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Enactivism and Performance Theory

Towards Interdisciplinarity Without Misunderstandings

Abstract

Watching a performance is a particular kind of a participatory experience; moreover, it is one with constitutive embodied and interactive features, where a *meaning* is not simply received or passively observed but, rather, enacted or reconstituted in an interactive process between a performer and a spectator. This is a depiction of performance (theatrical or otherwise) that many scholars will agree with. It is also, and importantly, a description founded on a new and comprehensive approach to human cognition called *enaction* or *enactivism*. The similarities between performance theory, as used and applied in various branches of the humanities (including theatre studies), and the newest achievements of cognitive science are noticeable. Yet, there are also important differences that stem from the very genealogies of the respective theoretical fields. Performance studies rests on its beginnings in anthropology and

philosophical pragmatics. Enactivism is the offspring of a fruitful union between biology, dynamic systems theory and phenomenology. The aim of this article is to look at what is common but also distinct in these two domains of thought and to clear up some misunderstandings, thus opening the door to potential connections in the future.

Keywords

autopoiesis, enactivism, interaction asymmetry, participatory sense-making, performance theory

Abstrakt

Enaktywizm a teoria performansu: Ku interdyscyplinarności bez nieporozumień
Oglądanie widowiska o charakterze performatywnym jest szczególnym doświadczeniem partycypacyjnym, na które składają się ucieleśnienie i interaktywność. Jego *znaczenie* nie jest ani odbierane wprost, ani biernie obserwowane, lecz raczej odgrywane lub rekonstruowane w interaktywnym procesie zachodzącym między wykonawcą a widzem. Z takim obrazem widowiska performatywnego (przedstawienia teatralnego i innych form performatywnych) zgodziłoby się wielu badaczy. Co ważne, taki opis jest oparty na nowym, kompleksowym podejściu do ludzkiego poznania, określanym jako *enakcja* lub *enaktywizm*. Istnieją wyraźne podobieństwa między teorią performansu, wykorzystywaną w różnych dyscyplinach humanistyki (w tym w teatrologii), a najnowszymi osiągnięciami kognitywistyki. Te dwa obszary refleksji teoretycznej dzielą jednak równie istotne różnice, wynikające z ich genealogii. W swoich początkach performatyka opierała się na antropologii i pragmatyce filozoficznej. Enaktywizm zaś narodził się z efektywnego połączenia biologii, teorii systemów dynamicznych i fenomenologii. Celem artykułu jest przyjrzenie się temu, co wspólne i odmienne w obu domenach refleksji i wyjaśnienie pewnych nieporozumień, by w ten sposób otworzyć drogę do potencjalnych powiązań w przyszłości.

Słowa kluczowe

autopojeza, enaktywizm, asymetria interakcji, partycypacyjne tworzenie sensu, teoria performansu

Introduction

Watching a performance is a particular kind of a participatory experience, one, moreover, with constitutive embodied and interactive features, where a *meaning* is not simply received or passively observed but, rather, enacted or re-constituted in an interactive process between a performer and a spectator. The above is a depiction of performance (theatrical or otherwise) that many scholars will agree with. It is also, and importantly, a description founded on a new and comprehensive approach to human cognition called *enaction* or *enactivism*. The similarities between performance theory, as used and applied in various branches of the humanities (including theatre studies), and the newest generation of cognitive science are noticeable. Yet, there are also important differences that go to the very genealogies of the respective theoretical fields. The discipline of performance studies rests on its beginnings in anthropology and philosophical pragmatics. Enactivism is the offspring of a fruitful union between biology, dynamic systems theory, cognitive neuroscience, and phenomenology. The aim of this article is to look at what is common but also distinct between these two domains of thought and to clear up some misunderstandings, thus opening the door to potential connections in the future. As a point of entry into the discussion I will be using a well-known description, introduced by Erika Fischer-Lichte, of theatrical performance as an *autopoietic loop*, through the use of which she aims at a new explanation of the nature of performance.

