

What performance? An inventory of effects

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Resumo

An in depth look into the array of possibilities brought to surface by performance and performativity as the building blocks of human cognition.

Palavras-chave

Performance studies. Rites. Interpretation. Meaning construction.

Interpretation at a distance is inherently uncertain.

Morse Peckham

Every text is written *here* and *now*.

Roland Barthes

Warning: from the outset, the very acts of reading/writing must be understood as performative. In trying to particularize what performances are--we already locate ourselves in the realm of the performative itself. If reading and writing are performative in and by themselves, it follows that no interpretation apart from a performative one is ever possible. In this sense, "abandon all hope" (or the possibility of organizing a coherent whole in terms of what this text is and what logic it entails) "ye who enter here."

Why performance?

If we can think of contemporary landscapes as those in which values based on singular, absolute oppositions do not hold (for long), performance becomes the inevitable ground over which we must thrive, over which judgment, interpretation and meaning (yes, all three of them) coming with a jolt to a halt, become manifest, aware of their performative qualities. Jon McKenzie:

Indeed, performance has taken on a particular political significance; with increasing consistency, performance has become defined as a "liminal" process, a reflexive transgression of social structures. Marginal, on the edge, in the interstices of

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institutions and at their limits, liminal performances are capable of temporarily staging and subverting their normative functions. ("Perform or Else" 8)

Performances—normally halfway between the "real" and the "reproduction", or the "real" and our failure to stabilize it—can move from one side to the other of the "cultural continuum" without losing their power to bring forth the correspondence of a subjective representation to objective reality. That is, the *reality* of a performance, the real as performative, right here, right now, is brought to our *attention* and, at times, subverted. Herbert Marcuse, in *Eros and Civilization*, as Jon McKenzie notes, calls this the "performance principle" and defines performance as alienated labor: "Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions." (160) This is performance's *hold* on the real, the quantifiable and measurable effectiveness of any given set of standards and the authoritative set of values that become associated with them. Or else, performances stage their subversion, transgression, and their destruction. Language, discourse as power. Foucault would probably associate such condition to a historical will to be present, be a position taken. Let us call this the binding power of the performative. In "Critically Queer," Judith Butler writes:

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power.... The power of discourse to produce what it names is linked with the question of performativity. The performative is thus one domain in which power acts as discourse. (15)

Such singularity is of some value to contemporary times which see repetition, restored, twice behaved behaviour at the axis of its exchange economy and witness an overwhelming multiplication of commodities (performative nuggets?) struggling to hold on by the minute to the surface of the media landscape.

In sum: performances are that which strive for attention, that which disrupt any given sequence/pattern of events, previous or otherwise, verbal/non-verbal, and elicit a response. Performances are patterns and models of response subjected to being marked off (ruled off?) as an "it", as *different* from what came before and (arguably) from what will immediately follow. Are performances authoritative signs?

In a strict sense, performances are whatever we come to *sense as happening* in the world. The performative is that which we recognize as discreet. By the same token, performances are that which once being recognized as "discreet", "other", "separate" from "us", that is, that which separates "us" from a previous condition, state or event that calls for or marks (the beginnings/the endings) of another. Performances are, then, that which we "feel" (or think we "feel") as discreet from a previous/subsequent configuration. Performances are the world, made visible, vivid, "real" and "in detail": facts, accidents, events. Performances are that which, by whatever means, we come to control, to detail and "sense" as separate, as diverse from any previous state we were in. In this respect, performances resemble communications, that which can carry experience from one side of the "mirror" to the other, that which will elicit response: "In the case of each response there [is] a transfer of a response, that is, of a meaning from configurations already experienced and identified to the configuration new in

experience.” (Peckham 2) Performances communicate, but communication depends on coherence: one incoherent trait is enough to destabilize a series of previously accorded states, a series of controlled meanings, eventually subverting ... reality.

Thus, performances can become uncontrollable, they become transgressions, they become liminal as Turner suggests. Sure they can be measured, but only for short instants and from certain points of view. At times, they become completely immeasurable. We can, at best, *expect* that a certain pattern of events will evolve/result from such or such behavior/meaning/attitude. However, it is feasible that whatever disruptions take place during the course of more or less stabilized/fixed performances, these suffice to render subsequent recognition of continuing patterns simply impossible, thus rendering the (re)production of meaning unstable. To a certain extent, performances are a matter of expectations, a matter of finding certain order, length, pattern in one or across multiple actions/events, platforms.

