

A Brief History of the Notion of Performance

The notion of performance emerged in the humanities and social sciences in the mid-20th century and, following this development, also in the arts and science in general. It took shape during the 1940s and 1950s with an intellectual movement known as the *performative turn*: a paradigm shift in the humanities and social sciences, with a focus on theorising *performance* as a social and cultural element. Key to the movement were the works of Kenneth Duvya Burke, Victor Witter Turner, Erving Goffman and others, which focused on the elaboration of a dramaturgical paradigm to be applied to culture at large and that facilitated the view of all culture as performance.¹ Similarly influential were the writings of the British philosopher of language John L Austin, who posited that speech constitutes an *active* practice that can affect and transform realities.² Due to the movement, performance is today commonly understood as a concept that provides a path to understanding human behaviour. This is rooted in the hypothesis that all human practices are performed and are affected by their specific context: the notion of *active human agency*.

The performative turn movement inspired a similar development in the arts. Fine art, music, literature and theatre all – in the words of Erika Fischer-Lichte, Professor of Theatre Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin – ‘tend to realise themselves through *acts* (performances)’, thus shifting the emphasis from *works* to *events* that increasingly involve the ‘recipients, listeners, spectators’.³ Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte proposed that Austin’s notion of the

performative is not only applicable to speech, but that it can also be applied to corporeal acts. This relates to the development of the 'performance arts' as situation-specific, action-emphasising and ephemeral artistic presentations of a performer. It thus engages spatial and temporal aspects, as well as the performer and a specific relation between performer and audience.

Subsequently the concept of performance also began to surface in the natural sciences, technology studies and economic science. Andrew Pickering, Professor of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Exeter, charted a shift within the sciences away from a 'representational idiom' and towards a 'performative' one, proposing that:

Within an expanded conception of scientific culture ... – one that goes beyond science-as-knowledge, to include material, social and temporal dimensions of science – it becomes possible to imagine that science is not just about representation ... One can start from the idea that the world is filled not, in the first instance, with facts and observations, but with agency. The world, I want to say, is continually doing things, things that bear upon us not as observation statements upon disembodied intellects but as forces upon material beings.⁴

Pickering went on to write that 'practice effects associations between multiple and often heterogeneous cultural elements', as well as operates the production of knowledge and scientific activity as a way of *doing things*.⁵ In so doing, Pickering paved the way for an understanding of active human agency in the context of the sciences, and of the world being filled with and intrinsically characterised by active agency.

It becomes necessary at this point to clarify the concept of *agency*. In philosophy and sociology, agency refers to the capacity of a person or entity to act in the world. While studies of human agency are generally characterised by differences in understanding within and between disciplines, it is not usually contested as a general concept. The concept of *non-human agency*, however, has remained to some extent controversial. *Actor-network theory* as developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law and others is a social theory that postulates non-human agency as one of its core features. Bruno Latour explained that:

If action is limited a priori to what 'intentional', 'meaningful' humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a

list, or a tag could act. They might exist in the domain of ‘material’ ‘causal’ relations, but not in the ‘reflexive’ ‘symbolic’ domain of social relations. By contrast, if we stick to our decision to start from the controversies about actors and agencies, then *any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant. Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent’s action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference?⁶

Latour referred to such items as ‘*participants* in the course of action awaiting to be given figuration’.⁷ Moreover, Latour argued that such participants can operate on the entire range from determining to serving human actions and from full causality to none, and called for analysis ‘to account for the durability and extension of any interaction’.⁸ The proposed grading of causality is of interest in that it can serve as a systematic approach to specific aspects of performance-oriented architecture.

There are several fundamental criticisms of actor–network theory. One key criticism focuses on the property of *intentionality* as a fundamental distinction between humans and animals or objects. Activity theory, for instance, operates on intentionality as a fundamental requirement and thus ascribes agency exclusively to humans. In contrast, the concept of agency in actor–network theory is not based on intentionality, and nor does it assign intentionality to non-human agents.

Recognising non-human agency does not, however, necessitate the relinquishing of concerns for human intentionality. If architecture is thought to perform, this requires some concept of non-human agency and the integration of different forms and lack of intentionality in agency.

