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2014

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ringmar, E. (2014). *Performance, Not Performativity: An Embodied Critique of Post-Structural IR Theory*. Paper presented at Performativity and Agency in International Politics, Goethe Universitet, Frankfurt/Main, Germany.

Total number of authors:

1

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Performance, Not Performativity: An Embodied Critique of Post-structural IR Theory

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Much of what takes place in world politics is best described not as events but as performances. Things are not just happening by themselves, but they are staged and made to happen, and to appear, in a certain fashion. Staged events have a logic, and a social ontology, which is different from that of mere events. Above all, they are communicative; ways in which the members of an audience are informed, instructed, entertained, and thereby made to see, learn and to feel certain things rather than others. Studying such staged events, scholars in anthropology and sociology have recently undergone what rather unimaginatively has been referred to as a “performative turn.”¹ Social performances, they have maintained, are a main way in which collective meaning is made, established and disseminated. Scholars of international relations have hitherto paid scant attention to these intellectual trends. And yet, the metaphorical infrastructure is already present — world politics, after all, has long been regarded as a “stage” on which states “act” and “interact” before the eyes of the world.

The only proper exceptions to this state of neglect concerns post-structural scholars who have taken an interest in what is known as “performativity.” Drawing on Judith Butler’s ideas regarding the constitution of identities — which in turn are indebted to John Austin and Jacques Derrida — scholars such as Cynthia Weber and David Campbell have investigated the way states constitute themselves as subjects

1 Erik Ringmar, “Pontus Fahlbeck, tidsandan och folkrörelserna,” *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift*, 116 (3), 2014.

through the performance of “discursive practices.” It is through performativity, they argue, that sovereign subjects come into being. “Performativity,” however, is not the same thing as a “performance.”² In fact, post-structural scholars have often been suspicious of the claims made by traditional theater scholars. In particular, the Aristotelian idea of mimesis, imitation, seems to imply that on-stage actors represent off-stage subjects that have a “real,” abiding and pre-given, existence. The belief in such subjects, they go on to explain, is a metaphysical illusion characteristic of modern society. Such “metaphysics of presence” involves us in pernicious dualisms — between “mind” and “body,” the “ideal” and the “material” — which deconstruction is designed to help us dismantle.

As far as this paper is concerned, these are the right starting-points but the wrong conclusions. Post-structural scholars are correct, first of all, in their anti-Cartesian skepticism. There are indeed no abiding, pre-given, subjects and mind/body dualism is an intellectual dead-end. Post-structural scholars are also correct in connecting the emergence of a sovereign self with the idea of a performance. The sovereign selves which do not exist are indeed brought into existence through performances. And yet the solutions which post-structural scholars propose are unconvincing. The subjects which appear in the descriptions they provide are nothing like the individuals, or the states, with which we are familiar. The descriptions are hopelessly two-dimensional, bleak, and never more than the products of the rather lifeless texts, or text-analogues, they are made to recite.

This, we will argue, is a result of post-structuralism's reductive understanding of a performance. Going back to Austin and Derrida, post-structural scholars, in and out of the study of international relations, have never properly understood what a performance is and what a performance does. More than anything, we will

2 On this distinction, see further Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

argue, performances involve the body. Although pre-given, abiding, subjects are not present on the stage, pre-given, abiding, bodies certainly are, and these bodies are the loci of meanings which reach far beyond that which "discourse," no matter how often recited, is able to capture and convey. Embodied meaning, we will conclude, provides a way to talk about sovereign subjects which does not involve us in the traps set by René Descartes and his fellows. Embodied meaning also provides a new way of approaching the notion of a conscious self.

Language and performativity

A common starting-point for post-structural analyses has been a rejection of the idea of a subject which precedes, and underlies, the actions and characteristics of individuals. Compare, for example, the notion that individuals "have experiences." It is not, the feminist historian Joan Scott concludes, "individuals who have experiences, but subjects who are constituted through experience."³ Since the kinds of experiences available to us depends on cultural, political, and socio-economic structures of power, the subject is culturally, politically and socio-economically constituted. What we call a "woman" is thus a function of the patriarchal system; what we call a "worker" a function of the capitalist system, and so on. Thus understood, it is only a small step from analysis to critique. To reveal how "woman," "worker," etc. came to acquire their identities is to criticize those identities and to start constructing more acceptable alternatives.⁴

This is what Jacques Derrida discussed as "deconstruction" — the reversal of established hierarchies, the introduction of new oppositions, the attempt to expose repressed terms and to challenge the natural and inevitable status of seemingly dichotomous pairs.⁵ Applying the deconstructivist tools to the notion of the self we

3 Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," 779.