Much as playing with mirrors, performances at once ask and establish: What is the meaning of this? Which and what are its functions? Furthermore: Where/what is “its” starting point? And, once we mark “it” as such, as an entity, as an event which then is its possible meaning? Whatever gets marked with a “starting point”, a mark, a trace... such “starting point” effectively makes “it”... perform. Thus, it begins... and arbitrarily so.

Once a performance is in effect a binding power takes control, becomes authoritative, discursive or otherwise. Presence albeit temporary, is the binding power behind the performative. Can we tell one from the other? Can we tell this is performance, this is the performative? Can we say there is a reflection (a performative) for every action (performance)? Can we say there is an initial performance being reproduced/restored? It is impossible to decide and it does not really matter. The response, or effect is what matters the most as it unfolds into presence and becomes arresting, binding power, authoritative, “real.” Temporarily, authoritatively staging all sorts of transgressions, performances sustain reality. Performances are responses, effects, happenings and it is rather hopeless to disentangle performances from their “performative” function. Thus, it is impossible to establish an origin for the performative: as one performance ends, another immediately commences. Thus, trying to define performance is like playing with mirrors, one too many mirrors.

Already complex performative operations result in a series of more discreet performances, including those which describe, authorize and, eventually, come to restore socially symbolic systems (Schechner). The idea of performance and the performative as mirrors facing each other is intriguing because each reflection is not only a fraction of the performative as it also marks the forever receding institution of one performative inside/on top of the other, and that’s what performances are all about as each new performance is forever receding in relation to another.

Performances then are the world “unveiled”, i.e., configured, made “sensible”, “detailed”, “recognizable”, “familiar” or... performances are this same world made “undetailed”, “unrecognizable”, “foreign.” The performative is a matter of (re)cognition then.

Interestingly enough, not too long ago, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote the following proposition in *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus*: "Die welt ist alles, was der fall ist." (The world is everything that happens.) Wittgenstein's statement, at the outset of his book on logic, is as good a definition of the performative as any. It is precisely because the performative encapsulates 'action' in the physical world from a human perspective that Wittgenstein's statement reads very well in relation to a theory of performance. From his perspective, performances can be anything that "happen": movement(s), word(s), act(s). The list is actually infinite. Performance is the human lens. Prior to performance there can be nothing. No world, no words, and certainly no interpretation or meaning can breed outside the performative because we need—at all times—to perform "a perceptual disengagement of an analogically determined recurrent semiotic pattern from an analogically determined series of semiotic events" (Peckham 3) in order to "respond", that is, "perform."

Probing with exhaustive, all-inclusive, forever more detailed propositions, Wittgenstein's idea can serve well to define the scope to which we are subjected to performance and the performative. Such notion of performance as anything discreet that takes place in the physical world is handy as one realizes the myriad of different, apparently unrelated, events (Foucault's notion of discursive territories?) that can trigger the 'performative'.

Wittgenstein ends up proposing a solid parameter as to how "we" actually 'experience' the performative, that is, of how we come to make sense of physical events by repeatedly marking out and signaling 'occurrences' in it. That is, by the very capacity we inherently have for 'marking' out events in the chain of 'events' that is the physical world (be that linguistically or by whatever means we have) we can, then, use these marks to make correspondences between other (past and present) events (also occurring in the world). Such capacity for making/marking correspondences is the very "nature" of performance. Thus, performance's emergent quality, as Victor Turner has aptly put it, stands in relation to control as the proliferation of meaning stands in relation to interpretation. Meaning is power and power is meaning. However, meaning is not immanent, but a response. A culturally stabilized response (Peckham), albeit forever receding. One that must be grasped with whatever means we have at present, that is, we can only grasp it ... (you guessed it) performatively.

If, as Wittgenstein puts it, the world is anything that happens, then the world is emergence, liminality. Thus, performance and the performative play at its basis. Performing is the (only) possible form of existence for humankind and the performative, mankind's only means of interaction with the physical world. Any event in the world, those we recognize as such (but also—and perhaps more importantly—those we don't), are performances: *reality* marked and mapped out as controllable.