Enactivism or the Continuity Between Life and Mind

As a theory of cognition, enactivism or the enactive approach to life, mind, and sociality, represents the most recent stage in a series of changes that have taken place to modify how philosophers and cognitive scientists think about the human mind.[1] The notion of embodiment, which historically predates but is now incorporated in enaction, hails from European phenomenology—especially

[1] The enactive perspective is an important thread in what has become known as post-cognitivist cognitive science, and a major part of what is also known as 4E cognition: embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive, see Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, and Gallagher Shaun, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). It is also worth noting that rather than a single theory, *enactivism* is a cluster of approaches to cognition and life. One of those strands, namely *autopoietic enactivism*, will be the topic of discussion throughout this paper. This is because it is the earliest and most encompassing of the three approaches, the other two being *sensorimotor enactivism* and *radical enactivism*.

the work of Husserl, Jonas, and Merleau-Ponty—in its emphasis on the body as a medium through which the world becomes known in subjective first-person experience. An especially prominent inheritance from phenomenology is the project to extend accounts of cognitive processes beyond the traditionally conceived boundaries of the brain and to examine the entire body's role in cognition. The human mind is understood as necessarily an incarnate mind, and cognitive theories of embodiment highlight the constitutive role played by the whole body (and not just the brain) in phenomenal experience and in thought, thus replacing previous linguistic/representational and computational/neurocentric models of cognition.

It can be said that enactivism goes much further than theories of embodiment in its inspiration to be no less than a biologically inspired epistemology whose aim is to overcome the dichotomy between the physical and the mental in a way that no current philosophy or theory of cognition does. It is, therefore, first and foremost a theory of life, a coherent naturalistic approach to the processes characteristic of the living organism, grounded in contemporary biology, dynamic systems theory, and neuroscience, yet, equally, as mentioned, remaining firmly indebted to phenomenology. Starting with its initial conception in Francisco Varela et al. in 1991,[2] and subsequently developed in the work of Evan Thompson, Hanne De Jaegher, Ezequiel Di Paolo,[3] and others, the enactive approach adds to the above-mentioned ideas of embodiment some further assumptions, the most relevant of which I summarize below.

First is the assumption that all living systems are autonomous, *autopoietic*, or *self-organizing systems*.[4] Following Maturana and Varela, the notion of *autopoiesis* stands for the active (agentive) self-generation and self-regulation of a living cell through processes of interaction with an environment. Such a notion can be seen as a precursor of a conception of agency understood as a teleology or

[2] Francisco J. Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).

[3] Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-Making: An Enactive Approach to Social Cognition," *Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2007): 485–507; Ezequiel Di Paolo, Marike Rohde, and Hanne De Jaegher, "Horizons of the Enactive Mind: Values, Social Interaction and Play," in *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science*, ed. John Stewart et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Ezequiel Di Paolo and Evan Thompson, *The Enactive Approach*, November 2017, https://doi.org/10.31231/osf.io/3vraf; Ezequiel Di Paolo, Elena Cuffari, and Hanne De Jaegher, *Linguistic Bodies: The Continuity Between Life and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Ezequiel Di Paolo and Hanne De Jaegher, "Enactive Ethics: Difference Becoming Participation," *Topoi* 41, no. 2 (2021): 241–256.

[4] *Autopoiesis* literally stands for *self-creation* and can be traced to Maturana and Varela's (1980) work on the biological roots of cognition. See Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Boston, MA: Riedel Publishing Co, 1980). The notion relates to a view of life as self-regulating and self-producing over time, but concerns at this stage of the theory just the individual living cell.

"purposiveness of life,"[5] although its initial strictly biological understanding was extended in Varela's later work,[6] of which more will be said below. Secondly, the notion gives rise to an understanding of the inherent reciprocity and unity between an agent and their world through a process of co-constitution, or in the description, used by enactivists, of *needful freedom*[7] that is inherited from the philosophy of Hans Jonas. *Needful* explains the living organism's dependence on its environment for its sustainability, while *freedom* expresses its agentive autonomy in that very process. This is because the interaction between a living being and its environment is always *asymmetrical*–self-individuation and autonomy being predominantly in charge, so to speak, of the agent's encounter with the world. *Interactional asymmetry*, another related term from enactivism, accounts for the fact that living beings are agentive: they act in the world; they do not merely react to their environment. Agents drive the interaction, which nevertheless remains a precarious process because the very integrity of a living organism is fragile and prone to breakdowns. A third notion in the enactive approach is *normativity*, used to depict the success or failure of an organism in biological terms but later also used to refer to the value-ridden socio-cultural contexts we inhabit as human beings.[8] Normativity is thus best understood not simply as a biologically determined advantage but as an expression of subjectivity, of that which constitutes a sense of felt value for a subject, thus also of affectivity. The lived world is never neutral but a place of intrinsic value, of situations, actions, and people that are attractive or repulsive for an individual.