4 Ibid., 793.

5 Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 7.

realize that there is no one there. Deconstruction reveals “the metaphysics of presence” — the illusion that we are present to ourselves, as though, beneath all the empirical jetsam and emotional flotsam, there really were a person, ready and complete.⁶ There can be no “freedom” and no “authenticity,” as Judith Butler explains, since “the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication.”⁷ The notion of the ever-present subject is one of the foundational myth of modern society — as propounded by René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and others — and it is the metaphysical basis on which modern individuals make their often preposterous claims to power, rights and attention.⁸

When applied to the study of international politics, this position turns into a critique of the state, or rather, a critique of sovereignty. There is no state, say post-structural international relations scholars such as Cynthia Weber and David Campbell, at least if we take the state to constitute a pre-existing subject to which sovereignty can be attached as an attribute.⁹ Focusing on “institutions,” the “people,” or perhaps on the state as a transcendental idea, mainstream accounts always presuppose that which they intend to prove. Instead sovereignty must be understood as the process through which political subjects come to constitute themselves as such. “I suggest,” says Weber, “that sovereign nation-states are not pre-given subjects but in process and that all subjects in process (be they individual or collective) are the ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted.”¹⁰

Weber's idea of “performatively enacted practices” needs further elucidation.¹¹

6 Derrida, “Différance,” 11, 16.

7 Butler, “Performative Acts,” 195; Nelson, “Bodies and Spaces,” 340–341; Laffey, “Locating Identity,” 341.

8 See, for example, Ricœur, “The Crisis of the ‘Cogito.’”

9 Weber, “Performative States,” 84.

10 Ibid., 78.

11 See, further, Ringmar, “The Search for Dialogue.”

Even if we reject the idea of a pre-given self, there is certainly the illusion of such a being, and the question thus becomes how that illusion arose. According to post-structural theory, the self is created through reiterative linguistic practices.

Language precedes the human subject, they explain; we are born into language, and language is best understood as a semiotic structure where the meaning of each word is constituted by its difference from other words. It is, as Ferdinand Saussure once argued, the structure as a whole that ultimately determines what things mean. According to performativity theorists, in other words, structure is to practice as *langue* is to *parole*; as the abstract rules that make possible the production of grammatical sentences, that is, are to the production of an actual sentence.¹² A structure, like *langue*, is a complex of rules with a virtual existence whereas practice, like speech, is an enactment of these rules in space and time.

But a semiotic structure is not yet a sovereign self. We move closer to the subject once we realize that words do not only mean things but also do things in the world. Words have what John Austin's in *How to Do Things with Words*, 1962, called a "perlocutionary force."¹³ The proverbial example is the "I do" of the wedding ceremony. By speaking the words, you are not merely conveying meaning, you are also doing something, you are constituting a marriage. The words are performed and thereby enacted.¹⁴ Adding to Austin's conclusions, Derrida emphasizes what he calls the "citational" quality of even the most pragmatic forms of language use. That is, the texts we invoke always cite seemingly absent contexts from which they ultimately derive their meaning. "Could a performative utterance succeed," Derrida asks,

if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an

12 Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 6.

13 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

14 Derrida, "Signature Event Context."

iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation"?¹⁵

This is how the subject comes to constitute itself. "The subject is inscribed in language, is a 'function' of language, becomes a speaking subject only by making its speech conform ... to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences."¹⁶ The human subject is "a being devoid of Being until it is organized by a system of codes."¹⁷

This is an argument further developed by Judith Butler.¹⁸ Our identities take shape, she says, through the perlocutionary force of the discourse we apply to ourselves. Talking about the being that we take our selves to be, we quote statements that connote normalcy and imply acceptance much as a lawyer might cite supporting precedents in a court of law. By making performative statements, and applying them to ourselves, a certain person comes into being; performativity is "a compulsory reiteration of those norms through which a subject is constituted"; "subjectivity is performatively constituted by the ritualized production or codified social behavior."¹⁹ These statements, says Butler, are not only repetitive and ritualistic but also socially determined. If we misquote the established discourse and fail to construct an appropriate self for ourselves, we are punished through various, often surprisingly severe, social sanctions.²⁰

This is the argument which Cynthia Weber and David Campbell apply to the study of international relations. "There is no sovereign or state identity behind expressions of state sovereignty," Weber summarizes. "The identity of the state is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."²¹

15 Ibid., 18.

16 Derrida, "Différance," 15.

17 Hart, "Matter, System, and Early Modern Studies," 322-323.

18 Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, "Performative Acts."

19 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 95.

20 Butler, "Performative Acts," 194; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.

21 Weber, "Performative States," 89; See further Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*.

States, Campbell concurs, are “unavoidably paradoxical entities which do not possess pre-discursive, stable identities.”²² Foreign policy discourse is “a persistent impersonation that passes as the real”; states state and through their statements they instate and reinstate themselves as sovereign actors. This is a constantly ongoing process. “For a state to end its practices of representation would be to expose its lack of prediscursive foundations; stasis would be death.”²³ Weber talks about sovereignty as a form of simulation, but while simulations usually are defined through their likeness to the real, the world politics which she describes contains no originals.²⁴

As an illustration, consider Thomas Hobbes' solution to the problems of life in the state of nature.²⁵ By handing over their right to self-defense to a common power who guarantees their security, individuals no longer threaten each other. Yet prior to the signing of this contract, there was no people; the people literally declared itself into existence.²⁶ Derrida analyzes the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 in the same terms.²⁷ The authors of the declaration, he says, referred to themselves as the “Representatives” of “the good People of these Colonies,” but these people did not exist prior to the issuing of the declaration itself. It was only through the signatures that the people came to constitute itself as such. “The people” who authorizes their representatives to make the declaration is invented by the declaration they authorize.²⁸

