

# THE PERFORMANCE STUDIES PARADIGM

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to show how performance can be considered as a paradigmatic practice significant for understanding of the contemporary art not only in the field of theater and performance art, but also in all other artistic and cultural practices as well as in a number of non-artistic practices. I will develop my argument based on Richard Schechner's understanding of performance as a collection of interpretative tools for studying the broad spectrum of social phenomena, where the objects of research don't have to be clarified according to the medium, nor bound to specific disciplines, and on Jon Mckenzie's understanding of performance as onto-historic formation of knowledge and power, where performance is established as a general paradigm of contemporary society. In the central discussion I will refer to the significance of the concept of liminality.*

**Keywords:** *performance, liminality, knowledge, power, contemporary art*

## PERFORMANCE: IN AND OUT OF ARTISTIC DISCOURSE

Rather than a strict theoretical/academic discipline, Performance Studies have been established as an interdisciplinary field of research, a post-discipline which is based in arts and humanities and focuses on performance as a central component of art, culture and life itself. In this regard it is easy to notice that scholarship and practice of performance studies significantly overreach the traditional forms of performing arts (such as theater, dance, opera, music performance art etc.) and include in its field of research all kinds of rituals, performance of everyday life, public speaking, oral history, philosophical performance, political performance, activism, storytelling, performance art, various kinds of popular entertainment, micro-constructions of race, class, gender, sex and ethnicity, carnivals, performance in sex, performance in business, technological performance, folklore performances, festivals, drag, non-verbal communication, body-language, games, sports, political demonstrations, digital performance, electronic civil disobedience, performance in everyday culture, all kinds of human as well as post-human behaviors, i.e., all forms of life in its widest bio-political sense. In other words, almost everything.

Historically, the decisive moment for the birth of Performance Studies was marked by the beginning of a productive dialog between theater studies and anthropology initiated with the collaboration between theater director Richard Schechner and anthropologist Victor Turner in late 1970s. At the time, theater practitioners and scholars were expressing the tendency towards a radical expansion of theater and performing arts towards the more general area of arts, culture and life, while anthropologists and sociologists sought to apply the knowledge from the avant-garde theatrical forms to studying the ritualized social life. From these complementary tendencies Performance Studies were born. Since the very beginning the key elements in Performance Studies research and practice were interculturalism and interdisciplinarity. Interculturalism meant rejecting the western-centric view and inclusion of non-western performing practices into this field of research – which was an important and complex issue to address especially when having in mind that performance studies were articulated in an Anglo-American context, and therefore still require constant questioning and (re)articulation of both obvious and hidden internal hierarchies and power relations today.<sup>1</sup>

Interdisciplinary approach firstly meant exchange of scientific methods and objects of research between theater studies and anthropology, which was an extremely significant move forward in the way of thinking about phenomena outside the boundaries of artistic practice from within an art theory. In other words, it was a turn from the autonomy of art (characteristic for western cultural spaces) towards the interdisciplinary and heterogeneous linkage of various aspects in socio-political and cultural practices as well as towards acknowledging non-western perspectives. Epistemologically, interdisciplinarity was inscribed in the foundations of Performance Studies,<sup>2</sup> opening a dialog with anthropology and theater but also history, sociology, literature and philosophy. Particularly important for contemporary Performance Studies are trans-disciplinary and inter-discursive dialogs with postcolonial and decolonial theories, critical theory, post-Marxism, feminism, queer theory, psychoanalyses as well as cultural studies. However, unlike cultural studies that focus on the text as an expanded metaphor of culture, Performance Studies focus on the agency, embodiment and event in relation to the life as well as technologically mediated performances. The paradigm shift in which performance was established as an organizing concept<sup>3</sup> for understanding

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- 1 For more information on this aspect see: Janelle Reinelt: “Is Performance Studies imperialist?”, in: *TDR*, 51/3 (Fall 2007), pp. 7–16.
  - 2 Ana Vujanović: “Epistemološka mapa studija performansa”, in: *Uvod u studije performansa*, eds. Aleksandra Jovičević and Ana Vujanović. Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2007, p. 19.
  - 3 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: “Performance Studies”, in: *The Performance Studies reader*, ed. Henry Bial. London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 25–36, here p. 43.

and studying (human) behaviors as well as a wide set of related socio-political and cultural phenomena marked the performative turn in humanities and social sciences. Or, as put by Jon Mckenzie:

