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Enacting the Difference between Liveness and “Lifeness” in Performance

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> Abstract • I discuss Maiya Murphy's claim that theater performances operate as autopoietic systems. My view is different: Performances of this kind can be better understood as “as-if” autopoietic systems that operate as staged, concept-based, and instructed events applying autopoietic systems and operations as artistic means for sense-making.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » In her target article, Maiya Murphy “propose[s] a move from ‘liveness’ to ‘lifeness’” and suggests “that both individual humans and theatrical performances are embodied through the process of autopoiesis” (§6). In a few sections, she introduces three dimensions of the concept of autopoiesis: biological autopoiesis as self-sustaining systems, cybernetic autopoiesis and the role of the observer,¹ and enactivism and the role of sense-making. However, Murphy never defines the autopoiesis of a performance. Clearly, human beings can be seen as autopoietic systems (including other autopoietic systems) and thus participate in performances either as performers or as spectators. Yet how can a performance be an autopoietic system? What criteria are necessary to define a performance as an autopoietic system versus, for example, designed and instructed occurrences entailing autopoietic systems?

« 2 » The notion of autopoiesis and its inaugurating change in philosophical standpoint from ontology to a context-based process of emergence seem to offer a theoretical perspective that is able to conceptualize the question of performativity. The concept of performativity sheds light on dimensions of staged occurrences that could not be fath-

1 | An observer is not only a human looking at something; all autopoietic systems include the observation (sensing, registration) of their own operations, thereby inserting a difference with regard to the system and its environment.

omed by ontological concepts, such as representation and mimesis. Performativity indicates action and its effects and processes of exchange on various levels. The linguist John Langshaw Austin is credited with this paradigmatic change; he investigated the social and personal effect of statements rather than their representational value (Austin 1975). Theater and performance studies appropriated the term and applied it to investigating formats of stage art, such as performance art and performance theater, which were novel at the time. Performance art emerged as a part of the classical avant-garde at the beginning of the last century. Futurism, Dada, and later minimalism and happenings, among others, are all important movements that focused on immediate sensory impact and processes of exchange, often by questioning and annihilating the distinction between everyday life and art. For example, happenings are designed events that include everyday spaces and action in their presentation. In *Untitled Guide-line for Happenings*, Allan Kaprow writes:

“In this respect it is not different from the preparations for a parade, a football match, a wedding, or a religious service. It is not even different from play. The one big difference is that while knowledge of the scheme is necessary, professional talent is not; the situations in a Happening are lifelike [...] The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.” (Kaprow 1965, in Stiles & Selz 2012: 836)

« 3 » Concurrently with the second avant-garde movement during the 1970s, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1998) applied the term “autopoiesis” to describe living organisms as operating, self-regulating, and self-maintaining organizations. Autopoiesis became one key notion in describing life as self-regulatory processes in fields other than biology. Theater and performance theorists have also appropriated the concept to describe and uncover dimensions of emergent processes that theories of representation could not see.

« 4 » On the face of it, performances are designed occurrences that have a planned beginning and indications of determination. A performance does not organize its operations with the aim of operating for as long as possible (that, of course, could potentially be a director's instruction to performers, but I have

not encountered this yet). Thus, I do not consider a performance an autopoietic system, but rather an allopoietic arrangement that includes autopoietic entities and occurrences as an artistic medium. A performance's operating mode can thus be characterized as an “as-if” autopoietic system because for an observer it appears to be behaving autopoietically. I have elaborated on this mainly in the context of interactive installation art, where the audience is an integrated part of the proper artwork (Heinrich 2008, 2014). A theater performance consists of allopoietic operations, whose structures and frameworks are designed to display and entail autopoietic occurrences. Performance, like all art, cannot do without a distinction between art and what we experience and consider as quotidian reality (Heinrich 2016). That is not to say that performances are not genuinely understood as material-based occurrences, but only that every theater performance is based on the audience's cognitive awareness of this distinction. Performance art is deliberately questioning and complicating this distinction by making it not only an artistic medium but often also a thematic topic. Performance is negotiating life by being “liveness.”

« 5 » To be able to cognize performance as “as-if” autopoietic systems, one must recognize that theater performances are social artifacts. Of course, a theater performance stages, besides objects such as props, spoken words, costumes and spaces, also human beings (and sometimes animals). One way to apply the concept of autopoiesis to performance is by declaring that theater performances are part of social autopoietic systems that work with communication as their main medium (properly applying Niklas Luhmann's theory on social systems). However, a theater performance is not itself an autopoietic system simply because it is designed, rehearsed, and repeated by humans and ceases to exist when the stage lights are turned off and the public has left the room. “As-if” systems entail and present autopoietic dimensions or what Murphy describes as “isomorphisms between life and art, which [...] can create an experience of the autopoietic resonance between life and art” (§23). Yet, these dimensions are part of performances' *modus operandi*, i.e., they are cognitively framed by the designedness of theater performances and thus experienced ambiguously as “as-

if” autopoietic. For theater performances to happen as theater, there need to be observers that can distinguish between everyday life and art. This is different from observing the theater as a workplace for people who work with the production and presentation of theater shows. Still, all of them must be aware that they are producing artistic artifacts with, according to Luhmann, one distinct social function: “[...] that art tests arrangements that are at once fictional and real in order to show society, from a position within society, that things could be done differently [...]” (Luhmann 2000: 313).