Or consider the case of military interventions, as discussed by both Weber and

22 Campbell, *Writing Security*, 11.

23 Ibid.

24 Weber, “Performative States,” 92–93.

25 Hobbes, *Leviathan*; Junge, “Promise of Performance,” 298–308.

26 As Junge points out, this distinguishes Hobbes from the contract theorists who followed him. “For Locke, the government is only a trustee to the community and for Rousseau a people exists and can be identified before it might or might not surrender to or choose a king.” Junge, “Promise of Performance,” 304.

27 Derrida, “Declarations of Independence.”

28 Ibid., 49.

Campbell. Interventions are violations of independence, but as such they exemplify the power of the same performative practice. Military interventions, we might say, constitute a discursive boundary along which the principle of sovereignty breaks down. By analyzing where and how this boundary is drawn, we learn where and how sovereignty is produced.²⁹ It is for that reason interesting to see how military interventions have been justified. In *Writing Security*, Campbell discusses a striking example: the *Requerimiento*, the short proclamation which the conquistadors read to the native populations of the New World before they took possession of their land and imposed European laws on them.³⁰ “Therefore I beg and require you as best I can,” the conquistadors declared, in Spanish, to the puzzled locals, “...

we will not compel you to turn Christians. But if you do not to it ... with the help of God, I will enter forcefully against you, and I will make war everywhere and however I can, and I will subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and His Majesty, and I will take your wives and children, and I will make them slaves ...³¹

As Weber shows in *Simulating Sovereignty*, the right to violate sovereignty has continued to be a privilege of the most powerful states. At the time of World War I, national self-determination was enshrined as an absolute principle; absolute, that is, as long as it did not run up against the fundamental interests of the leading states — compare the invasion in support of the Whites after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Sovereignty continues to be the core principle of the international system to this day, except when it is in the interests of the United States and its allies to violate it — witness Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 (and, we might add, Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003). As Campbell points out, the sovereign state continues to be defined through its opposite — the “failed states” which exist

29 Weber, “Performative States,” 93.

30 Campbell, *Writing Security*, 112–118.

31 Seed, *Ceremonies of Possession*, 69; As Seed shows, the origin of the *Requerimiento* is to be found in the Moslem rituals of occupation in Spain. *Ibid.*, 69–99.

outside the peaceful, democratic and prosperous core administered by the Americans.³² It is consequently only by extending U.S. hegemony that problems such as terrorism can be addressed. This too is a performative practice: interventions are a way of specifying “the way the world (now) is,” and like all similar geopolitical descriptions it contains a prescription for how to “put the world right.”³³

Embodied brains and cognitive selves

It is indeed curious how heavily modern society has invested in the notion of the sovereign subject. Sovereign individuals are the bearers of political rights and social obligations; they are the loci of emotional and spiritual experiences and the main protagonists of next to all stories they tell about their world. Sovereign states, for their part, are institutions that help organize social life and guarantee domestic peace; they are centers of political power and thereby of political struggles, but also the vehicles of democracy and the expressions of a collective will. In the stories told about them, states are actors who act and interact with other states in pursuit of their interests — this, at least, is how students of international politics have come to see them.

Although the modern world is organized around, and organized by, these two sovereign selves, we know surprisingly little about what, or perhaps who, they are. This is most obviously so in the case of individuals. Consciousness is still not well understood — how can a self and an awareness of self be derived purely from physical matter? — and we do not even properly understand basic processes of the mind such as memory or perception.³⁴ Yet the sovereign state is in some ways

32 Bialasiewicz et al., “Performing Security.”

33 Ibid., 417.

34 See, for example, Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness*; Searle, “The Mystery of Consciousness Continues.”

equally mysterious.³⁵ The state is clearly not any of the things we commonly compare it to: it is not, or at least not only, an institution, a center of power, a vehicle of values, an expression of a will, or an actor with a set of interests. The state is real but it is also imagined — but how can something at the same time be both imagined and real?

The most pervasive answer to these puzzles is also the least persuasive. In his *Meditations*, 1641, René Descartes made a celebrated distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, between the thinking mind and the materiality of the body.³⁶ In our mind we can observe the world through the representations we make of it, Descartes argued, yet the mind is not of the world, indeed this is what guarantees its ability to cogitate. Following Descartes, we have come to think of the individual subject either as a transcendental entity or as an empirical fact. Either way, however, it disappears — as a disembodied *res cogitans* it disappears from the world, and as a *res extensa*, reduced to a collection of scattered attributes, it disappears into the world.³⁷ The same argument can be made about the state.³⁸ Either we position the state as given prior to our investigations, in which case it becomes unavailable to observation, or we reduce it to its political and institutional features, in which case it falls apart in a mass of empirical details. Or compare the notorious agency/structure problem. By assuming the existence of a self which is radically separated from its environment, the question becomes how agency relates to structure, which of the two came first, and which influences which.³⁹