I would like to return briefly to the notion of interactional asymmetry because it has implications, as I will argue below, for how we understand performance, which constitutes for the enactive approach a form of social interaction. The point is that the agent, by definition, drives the interaction and remains open to the environment, yet both this openness and this agency are intersubjectively achieved. In a further development of the theory, called *participatory sense-making*,[9] social interactions are seen as co-regulated processes between autonomous agents whereby relational dynamical patterns acquire their own autonomy.[10] Thus, it can be shown that sense-makers in interaction can be

[5] Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 140.

[6] Francisco Varela, "The Early Days of Autopoiesis: Heinz and Chile," *Systems Research* 13, no. 3 (1996): 407–416.

[7] Di Paolo, Rohde, and De Jaegher, "Horizons of the Enactive Mind," 38.

[8] Giovanna Colombetti, "Enaction, Sense-Making, and Emotion," in *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science*, ed. John Stewart et al. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).

[9] De Jaegher and Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-making."

[10] De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 493.

seen to navigate two orders: that of their own individual agency and that of the interactive order itself, a point recently argued in relation to the unfolding dynamics of reading a story.[11] Despite the use of jargon, the last point states that the enactive notion of participatory sense-making captures something that is at the centre of considerations about performance, namely, the idea that social interactions are dynamic and unexpected, and the meaning arising through them is often unpredicted or emergent. Performance, in other words, is an embodied and enactive event: like any socially situated experience it is grounded in the ability to move, perceive, exercise agency, and respond to others in often non-contingent and unforeseen ways.

Fischer-Lichte and the "Autopoietic Loop" in Performance

At the beginning of her 2008 book *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*,[12] Erika Fischer-Lichte spends a considerable time describing in detail a performance by Marina Abramović from 1975 called *Lips of Thomas*.[13] The performance event features Abramović taking off all her clothes, eating large amounts of honey and drinking red wine, then proceeding to break the glass she is drinking from and cut the skin on her abdomen with a razor blade. Bleeding and clearly in pain, she then lies down on a cross made of blocks of ice. An electric heater is suspended from the ceiling above her body with the intention that it melts the ice on which she is lying. It is also, presumably, meant to intensify the bleeding from the cuts on her body. After about 30 minutes of watching the performer endure physical pain and bleed heavily, some members of the audience approached the stage and removed the artist from the cross, thus putting an end to the performance (description according to Fischer-Lichte).[14]

What is of interest to us here is not a discussion of the artistic merits of that particular performance and what its possible meaning could be but the very interpretation offered by Fischer-Lichte to account for what happened on that stage and what, by analogy, she deems characteristic of performance in general. Her analysis is based on a clearly stated juxtaposition, in her view, between what

[11] Yanna Popova and Elena Cuffari, "Temporality of Sense-Making in Narrative Interactions," *Cognitive Semiotics* 11, no.1 (2018), doi.org/10.1515/cogsem-2018-0007.

[12] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008).

[13] *Lips of Thomas* by Marina Abramović, Innsbruck, Galerie Krinzinger, 1975.

[14] Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 11.

a traditional performance should be, and the one offered by Abramović. Thus, the latter is characterized as non-representational, that is, not reliant on a fixed text or script, but, rather, based on *real action*: the artist is not playing a role of any kind but inflicting injuries on her own body, thus breaking the conventions of a standard theatrical performance. More importantly, for Fischer-Lichte, the artist, by inflicting harm on her own physical body attempts to change the established rules of behavior in theatrical performance with respect not only to herself, but also to the spectators. Thus, she claims, Abramović "created a situation wherein the audience was suspended between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives."[15] Rather than watch passively, as is customary for an audience, which also gives a nod towards respecting the assumed intention of an artist in performing their *work of art*, in the end the ethical imperatives in the form of sheer empathy clearly won when the spectators rushed to the stage and put an end to the performance and the artist's suffering. Fischer-Lichte states that "the performance transformed the involved spectators into actors."[16] In the context of our discussion of enactivism, we could rephrase this by saying that the spectators gained a sense of agency at a time and a place where they conventionally should have lacked it, or, at least, were not expected to exercise it in the manner that they did.