« 6 » A theater performance is both enacted and experienced by human beings. Human beings are, above all, sense-making beings. Enactivism proposes that all cognition takes its starting point in interaction with one's environment, including social interaction rather than mental representations. Hanne De Jaeger and Ezequiel Di Paolo define social interaction as –

“[...] a co-regulated coupling between at least two autonomous agents, where: (i) the co-regulation and the coupling mutually affect each other, constituting an autonomous self-sustaining organization in the domain of relational dynamics and (ii) the autonomy of the agents involved is not destroyed [...]” (De Jaeger & Di Paolo 2007: 442)

« 7 » However, this sensible definition cannot be directly applied to staged events, again simply because they are overtly staged.² In theater performances, all social interactions are instructed or based on a concept and played out on stage.³ Even Konstantin Stanislavski's perfect actor must have a cognitive awareness of the theatrical framing that allows them to stop acting at any moment. That does not mean that either the actors or the audience do not believe in the experience of enactions. However, they are doing just this: they believe. Believing

2 | An exception is Augusto Boal's invisible theater, which works with the difference between the known and unknown: for the actors, the events are framed and performed, but for the audience, the very same events are part of their usual quotidian life (and the performers know that).

3 | A stage is any instance of space occupied by living or life-like beings that are recognized by the audience as performers.

includes a double context: first, the sensory experience of the performed action and, second, the performance framing that declares that the enaction should be observed and considered as artistic presentations, i.e., designed interactions on stage and between the performance and the spectators. Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008) “autopoietic feedback loop” tries to uncover moments of sensory experience as moments of mutual affectedness on both sides of the stage. Audiences and performers affect each other. This creates but one dimension of the momentary social interaction systems that performances establish. It is what Murphy characterizes as “isomorphism” and the more process-oriented “resonance.” She summarizes:

“Turning from a traditional conception of liveness to ‘life-alike-ness,’ or ‘lifeness’ for short, means that we do not have to choose between locating these phenomena in the maker, performer, or spectator. On this view, a fundamental process of life reiterates through the biological, cognitive, affective, and imaginative domains of experience.” (§3)

« 8 » However, this is not enough to declare a theater performance a proper autopoietic system; it only says that human-to-human interactions form part of performances and are framed by them. Sense-making in theater and performance art is grounded in the experiential difference between allopoietic and autopoietic forms of organization. In other words, the spectator makes sense of the difference between liveness and “lifeness,” engaging in both modes on various levels by being alternately and simultaneously inside the resonance space as a participating observer and outside of it as a reflective observer. Even in performance installations that include and engage the audience as part of the occurrences (e.g., by means of direct dialogue or by assigning a role and function), performers and audiences/participants alike are aware of the artistic setting and can at any time withdraw their participation by refusing to be spectators or by leaving the performance space entirely. Both the performer and the audience/participants must manage multiple observational viewpoints and multiple modes of interpretation, including a resonance between the participating humans.

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Orders of Autopoiesis and “Lifeness” as the Biological Spectacle of Control

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> Abstract • Descriptions of theatre events as autopoietic are more productively grounded in Luhmann’s theory of social systems rather than in Maturana and Varela’s original biological conception. The sense of “lifeness” resonating within audiences of all styles of theatrical performance is directly correlated to the type of spectacle produced by the observed relationship between this social autopoiesis and the engagement of biologically autopoietic performers in the closed-loop control activity through which it is catalyzed.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

Introduction

« 1 » Maiya Murphy’s target article brings much welcome additional richness to the analysis of theatre and performance through the lens of autopoiesis. I am also particularly grateful for Murphy’s integration of my own cybernetic approach into the “liveness” debate in performance studies, something I have long contemplated on my own but, unlike Murphy, without being able to discern a suitable entry-point. I would like to take the opportunity provided by Murphy to think through some further theoretical clarifications that I hope will continue to push this fruitful conversation forward.

« 2 » Before proceeding, I must foreground Merriam Webster’s definition of *spectacle* as something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining *especially*: an eye-catching or dramatic public display. In addition to discussing different orders of autopoiesis, this commentary will propose ways in which, while the type of spectacle produced by naturalistic and non-naturalistic performances significantly differ, they both emerge via audience members’ resonance with the closed-loop control activity of performers who are similarly autopoietically structured.

Which autopoiesis?

« 3 » Given their non-biological nature *qua* systems, I suggest that discussion of the autopoiesis of theatrical or performance systems, as opposed to the presence of autopoietic entities *within* performance systems and their recognition thereof, is more productively grounded in the theory of Niklas Luhmann than that of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. For Luhmann, *meaning-constituted* systems are either *psychic* or *social*, with the former operating as environments for the latter (Luhmann 1995). All manner of theatrical performances, regardless of stylistic convention, play a role in the autopoiesis of both these types of system; as a set of perturbations to the *psychic systems* of the observers (i.e., audience members) who will make distinctions in the on-going process of meaning-making (commonly understood, in the theatre, as *interpretation*), and as communicative acts that serve as constitutive elements of nested *social systems*, from the basal level of *interactions* up to the symbolically generalized *art system* (Luhmann 2000). It is the connection between this social autopoiesis and the closed-loop control activities of the biologically autopoietic performers that will determine the potential observation of “lifeness” by observers.

“Lifeness” in Naturalism

« 4 » Instances where the resonating sense of “lifeness” is made manifest in naturalist theatre occur when biologically autopoietic systems (human audience members) observe the spectacle of other biologically autopoietic systems (human performers) genuinely engaged in quintessentially cybernetic closed-loop control activity *within* the imaginary world of the performance system. Such observation activates the “resonance” across the interpenetrating *psychic* and *biological* systems of individual observers (with the latter as environment for the former) affording the recognition of “lifeness.”

« 5 » In §35, Murphy suggests, that, to some, my “application of isomorphisms to successful naturalist acting and life may seem obvious, subjective, or limited.” The claim to obviousness seems to be linked to the notion that, by its very definition, works of naturalism are intended to be “life-like”;