It is puzzles such as these that Derridean deconstruction was designed to dismantle. Post-structural scholars do this, as we saw above, by undermining the

35 Ringmar, "The Ontological Status of the State."

36 Descartes, "Second Meditation."

37 Hollis, "The Category of the Person."

38 Ringmar, "The Ontological Status of the State."

39 Ringmar, "The Search for Dialogue."

pretensions of the sovereign subject. By reducing the subject to a feature of the semiotic structures in which it finds itself, the pre-given self effectively disappears and the Cartesian aporias, as a result, no longer arise. Compare the post-structural solution to the agency/structure problem.⁴⁰ Before there were agents and social structures, post-structural scholars argue, there were social practices, and it was through these practices that both agents and social structures came to be formed. The practices were performed and this is how the subject, such as it is, was constructed. "The notion of practice," as Roxanne Lynn Doty explains, "encourages a reformulation of the questions of both agency and structure as questions of how discursive or signifying practices work."⁴¹

Yet the entities that emerge from these post-structural inquiries are difficult to recognize as actual individuals or states. They are bleak, two-dimensional, characters entirely determined by forces beyond their control; they are puppets on structuralist strings. Subjectivity, on this account, is not the result of anyone's lived experience but is instead mechanically reproduced; the self is read and recited into existence.⁴² Yet given the post-structural obsession with texts — with proclamations, declarations and statements — it is hardly surprising that the subjects they identify never come alive. The problem is actually both well known and well documented: seeing the world as a function of semiotic systems, post-structuralism finds it impossible to reach outside of language.⁴³ This is not to say of course that there is no such thing as "social practices," or that people do not often behave in a habitual and mindless fashion.⁴⁴ Neither is it to deny that such habitual

40 Doty, "Aporia."

41 Ibid., 385.

42 Nelson, "Bodies and Spaces," 331–332.

43 There is, says Garner, "a scriptocentrism that, deriving from deconstruction's linguistic and textual interest, may also condition (and limit) its field of inquiry." Garner, "Still Living Flesh," 447–448; Compare Mancing, "See the Play, Read the Book," 190.

44 James, "Habit."

behavior may be the products of structures of power. What is denied, however, is that these are acceptable accounts of subjectivity. Practices do not provide a satisfactory description of what a subject is, and they do not provide a satisfactory account of how a subject is constituted.

What is missing here is more than anything an account of the body. Subjects — whatever they are — have bodies to which their consciousness and sense of self are intrinsically attached. Moreover, insisting on the primacy of the body in any account of the self provides our best chance of bringing *res cogitans* and *res extensa* back together.⁴⁵ There is a continuum from the material to the mental, as it were, and the mind is a part of the body much as the body is a part of the mind.⁴⁶ Moreover, the body is located in an environment with which it is in constant and inevitable interaction. This environment is physical to be sure, but it is also social, economic and political. That which we call a self is the result of this interaction — with embodied, physiological, conditions, but also with social, economic and political processes.⁴⁷ Something similar is the case for the state. It is common, after all, to talk about the state in terms of the metaphor of the body.⁴⁸ Traditionally it was the king who embodied the state, but once kings were demoted, states have been embodied by the representatives of the people. These “bodies politic” too interact with a social, economic and political environment which determines its collective sense of self.

An embodied perspective means that we must define meaning quite differently than do post-structural scholars.⁴⁹ Meaning on our account is not a function of the way the world is represented, instead the world is made meaningful

45 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*; Damasio, *Descartes' Error*.

46 This is John Dewey's so called “continuity principle.” Dewey, *Logic*, 30–31; Discussed in Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 10, 122–123.

47 Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 123–126.

48 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*.

49 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*; See further Johnson, “Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Semantics.”

through our direct bodily interaction with it; meaning is something felt, something perceived, the *qualia* through which we experience life.⁵⁰ The world is consequently just as meaningful, if in a different way, to animals — to dogs or to gastropods — who engage in no explicit interpretations, and it is meaningful to newborns too who have no words in which to describe it. “An embodied view of meaning,” Mark Johnson explains,

looks for the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied creatures in interaction with their changing environments. It sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate things, move our bodies in space, and evaluate our situation.⁵¹

The poststructuralists arrive too late on the scene, as it were, once meaning already has happened. What they call “discourse” is little but a *post hoc* rationalization of meanings which already have been derived through more immediate, bodily, means.

It is meaning of this embodied, experiential, kind that explains how our cognitive processes work. While no contemporary linguist takes Saussurean structuralism even remotely seriously, embodied linguistics has recently revolutionized the field.⁵² A key mechanism here is metaphor, and as cognitive theorists explain, all basic metaphors are based in bodily experiences.⁵³ It is because of our body's knowledge of what it means to pile things on top of each other that “more” is taken to be “up,” or because we pour liquids into containers that our “hearts” can be “filled with joy.”⁵⁴ Compare post-structuralism.

50 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 25.