The explanation provided by Fischer-Lichte for this new kind of *transformative* performance centers partially on a discussion of cultural precedence, which she finds in various religious and monastic practices, where bodily afflictions are sought in order to attain spiritual enlightenment, or in eliciting awe and shock in the spectators (again, a cultural practice observed in various circus acts or in penal rituals of the early modern period). The main point that the author makes, and that is of interest to us here, is that such performances, first, redefine the conventional relationship between subject and object or performer and observer, but also, performer and performance, and second, redefine the very reception of an art piece, transforming its delivery into a matter of experience, and not of understanding, or, as she calls it, a matter of "materiality and not semioticity."[17]

To critics and readers of theatrical work in the twenty-first century such a stark distinction between meaning (semiotic) and experience (bodily) in the context of the study of art and performance should be questionable. Such a division between a semiotic dimension (presumably understood to rest exclusively

[15] Fischer-Lichte, 12.

[16] Fischer-Lichte, 13.

[17] Fischer-Lichte, 17.

on text and linguistic expression) and a material one (presumably understood as embodied and involved in action and emotion) suggests the author remains unaware of a long tradition of pragmatist or phenomenological aesthetics. For this tradition the very distinction between the semiotic and the material is rejected in favor of a unified vision that aims to overcome the older dichotomies of aesthetic reception. Thus, nearly a hundred years ago, John Dewey spoke of the work of art, be it a picture, a sculpture, an installation, or a performance, not as an object of observation or detached interpretation but as something that brings about an experience.[18] Another questionable point in Fischer-Lichte's dichotomous separation of the meaning of performance into a matter of feeling or materiality versus semiosis is her inattention to the plentiful phenomenological writing that clearly shows movement itself to be a form of thought or sentience, thus situating her discussion outside of much contemporary work on embodiment and cognition, as well as work on theatre and performance that has openly adopted the embodied framework.

Indeed, in the field of theatre studies, as long ago as 1985 Bert O. States wished that the totality of theatrical experience be understood as the very complementarity of the semiotic and the experiential perspectives.[19] And this is indeed the path taken by much new work on embodiment in theatre and performance.[20] In addition, remaining on the level of language and linguistic semiosis, recent research in linguistics has also demonstrated the embodied nature of language and thought, richly documented in the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on conceptual metaphor,[21] but also in studies of grammar and syntax in the

[18] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934). The same point relates to well-known attempts made by phenomenologists to describe aesthetic experience (notably not of performance per se) as always co-constituted by the work of art and its perceiver, albeit with very different results. See, for example, Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989); Roman Ingarden, *Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth Olsen (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980).

[19] Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7.

[20] For the foundational significance of movement as constitutive of human consciousness that relies on a Husserlian phenomenological understanding of the body, see Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999); Renaud Barbaras, "The Movement of the Living as the Originary Foundation of Perceptual Intentionality," in *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, ed. Jean Petito et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). For the application of theories of embodiment to the study of performance, see Richard Kemp, *Embodied Acting* (London: Routledge, 2012); John Lutterbie, *Toward a General Theory of Acting: Cognitive Science and Performance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), among others.

[21] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

work of Ron Langacker.[22] Finally, it is curious that in her book Fischer-Lichte ignores nearly all of the older phenomenological and newer enactivist views on sense-making that can be useful in elucidating her ideas of performance but picks out, not entirely correctly, as we will see, what she terms the *autopoietic loop* from Maturana and Varela's early research on theoretical biology,[23] and argues that it can be descriptive of the nature of a complex cultural event such as performance.

Autopoiesis and Enacting Performance?

In this section I would like to consider some of the implications of the enactive approach and their contribution to performance studies.[24] As already suggested, autopoietic enactivism has developed a sophisticated view of the human organism and has defined it as a specific kind of a living being. As noted, autopoiesis is a term from biology and describes an organism's striving toward self-preservation, a kind of self-producing organization at the level of the cell, the latter being understood as the simplest living system. Humans can be seen as autonomous beings that produce and maintain their integrity as precarious bounded selves. The activity of self-constitution (autopoiesis) is characteristic of the individual cell but the question remains whether it can be transposed in one sweeping step to describe a complex, culturally, and socially determined event, such as a theatrical performance.[25] What could the *autopoietic loop*, which Fischer-Lichte uses as the defining principle of theatrical work,[26] mean in the context of performance? Is it the self-sufficiency of a performance to continue to exist beyond the particular intention of any one of its participants?

[22] For representative work in this field, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*; Roland Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[23] Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*.

