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Text and Time of Performance
Four Questions to Richard Schechner*

How can the Performance Studies paradigm be applied to literary criticism and theory?

Performance Studies concern a “broad spectrum” methodology which aims to include any artistic field. By vocation, Performance Studies investigate the contexts where textual and literary works are produced, but we know from experience that a performative approach also tackles the processes that regulate textual fixity. The Performance Studies approach questions which theories can be deduced from such processes.

In the West we tend to assign primary importance to the text. However, I have seen Shakespeare’s *Othello* with black actors who played both the roles of Othello and Iago or plays with women playing male roles. How does such a performative approach change the theoretical hypothesis of a supposedly racist or misogynist interpretation of the text?

As we can see, from the perspective of Performance Studies, the performative context renegotiates and reshapes the apparently immutable conditions of a written text.

Can a performative inquiry into literary texts provide a new perspective on contemporary reality?

I’m not sure what you mean when you talk about a performative inquiry. I don’t know of any kind of inquiry which is not performative.

This is directly verifiable by dramaturgical practices. Take, for example, Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Taking a performative approach the great Italian author tackles the circuit between reality on stage and reality in the audience. This contrast, or mirroring, is inherent in professional activity of the actor or the actress, who performatively question the sense of their own position on stage, while the character they play claims truthfulness.

Performance Studies promote a methodology that is aimed to continuously question reality rather than accept the finality of assertive judgments. The question that Performance Studies ask is “What kind of action and, therefore, what kind of performance does the text that I’m reading claim?”.

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Let's take the case of another classic, *Oedipus*. We assume that the main character has killed his father and slept with his mother. This is what the text says; we take it for granted. This could lead to accepting this text as tautological, as something already known, but what is unknown is the way in which the text can reveal to us new meanings in a performative dimension. It is not simply, "Oedipus kills; Oedipus has sex with". It is "How does Oedipus find out that he has done these things?". Every production of *Oedipus* is like a musical score, where every single experience significantly changes apparently predictable contents.

This also reminds me of Brecht and his estrangement technique. In certain circumstances it is necessary to establish a difference, standing alongside the character and reconsidering what we took for granted.

This taking circumstances into consideration; this standing next to what happens even as it is happening is fundamental to Performance Studies. It is often necessary to reconsider our internal and external position within a performance. We need to deduce from the context how what seemed to be obvious was actually not obvious at all.

If we refer to the notion of «as performance», could we argue that Performance Studies enable a different quality of epistemological approach to literary text as an action? And how could such approach differ from the perspective of Cultural Studies?

Cultural Studies investigate cultural expressions, whereas Performance Studies focus on actions; also, Performance Studies tackle not only the issue of doing, but also showing (representing) what is being acted. On the contrary, Cultural Studies don't necessarily include showing. Performance Studies study behaviour. From this point of view, the question of time is of utmost importance for Performance Studies, and not so much for Cultural Studies. When you question a written text, you know that the underlying flow is occurring. Heraclitus's river is always flowing. If we observe, in its immanence, a conversation (like the one we are having now), we can assume that the issue of time is central. Even as I speak, I have already spoken and can almost immediately recall what I've said.

However, in some situations a subject we are studying allows us to cross both methodologies. I am thinking, for example, about the possibility of a poetic work written and staged in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The aspects related to the text may draw on Cultural Studies when dealing with the text in the abstract sense of a "thing written". But the manner of staging the text, the performative necessities generated by the exceptional context certainly concerns Performance Studies.

What is your opinion about technological reproduction, literary description, or re-enactment of performances?

These imply a shocking upheaval of the categories of time and space. As Walter Benjamin understood almost a century ago, the means of “mechanical reproduction” heralded basic questions related to what is real and when what is real happens. Let’s take the so called “here and now” as an example. It is a formula linked to the transient character of an experience. Even knowing that we are in the same place at the same time thanks to the media we are using – talking via Zoom – yet I am in Manhattan and you are in Sicily and where you are it is six in the afternoon while for me it is not yet noon. What does “here and now” mean in such a situation? This problem of simultaneity – even of historicity – is fundamental and will increasingly characterizes our co-presences, our performances, reshaping artistic and literary phenomena in not yet fully imagined ways