51 Ibid., 11.

52 “Virtually no one in linguistics today,” says Mancing, “conceives of language as a closed self-referential system of differences, believes that the terms ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ are particularly meaningful or useful, places processes of coding and decoding at the heart of communication, or conceives of the listener (or reader) as a passive receiver of the speaker’s (or writer’s) message.” Mancing, “See the Play, Read the Book,” 189.

53 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

54 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 195.

Embodiment here is necessarily understood as an imposition on the body by semiotic structures, while the subject's agency, to the extent that it exists, only manifests itself as a variation within the iterations and reiterations allowed by this imposition.⁵⁵ As long as the connection to the body remains as tenuous as all this, it is not surprising that post-structural scholars see no limits to the "open-ended play of signification" and regard everything as "socially constructed."

As an embodied perspective on meaning and subjectivity makes clear, however, there are limits to such playfulness. Many things do *not* vary between cultures — most notably the physiological and neurological processes that underlie our sense of self.⁵⁶ This is true of many cognitive processes too: the metaphors "more is up" and "the soul is a container" are universal in their application and exist in all societies. The metaphors are universal since human bodies are alike in their fundamental processes and features and since they interact with the environment in much the same way. This is not to say, of course, that meaning does not vary from one society to the next.⁵⁷ Indeed, many metaphorical constructions are intelligible only within the boundaries of a certain culture ("she walks like an elephant," "my love is like a red, red, rose"). What is needed is consequently a combination of approaches. Meaning is embodied, but it is also socially constructed, and no study of international politics, or of anything else, is legitimate which fails to acknowledge this fact.

Performance, not performativity

These shortcomings are dramatically illustrated by what post-structural scholars refer to as "performativity." Sharing the "perform" part of the word, we may be

55 Hart, "Performance, Phenomenology, and the Cognitive Turn," 30.

56 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*.

57 Milan Kundera provides a list in Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; For IR examples, see Marks, *Metaphors in International Relations Theory*.

forgiven for thinking that “performativity” has something in common with a “performance.” This is, for example, how theater scholars have treated the concepts when they have abandoned their traditional focus on the stage and started analyzing the ritualized forms of behavior taking place elsewhere in society.⁵⁸ Yet performativity is emphatically *not* what we mean by a performance. Performativity is not staged, it is not presented, it has no props, no audience, no script and no plot. Performativity is an iteration of structurally given imperatives and the only physical movements implied are the practices which these imperatives necessitate. For the members of a theater audience, watching a practice being performed is a thoroughly disappointing night out.

The source of this anti-theatrical prejudice can be traced back at least to John Austin.⁵⁹ In *How to Do Things with Words* he famously disregarded speech delivered from a stage since he never could make proper sense of what it was the actors were doing. The words they uttered quoted real words, spoken by real people, but they did not seem to “do” anything. Such performative utterances, Austin decided, were “in a peculiar way hollow or void”; language was not used seriously but was “parasitic upon its normal use.”⁶⁰ This conclusion tallies nicely with Derrida's view of the theater.⁶¹ In accordance with his critique of the “metaphysics of presence,” Derrida insists that there can be no real person behind an utterance, and a theatrical performance, for that reason, does not stand for anything. Or to be more precise: “the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene of utterance.”⁶² Hence the rejection of the idea of mimesis, the kind of

58 Schechner, *Performance Theory*; Turner and Schechner, *The Anthropology of Performance*.

59 The anti-theatrical instinct has of course a far longer history, including Plato as well as 17th century Puritans. Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*.

60 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 21–22.

61 Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 16–21.

62 *Ibid.*, 18.

theater that purports to represent reality by presenting a make-believe copy of the world off-stage.⁶³ There is no presence behind the re-presentation and only motion where there appears to be emotion.

Post-structural scholars are correct in their starting-points but wrong in their conclusions. They are no doubt correct to conclude that there can be no enduring, pre-given, self which performances straightforwardly can proceed to represent. This is indeed a Cartesian myth. The self is not a metaphysical entity; the self is of this world and constituted by, and continuously dependent on, basic material processes. And yet what there indubitably is is a body. The body is present right there before us on the stage — it is both abiding and pre-given — and it is more than anything through the body that the performance comes to take place. The bodies that appear before us have a certain posture and gait; they walk, slouch and dance; they sweat, cry and gesticulate; their voices whisper, their knees go weak, their eyebrows are raised, their arms embrace. And all of these actions, and many more, are directed by a director, put on stage by set- and clothes designers, and accentuated by light- and sound engineers. A performance thus described is not the practices required by a text for the same reason that our lives are not the practices required by texts. Texts are words on paper, but plays and lives are things that we do, things that we experience and live through. The subtitles that accompany our lives are only a small part of the story.