[24] Some applications, albeit very different in both topic and scope, of enactive theory to theatre performance already exist. For a very general and theoretical background, see Bruce McConachie, *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For an application of enactive theory to the practices of Jacques Lecoq, see Maiya Murphy, *Enacting Lecoq: Movement in Theatre, Cognition, and Life* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), and for the describing of some of Pinter's dramatic works, see Guy Zimmerman, "Devlin's Love: Autopoiesis and Harold Pinter's 'Ashes to Ashes,'" *SubStance* 49, no. 1 (2020): 74–96.

[25] It needs to be emphasized that Maturana (2002) himself has questioned whether *autopoiesis* can be a useful concept beyond the level of the cell. See Humberto Maturana Romesin, "Autopoiesis, Structural Coupling, and Cognition: A History of These and Other Notions in the Biology of Cognition," *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 9, no. 3/4 (2002): 5–34. Villalobos and Ward equally doubt the range of applications beyond the purely biological that the concept has been used for, see Mario Villalobos and David Ward, "Living Systems: Autonomy, Autopoiesis and Enaction," *Philosophy and Technology* 28, no. 2 (2015): 225–239.

[26] Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance*, 39.

Could a performance be said to be interested in its own continuity and self-perpetuation? Could it be thought to possess any kind of autopoietic selfhood, i.e., be a distinct entity that is separate from its environment? Does it even make sense to think of performance in those terms? The answer, I believe, is clear. Even if used metaphorically to describe the ever changing and unpredictable nature of performance and its assumed self-generation and self-sustainability, the term itself describes the cellular needs of an organic body but not necessarily its conscious experience.

Only a respondent action, a different kind of agency than the performing one, evokes the teleology that can, perhaps, be said to be descriptive of performance. As Thompson comments, "sense-making is not a feature of the autopoietic organisation, but rather of the coupling of the concrete autopoietic system and its environment."[27] In other words, it is the interactive agency of performers and spectators that is expressive of sense-making. This is to say that first, autopoiesis is not an intrinsic but a relational organizational property of a living organism. Second, sense-making or enaction presupposes a conceptual shift from a mere biological depiction towards a world of significance and value, which are characteristic of conscious life and subjectivity. The two descriptions cannot be equated because they constitute distinct levels of embodiment: one, physiological; the other, descriptive of subjectivity. Hence, there is a long way from the initial idea of autopoiesis, as it appears in early work in theoretical biology, and the phenomenologically rich description of enactive cognition that includes notions of *needful freedom* or *normativity*, as discussed above. As Varela himself has noted, "The mature concept of autopoiesis did have . . . clear roots. But between an idea and its roots exists a crucial jump."[28] This is precisely the jump that Fischer-Lichte does not make in the use of the term autopoiesis when describing performance. At best the term, as she uses it, suggests that the performance she references is to some extent self-generating and not (entirely) pre-planned.

I have tried to emphasize that it is the biological provenance of the term autopoiesis that makes it problematic for the use that Fischer-Lichte puts it to. Human beings are in some sense both biological organisms and living creatures who experience a world. Thus, when there is talk of embodiment in much contemporary discourse, depending on the particular discipline, two understandings are usually meant: there is living (biological) embodiment and lived

[27] Evan Thompson, "Life and Mind: From Autopoiesis to Neurophenomenology; A Tribute to Francisco Varela," *Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences* 3, no. 4 (2004): 392.

[28] Varela, "Early Days of Autopoiesis," 407–416.

(experiential) embodiment. Both are constitutive of what Hans Jonas has called *the phenomenon of life*.[29] To make a similar point, Evan Thompson writes thus: "For biology living being is living organisms; for phenomenology, it is living subjectivity. Where these two meet is in what phenomenologists call the lived body."[30] And the lived bodies of the actor and the spectator constitute the very substrate whereby performance is enacted. In enactive terms a performance is a participatory event for those who perform, those who are witnesses to what unfolds and the interactive agency of the encounter itself. In other words, it is not *the autopoietic feedback loop* that Fischer-Lichte suggests characterizes performative work, but the participatory sense-making of all those involved. As mentioned, the participatory sense-making in the enactive approach to cognition pays attention to two factors: the autonomy (individual cognition) of the agents and the interaction thereof (the interactive order). By itself, neither of these is sufficient to account for the interactional dynamics of a social encounter. In many types of social situations, such as conversations, verbal arguments, attempts to terminate telephone calls, by trying to put an end to an interaction process the individual agents entrain the self-perpetuating continuation of that very process, and, often, explicitly, against their own intentions. Similarly, watching a performance and, thus, participating in one, is always a matter of letting one's own agency both be transformed by that of another and also, importantly, be subsumed into a form of shared agency (also called *interaction autonomy*). As noted, this is a feature of all cognition, not just aesthetic reception. It is also, and inevitably, a matter of emotional attunement. This is the case if we take emotions to be "ways of knowing of what matters in light of our aims and values."[31] Thus, a spectator will respond in distinct ways to a performance that they find interesting, disturbing, or upsetting, a point substantiated by the actions of the spectators of *Lips of Thomas* that Fischer-Lichte used as an example of what she termed *ethical response*. What she calls ethics here is better formulated as *value* – the significance of an experience or an event for an individual or a community.