The concept of performance as the embodied enactment of cultural forces has not only informed many disciplines of study, it has also given rise to its own paradigm of knowledge, called in the United States and other English-speaking countries “Performance Studies”.<sup>4</sup>

Schechner’s broad spectrum approach contributed to the popularity of Performance Studies as a field within which the relations among the social, the political and the artistic can be studied and performed. At the same time, the broad spectrum approach made it difficult to determine the specific field of research of Performance Studies and this elusiveness has been systematically applied in order to maintain the unique liminal position in academia as well as in the art world: in-between theory and practice, theater and ritual, art and life. As picturesquely explained by Schechner:

Is performance studies a “field” an “area” a “discipline”? The sidewinder snake moves across the desert floor by contracting and extending itself in a sideways motion. Wherever this beautiful rattlesnake points, it is not going there. Such (in) direction is characteristic of performance studies. This area/field/discipline often plays at what it is not, tricking those who want to fix it, alarming some, amusing others, astounding a few as it sidewinds its way across the deserts of academia.<sup>5</sup>

In other words as an inclusive post-discipline, Performance Studies do not set boundaries to the objects of research in terms of medium, culture, or possible theoretical approaches, while the organizing principle is that they are all examined through the lens of performance. Treating the artistic performance (performing arts) as but one of many overlapping forms of performance undermines the arbitrary dichotomy between the artistic and non-artistic. Although post-discipline, it is important to understand that Performance Studies are fundamentally an artistic post-discipline. This is not only because they have originated from the field of performing arts and theater but also because they have stayed institutionally and practically linked to the field of art: at universities they are studied in the art faculty departments and academies, projects are realized in the system of arts and culture, theoretical texts are mainly published in journals and publications dedicated to

4 Jon Mckenzie: *Perform or else: From discipline to performance*. London-New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 8.

5 Richard Schechner: “What is Performance Studies anyway”, in: *The ends of performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lanne. New York: NYU Press, 1998, pp. 357–361, here p. 357.

artistic practices, etc. It is significant that such a position is acknowledged precisely because the Performance Studies paradigm offered an unprecedented turn in which the artistic field appeared not only as a space for artistic interpretation of the world (as in traditional practices and disciplines where certain topics “from the word/life” would be thematized, elaborated, interpreted, commented or mimed in an artwork), but in fact offers a toolbox, a set of methods for understanding and studying and approaching the world (private, social, political, economical and other performative aspects of life). In this way, the paradigm shift introduced by the Performance Studies presented an important re-politicization of the whole field of art.

### LIMINALITY

This seemingly eclectic broad spectrum approach established Performance Studies as a systematically and inherently liminal field of research that cannot be captured, fixed or precisely located. Numerous Performance Studies scholars consider liminality as the key feature of performance, i.e., being in between. Since its beginnings, Performance Studies as a post-discipline have maintained the position between theory and practice established in the elusive, fluid, flexible, transgressive liminal space.

Etymologically the term *liminality* stems from the Latin word *limen* meaning a *threshold*. In Performance Studies liminality refers to the state of being in between two possibilities of existence in such a way that it relates to both but does not (yet) become to either of them.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the notion of borderline that refers to the clear demarkation and differentiation between certain notions, spaces of forms of existence, *liminal* encompasses the hybrid “in between” space where the differences and similarities are not separated in a clear way. The efficacy of performance has often been defined in terms of liminality. The term liminal marks the in-between space that is at the same time the point of joining and separation, an actual as well as symbolical space between two sides of the border. It also refers to the temporal quality of “being in-between”, which is the process of transition, transitory. For example in anthropology, a liminal phase in a ritual – for instance a ritual of initiation – is that in which one has already left their pre-ritual status but still has not taken the new status that they will obtain when the ritual is over. In other words, liminality is a form of activity whose spatial, temporal and symbolical quality of being in between opens the possibility for transgression and resistance and perhaps even transformation of social norms. If we apply the term liminal to political and

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6 Victor Turner: “Liminality and communitas”, in: *The Performance Studies reader*, ed. Henry Bial, p. 79.

cultural processes and changes, we can use it to name the periods in which the social hierarchies, traditions and established social order can be brought into question, shaken and temporally or permanently changed. Therefore, we can say revolutions are always liminal periods, i.e., liminal stages. This is not to claim that liminality is emancipatory per se, but that it opens up the possibility for emancipatory action.