There is ample evidence that performances and texts are processed entirely differently by the brain.⁶⁴ Neurologically speaking, watching a performance is similar to watching an event taking place off-stage. In both cases, the actions of the people we see before us are mirrored in the parts of our brains which would be responsible for the actions were we ourselves to undertake them.⁶⁵ This mirroring,

63 Phelan, *Unmarked*.

64 Mancing, "See the Play, Read the Book," 191.

65 *Ibid.*, 196–197.

moreover, takes place directly, unconsciously, and is not dependent on the interpretation we give it. Mirror neurons, according to Vittorio Gallese, one of the neuroscientists responsible for discovering them, provide a means of

“reading” another's intentions, linguistic expressions, emotions, and somatic sensations. The evidence, we argue, points to neuronal mechanisms whereby the observation of another triggers an automatic and unconscious “embodied simulation” of that other's actions, intentions, emotions, and sensations. Embodied simulation ... constitutes a fundamental functional mechanism for empathy, and more generally, for understanding another's mind.⁶⁶

The way our minds mirror each other makes the audience members into co-actors of a kind. As a result, it is not surprising that our reactions to a performance are both immediate and often overwhelming — before we know it, we clap or laugh or cry.⁶⁷ When reading a literary text, by contrast, the information must first be interpreted and mapped by our brains. It is through such cognitive mapping that we imagine the characters, their clothes, voices, physical characteristics and the various features of the worlds they inhabit. Interpretation is a more cumbersome process, if not necessarily less exciting — as we realize when we compare books favorably to their theatrical adaptations.

Comparing discursive practices to theatrical performances, on the one hand, and to the reading of texts, on the other, they appear as impoverished versions of both. A practice has none of the experiential richness of the performance but neither has it any of the imaginary potentials of the literary text. Performativity gives us no chance to act, if we by acting mean to engage in a creative, embodied, event which takes place in front of an audience. But neither does performativity provide us with a chance to read, if we by reading mean the imaginative recreation of a text. Post-structural acting is always robotic and post-structural readings are always literal.

66 Gallese, Eagle, and Migone, “Intentional Attunement,” 132.

67 Mancing, “See the Play, Read the Book,” 194.

The reason why performativity theorists end up with such an impoverished account of the subject, we said, is their fear of falling into Cartesian traps. They are skeptical of theatrical performances to the extent that they seem to presume a mimetic relationship between life on and off the stage. Post-structural scholars cannot accept that there is such a thing as a pre-given, abiding, subject which theatrical performances re-present. Yet the processes of neural mirroring which neuroscientists describe provides an entirely different way to think about the question of mimesis.⁶⁸ The imitation which matters happens not between actors and their real-life originals, but instead between the actors and the audience.⁶⁹ It is the audience that imitates what is going on on stage. What we are witnessing is not an imitation, but neither is it a reiteration. Instead it is an original event. It is really happening, right there before our eyes, lodged in the bodies of the actors themselves and directly conveyed to the bodies of the members of the audience as they gasp and cry, sit straight up in their seats or convulse with laughter. The discovery of mirror neurons, says the theater scholar Naomi Rokoitz, has “potentially revolutionary implications for theater and film studies.”⁷⁰

While facilitating inter-subjective communication, mind-reading, and empathy, our innate matching system is also responsible for our readiness to engage with fictional agents. If simulation involves “incorporating an attempt to replicate, mimic, or impersonate the mental life of the target agent,” then its study through the interaction of audiences with actor-characters in performance becomes all the more pertinent.⁷¹

Finding our selves in the theater

There are implications here for what we mean by a self and for what we mean by consciousness. If post-structuralism purports to give an account of the origin and

68 See, for example, Auerbach, *Mimesis*.

69 Cook, “Interplay,” 592.

70 Rokoitz, “Too Far Gone in Disgust,” 415.

71 Ibid.; Quoting Gallese and Goldman, “Mirror Neurons and the Simulation Theory of Mind-Reading,” 497.

nature of the sovereign subject, and if this explanation fails, it is incumbent on us to try to come up with an alternative.

The embodied self, first of all, is not socially constructed, at least not “all the way down.”⁷² The reason is that the body’s basic physiological and neurological processes take place on their own terms, regulating various homeostatic states — heart rate, oxygen-levels, body temperature, endocrinological processes, and so on.⁷³ It seems easy to dismiss such basic physiological facts as irrelevant to the question of the status of the self, but this would be a mistake. More egregiously, it would be to fall, once again, into the Cartesian trap which separates the body from the mind. Instead automatic physiological processes such as these are the building blocks from which the conscious self is constructed. The same is true for basic forms of cognition — some 95 percent of cognitive processes, after all, take place outside of our conscious awareness.⁷⁴ The body feels, and the feelings color and thereby influence even our most sophisticated processes of ratiocination.⁷⁵

An embodied self consists of layers, we might say. If the post-structural self is built from the outside-in, the embodied self is built from the inside-out.⁷⁶ At the most basic layer we find the “proto-self.” Here basic physiological, neurological and cognitive processes provide a sense of direction and a sense of being alive. Much of this activity takes place in the evolutionary speaking oldest parts of the brain, and it is common to all animals. On top of this layer there are more advanced processes resulting in the constitution of a “core consciousness,” a self which feels and desires and which knows that it feels and desires. This is a self with a mind, who can imagine and plan. Finally, there is the “autobiographical self,” the self who

72 Hart, “The Epistemology of Cognitive Literary Studies.”

73 Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*.