Moreover, the notion of agency is based on that of *environment* – a term which itself has greatly varying definitions and implications and therefore requires clarification. Thomas Brandstetter and Karin Harrasser highlighted two works that were key to the development of the related notions of *ambiance* and *milieu* from the 1940s onwards: Leo Spitzer’s ‘*Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics*’ of 1942, and Georges Canguilhem’s lecture from 1946–7 later published under the title ‘*Le vivant et son milieu*’.⁹ Spitzer traced the development of the concept of *ambiance* from the Greek *periechon* and Latin *ambiens*, via the notion of medium, to the modern notions of *ambiance* and *milieu*. Canguilhem started from the 18th-

century import of the notion of environment from mechanics into biology. Both cite Isaac Newton (1642–1727), who used the notion of *medium* to refer to ether as the locus of gravitational force, and Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who extended the French term *milieu* to encompass not only the physical medium that surrounds an organism, but also the general scope of external conditions that are necessary to support the organism's existence. Where they differ, according to Brandstetter and Harrasser, is in assessing the work of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) who examined how living beings perceive their environment subjectively. Von Uexküll posited that:

All reality is subjective appearance. ...

Kant set the subject, man, over against objects, and discovered the fundamental principles according to which objects are built up by our minds.

...

The task of biology consists in expanding in two directions the results of Kant's investigations:

- (i) by considering the part played by our body, and especially by our sense-organs and central nervous system, and
- (ii) by studying the relations of other subjects (animals) to objects.¹⁰

Von Uexküll introduced a distinction between the general surrounding (*Umgebung*) and subjectively perceived environments (*Umwelt*), and between the latter and the inner world (*Innenwelt*) of an organism. The study of the relation of animals to their environments or *Umwelten* led Von Uexküll to argue that all organisms are subjects, because they react to perceived sensory data as signs. This gave rise to a field of study in biology entitled *biosemiotics*, a term coined by the psychiatrist and semiotician Friedrich Rothchild (1899–1995). As Kalevi Kull explained:

Biology has studied how organisms and living communities are built. But it is no less important to understand what such living systems know, in a broad sense; that is, what they remember (what agent-object sign relations are biologically preserved), what they recognize (what distinction they are capable and not capable of), what signs they explore (how they communicate, make meaning and use signs) and so on. These questions are all about how different living systems perceive the world, what experience motivates what actions, based on those perceptions.¹¹

This notion of the subjective perception of *Umwelt* offers an interesting approach to the notion of environment in that it involves the organism's

active agency and relates to the approach of agency in actor–network theory. As Brandstetter and Harrasser pointed out, Spitzer was critical in his 1942 article of a pronounced leaning to determinism in relation to specific scientific notions of milieu and *Umwelt*.¹² In contrast, Canguilhem argued that Von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt* took adequate account of the 'irreducible activity of life'.¹³ He maintained that:

man's specific environment is not situated in the universal environment like content in its container. ... A living being is not reducible to a meeting point of influences. Whence the inadequacy of any biology which, through complete submission to the spirit of the physicochemical sciences, would eliminate from its domain every consideration of meaning. A meaning, from the biological and psychological point of view, is an assessment of values in keeping with a need.¹⁴

Whether one concurs with Canguilhem's assessment of need or not, it seems clear that, when considering agency of different species, their perception of their specific environment is key.

Thus the discipline of biosemiotics can provide an insightful approach to questions of agency of different species, and can perhaps offer an inroad to rethinking concerns of meaning that are present in post-modern approaches to questions of performance in architecture. At any rate, biosemiotics and architecture are not yet affiliated disciplines and research needs to commence in this intersection of knowledge fields.

References

- 1 See, for example: K Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA), 1966; VW Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press (Ithaca, NY), 1967; VW Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press (Ithaca, NY), 1974; E Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor Books (New York), 1959; E Goffman, *Where the Action Is*, Allen Lane (London), 1969.
- 2 JL Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Clarendon Press (Oxford), 1962.
- 3 E Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp (Frankfurt), 2004, p 29.
- 4 A Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, IL), 1995, pp 5–6.
- 5 Ibid, p 95.
- 6 B Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press (Oxford), 2005, p 71.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid, p 72.
- 9 T Brandstetter and K Harrasser, 'Introduction', in T Brandstetter, K Harrasser and G Friesinger (eds), *Das Leben und seine Räume*, Turia + Kant (Vienna), 2010, pp 9–20; L Spitzer, 'Milieu and Ambience: An Essay in Historical Semantics', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol 3, 1942, pp 1–42, 169–218; G Canguilhem, 'Le vivant et son milieu' [1952], *La connaissance de la vie*, J Vrin (Paris), 1980, pp 129–54.
- 10 J von Uexküll, *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere*, Julius Springer (Berlin), 1909, p xv.
- 11 L Else, 'A Meadowful of Meaning', *New Scientist*, 21 August 2010, Vol 207, No 2774, pp 28–31 (p 31).
- 12 Brandstetter and Harrasser, 'Introduction', in T Brandstetter, K Harrasser and G Friesinger (eds), *Das Leben und seine Räume*, op cit, p 14.
- 13 Ibid, p 16.
- 14 Canguilhem, 'Le vivant et son milieu', op cit (translation by Graham Burchell).