In the context of Performance Studies it is important to understand that liminality does not function as some kind of an abstract meta-concept but that it obtains its manifestations and realizations in actual artistic and non-artistic performances. Such a liminal position provides the possibility to test, suspend, confront, and maybe even transform the repressive social norms. Therefore, liminality is understood in terms of transgression, resistance, possibility for realization of the ideas that are left outside mainstream or that go against it. With this in mind, many Performance Studies scholars consider liminality, social activism and/or subversiveness as defining characteristics of performance.<sup>7</sup> This standpoint suggests several problematic implications: (a) performance that is not liminal is not efficient; (b) performance that is not liminal is not a subject of performance studies and; (c) if we push the previous claim a bit further: a performance that is not liminal is not at all a performance. Any of these conclusions would be problematic and misleading, as we encounter the problem of auto-reflexiveness which diminishes the political edge (at best) or even transforms it into its own contradiction (at worst).

Therefore, I will here elaborate on the notion of “liminal norm” introduced by Jon Mckenzie. Although he acknowledges that liminality possibly provides the most precise answer to the question “what is performance and performance studies?”, he points out that the repetitive use of this term has led to the paradox where liminality has become normative. By “liminal norm” Mckenzie understands a tendency to establish liminality as a paradigm for performance studies, where the efficacy of performance is almost exclusively determined in relation to its potential for transgression and/or resistance. The problem with this approach is that while focusing on liminality, performance studies fail to see a broad segment of different forms of performance, those which are not transgressive but on the contrary highly normative. These include practices performed by governments, institutions, establishment as well as governmentality itself, that is, exactly those formations that Performance Studies aimed to resist for the past fifty years.<sup>8</sup>

7 Henry Bial: “What is Performance Studies? ”, in: *ibid.*, pp.5–58, here p. 5.

8 Mckenzie: *Perform or else*, p. 52.

PERFORMANCE AS A PROBLEMATIC PARADIGM  
OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The far-reaching thesis that McKenzie elaborates in his book *Perform or else: From discipline to performance* argues that demand for performance has become the norm of our contemporary society. This means that performance is no longer exclusively connected to the progressive and transgressive fields of human performance activities, but it has become the general imperative of existence in the present society which is determined by the rules of institutional performance and/or performance management. In reference to Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison, 1975), Jon McKenzie suggests that in the twenty-first century, performance will be what discipline was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup> According to him, today it is performance that produces the subject of knowledge. This subject differs from the subject produced by discipline as it is not unified; on the contrary it is fractal, unstable, fragmented, decentered, nomadic, flexible, virtual as much as actual:

performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge. This formation is ontological in that it entails a displacement of being that challenges our notion of history; it is nonetheless historical in that this displacement is materially inscribed.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, we could say that the efficiency of contemporary Performance Studies is determined by their readiness and ability to articulate an adequate response to this global phenomenon of performative paradigm. Nevertheless, I find it important to emphasize that this does not mean giving up on the liminal position of Performance Studies. I agree with McKenzie that it is necessary to formulate a theory of performance that will (as well) encompass performances which are by no means liminal. However, I argue that, precisely because of the prevailing demand for performance, we need to persist on the significance of liminal space occupied by performance studies. Liminal, processual, elusive in-between space could function as a gap in reality where it would be possible to realize a certain degree of freedom. Therefore, I would read McKenzie's notion of liminal norm as an invitation to redefining and reconceptualizing liminal space occupied by performance studies, rather than completely discarding it. This would mean acknowledging the non-liminal performances in a liminal field of performance studies. Such a

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

complex operation would require a shift from the question “what is performance?” towards the question “which performance?” and I would add “which performer and in what context?”.

By proposing a general performance theory, Mckenzie does not intend to proclaim a new stable theoretical meta-system, but a critical formation that will include all contemporary issues, procedures and processes connected to performance in various social aspects.<sup>11</sup> This general theory of performance is elaborated on three main levels: (a) performance stratum; (b) performance paradigm; and (c) performance-performative blocks.

