

Post Post-Structuralism?

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In my last comment, "Mainstream Theatre and Performance Studies" (T166), I urged the building of bridges between PS and the mainstream. I argued that PS methods of analysis could very fruitfully be deployed to examine mainstream performance--such as Broadway, the regional theatre, classical and modern dance. But that is only part of the program. Performance studies also needs to generate theories based on performance. Up till now, PS has relied too heavily on theory coming from outside the discipline, and this has led PS to converge on cultural studies. I would like to see PS assert more strongly its own disciplinary independence.

The turn toward cultural studies is related to something I have long advocated--the "broad spectrum approach," the assertion that anything and everything can be studied *as* performance. But what I meant was that in studying phenomena as performance one must interrogate these subjects with "performance questions." That is, questions of behavior, enactment, and reception. Events, situations, and even objects need to be examined in terms of the behaviors that animate and/or surround them. I did not mean to encourage "reading" events as one would read literary texts. In this regard, I believe that performance studies remains lacking in not fully developing methods that do not rely so heavily on the tradition of "close reading" derived from English and comparative literature. I even want us to be very cautious about accepting Clifford Geertz's well-known advice to "read" cultures as if they were texts comparable to great novels.

On the contrary, we in performance studies need to pay closer attention to behaviors, to actions enacted, and of course to the complex social, political, ideological, and historical contexts not merely surrounding behavior, but profoundly interacting with it. Meaning radiates from these interactions, from what happens among performers and between performers and performance contexts. There is no meaning inherent in objects or events treated as settled or finished "things." Meaning--and the bodies and objects and relations of which meaning is a function--is always unstable, shifting as circumstances and historical process shift. If we attend more carefully and precisely than we have done to behaviors, events, and enactments, we will put more performance into performance studies, and in so doing more clearly differentiate it from cultural studies or other disciplines allied to but necessarily different than performance studies.

A decisive case in point is the relation between performance studies and post-structuralism. Post-structuralism has had, and continues to have, a fruitful and formative influence on performance

studies. Under the aegis of post-structuralism, new ways of studying performance have been introduced into [End Page 4] performance studies. Post-structuralism has helped expand the range of what is considered "performance," including but far surpassing the "performing arts." Performance, and its sister, the performative, now are seen to inhabit just about all aspects of human thought, expression, and behavior.

Post-structuralism, including deconstruction, began as a revolt by French intellectuals against the rigidities of structuralism. The movement spread far beyond France. In the English-speaking world, post-structuralism merged with theories of the performative; and to a degree post-structuralism was aligned with critical theory, especially that of the Frankfurt School. These fruitful alliances helped make and/or transform many fields from philosophy to psychoanalysis, Marxism to postcolonial studies, gender to queer theory, cultural studies to performance studies, and more. Hereafter in this writing, when I say "post-structuralism" (or "-ists") I am referring to the full panoply of ideas, works, and persons clustered around post-structuralism. Much robust work was done, and continues to be done, by both established and younger adherents to post-structuralism, including several of my colleagues in the Department of Performance Studies, TSOA/NYU.

But despite these ongoing accomplishments, I believe post-structuralism is in need of an overhaul in its relationship to performance studies. Before being specific, let me acknowledge that I am not an expert on post-structuralism. I am speaking from my more general position as a performance practitioner and theorist, an editor who reads lots of manuscripts, a teacher, and someone who is committed to performance studies as a multifaceted project that ought to address the general public as well as its own disciplinary community.

What are the problems as I experience them?

Post-structuralism has become canonical, depending heavily on the thinking of a relatively few persons--whose works are more often cited as "authorities" than criticized or revised. This is very ironic because the basic tenet of deconstruction is the impossibility of finality, the rejection of settled authorities, and the emphasis on difference/ance. Yet again and again, Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Butler are treated more as saints professing a credo than as persons presenting wholly provisional theories. This is not their fault. All too rarely are their fundamental assertions criticized by those sympathetic to the post-structuralist project--by those on the inside, where cogent revision ought to come from. Many younger scholars more often mimic than analyze or update the pronouncements of the saints.

Why am I singling out post-structuralism? Simply because the cluster of ideas it represents pervades today's performance studies. Also because post-structuralism, especially in its Derridean version, claims universality, a way of explaining how humans grasp and organize "the world." This claim asserts that no assertion about reality, even itself, is anything but, and always already,

a "human construction" saturated with ideology. This paradox is at the heart of post-structuralism.

The case I am putting forward is a continuation of, or a version of, a very old tug-of-war between English-American and Continental, especially French, ways of understanding reality, a difference that can be summarized (in modern terms) as the struggle between pragmatism and variations, pro and con, of the Cartesian "cogito." I do not want to go too far or too deeply into this thicket, except to say that the pragmatic approach is based on experience, acknowledging a "real world" separate from human agency but probably not altogether knowable because of practical *not* theoretical (or absolute) constraints on knowing. Pragmatism was thrown into doubt by Heisenberg's theory of indeterminacy, which puts theoretical constraints on human knowledge. But pragmatism answers that what is true of particle physics may not be true of human behavior at the social level. **[End Page 5]**

The Cartesian approach argues that all that humans ever will know--because all that humans ever *can* know is founded on "thinking," the operations of human consciousness. In fact, even more radically, the cogito asserts that human being/being human is a function of thinking, thus: "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). Derrida of course stands Descartes on his head, but with typical Derridean "playfulness," Derrida does not reject the cogito so much as resituate it in a hall of trembling refracting mirrors: human realities are reflections--distortions of what humans perceive/conceive: iterations, reiterations, aporias, differences. Realities that are, as a traditional Jewish hymn has it (and Derrida is Talmudic): *beli reishit, beli tachlit*--"without beginning, without end."

