yaw), depending upon what is apt.

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As Richard Biernacki wrote of the cultural turn, “these three emerging visions – culture as the corporeal knowhow of practice, as the organizing ethos of practice, and as the experienced import of practice – can easily overlap in any particular study.”¹ So, too, in performance studies. For example, Baz Kershaw describes how the SS *Great Britain*, an early Victorian steamship built at Bristol and recently retired there in dry dock, reverberated as drummers repeatedly struck its engine during a promenade performance in 2000. Everywhere on the nearly 2,000-tonne vessel the effect registered as a simulacrum for motion, redolent of ocean journeys long past, even for audience members who had never been to sea. This visceral information, made percussively and absorbed corporeally, turned experience into knowledge – or a kind of knowledge enabled by aesthetic effect. Here theatre is the institutionalized term for the performance. As a knowledge regime in its own right, theatre “makes sense” of the reverberation along with the other staged elements in the performance and the “given circumstances” of the historic artifact on which the event occurred.

Diana Taylor explains how UNESCO’s concept of intangible cultural heritage acknowledges performances’ role in preserving and conveying social memory and identity, but falls short – institutionally – in fulfilling the promise inherent in this concept. In this sense knowledge formerly the prerogative of books is recognized *in* bodies. But now that this is a sanctioned viewpoint, how can such knowledge best be protected? The rapid disappearance of indigenous and minority languages and folkways in the path of nationalist, pan-nationalist, and globalizing forces – performative regimes in their own right – underline the urgency of UNESCO’s task.

Susan Leigh Foster explains how neurological perception of action results in an “inner mimicry” of what is seen. Thus movement is contagious – through the conduit of sight – because spectators’ brains mirror the actions in their bodies, which in turn rehearse what is seen even if muscles are immobile. Seeing, in effect, is doing. This concept of the neurological basis of the duet between Foster’s dancer and viewer is a microcosm of the “practical knowing” that Kershaw reveals on the SS *Great Britain*. Not merely the traces of events but events *per se* are knowledge. Performance, in the aestheticized contexts that Kershaw and Foster describe, is a means to both express knowing and acquire knowledge. Its artifact, if any, is neurochemical, for performance registers in the cerebral cortex and is processed in kind. Foster suggests, by implication, that sensory perception works in tandem with Kershaw’s homology of reflexive circuits; Kershaw extends his investigation to digital media as a way for performance to “survive” the moment of its doing, but Taylor argues that safeguarding intangible performances is

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neither unambiguous legal ground nor clearly a matter of assigning responsibility to “archive” practices.

Philip Auslander is also concerned with the co-presence of performers and audience members in the phenomenology of reception and the mutuality of making meaning. Because of technological innovations of webcasting, looping, and other delayed-action, remote-broadcast techniques, mediation has become an ever more important question in performance studies. Auslander works primarily within the interpretive arts to show how the “liveness” of performance is a question of degree, not an either/or, and that presence is no longer a limiting condition for performers any more than for witnesses to a performance. This accounts for an expanded range of cultural objects and effects within the fold of performance studies – into media studies, for example – while allowing for the relationality of liveness to mediation, presence to absence, embodiedness to technology, and willed “spontaneous” action to programmed effects.

Nicholas Ridout considers how performance studies is deemed a “democratic” discipline because of its attentiveness to participatory involvement as a means to acquire knowledge. What is this knowledge, anyway, and how is its acquisition democratic? For Ridout, the maintenance of a guise in public – not the private or true self but a projected self – enables participation in open debate without the danger of incurring psychic injury. By occupying the space between one’s self and one’s role, “politics” is made apparent to the individual. Thus a technique readily recognizable from theatre is revealed in the arena of performance and made indispensable in social relations.

For most of the contributors to this book, the role of performance in enabling immanent critique is of keen interest. Invariably, this is conditionally described in relation to historical circumstances, not an *a priori* condition of all times, places, and cultures. To Shannon Jackson, for example, “heteronomy,” or externally imposed order, accounts for how performance art (including installations and durational art) transcends its material conditions in order to aspire to social effects (as a result of aesthetic effects but not limited to them). Practice and theory are mutually constitutive, equally traceable through the social work of early twentieth-century settlement houses and the art world of trained practitioners. For Amelia Jones, the twentieth-century history of reluctantly accrediting value in subjectivity, notably in the body’s inevitability in art-making, once again implicates the importance of space and time in the social practices of making and being witnesses to art. In happenings, body art, and performance art, viewers identify bodily with the work, and this is critical to debunking deeply held convictions about the necessity for “universality” in art, apportioned by elites and appreciated only by specialists.

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Experiential knowledge, therefore, is a cornerstone of performance studies. E. Patrick Johnson's overview of the contested terms "queer" and "LGBT" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual) rests upon antiessentialist arguments about gender, race, and class geared to disrupt power relationships. Personal claims are validated, even beyond collectively identified categories, to *count* as knowledge. Thus "engaged critical praxis" is not reducible to citationality, but consistently questions "authentic" versus "performative" identities; or, as Johnson writes, this keeps the performance in performativity. For Della Pollock, too, "liminal truths" revealed through oral histories negotiate past and present, and differences between the teller and listener make witnessing an act of co-performing. Private issues are transcended by "critique, poesis, intervention, and translation," to come forward as public concerns, without spectacle or histrionic excess, in a "representational real" of memory. In making memory public, performance transforms, even in cases of inconceivable trauma, making experience legible to others.