74 Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 13; For a discussion, see McConachie, “Doing Things with Image Schemas,” 577–578.

75 Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, 104–106; Compare Damasio on “somatic markers.” Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, 205–212.

76 Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 167–279.

features in the stories we tell about ourselves to ourselves and to others. This is a social self, created, recognized and confirmed in social interaction. The autobiographical self is of course the self that is most familiar to us, but it is a mistake to think that the autobiographical self is all there is. The autobiographical self depends for its proper functioning on both the core-self and the proto-self, as becomes obvious whenever the normal functions of these latter two happen to break down.

It is sometimes argued that the state cannot be a "person" since personhood belongs exclusively to individuals. Only individuals have a unified consciousness with thoughts and feelings of their own.⁷⁷ A state is at best a collection of individuals and a person only in a metaphorical sense. Yet the embodied perspective on the self requires us to modify this conclusion. It is a Cartesian mistake to treat the self as an entity who either completely exists or is completely absent, and it is a mistake to think that this self somehow "owns" or is "in charge" of the body. The embodied self is instead a variable, a collection of physiological processes which we may possess to varying degrees. Thus animals have a rudimentary sense of self compared to humans, but humans can also lose their sense of self, in whole or in parts, as a result of brain injury.⁷⁸ The fact that neurological processes in humans are contained by the skin is not a knock-down argument either. Social insects or a school of fish have a self — admittedly a very basic one — which is distributed throughout several biological individuals.⁷⁹ Humans are social animals too and there are plenty of neurological processes which depend on the interaction with others. In social phenomena, say Humberto

77 See the contributions to Jackson, "Forum Introduction: Is the State a Person? Why Should We Care?".

78 Compare, for example, the medical cases discussed in Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 3–51.

79 Maturana and Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, 180–201; Compare Minsky, *The Society of Mind*.

Maturana and Francisco Varela, "the individual ontogenies of all the participating organisms occur fundamentally as part of the network of co-ontogenies that they bring about in constituting third-order unities."⁸⁰ The collective self is a network of connections, but so too is the individual self.⁸¹ "I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth," as David Hume put it, "in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination."⁸²

Performances are essential to this process of self-making. Indeed, it is striking how often neuroscientists and cognitive theorists rely on theatrical metaphors when explaining how consciousness works. "The mind is a kind of theatre," as already Hume noted, "where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations."⁸³ Or, as Thomas Hobbes reminded his readers, the Latin word *persona* originally "signifies the disguise, or outward appearance of a man, counterfeited on the stage."⁸⁴

So that a person is the same that an actor is, both on the stage and in common conversation; and to personate is to act or represent himself or another; and he that acteth another is said to bear his person, or act in his name ...

To ask whether a state can be a person is consequently to ask whether a state can be an actor "both on the stage and in common conversation" which can "act or represent himself or another."

The prevalence of theatrical metaphors, lets suggest, is not a coincidence. The theater is invoked by brain scientists and philosophers alike since it provides an effective way of visualizing a basic cognitive process of our minds. We can call it

80 Maturana and Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge*, 193. "Ontogeny" referring to the "origin and development of an individual organism."

81 Compare, for example, Varela, "The Reenchantment of the Concrete."

82 Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, chap. "Of Personal Identity."

83 Ibid.

84 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 16. "Of Persons, Authors, and Things Personated."

"conceptual blending."⁸⁵ In a conceptual blend, the meanings constructed in two or more input spaces are projected onto an additional space where new meanings arise which were not originally present in the inputs.⁸⁶ The blended space exist in a subjunctive mode, as it were; it points to the existence of a possible world which is organized according to the combined logics of other, real or possible, worlds. Conceptual blends are "as if" simulations that we run in our minds, and it is the cognitive mechanism which makes imagination, and thereby creativity, possible. By "living in the blend," we envision situations and circumstances which have not yet, and may never, occur.⁸⁷ Consider, for example, the "case of the missing chair."⁸⁸ Curiously, but also self-evidently, there can be no nothing in the world since there is at least one of everything. All absences, for that reason, are conceived of in a subjunctive mood.⁸⁹

In the case of "the missing chair," the missing chair is a thing in the blend that, viewed from the outside, is a non-thing. It can be pointed to and takes up physical space. It inherits its physical characteristics of being a gap from the "actual" input, in which there is not a chair in the corresponding position.⁹⁰

The theater, from this point of view, can be understood as a blending-machine — as an embodied, externalized and professionalized version of the same cognitive processes that go on in the human mind.⁹¹ Minds and theaters are projectors, simulators, that allow us to see things we otherwise would not see. Once the curtain goes up, script, actors, stage-set and props are blended into a theatrical

85 Fauconnier and Turner, "The Origin of Language as a Product of the Evolution of Double-Scope Blending."

86 Fauconnier and Turner, "Conceptual Integration Networks"; Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*.

87 Blair, "Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting," 94.

88 Cook, "Staging Nothing"; Compare Fauconnier and Turner, "Conceptual Integration Networks," 146–149 -- and that book I have regarding "the invention of zero."

89 check: Cook, "Staging Nothing."

