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Performance and Presence

Telling the story of performance theory in the twentieth century to the present is an enormous undertaking. Insightful research from the fields of theater studies, cultural and literary studies, and anthropology, including such a selective list of influential scholars as Victor Taylor, Richard Schechner, Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, Michael Taussig, Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick, have led to a renewed focus on performance that grants it a specificity above and beyond the mere transmission of a given meaning or message. In this light, performance theory can be grouped with other twentieth-century theoretical innovations such as media theory, new historicism, and science studies, which focus critical attention on the medium or means of transmission of a knowledge that was traditionally regarded as itself the ultimate or even exclusive object of intellectual study. Instead of attempting to relate this history in all its richness here, I will focus on one aspect of performance theory: namely, its crucial relation to the philosophical problem of presence as it developed over the same period of time. This relation will, I hope, itself turn out to be highly relevant to the story as a whole, in that a general sea change in the way presence has been theorized since the early twentieth century has much to say about the importance performance theory has attained today.

In the first part of the paper I analyze the concept of presence in light of its appearance in twentieth century philosophical debates, in particular in Heidegger's discussion in *Being and Time* and Derrida's critique of Heidegger in his own deployment of the term. What is crucial to grasp here is not the specifics of whether Derrida in fact trumped Heidegger on this point, but rather how Derrida focused and perhaps even intensified the rigor of Heidegger's own attunement to the insistence with which the concept of presence infiltrates thought and installs itself in a position of privilege. Derrida's attentiveness to this question throughout his oeuvre, and his subsequent popularity in literary and cultural theoretical circles in the United States and elsewhere, led to a general tendency in the humanities to mistrust the notion of presence in all its forms, although this mistrust was not always accompanied by a particularly thorough philosophical understanding of why presence had attained this pariah status.

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Whether under the direct influence of Heidegger and deconstruction or as part of the general zeitgeist that this mode of thought announced, practices in fields as divergent as cultural history, anthropology, sociology, and the newly minted field of media studies underwent a shift of focus from an ultimate meaning underlying artifacts, texts, cultural practices, and mediatic forms of expressions, to the analysis of the media and practices themselves, in their performative and material specificity. It is in such a light that we can best understand the influence of, for example, Clifford Geertz's notion of ›thick description‹ in cultural anthropology, and its deployment in the ›new historical‹ research of literary scholars like Stephen Greenblatt. In a similar vein, Marshall McLuhan's insistence that ›the medium is the message‹ established a new academic discipline that in general vowed to upend a longstanding disregard for the means of a meaning's transmission in cultural theory.

In the context of this overall framework, then, it makes sense to propose a series of parallel binary concepts that underwent this revolution in thought. To the same extent that the signifier began to gain ascendancy over the signified in semiotics; textuality over meaning in literary analysis; indexicality over expression in Derrida's very first deconstructions of the phenomenological tradition; mediality over the presence of the message in media studies; surface over depth in architectural theory; performance, in the case of our theme, began to assert its importance over the presence of an underlying meaning that theater, ritual, and the performances constituting quotidian existence had been presumed to convey.

From this broadly sketched outline of shifts in related disciplines, it is clear that performance and presence occupied opposing poles of a binary that was, during the time in question, brought under examination and in some cases actively subverted. Nevertheless, in current cultural theoretical practice, the concept of presence is no longer exclusively associated with its direct philosophical heritage, and has rather, and very much as a result of the above described revolution, begun to switch sides, and itself signify the very temporal, material modalities that were once subject to its previous avatar. The key figure in this move is, in my mind, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who has for at least the last twenty years developed a notion of presence that we could call post-deconstructive, in that it at one and the same time emerges from the deconstructive de-privileging of being-as-presence, and re-establishes itself as a privileged term of analysis. It does not do so, to be sure, by in any way reversing the work of deconstruction; rather, the concept of presence in Gumbrecht's work and in that of those who have been influenced by him (and I count myself among this group), reasserts itself on *this* side, as it were, of the mediality/presence binary. Presence, in other words, is no longer the ultimate and pre-existing reference to material practices of various sorts, but designates instead the very materiality of those practices themselves. Presence, in the current sense, has become performance.

In the final section of the paper I position Gumbrecht's transvaluation of presence within a general intellectual history of modernity, wherein I locate the leading problem of thought as involving the paradoxical relation between appearances and the truth they veil. This problem, however, has a very specific historical provenance, namely, in the historical Baroque – a period dated by art historians as spanning more or less from the end of the sixteenth to the early part of the eighteenth centuries. European cultural production in this period is endlessly obsessed with the problem of appearances, their potential deceptiveness, and the truths they veil and disclose. The aporia of truth and appearances forces cultural production and thought alike to adopt one of two strategies, what I call major and minor, and it is the oscillation between these that has most determined the conceptual dyad of presence and performance.

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