Without going into too much detail in the limited space I have here, I note that notions like *participatory sense-making*, *needful freedom*, and *interaction autonomy* are much better nuanced to describe aspects of performance than Fischer-Lichte's *autopoietic feedback loop* or even an autopoietic account of performance. The relationship between actors and spectators is not one of mere

[29] Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

[30] Thompson, "Life and Mind," 384.

[31] Hans Bernhard Schmid, "Collective Emotions," in *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*, ed. Marija Jankowic and Kirk Ludwig (London: Routledge, 2017), 152.

biological life, nor a simple reversal of agency, as she claims, but one of *needful freedom*, where the agency and autonomy of each is precariously dependent on the actions of the other. It is also a relationship of *interaction asymmetry* where the performer remains the primary agentive force in the interaction, whose acts are also at times dependent on, and often determined by, what an audience does or does not do. It will be a good question to ask how her considerations would apply to a conventional performance (with predetermined script, a director, a particular setting, and even fixed performer and spectator roles), in other words, a performance that can be described, using a term from cybernetics, as *allopoietic*.[32] We can argue that even Abramović's performance was, to some degree at least, pre-determined: by the particular props that were chosen with a specifically envisioned response from the audience in mind, such as, for example, the presence of the electric heater to accelerate her bleeding from the self-inflicted wounds, but also by the order of the actions she took, etc. Which makes the claim of life-like autopoiesis taking place during the described event a metaphorical description at best, while at the same time erasing some important distinctions between performance art and performance theatre, given the fact that Fischer-Lichte's example comes from performance art, while the larger discussion she offers concerns theatre.[33] Perhaps it is best to state that performance art and performance theatre are to a large degree allopoietic, yet allow, at times and with different degrees of applicability, given the vast diversity of existing theatrical styles and traditions, for autopoietic elements to appear.[34]

Importantly for the current discussion, rather than ask, let alone attempt to answer, the question of whether theatre can be seen as a form of biological

[32] The term *allopoietic* describes a system that is maintained by something outside of itself. Thus, it is the exact opposite of an *autopoietic* system, which, as discussed, is a self-regulating one.

[33] As is well known, but not explicitly mentioned by Fischer-Lichte, the field of performance studies is based on the presupposition that performances subsume all theatrical practices but are ultimately larger than any of them: that is to say that the theatrical is always performative but not all performances are theatrical, such as, for example, performance art, but also the mundane actions and behaviors of everyday life.

[34] It is worth mentioning in this context that there exists theoretical research on theatre that looks at theatrical performance in cybernetic terms, namely systems theory, which aims to take the discussion of autopoiesis beyond its biological origins and looks at theatrical performances as social systems. See Nicklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Tom Scholte, "Rehearsing the Revolution: Theatre as a Reflective Social Practice," *Kybernetes* 46, no. 9 (2017): 1499–1507. One of the defining characteristics of these approaches is to look at the complex organizations that exist among elements and processes of a system, rather than at the elements themselves. This approach, which takes us quite outside of Fischer-Lichte's claims, will not be discussed here. Somewhat on the border between autopoietic enactivism and cybernetics is the work of theatre practitioner and theoretician Sofia, who takes as definitional the relational nature of performance and argues that a performance is ontologically determined by the co-constitution of observer and observed, and not by representational terminology such as text, character, or role, yet remains sympathetic to complexity and systems theory. See Gabriele Sofia, "Systems Theory, Enaction, and Performing Acts," in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance and Cognitive Science*, ed. Rick Kemp and Bruce McConachie (London: Routledge, 2019).

life, or some kind of intentionally replicated social system, Fischer-Lichte's selective application of the notion of autopoiesis does not contribute much to understanding theatrical performance. One striking element in her considerations is the complete absence of the discussion of voice or speech. Theatre, by definition, notwithstanding its various forms, relies heavily on the power of the spoken word and on the skillful ability of the human voice to give it expressivity in performance. The example, chosen by Fischer-Lichte, however, involves a performance event that is completely silent, a choice that remains unexplained.

