

CARMELA CUTUGNO

PERFORMANCE STUDIES FROM A SHORT-SIGHTED POINT OF VIEW

What is Performance Studies? What is Performance? What is the role of a fieldworker trying to understand what Performance Studies does? This is a brief consideration related to a wider attempt of approaching the phenomenon of Performance Studies "as performance", studying it through the methodological lens of the field itself. A work in progress for a "discipline in progress"; both things crossing borders, cultures, genres, methodologies.

"My goal is nothing less than making performance studies a method of analysis, a way to understand the world as it is becoming, and a necessary tool for living".¹

This is Richard Schechner, on July 2001. When I read it indeed, it was October 2009. At that time I had just received my MA in Theatre and Performing Arts at the University of Bologna (Italy), previously read a few other things about Performance Studies, and stopped by the NYU's Tisch building on Broadway (two years earlier, in 2007), during my first visit to New York City. I was not completely blind about the existence of Performance Studies then, and "that not much" I had the chance to see from far away made me curious. Now, which is when I am writing, it is June 2012, and I have been a visiting scholar at NYU's department of Performance Studies since last September 2011.

Up until now, shortsightedness is something you cannot really cure or recover from. I do not think I have ever felt ready for a laser surgery, and so, most of the times, the only solution seems to get closer to what you want/need to see, and to put on your contact lenses (more lightweight and less evident than glasses, as most of the commercials say).

What I have seen so far from a bit closer is something nobody (including myself) really wants to define, label or border, but rather understand, keep open, enjoy. The object of the "view" is Performance Studies, the new contact lens (which I am still trying to learn how to wear and disinfect every day) are the Performance Studies methodologies, the closest point of observation I have reached is the Department of Performance Studies at NYU. Mine is a modest, scared but, for me, curious kind of meta-methodological approach to "*the broad spectrum approach*"; it is an enjoyable attempt to see what Performance Studies does/(*ergo*) is, by means of trying to use some of the same methodologies which are proper of Performance

¹ R. SCHECHNER, *Performance Studies An Introduction*, Second Edition, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. X.

Studies itself. If PS studies performance through the lens of performance, I am trying to look at PS “as performance”, studying it through the methodological lens of PS. This basically has turned into studying what Performance Studies does and the way it does what it does, by doing, for a short while, what it does.

Performances may not, as Turner had hoped, give us access and insight into another culture, but they certainly tell us a great deal about our desire for access, and reflect the politics of our interpretations.²

PS as object, PS as method, then: a bit tricky, above all for a short-sighted person! So, I apologize in advance for the many oversights.

Embody! Without Instructions and Counter-indications

First personal non-written rule: embody the subject, walk on the field.

What role does the fieldworker play? He is not a performer and not not a performer, not a spectator and not not a spectator. He is in between two roles just as he is in between two cultures. In the field he represents—whether he wants to or not—his culture of origin; and back home he represents the culture he has studied. The fieldworker is always in a “not . . . not not” situation.³

From the “not... not not” point of view of my fieldwork at NYU, Performance Studies expresses the only things I can say about what it is, through what it does. It is pretty hard and actually it might turn out to be unproductive to try to define what PS is, just because this attempt would go against the nature of PS itself. It does not want to be defined, because, by its only own definition, it is not definable. You might want to look at it as a discipline, as an academic field, as a new way of investigation. PS seems to be none of these and all of these things at the same time. It is the space of the inclusions and refuses the boundaries, or maybe, it can accept them at the only condition of blurring them (probably because walking through them is a constitutive part of what it does).

Performance Studies shares with its object, performance, many elements, first of all the difficulties of talking about both of them. So, to say that the object of PS is Performance does not clarify much, and it is just a tautological reflection.

² D.TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 6.

³ R. SCHECHNER, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 108.

Performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary life – are “restored behaviors,” “twice-behaved behaviors,” performed actions that people train for and rehearse.⁴ All human activity could potentially be considered as “performance”, or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself. The difference between doing and performing [...] would seem to lie [...] in an attitude – we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance.⁵

“The Performance Studies performance” itself might be considered as an example of “restored behavior”, “activity carried out with a consciousness of itself” by scholars, students, artists. Consciousness of what, or better, of doing what? Maybe of using a space where you can look at a multiplicity of “embodied behaviors”, putting on lens coming from a variety of other disciplines.

A provisional coalescence on the move, Performance Studies is more than the sum of its inclusions.⁶

I like the idea of thinking about PS as an “in transit space for transit of views”: the Highline of the freight rail line of knowledge, the Zuccotti Park among the disciplined skyscrapers, the Q or B train route over the Manhattan Bridge.

What is performance? What is performance studies? “Liminality” is perhaps the most concise and accurate response to both of these questions. Paradoxically, the persistent use of this concept within the field has made liminality into something of a norm. That is, we have come to define the efficacy of performance and of our own research, if not exclusively, then very inclusively, in terms of liminality — that is, a mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic “in betweenness” allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed.⁷

It is in this “in betweenness”, in this space of liminality that the PS actors play their role, refusing the limits of any “sectorialization”. And probably it is this same “in betweenness” to drive PS closer to the way things around us work. Most of these things are behaved behaviors in the liminal state of life, and trying to understand these “things” might imply a liminal approach.

⁴ R. SCHECHNER, *Performance Studies An Introduction*, Second edition, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 28.

⁵ M. CARLSON, *Perormance: a critical introduction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 4.

⁶ B. KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, *Performance Studies*, Rockefeller Foundation, Culture and Creativity, September 1999.

