

Mehmet Şiray

Performance and Performativity.

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The growing interest in performance was initially aroused in the 1960s and largely stimulated by the development of technology which caused a widespread feeling of alienation. So, since then performance has gradually become the focus of theoretical considerations from across a variety of related disciplines: theatre and performance studies, art studies, cultural studies, social and political studies.

Richard Schechner, a founder of performance studies, recognizes that performance is a “continuum” of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet’ (*Performance Studies: An Introduction*, New York: Routledge 2002, p. 2). However, theorizing about performance, which encompasses such a ‘broad spectrum’ and has a changing nature, is a challenge. Thus, researchers who adopt a multitude of theoretical perspectives and keep one eye on considerations of practical relevance tend generally to avoid essential characterizations or definitions of performance.

Şiray’s monograph sets out to capture this plenitude of varied accounts and perspectives in performance research, many of which partly overlap. It attempts to present the central notions of performance and performativity and to ponder their scope and function in different domains, both theoretical, i.e., performance studies, cultural studies and philosophy of language; and practical, i.e., within the domain of performance art. At the outset Şiray acknowledges that ‘it is almost impossible to define the general content and use of the notions of performance and performativity’ (12). Nonetheless, he takes on the challenge to demonstrate that they are not mutually interchangeable or reducible notions.

The book is structured into six chapters, conclusion and references. The rich introduction investigates the possibility of defining the notions of performance and performativity, gives a list of the book’s ‘research aims’, summarizes the subsequent chapters and their cutting-edge discussions, and ends with a methodological note. Considering the interdisciplinary character of the subject-matter, Şiray decides to follow the methodology of deconstruction developed by Derrida (and subsequently by P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J. Butler), as it ‘offers a number of theoretical tools for taking an image apart and tracking how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning’ (22).

Chapter 2, ‘Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty: Performance without Theatricality’, and Chapter 3, ‘Mimesis or Performance: The Crisis of Mimesis in Philosophy and Theatre’, use the domains of performance art, theatre and art studies as

their research material. Investigating Artaud's project of the theatre of cruelty and analyzing the category of mimesis as interpreted mainly by Derrida, Şiray attempts to point out the discrepancy between the notions of performance and performativity. He provides ample description of the inspiration and context of Artaud's works, and focuses on his conception of theatre as ritual (anti-mimetic) and on his theatrical language ('pure physicality'). An experience of ritual eradicates the gap between fiction and reality, enabling immediate experience of destructive force (death) and birth in genealogical perspective of the world and of an individual. Şiray correctly concludes that Artaud's attempt to create a new theatrical (poetic) language uses 'the devastating force from the language that Artaud wants to destroy' (43). Thus, Artaud fails both to create a fully autonomous language of theatre and to transgress the limits of conventions of the Western theatre.

Şiray's deconstructive method is nicely exemplified in his study of Erich Schleichem's work of art, *Men in Tribulation*, whose main character is Artaud, played by several metamorphic characters. They portray not only the complexity of the main character, but also the heterogeneous nature of reality itself. The same purpose in Schleichem's work is to be achieved by the constructive and deconstructive role of the chorus, victim and ritual, which embodies both Artaud's conception of theatre as a place of ritual and as a bodily dimension of speech and sound.

Şiray brings forth the notion of mimesis in order to comprehend the categories of the classical theatre. However, instead of referring to the original sources of theatre, he accommodates their modern interpretations (e.g., S. Halliwell, M. Spariosu) which diminish Aristotle's mimesis to 'a mere simulation of the highest truth' (79). Hence, it hardly covers the wide meaning of Aristotle's mimesis as 'one instinct of our nature' which enables a poet to imitate e.g. 'things as they are said or thought to be'.

Şiray concludes his detailed analysis of Derrida's conception of mimesis by consenting to the claim that mimesis is a process that

regulate[s] the relationship between the two, and always defeat[s] pure objectivity and subjectivity. ... Mimesis always oscillates between the two, reproduction and representation. (115-16)

Hence, Şiray's key interpretive category of 'subjectility' is construed so as to exceed both objectivity and subjectivity, and to transgress the gap between creator and audience.