Yet, the human voice features comprehensively in considerations of performance. The initial development of the very field of performance studies can be naturally linked with that of theatre studies and anthropology, on the one hand, and with linguistic pragmatics and philosophy of language, on the other.[35] The speech-act theories developed by J. L. Austin[36] and John Searle[37] understand performance more narrowly, as a particular kind of doing, carried through and articulated by speech in acts like promising or betting. The idea here is that very much like an embodied act, human speech is understood not as an internal mental event but as a public undertaking. Thus, words are believed to be able to surpass mere referentiality or semiosis, and bestow agency on the part of the speaker because they can literally do what they say, as when a court declares: "I accuse you of committing genocide." It remains the case, however, that for the performative function to be effective an important provision needs to be in place, namely that, in making a particular statement, certain *felicity conditions* have to be fulfilled. This requirement makes *performatives*, as those particular expressions are called, always dependent on extra-linguistic factors such as the speaker's intentions and social conventions, the latter being in important ways comparable to the enactivist notion of *normativity*. At the same time, we note that speech by necessity requires an audience; a linguistic utterance needs to be heard in order to become meaningful or have an effect. Speech, in other words, very much like performance itself, is always already co-constituted by the actions of a performer/speaker and an observer/receiver. Language too,

35 The anthropological work of Van Gennep—see Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960)—on rites of passage has been used successfully to frame the analyses of social drama by Victor Turner, see Victor Turner, Roger Abrahams, and Alfred Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Routlege,1969). The emphasis on process, rather than product or structure, characterizes much of that work, as does the claim that performances are part and parcel of everyday life, and not just a form of artistic expression.

36 John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

37 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

like other performance events, is public and relational; it is based on a set of pre-determined rules, yet is capable of producing novel and emergent meaning.

The broad definition of performance offered by Schechner, namely that "performance is a mode of behavior, an approach to experience, it is play, sport, popular entertainments, experimental theatre, and more,"[38] serves to confirm that performance is a description of human behavior in general, not just a form of traditional or avant-garde theatrical practice. It is not limited to specific situations, and not necessarily staged in any way, but represents a mode of *being-in-the-world*, to use a Heideggerian term.[39] As such, it is subject to the practices and restrictions of ordinary life, which includes reciprocity and the relevance of intersubjective action as the very foundation of meaning. Crucially, for Schechner too, a performance needs an audience by definition.[40] Both bodily acts and linguistic expressions are therefore the vehicles for meaning that is mutually co-constituted, i.e., always interactive, thereby producing a notion of performativity (in theatre and at large) that is not ontological but relational.[41]

Instead of a Conclusion

In this article I have sought to highlight some common areas of interest between an enactive theory of human cognition and theoretical work in the study of performance. The dynamic, embodied view of an agent who acts in the world (or on stage) and who co-creates meaning in interaction with others, are considerations that are prominent in both fields. By way of a conclusion, I would like to mention four aspects of performance that could benefit from a more elaborate

[38] Richard Schechner, *General Introduction: Performance Studies Series* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 2.

[39] See also Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[40] Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 35.

[41] It is important to note that in the sphere of language understanding itself there has been a significant change in recent years. In the past, perhaps due to the still dominant orthodoxies of autonomous (disembodied) cognition and representational language, it was assumed that communication is simply a matter of transmission, of sending out some words (meanings) and waiting for them to be received and interpreted. Linguistic meaning now is seen as a product of *languaging*, a descriptive term adopted by Linell—see Per Linell, *Rethinking Language, Mind, and World Dialogically* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc, 2009)—to convey the dialogic nature of linguistic communication. For application of the concept of languaging to the teaching of language, literacy, and the language arts, see Richard Beach and David Bloome, eds., *Languaging Relations for Transforming the Literacy and Language Arts Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2019). For a consideration of literary narrative understanding within an enactive framework, see Yanna B. Popova, "Participatory Sense-Making in Narrative Experience," in Beach and Bloome, *Languaging Relations*.