⁷ J. MCKENZIE, *The Liminal Norm*, in *The Performance Studies Reader*, Second Edition, edited by Henry Bial, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 27.

*[...] at the onset of the twenty-first century, the idea of performance and the young tradition of performance studies are critical to any understanding of our present situation. We can use and develop the tools of performance studies to explain to ourselves and to others what is going on around us.*⁸

From my understanding, Performance Studies, as a field of research and analysis, seems reflecting some of the intrinsic mechanisms which are proper of the world that observes. The openness, the multiplicity of views, the times and ways of observation, sometimes even the chance though which you end up thinking about something instead of something else. I am not sure if most of the things around us are linked in a way or in another to some forms of “behaved behaviors”, but it seems to me that most of the things we are interested in, as human beings, are things which have a certain kind of relation with our “embodied practices”. By saying this I mean that, even if things we look at might not be “behaved behaviors”, they have an effect on our behaved behaviors, and/or our behaved behaviors have an effect on them, in a kind of continuous mutual osmosis.

*A Performance Studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture not in themselves, but as players in ongoing relationships, that is, “as performance”.*⁹

What PS does is looking at these ongoing relationships and trying to understand how they work. This probably explains why, if you take a class in Performance Studies or if you read PS people’s papers, books and essays, you end up dealing with the power of the trance practices during religious ceremonies in a church in Brooklyn, with dancers performing in museums, with histories of trauma in the Latin American dictatorships, with the Olympic games and the terroristic attacks, just to give a few examples.

Welcome to the world!

In 1976 the Drama Department, School of the Arts, NYU began a reorganization of curriculum. We focused on several “tracks” or programs that taken together offered students a complete but very unusual curriculum in “performance” rather than drama (literature) or theatre (actual training in acting, directing, and design). Our aim was --

⁸ J. BELL, *Performance Studies in an Age of Terror*, in *The Performance Studies Reader*, Second Edition, edited by Henry Bial, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 58.

*and is -- to understand performance from the broad perspective of those human activities where behavior is consciously structured, whether in art, religion, folk and popular culture, sports, or other public activities.*¹⁰

Reading the Richard Schechner's papers at the Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of Princeton, it seems that the birth of Performance Studies at NYU was preceded by half a decade of experimentation in approximation to PS inside the Drama Department at the same School of Arts. Some of the first faculty members initially involved in this shift were Theodore Hoffman, Michael Kirby, Brooks McNamara and Richard Schechner. The fact that all of them were part of the theatre scene, both academically and artistically, as well as the fact that PS was breastfed in the cradle of the Drama department, explains why the tradition of Performance Studies at NYU has theatre studies as parent.

Born from "dad theatre" and "mum anthropology" (via Victor Turner), in the Spring 1981 the baby PS curriculum presents itself with this somatic features:

Classical and Medieval Theatre
History of Theatrical Theory
History of the Avant-garde
Popular Performance
Modern to Post-Modern Performance
Dance
Supervised Research
Shubert Archive
The Management of Performing Arts Collections
Dance History II
Dance Criticism
Performance Theory
Performance Theory: Seminar
Dramaturgy
Festival and Folk Performance
Mini Course: Poetics of Performance
*Introduction to Dance Research: Issues and Approaches*¹¹

During the last three decades things have changed of course. In the meantime PS has generated its first creatures (scholars, theorists, performers and who knows what else) and some of them continued contributing to the field, joining scholars and

¹⁰ Draft by Richard Schechner, September 1979, located in *The Richard Schechner Papers*, Rare tautologicalBooks and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 151, folder 2.

¹¹ Document located in *The Richard Schechner Papers*, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 151, folder 2.

theorists coming from other disciplinary backgrounds. The field of performance studies has spread out in different Universities in the US and in other (mainly English speaking) countries, developing specific features in each place, but always maintaining its openness. If it is true, as Shannon Jackson writes, that “*the story of a field changes depending upon where one decides to begin*”¹², on the other hand I also agree with James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal when they say that “*as a discipline performances studies has evolved to the point where it need no longer justify its existence through carefully constructed intellectual genealogies or pedigrees*.”¹³

*Approaching phenomena as performance has certain advantages. One can consider things as provisional, in-process, existing and changing □ over time, in rehearsal, as it were.*¹⁴

This implies that approaching the phenomenon of Performance Studies as a performance itself gives us the chance to consider PS as a work-in-progress, or, better, as a “*discipline in progress*”.¹⁵ And the progress of this discipline works on the borders, it works by crossing the borders of disciplines, cultures, genres and methodologies. For this reason most of the Performance Studies people talk about their work as “intercultural, interdisciplinary, and intergeneric”.

If, as said before, the way PS looks at the world reflects the structural forms of the world itself, sometimes what PS does might appear as disorienting as its own object of analysis. Being intercultural, interdisciplinary, intergeneric, open and unfinishable is definitely coherent to the way things around us work; if a strategy to get into a specific logic is trying to adopt the same logic, then PS certainly performs that strategy.

¹² S. JACKSON, *Professing Performance*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹³ J. HARDING and C. ROSENTHAL, *Introduction: The Rise of Performance Studies*, in *The Rise of Performance Studies. Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 10.

¹⁴ R. SCHECHNER, *What is Performance Studies anyway*, in “*The Ends of Performance*” edited by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, New York University Press, 1998, p. 361.

¹⁵ R. SCHECHNER, *Performance Studies without End*, «TDR», 51. 4, 2007, p. 8.