On a most abstract level stratum is built from three paradigmatic levels: Performance management (organizational performance), Performance Studies (cultural performance) and Techno-performance (technological performance).<sup>12</sup> Performance management refers to the managerial strategies in the companies/corporations so that it “attunes itself to economic processes that are increasingly service-based, globally oriented, and electronically wired. [...] Performance Management does not sell itself as scientific management: instead, it articulates an *ars poetica* of organizational practice”.<sup>13</sup> Techno-performance refers to changes that occurred in the USA during the Cold War arms race and space race and today reaches its peak in the global world where we have become dependent on technology in all aspects of life.<sup>14</sup> In his inclusive elaboration of cultural performance Mckenzie introduces a list of activities, emphasizing that cultural could be understood in its widest sense: from high to popular culture and counter-culture manifestations and events:

The field of cultural performance that has emerged over the last half century includes a wide variety of activities situated around the world. These include traditional and experimental theater; rituals and ceremonies; popular entertainments, such as parades and festivals; popular, classical, and experimental dance; avant-garde performance art; oral interpretations of literature, such as public speeches and readings; traditions of folklore and storytelling; aesthetic practices found in everyday life, such as play and social interactions; political demonstrations and social movements.<sup>15</sup>

11 Vujanović: “Epistemološka mapa”, p. 27.

12 Mckenzie: *Perform or else*, p. 20.

13 Ibid., pp. 6–7.

14 Ibid., p. 12.

15 Ibid., p. 29.

Mckenzie's intention "to rehearse a general theory of performance"<sup>16</sup> came in response to performance as a dominant social demand in our time. In this context, Mckenzie introduces the new subject of knowledge as a performative subject, that is, a contemporary subject of biopolitics is a performative subject:

Like discipline, performance produces a new subject of knowledge, though one quite different from that produced under the regime of panoptic surveillance. Hyphenated identities, transgendered bodies, digital avatars, the Human Genome Project – these suggest that the performative subject is constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentered rather than centered, virtual as well as actual. Similarly, performative objects are unstable rather than fixed, simulated rather than real. They do not occupy a single, "proper" place in knowledge; there is no such thing as the thing-in-itself. Instead, objects are produced and maintained through a variety of sociotechnical systems, overcoded by many discourses, and situated in numerous sites of practice.<sup>17</sup>

In the new processes of subjectivisation, technology (which directly or indirectly influences geopolitical, economic, and technological transformations) plays a key role. Directly and indirectly, technology influences the geopolitical, economic and technological transformations, influencing the formation of new "fractal subjects". At the same time technology is connected to cultural, institutional and technological performance, that is with the performance strata. Today people turn to their computers, smart phones, tablets, and various Internet-networked devices in search for performances in which they will partake. People perform in technology, with technology, and via technology. This new performative subject is in constant flux and tensions pressed by the demand *to perform – or else*.

Moreover, as Mckenzie points out, people are no longer the exclusive producers of technology, but we also have technologies that produce and even design other new technologies for the production of some third technologies. This means that the performing subject (performer) is not necessarily human, but it can also be a machine, as well as numerous nuances and variations between those two entities (Cyborg, avatar, bot, etc.). I would say that the most far-reaching implication of that thesis is that it suggests the possibility of considering non-human performers in an equal footing with human performers.

16 Ibid., p. 4.

17 Ibid., p. 18.

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Finally, does this mean that in the Performance Studies paradigm everything is performance? Introducing the distinction between “in performance” and “as performance”<sup>18</sup> is key to understanding the Performance Studies paradigm from a methodological as well as a political point of view. This distinction exposes that, although everything can be interpreted “as performance”, there is a distinction to what “is performance” (in a certain cultural, artistic and social context). In other words, although claiming that everything is a performance would be inaccurate or at least unproductive, we can claim that everything can be studied as performance. Interpreting something as performance includes being aware of one’s own position and responsibility in relation to the observed / interpreted / studied phenomena. Moreover, it means exploring what it does:

To treat any object, work, or product “as” performance – a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all – means to investigate what the object does, how it interacts with other objects or beings, and how it relates to other objects or beings. Performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Performance Studies provide this possibility by offering a toolbox for studying and approaching the world as performance and especially for researching the political aspects of artistic and theoretical production as well as re-politicization of everyday life. Therefore, it is not surprising that in spite of its elusiveness and liminality or perhaps precisely because of them, Performance Studies provide a fruitful inter-discursive field that, to an extent, can function as a general theory of art.

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19 Idem.

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