John Emigh writes about one such case. Decades after the mass killings that accompanied General Suharto's transition to power in Indonesia in 1965–6, Balinese informants (colleagues and fellow artists) told Emigh about the events of those grim months. For Emigh, this is the basis for critiquing Clifford Geertz's rendering of Bali as a "theatre state" in which the Balinese people blend dreamlike perception with pragmatic reality: this account of a place where performance "matters" deeply is an ahistorical misapprehension of Bali. Because the time span in which Geertz did his fieldwork in Bali and then wrote *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) brackets this period, his ahistoricism is highly significant. For Geertz, Bali's legibility rests in its timelessness, evacuated of acts-in-history. For Emigh's informants, however, the unique cultural patterns, stories, and mythic figures of Bali come through precisely in response to the historical events of the killings. Place, time, and circumstance reveal how myths, characters, and performance genres are strategically utilized for immanent critique. Sometimes overt resistance is legibly coded for non-Balinese or opposing factions, but more often it is an intracultural communication, recognizing common religious beliefs through practices – even fratricide – of indigenous significance. These examples illustrate how a culture processes itself through performance, but without knowledge of both the history of referenced performance and contemporaneous circumstances, performance is insufficiently understood as chosen expressions or politics-as-culture constantly undergoing negotiation.

Individuals and the cultures to which they belong are mutually constitutive. While this is expressed in interpersonal encounters, it is also manifest in the built environments that we occupy, interact with, shape, and are shaped by. Susan Bennett's chief example of how this works is London's

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South Bank, recently revitalized as a tourist destination along the stretch of the River Thames from the former London County Council building to the recreated Globe Theatre. A “stage” set for tourists, it maps identities for individuals and groups: identities that are as likely to be authentic as assumed. Gender shapes these interactions, revealing the unlikelihood of a “universal” experience, however adamantly it is claimed.

Inventive reading practices, which Roger Chartier calls “effects of meaning targeted by the texts through the devices of their writing,” constraints caused by the mode of transmission, and “the competencies or reading conventions proper to each community of interpretation” have had an impact on many fields. But as Emigh and Bennett show, the content produced by “deep reading” is only as sensitive as the interpreter is attuned to the sensibility of the culture they study.² This connects what Chartier calls “three areas of reality”:

first, the collective representations that embody, within individuals, the divisions of the social world and that organize the schemes of perception and appreciation by which individuals classify, judge, and act; second, the forms in which social identity or political power is exhibited, as seen in signs and such symbolic “performances” as images, rites, or what Max Weber called the “stylization of life”; third, the “presentification” within a representative (individual or collective, concrete or abstract) of an identity or a power, a process that endows that identity or power with continuity and stability.³

This is a good definition as any of the abiding concerns of cultural studies. What does performance studies add? Emphatically, in performance studies “bodies” are corporeal not merely textual, and “speech” emanates from people with corporeality as well as identities. As Caroline Bynum notes,

despite the enthusiasm for the topic, discussions of the body are almost completely incommensurate – and often mutually incomprehensible – across the disciplines. . . . Sometimes *body*, *my body*, or *embodiedness* seems to refer to limit or placement, whether biological or social. That is, it refers to natural, physical structures (such as organ systems or chromosomes), to environment or locatedness, boundary or definition, or to role (such as gender, race, class) as constraint. Sometimes – on the other hand – it seems to refer precisely to lack of limits, that is, to desire, potentiality, fertility, or sensuality/sexuality (whether “polymorphously perverse,” as Norman O. Brown puts it, or genital), or to person or identity as malleable representation or construct. Thus *body* can refer to the organs on which a physician operates or to the

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assumptions about race and gender implicit in a medical textbook, to the particular trajectory of one person's desire or to inheritance patterns and family structures.⁴

Performance studies embraces this heterogeneity as the means to understand living in bodies. Sometimes the experience of a body is sensory, sometimes highly abstracted by medicalization or otherwise. Our bodies both form and are formed by our identities; our identities, in turn, citationally reflect our surroundings and circumstances. As we negotiate life as social beings – sometimes but not always consciously, sometimes but not always overtly – we perform. *As we perform, we are also historical.* This can be codified and held in common, as ritual, or not; coordinated and aestheticized, as theatre, or not; quotidian and mundane, the lived experience of the everyday, or not.

Performance can be radically transformative, either through extraordinarily masterful technique or through the strength of the performer's conviction and the power of the message. Unlike theatre, artistic technique is not a precondition of performative efficacy. Indeed, J. L. Austin's concept of the performative as an utterance that calls something into being would seem to democratize access to such acts.⁵ If so, then performance potentially becomes ubiquitous, no longer subject to heteronomous epistemologies. But, as Stanley Cavell argues, a performative utterance – such as a phrase accompanied by a gesture in the christening of a ship – is governed by a set of conditions:

According to these rules, for me, for example, successfully or happily to christen a ship I must (1) participate in a culture in which christening exists, (2) be the one authorized in the relevant subculture to do the naming, and in the presence of the appropriate authorities, celebrities, and onlookers, (3) at the appropriate place and time and with the appropriate implement in hand (here a bottle of champagne), say the required words (including I suppose 'I christen this ship the So-and-so') and break the bottle on the ship's edge, and (4) speak audibly, visibly, and without abbreviation.⁶

Austin famously precluded the theatre from his explication of the performative precisely because of its insincerity: theatre merely *plays at* something, so how can something come from mere pretence? Performatives have to meet cultural conditions, including sincerity. Cavell states, "Performatives may fail to fit the facts in the way statements do; and . . . statements may fail to fit the facts the way performatives do."⁷ This is just as important a brake on the ubiquity of performance as a reminder of the pirouetting,

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detouring, revolutionizing, deflecting, deviating, tacking, and yawing of performance.

Notes

1. Richard Biernacki, "Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History," in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 77.
2. Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 22.
3. *Ibid.*, 23.
4. Caroline Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," in Bonnell and Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 243.
5. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 14–15.
6. Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 165.
7. *Ibid.*, 168.

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