I do not want to go any further into this here except to note that phenomenology is an attempt to bridge the gap between pragmatism and the cogito. And that Derridean philosophy is not the last word. Western philosophers have not concluded their attempts to "locate" reality or to understand knowing. And outside the discourses of the West are other explorations of the way things are.

Performance studies was to a large degree formed by the productive convergence of theories derived from other fields. We continue to be infatuated with theories derived from other fields. In some ways, this attachment to what is not ours is good, it is even artistic in its willy-nilly appropriation of "what works." But the downside is that importing undigested theory often produces repetitive, reductive, and dogmatic restatements of clichés and truisms. One would expect, after several decades of thought, that there would be more theory coming from performance studies itself. Even the very rich vein of "the performative" is derived from a philosophy of language. This troubles me because Austin, as is well known, derogated theatre as an "etiolation" of speech. For his part, Derrida privileges "writing" over speaking. I know that Derridean writing is much more than the literal act of putting words on paper, but the underlying metaphor cannot be ignored. In Derridean practice, theatrical performance is downgraded,

"absence" trumps "presence." To me, this smells like the long-standing, Platonic bias against theatre.

Be that as it may, what is undeniable is the great and growing breach separating artists from spectators from scholars that I spoke of in my T166 Comment. These three groups--those who make performances, those who attend performances, and those who theorize about performance--need each other. At present, only a few performance artists pay attention to theory; hardly anyone in mainstream theatre and dance even knows what is being written, no less cares. And the general public is excluded because writing which relies heavily on theory is often turgid.

Complicating the situation are the big distances in approach, function, goals, and audiences separating the different branches of the performing arts, not to mention those whose major work is studying the performances in/of everyday life. I don't mean the "traditional" separation in Western cultures of theatre, dance, and music, but the break between the popular (pop music, film, TV, the internet), the "midcult" (Broadway, regional theatre, opera, ballet, and modern dance), the community-based, and the experimental (performance art, plus what's left of the historical avantgarde). This great diversity ought to be a cause for celebration. Nothing of value from the last century has passed from the scene. Theorists ought to be busy relating this diverse abundance of performance activities to each other, saying what connects individual genres to other genres, what separates them, devising theories within and across a wide variety of performance forms, relating these various forms to their personal, social, historical, political, and ideological contexts. A great opportunity for new theory is there for the taking/making.

The absence of performance in performance theory is in large part due to the predilection of post-structuralists to address theoretical rather than experiential **[End Page 6]** or practical questions. Post-structuralists ask: If the social world is not given but always in the process of being made, out of what and by what rules is it constructed? If there are no finalities but only relations among differences--the play of the alienated Self to Others (the Lacanian mirror)--then what can one say about "identity," both personal and social? Out of questions like these, post-structuralists have constructed an extremely culturally specific (French) philosophical "discourse." The discourse is vital and engaging, but it also results in giving an advantage to theory over practice. Is there another relation of theory to practice?

One model constructs practice and theory as a pyramid. The base of the pyramid consists of performances--the "broad spectrum" I have long championed--and the pinnacle of the pyramid is the relatively small domain of theory. In between the base and pinnacle are various "thick descriptions" of events (to use Geertz's term). Theory in this model is inductive, working from experience through description; theory seeks to illuminate, explain, and relate the many diverse practices at the base of the pyramid.

But what we have at present (if submissions to *TDR*, reading of books in the field, and perusal of student papers is an indication) is an inverted pyramid. Theory is at the base, determining what performance practices are selected for consideration, and the thinking is largely deductive, from theory to practice. Many domains of performance are overlooked; historical research is slighted; anecdotal and partial data replaces detailed, long-term fieldwork and the close study of archives.

So what's to do?

I am not arguing to dump what has been so important and liberating. I want to include post-structuralism in whatever is coming next.

I am arguing for a revision in the way we regard theory, *all* theory, not just post-structuralist theory; and for actively seeking/creating new theories specific to performance studies. And although I cannot describe theories that don't exist, I can outline some of their qualities.

First, such theories need to be closely tied to observation and historical and archival research.

Second, these theories need to be inductive and fluid--always being updated (as theories in the sciences are). In this regard, the "givens" of post-structuralism have become too much like a creed--articles of faith, rather than testable, changeable, and inherently unstable propositions. The post-structuralist creed can be summarized as: everything is relative, everything is constructed, behavior and events are inscribed before they are (always and already) reenacted, there are no originals, the powers-that-be cloak their pervasive control of individuals and societies.

If Einstein could revise Newton, surely someone should put Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Butler to the test. When it comes to writing, because performance studies exists at the intersection of several disciplines, we should be addressing a broad public, not just each other. To do this we have to write simply and clearly. The test I give myself is to ask if what I write might be understood (forget agreed with) 20 years ago and 20 years from now. Because of the overemphasis on secondhand theory, too much performance studies writing is dead on arrival.

In this regard, if the next generation of scholars works at it, they can develop practice-based performance theories that will include even as they revise and transcend current theory. The new theories will be generated from performance rather than "applied to" performances. Only when performance studies creates these theories, will the discipline have earned the right to its own name.

Whatever's coming next is ripe to make its appearance.

--Richard Schechner