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Performance Studies as New Anthropology of Events

Abstract: The question of relations between performance studies and new anthropology of events within the open cultural field directly points to the internal interventionist practice of performance and event as the agent of generative and constitutive roles in terms of initiating social processes and situations. An analysis of Turner's dramaturgical patterns in the development and solution of social crisis, as well as Goffman's social roles, in direct relation with performance studies, indicate that there is an original connection of these two theoretical platforms and point to their integral importance in terms of actualization and critical thinking related to current social situations. The basic theoretical and social transformations, connected to globalism and interculturalism, led to a redefinition of the aims and range of anthropological knowledge. Global anthropology of the contemporary in current, mediatized society is connected to the question of event, i.e. the event as performance, including different aspects of presence and behavior in a wide spectrum of human activities, along with their consequences.

Keywords: performance studies, anthropology of events, performing, anthropology of the contemporary

Introduction

Performance studies in the field of art and culture appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. In the earlier period it was based on establishing a relation between formal theatrical methods and anthropological and sociological processes, creating a trans-disciplinary concept of performance that could be identified in almost all social activities. Among the most distinguished drama theoreticians who relied on the ritualistic school of anthropology, a special part was played by Richard Schechner, a practitioner of drama experiments within the new academic discipline of performance studies. Schechner's approach to cultural performance in the 80s and 90s, in the tradition of

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Turner's application of dramatic structure to anthropological research, opens the issue of culture analysis in the context of theatricalization, with performance as the universal means of expression. The cooperation of Schechner and Victor Turner linking theatre studies and anthropology, seen by Erika Fischer-Lichte as the biggest turning point in theatre studies of the 20th century,¹ is identified in performance studies by a redirection of the former main focus on the dramatic text to its performance. By considering the performance as the artefact of culture, exclusivity of the work of art disappears and turns it into an instrument of analyzing art as social practice. Parallel with Richard Schechner and Michael Kirby's aspiration to expand the research and practical discourse of the theater to the entire field of art, culture and society, the socio-anthropological work of Turner, Clifford Geertz and Erving Goffman analyze ritualistic social life by applying theatrical forms. Interdisciplinarity based on exchange of scientific methods between theatre studies and social anthropology enabled the analyses of theatrical forms in each aspect of social life and the study of social life through formal theatrical methods. Performance studies primarily rely on the anthropological method of direct observation and participation, which is at the same time a critical, distanced observation of culture. The outcome of such an analysis are events composed as behavioristic acts in the social context, with a meaning which is not referential, but depends on the context, convention and the performance act itself.

Turner and Performing

By applying the dramatic structure to his anthropological research, Turner paved the path for dramatic analogy as one of the main directions of modern anthropology. By defining the differences between *a social* and *an artistic drama*, through an introduction of the structure of the dramatic action in the analysis of 'social dramas' and simultaneously by way of applying knowledge from social dramas to theatrical work, Turner examines three aspects of culture – liminality, marginality and structural inferiority.² While anthropologists in the post-war period analyzed culture as an abstract and static structure of symbols, he interprets it as the continuous behavior linking directly to the concept of the social drama, as dynamic existential expressions of social community.

Liminality (lat. *limen* – threshold) as the state of unstable existence and the position of being betwixt and between with relation to the law, customs, and conventions,³ in the theory of performance studies indicates transitional, *in between*, actions or behavior.⁴ When addressing the performance, Turner emphasizes a liminal phase

¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 77.

² Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press., 1974), 236–37.

³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process – Structure and Anti-Structure* (London, New York: Routledge, 1969), 95.

⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), 66–67.

characterized by the possibility of transition, transformation and creativity, which creates new situations, events and social reality. In the liminal phase, participants are stripped of their old identity and are yet to prove themselves in the new ones, when they are “betwixt and between”⁵. Turner depicts the liminal moment as the moment of “anti-structure”, when the past is immediately suspended or negated, and the future has not yet begun, the moment of “pure potentiality where everything trembles in the balance.”⁶ In culture, the liminal phase is identified as an experimental and innovative period, as “in liminality, new ways of acting and new combinations of symbols are tried out, to be discarded or accepted.”⁷ Turner finds that the ritual is one of the most powerful active genres of cultural performance, as its specific performing nature is exactly an indicator of the event or “the transformation act” of the participants’ social status and their perception of reality in all its aspects.

Turner also engaged in research on social drama in its universal phase structure, as a process of changing values and aims, shared by numerous participants, into a *system which is always temporary and provisional*. Social drama begins when a quiet course of regular, ordered social life is interrupted by *the breach* of rules.⁸ Possible reactions to the resulting crises create cultural frames within which the reflexive processes of drama will have their legitimate place. Inside a complex relations context of social and theatrical drama, Turner identifies a model of *active mirror*, which Schechner named *revision of the past*. The theater, according to Turner, is the most powerful genre of cultural play and a hypertrophy of social processes, not an identical copy of social events. Turner describes Schechner’s theater as research work of immediate, subjective experience towards an artistic outcome, inside the liminal phase where all shapes of experience experiments are possible. Turner stresses Schechner’s aspiration towards creation, not imitation (*poiesis* vs. *mimesis*), which creates the role simultaneously with the actor. By approaching the problem of performance from different angles, the research work of these authors defined the theater as an important experimental instrument of *inter-cultural transfer of different modalities of experience*.