But let's push Wittgenstein aside for a minute. According to the above, a second is performative. It follows that an hour is even more so. What's missing in this rationale (what we fail to acknowledge) is that the mechanisms that make we understand "second", "hour", or even "rationale" are equally performative. So, there's more to meet the eye. Perhaps, the Uhr-performance is humankind itself: a mass of flesh/bones/cells designed to operate in the physical world and be, in sum, our body-

performative. We cannot, however, state that birth marks the beginnings of this body-performative and we can certainly not say death marks its end. Humankind itself as a performance-producing machine, is entangled by meaning and control, incapable of achieving sufficient critical distance from the very tools that help create such understanding. E. Allan Poe's "dream within a dream" comes in handy as, again, do the receding mirrors image. In this way, for instance, we can understand life, God and religion as epistemological urges or, as Mark Peckham has aptly put it: "if the generator of the sign configuration is not present, it is necessary to seek elsewhere for that control." (Peckham 2)

Money: the ultimate performative?

Taking on from Peckham's point of view, and from the perspectives offered by modern industrial civilization, we can say that 'money' is the ultimate performative. 'Money', functioning performatively, is a normative/regulating principle that represents precisely the kind of arrangement (ideological, political, and cognitive) that all performances seem to strive for. 'Money' triggers the organization and sets in motion a hierarchy of fairly stabilized interpretations for every other series of complex adjacent structures. 'Money' is a pivotal contemporary experience. It sums up and organizes more than two thousand years of continuing performances in one neat package.

Whatever we see or think we see, whatever we understand or think we understand, whatever we feel, depends on our ability to recognize discreet units of the performative that may eventually become patterned performances which are then "used" to communicate, elicit culturally stabilized responses, exercise power (cultural, politic, and economic).

However, undetectable uncontrollable performances (that which we fail to input/acknowledge/recognize) are also feasible. Such discarded, undetectable (invisible?) parts are performative, even if negatively. Think of marginal political and economical views or systems and you may have a picture. Think of marginal identities, races, class and gender and, again, you may have another picture, indeed many pictures of discarded, disregarded performatives. In fact, it is possible to assume that, when recognized as such, performances (and by the same token the performative) lose whatever meanings they might have been previously imbued with and become sterile, somewhat vacuous, unproductive/reproductive communicative skills: that which we "then" recognize as meaningful, simply isn't, it is just the dead sign from a previously working performative that has been historically and culturally stabilized. Power and authority seem much to be in this league. To maintain performativity, a performance must be unstable, badly built, poorly lit. Thus, recognizing performances becomes a problem, once too often a matter of life and death. We are either lost in performance, or forever prying upon its leftovers with our flawed diagnostic tools. Every single action we discern is performative the moment it is DISCERNED. And then disappears the second thereafter in a complex series of smaller disappearances.

Performances are forever subtracted from the present, are forever receding into memory. Performances can only be “now” slightly removed from “now.” Performances are the present, slightly receded into the past. Performances are the present slightly tilted towards its beginning. Performances recede into memory, once they occur. They become part of an immediate past. In order to be understood performances are, however, forever subject to actualization. Lost to memory, performances seem to attest that, although we acknowledge that performances can only be experienced as present time, humankind has been intent on recovering, on preserving the records of its various performances, its doings, its actions and responses. Those become knowledge, culture, history, science, art, literature and, most of all, power in their various guises. Performances then can be said to be that which connect us to the world and any history of culture is, in fact, the striving for preservation of the performative debris.

Thus, the word “performance” may mean any number of things, from choosing the “right” glass for wine or, for that matter, the “wrong” one, to making love and failing at love. Art is performance. Technology is performance. Life is performance. When performances are brought into light, a kind of magic binding power takes place and we become real. Performances, however, most of the times, are helping us construct (un)equivocal reactions based on long extinct behaviors/events/meanings.

It may also mean...

Fact one: everything is/depends on performances and the performative. Performances, then, are constantly piercing that line between thought and action. They retain our link with reality: constructed, felt, sensed. Apart from performance there’s nothing. Performances can be an end in themselves, for themselves.