90 Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 241.

91 Ibid., 217–267; Discussed by theater scholars, including Cook, "Staging Nothing," 87.

space which is replete with emergent properties. What appears here is a reality which is powerful enough to hold our attention and to move us.⁹² The anti-theatrical gripes — most recently from Austin and Derrida — to the effect that the theater is but a pale shadow of the real world, are beside the point. The stage is not about verisimilitude but about imagination and imagination can have real physiological effects. The laughs and tears of the actors appear in a blend, but the laughs and tears of the audience appear on their faces. There is nothing strange about this; we often emote in reaction to things that did not actually happen — the beautiful woman who never called back, the cat we never had who died. The theater is not a shadow, and as far as individual or collective selves are concerned, there is no original with which the blended results can be compared. In the theater things simultaneously are and are not.⁹³

The theater, we could say, is a place where we go to find our selves; where we become present to our selves. Yet the presence which is revealed here is not the presence of a metaphysical, pre-given, being — the kind of entity that got Derrida's goat — but instead the imaginary character that appears in a conceptual blend. The self which did not previously exist suddenly presents itself to us much as it does in our minds. The theater is “presencing,” not re-presenting. Moreover, since individual and collective selves have to be projected in much the same way in the same blended spaces, there is no appreciable ontological difference between them.⁹⁴ The advantage of seeing our selves on stage, as opposed to seeing our selves in our minds, is that we can observe our selves from the outside, as presented by someone else. This is how the theater teaches us things. We go to the theater to learn more about what people like our selves are and what they can

92 Cook, “Staging Nothing,” 91.

93 Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*.

94 Weber's use of the term “simulation” provides an opening for a redefinition of her position. Weber, *Simulating Sovereignty*.

be.⁹⁵

Yet performances do not only take place in theaters, but also in society at large. Social interaction is to a considerable extent a matter of presenting oneself before others on any of the many small stages constituted by daily interpersonal interaction.⁹⁶ Here too we project an imaginary self, a person we would like to be, and we ask the people observing us to recognize us under this description. In the process we build sociality and inauthenticity into our being. It is easy to be disgusted with this spectacle, especially of course if the performance goes badly and we fail to receive the kind of recognition we feel we deserve. For this reason the playacting self, its antics and its fate, have often been a source of mournful laments. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player," as Shakespeare's Macbeth put it, "That struts and frets his hour upon the stage."⁹⁷ And Jean-Jacques Rousseau, scathing in his criticism of the superficiality and decadence of Parisian high-society, was equally scathing of the theater which he saw as a threat to a more natural, more rural and thereby more authentic, way of life.⁹⁸ Yet what Rousseau wished for is not available. Away from the many small stages of everyday life, the self, as we know it, does not exist.

But performances are presented also on a larger stage as social and political events are made to happen, and to appear, in a certain manner.⁹⁹ We can talk of "public performances" as staged events through which imaginary blends of social facts and visions are presented to vast audiences, perhaps to entire societies, at the same time. Through the public performance the world is cast in a certain form and held up for our contemplation; something is discovered, something is

95 Langer, *Feeling and Form*.

96 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*; Ryan, "Maximising ..."

97 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I. Act 5, Scene 5, lines 17–28.

98 Rousseau, *Letter to D'Alembert and Writings for the Theater*.

99 Alexander, "Cultural Pragmatics."

remembered or exposed.¹⁰⁰ Examples include a terrorist attack on a building in a major city; an attempt to “shock and awe” a civilian population; the signing of a peace treaty by two former enemies; the funeral of a world leader; the diplomatic rituals shared by members of the same international system.¹⁰¹

But make no mistake, these are *not* the performative reiterations of discursive practices. Public performances are originals, not citations; they involve all the senses and engage all neurological systems, not just the literal-minded mind. The way we, as members of the audience, react to these public performances may often surprise us. We scream at a rock concert; we raise our fists at a political rally, or we speak in tongues at a religious convocation. These are physical reactions, performed by us to be sure, yet they are in a sense not ours. They may be referred to as cases of “mass hysteria,” or as examples of “conversion syndrome,” but we could also say that they are the reactions of a shared, a public, body.¹⁰² It is in this public performance and in this public body that we come across ourselves as a society.

It is also here that we find the state. The state — *pace* Weber, Campbell, Derrida and Butler — is not declared into existence through the iteration of texts, but neither is it abolished through military interventions. Instead, in next to all cases, before independence could be declared it had to be fought for. People had to present themselves to themselves and to others as willing to risk their lives for the right to self-determination.¹⁰³ Such struggles constitute clashes of real interests, and often of real weapons, but they are also performances in a fully theatrical sense — involving aspirational plots, fluttering flags, arousing music, self-sacrifice, betrayal, and heroism. It was by watching these performances, and by getting

100 Apter, “Politics as Theatre,” 227.

101 On the last of these examples, see Ringmar, “Performing International Systems.”

102 Bartholomew, “Protean Nature of Mass Sociogenic Illness.”

103 Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*.

involved with them themselves, that "the people" and "the state" came to be constituted as subjects of international politics.

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