Turner and Schechner developed an analysis of play and ritual based on the model of *Homo Ludens*,⁹ by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who emphasized that the play is primarily the act of creating, performing and executing, where interaction of participants overcomes the set frame and can create unexpected and new

⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

⁶ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 44.

⁷ Victor Turner, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality,” in *Secular Ritual*, ed. S. F. Moore and B. C. Myerhoff (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), 40.

⁸ When studying the processes included in the structure of social drama, Turner emphasizes four levels where these processes are present: *the breach* or common social relationships ordered according to certain rules, *crisis* brought about by this breach, *regressive action* and finally *reintegration* of conflicting parties or acceptance of irrevocable separation. Cf. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 100.

⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London, Boston, Henley: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1949), 13.

meanings. Although this concept of drama lacks a more precise scientific determination from the point of view of contemporary anthropology, Turner maintains that it is interactivity and uncertainty of the outcome which are elementary for establishing anthropology as a scientific discipline of people.

Goffman and Performing

American sociologist Erving Goffman develops the theory of social behavior related to the meaning of the concept of performance, claiming that in everyday life, in order to achieve the social act, it is necessary to perform certain roles. By selecting the perspective which enables the analysis of the social life, Goffman examines the way in which each individual in everyday situations presents himself/herself and his/her activities to others, the ways he/she uses that to guide and control the impressions that others form of him/her.¹⁰ Considering the two types of communication – consciously produced expressions and implicit content or meaning – he bases his study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* primarily on the second, more theatrical and more contextualized, non-verbal, and supposedly, non-intentional type.¹¹ By taking the act of a certain participant as the primary referral point, from traditional, anthropological analysis of ritual play until contemporary, experimental theater, the author adopts the perspective of a theatrical play and the principles he develops are dramaturgical.

By placing the equation symbol between human interaction and the way the actors act on stage, Goffman uses dramaturgical analysis to explain the concepts of *status* and *role*. A certain social status resembles a play and the role becomes the scenario performed as part of a certain character, dialogue and action.¹² Goffman turned this individual performance into representation of oneself, i.e. attempts made by individuals to create a certain impression in interaction with others. The elements of this process include: performance (situation), non-verbal communication, idealization (intentions or cultural standard instead of real motifs) and tactfulness.

Goffman also defines the basic *situational terms* of everyday presentation. *Interaction* is seen as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon each other's actions, *encounter* is all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion and *performance* is all the activity by participants aimed at influencing each other. *Part* or *Routine* is a pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and

¹⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² Goffman differentiates the impressions a person “creates” (created) as a consequence of premeditated mental processes and the impressions that he “leaves” (authentic, part of his identity). Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

which may be presented or played through on other occasions.¹³ After determining the social role and realization of rights and obligations connected to a certain status, and which can be linked to one or more stage roles, Goffman raises the question of the ways in which the relationship, i.e. the differences between everyday life and theatrical play, could be understood. He uses the term *front* to describe the part of performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for observers of the performance. It is part of a *standard expressive repertoire* used intentionally or unintentionally by the individual during his performance.

Social reality, according to Goffman, is not fixed, it is created in the process of interaction between different individuals, where the initial phase is collecting and giving information about oneself as a prerequisite for the further definition of a certain *situation*. Goffman stresses that in this process, the real attitudes of individuals are hidden and are only reached indirectly, through symbols and associative moments, the first of which involves *verbal symbols of exchange of information*, while the second includes certain behaviors. The conclusions are made based on assumptions, and the final construction of a certain *social situation* depends on the interpretation of a certain phenomenon.

The culturological aspect of Goffman's concept claiming that a *social role* is not the reality, but presentation and concealment of reality, leaves a gap between the *theatrecalized* stage of social life and objective reality. Goffman claims that the role influences reality up to a certain point and participates in the creation of the identity of the person playing that role, which relativizes the boundaries between the real (natural, everyday, realistic) and the fictional (stage). Taking into consideration pluralism of influential social factors, Goffman was dedicated to examining and analyzing general classifications of social situations, initiating the discussion of the *social role* as a real element of a certain culture and assessing the possibility of applying it in a contemporary context.