engagement with the enactive understanding of human sense-making.[42] First, performances are predominantly constituted by bodily actions, and social cognition (including our understanding of performance) is based on such dynamic embodied interactions. Reliance on the discursivity of language and its so-called *performativity* represents an important consideration, which nevertheless should not take away from the very materiality of the theatrical event (bodies, props, stage space, costumes), that remains definitional for it as an art form and as a mode of expression. The lived material and sensorimotor dimension of theatre is what make it uniquely suitable as subject matter for enactivist considerations, notwithstanding issues of linguistic performativity and the still dominant culturally or semiotically constructed forms of expression of identity and subjectivity.

Second, the social aspect of performance is something that theorists have spoken about at length: as Schechner has noted, a performance requires an audience to exist. The primacy of the social aspect of cognition is also a characteristic feature of enactivism, although it has a long prehistory in work from many fields, such as phenomenology,[43] social psychology,[44] or developmental psychology.[45] What this means is that human cognition is best understood as primarily about engagement with others; it is intersubjective first and only in certain instances private and solipsistic. To put it differently, we need others to think, to speak to, to perform, and to live; communication, cultural practices, and forms of art are all best understood as varieties of socially mediated skills. The need for an audience is definitional for artistic performance but in this it constitutes no exception to human cognition in general.

Third, a very interesting and unresolved theoretical problem regarding performance is the issue of repeatability versus singularity. Again, it can be argued that repeatability (conventionality) and singularity (uniqueness) are indeed aspects of communication that underlie the use of language and everyday behavior (in the form of habitual acts) but also, with additional degrees of complexity, the skilled practices characteristic of various artistic outputs.

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42 Enactivism as a theory of cognition has been successfully applied to cultural practices such as reading a fictional narrative, see Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014); Yanna B. Popova, *Stories, Meaning, and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction* (New York: Routledge, 2015), the already mentioned application to the movement-based pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq, see Murphy, *Enacting Lecoq*, and to human language use, see Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher, *Linguistic Bodies*.

43 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002).

44 Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

45 Colwyn Trevarthen, "Communication and Cooperation in Early Infancy: A Description of Primary Intersubjectivity," in *Before Speech: The Beginning of Human Communication*, ed. Margaret Bullowa (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

But what makes for the uniqueness of a performance? Moreover, what makes one particular performance better than another at a different place and time? Undoubtedly, a high level of expertise is expected from a performer, be it in dance, music, or theatre. While there is a consensus over this latter fact, much disagreement remains with respect to the exact account of how this level of skill translates into the very act of performance. A discussion of the nature of its description in terms of agency or automaticity will take us too far from our main topic. Suffice it to say that it is the performative arts, the very study of skillful artistic practices that can contribute to enactivism and to understanding issues of reflective or unreflective agency, bodily awareness, and degrees of self-consciousness in action, thus providing us with a model for agency in the wider world. In other words, it is skilled performances of various kinds that are most useful in deciding about questions regarding what is explicit/reflective and implicit/habitual in human thought and action.

Fourth, the very unpredictability of performance (in theatre and outside it) as a significant event is nevertheless best accounted for, I believe, by the particular nature of the social encounter, labeled in enactivism by the term *participatory sense-making*. In enactive terms, we perceive the world as always already available to us in certain ways: as co-constituted by our own history, goals, and actions. Similarly, we interact with others in contextually rich ways, shaped by cultural norms, habits, and intentions. Habits and expectations constrain what we do but this is of no particular consequence in everyday living. Performance, on the other hand, at least in the context of artistic performance, exceeds such situations. This is because art is non-instrumental and often goes beyond the everyday, both in execution and in expectation. What it offers is best described not as a simple dichotomous oscillation between individual actions and passive reception, between agency and its lack (as Fischer-Lichte does at length), but as the coming into existence of a relational domain with its own properties which constrains and modulates individual behavior.[46] Unpredictability, a much-valued feature of the aesthetic, is born not as a mere rejection of habit or convention but as a deeply felt (and yet not always explicit) awareness of how our own thoughts and experiences are co-constituted in the very act of participation in something that transcends the expectations of individual participants. In that sense we can speak of the transformative power of art, brought forth, each time anew, in the transcendent space of the encounter with it.

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[46] De Jaegher and Di Paolo, "Participatory Sense-making," 494.

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