Fact two: Performances change and performance changes. Everything, everywhere changes because performatives mark the original production of meaning. Everything else is reflection, interaction, emergence. The changes involved in performances usually disrupt whatever arrangements/situations/balances/patterns existed prior to their emergence: the performative produces the energy for meaning to be called forth... and that happens... in performance. Thus, performances dwell in spaces that are prior to meaning, but wait! They linger on and occupy spaces produced right after meaning is made. Thus, performances (such as this text) also dwell in the spaces between “truth” and “lies”, the interstices of institutions and at their limits (McKenzie).

Performances and performatives are then, most of times, meaning producing manifestations: that which is made “visible” and that which can be “sensed.” Essentially, what “materializes” in front of us, human observers, materializes as performance. Are there recognizable performances outside human reach? “I” seriously doubt their manifestation. Our innate capacity for discreet thought and action is precisely what generates the very core/substance upon which performances and the performative can be marked out.

But, more accurately, because performances delve into the very core that creates/materializes meaning, some must go entirely unnoticed: we are not even able to recognize/sense them as such simply because we don't notice, much less understand their emergence and thus are incapable of marking them as discreet, other, alien. Science seems to work that way.

Performances vary in content, form and length to an almost impossible degree. The point being that we can firmly say there is very little besides an amalgam of performances. No points scored by asking/trying to establish what performances really are. They are. And in this passage, in their manifestation we live, we construct our little consciences with language, all languages, failing us (après William Carlos Williams). It is our failure to stabilize arbitrary reality that, however, keeps us going, keeps us ... performing our various tasks, errands and cultural follies. Recognising a performance as such admits to a certain level of change inside its core/codes, beyond that it becomes virtually impossible to categorize ongoing happenings.

Mediatized performances, for instance, take advantage of modern industrial civilization habits/paradigms: one is locked up into immobility in a concrete room with nothing but an electronic flicker to add a little movement to life. As I stated a few paragraphs above: performances—normally halfway between the "real" and the "reproduction", or the "real" and our failure to stabilize it—can move from one side to the other of the "cultural continuum" without losing their power to bring the real (that is, the *reality* of a performance, the real as performance, right here, right now)—if ever still so momentarily—to our *attention*. This is performance's *hold* on the real. Performances, beyond our quest for meaning, are authoritative machines, a singularity of some value to contemporary times which see repetition at the basis of its exchange economy and witness an overwhelming multiplication of commodities struggling to hold on by the minute to the surface of the media landscape.

Conclusion?

Only presence can regulate performance. Appropriateness of interpretation is possible: in the immediate presence of the performative. Once it is gone, it becomes sign, social construct. There, meaning and interpretation can never retain its original dimensions. Our most basic historical struggle has always been linked to this restoration of behaviour through cultural artifacts. The absence of the performative marks the endless recreation of meaning through its emergent qualities and by means of another set of signs. Alternative regulatory patterns always introduce doubt and uncertainty to the play. Names, concepts, theories are all performative. Theater, photography, criticism, literature, science, technology (you name it), are also thoroughly regulated performances, filled to the brim with performatives. Everything we do tries to regulate/recuperate the authority of the performance as it vanishes and becomes a performative sign of itself... Perhaps the only place where performances were not immediately subject to regulation (but, instead, were the deregulating subject) was the avant-gard arts scene which were once known as the "dada soireés" and, later on, 1950s "happenings", before such configurations would actually be

"named" "performance art." Even so, by the time these events were taking place, documentation and categorization were already at work. The performative entails aesthetic meaning as it stands in opposition to depth: "If nothing else, performance theories keep us from forgetting the obvious. They call attention to the surfaces upon which we humans inscribe meaning and on the basis of which we act." (Grimes, 13) Take September 11th, for instance. Ultimately, performing means wearing your heart on your sleeve. The performative is precisely that which marks out differences. Performances, implying a notion of originality that the performative can not live up to, not for long, anyway, open up the path for meaning to grow. Performances are the residue that both does and undoes meaning. They are a trace, left in the open.

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Title

Qual performance? Um inventário de efeitos

Abstract

Uma visão em detalhe sobre as possibilidades que o conceito de performance, seus efeitos e desdobramentos, oferece para a compreensão da cognição humana.

Keywords

Estudos da performance. Rituais. Interpretação e construção de sentido.

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