Anthropology of the Contemporary and Performing

Through analysis of key changes in anthropological theory and practice and their links to social and cultural transformations in the 1970s, contemporary theoreticians in this field point out intellectual diversity and theoretical disconnection. The last decades of the 20th century were the period when this discipline was faced with new social conditions and their own theoretical limitations. The basic theoretical, epistemological and social transformations, related to interculturalism and globalism, led to the evolving of new intellectual directions, thus leading to a redefinition

¹³ Goffman stresses the importance of differentiating between the stage role and the individual situation in which it is performed. Cf. John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *The Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 49.

of the aims and scope of anthropological thought. The focus on analysis of the society as a whole was replaced by interpretation of cultural diversity and understanding its meaning. Despite the lack of a common paradigm serving as the leading principle of action, theoreticians of contemporary anthropological studies emphasize the only constant, expressed in aspirations toward a more reliable, clear and more thorough understanding of ways in which the discipline problematizes its subject and research methodologies: concepts such as a *society* and an *individual* are replaced by the concepts of *culture* and *identity* which became the key concepts of the new orientation.¹⁴

The theoretical viewpoint of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner in the field of symbolic anthropology marks a *hermeneutic turning point* in contemporary anthropological theory and practice. By striving to distance anthropology from methodological scientific formalism and move it closer to humanistic disciplines and hermeneutics, the authors stressed that each culture should be interpreted in its own categories, and instead of looking for general rules, they should insist on cultural relativism.¹⁵ Gertz called this epistemological change in a theoretical and methodological sense *interpretative anthropology*.

Relying on theoretical contributions by authors such as Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault and Edward Said signifies the process of cumulative formation of the inner organization of the epistemological field of anthropology. This scientific discipline is perceived as a discursive formation in the sense that Foucault used this term. His concept of discourse and discursive formations refers to a particular schematic of ideas, performances and forms of social practice which lay the foundation for and determine the method to be used when discussing, thinking or writing about certain topics and phenomena.¹⁶ According to this viewpoint, the discourse constructs certain *truth regimes* which in turn create certain kinds of knowledge and behavior, related to a topic or a phenomenon. By criticizing anthropology as the constitutive element of thinking, Foucault claims that “philosophy has fallen into anthropological dream” and that it is required to “demolish completely the anthropological quadrangle”¹⁷. This defines the criticism of structuralism through the development of the analytical concept of power as the instrument of guiding social behavior. The key contribution by Foucault was in considering ways in which social and humanistic sciences, including anthropology, constitute the subject and classify the world.¹⁸

¹⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2–3.

¹⁵ According to Gertz's interpretation, anthropology should not be understood as “experimental science in search of (universal) laws, but as interpretative science in search of a meaning.” Roger M. Keesing and Andrew Strathern, *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective* (Boston, Massachusetts: Wadsworth Publishing Co Inc., 1997), 161.

¹⁶ Alec McHoul and Wendy Grace, *A Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 33–34.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 380.

¹⁸ Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 14.

During the 1980s the domain of *practice* has become one of the most significant platforms of action in anthropology and at the same time a recognizable and influential paradigm in social and humanistic sciences.¹⁹ In this context *the man* is the key figure as the *subject of social and historical processes*, bridging the gap between the culture and the individual, between objectivism and subjectivism.²⁰ In this line of integrative sociological theories, Ivana Spasić emphasizes the importance of the active involvement of human subjects, either individually or collectively, the importance of what they bring into the world, and how they change it, most often in contrast to limitations set by social norms.²¹ Instead of explaining the actions of individuals as being determined by social circumstances, a society is perceived as a complex set of processes, its focal point being the behavior, aspects and layers of interrelated communication. This kind of performance determined as an event, act or action, goes further from the general acceptance of culture as a static collection of artefacts to a dynamic network of relations defying fixed structures, values or meaning. In this sense, an event as a performance, within a global anthropology of modernity is seen as an instrument of critical problematization and intervention in multiple and heterogeneous cultural relations.

Conclusion

Anthropology as a critical awareness of the contemporary, i.e. multi-cultural relations in the globalized world, requires constant reflexivity and the criticism of its own analytical instruments and interpretative models. Discussions on cultural plurality in the period after the 1960s replace a generally accepted concept of globalization. The paradox of the cultural system of globalization is present, on the one hand in the open process enabling cultural differences on an everyday life scale, while on the other hand, it initiates the mechanisms of *the loss of originality and uniqueness* under the imperative of dominant cultures. Intercultural performance in this context does not represent linearity of interdependent activities of cultures but their multiple conditioning which produces various meanings. Theoreticians of interculturalism such as Richard Schechner, Patrice Pavis and Erica Fischer-Lichte point out the aspects of *global context* of overlapping and intertwined histories, leading to a formulation of performance common to all cultures, related to the operativity of concepts in different media. In such a media context, looking from the angle of global anthropology of the contemporary, a performance is an act of communication placing all participants in a common situation, where life becomes the accumulation of scenes and the tonality

¹⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Durkheim* (London: Modern Masters, 1997), 285.

²⁰ Moore and Sanders, *Anthropology in Theory*, 13.

²¹ Ivana Spasić, *Značenja susreta: Goffmanova sociologija interakcije* (Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Filip Višnjić, 1996); Ivana Spasić, *Sociologije svakodnevnog života* (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2004).

of spectacle is at the same time mediatization and theatricalization of all aspects and experience of life. In place of performance, as a contextually specific event, its performative structure as a real literal event is also related to issues of transformation of appearance, status and function of behavior of social subjects. Such a specific context of critical thinking related to global culture deepens the inherent meaning of the concept of performance and simultaneously opens the meanings resulting from the exterior, discursive paradigms. Inside the concept of *culture as performance*, the event refers to the constant potential of social situations manifesting itself and being repeatedly activated through different performance practices.

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