The fourth chapter, 'Speech Act Theory: From Language as Performance to the Performativity of Language', recalls J. Austin's and J. Searle's theories of speech acts and Derrida's criticism thereof. That criticism latter underlies writing characterized as the decisive moment in the development of language and communication, and culture in general. Writing implies the category of absence (of sender and receiver) which reveals its operating powers: iteration and citationality. Those powers also constitute performativity as a cultural script.

The fifth chapter ('Performance and Performativity: The "Performative Turn" in Performance Studies') traces the development of terminology—'lifelike art', 'body art', 'performance', 'postmodern'—and identifies the 1970s, especially in the USA, as the time of the 'performative turn'. It brought the focus of performative accounts onto the presence of body and it highlighted anti-theatrical and anti-mimetic categories.

Şiray attempts to come up with an operative notion of performance along the lines of Schechner's criticism of anthropocentric idea of *theatrum mundi* in the Western theatre. He claims that such a notion opposes the traditional understanding of theatre and that it accommodates unmediated life which is realized in the same manner throughout the world. This leads Şiray to reexamine the issue of performance as ritual, referring to accomplishments of Schechner, and to underscore the problems of liveness and ephemerality. Şiray brings out the destructive power of ritual, which power is acknowledged also by both theoreticians (V. Turner, Schechner) and practitioners (Artaud, J. Grotowski) in their understanding ritual as performance (or performance as ritual).

Şiray's reading of Nick Kaye's *Postmodernism and Performance* occasions his (Şiray's) presentation of different accounts of anti-theatricality in performance art. Kaye adopts a chronological perspective, pointing out that before the 1960s the 'modern creators' penetrated the boundaries of work of art. In the 1960s artists came to focus their attention on lifelike art. Kaye thus identifies this period as the turning time for postmodernism. For Şiray it epitomizes a disruptive force. Similarly for Kaye the phenomenon of performance constitutes a disruptive force with regard to the periodic development of art. So, postmodernism and performance are both characteristically anti-theatrical.

The climax of the book is the section titled 'A Return to the Question "What is Performance?"', where Şiray presents Butler's views. Gender studies provide Şiray key tools to understand the notion of a subject. Contrary to Artaud, Searle and Austin, Şiray claims that 'language cannot be the result of the function of a speaking subject' (248), because it is social norms, conventions embodied in the language code that create the subject itself. Gender studies also offer Şiray the tools to analyze the relation between performativity and performance. Performativity is characterized here as the exercise of two powers, repetition and citation, which creates the script of social reality in which motives, characters and plots become real. Performance in this framework is thus an individual act which makes the concealed performative powers actual: 'Performativity is none other than the force which rewrites performance' (252).

The analyses of K. Ataman's two video installations presented in the final chapter, 'Performance and Performativity Revisited in K. Ataman's Two Works', are also worth mention. However, they are not as clear as the preceding study of Schleicher's drama. Still, we can seize upon some of the artistic assumptions which Şiray uncovers. Ataman contests the opposition between copy and original, fiction and reality, identity and difference, by 'displacement and deconstruction of irreversible poles' (249). For Şiray, he thereby achieves his intended aim: reflection of spectators on the central

problem of art and world.

A somewhat hermetic style of writing and an insufficiently clear identification of the adversaries of this book's main claim could hinder the reception of this otherwise valuable contribution to performance studies. In particular, Şiray does not straightforwardly acknowledge that the selection of topics—in particular, Artaud, Derrida, and Austin—and conceptual tools in the book are directly inspired by Butler's writings on performance and gender. That said, Şiray addresses hardly any of the major criticisms of the conception of the relation between performance and performativity advanced by Butler on the grounds of queer and gender theory. Given that *Performance and Performativity* was carefully proofread, one might also have expected personal and subject indexes, to save the reader time-consuming cross-referencing of the numerous paraphrases throughout.

In this book Şiray seems to embark on the formidable, if not impossible task of elaborating an essentialist approach to performance. That said, his detailed discussions of certain subjects, especially the notions of performance, theatricality and the categories of subject and performativity, as well as his frequently successful efforts at context-setting, make reading this book worthwhile.

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