

Danse de l'énergie: Qi in a Micro-Level Systemic Definition of Performance?

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> Abstract • I question *différance* as the best descriptor for micro-systemic-level activity in a general description of art. In its place, I take up something that Bäckér in his target article sees as insufficient, Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept of "energy" in an autopoietic feedback loop between performers and spectators. To address Bäckér's concerns about the suitability of "energy" as a concept to anchor a micro-systemic description, I follow the cue of actor-trainers to suggest that a vague sense of "energy" can be better described through the specific concept of *qi* from Asian martial, meditative, healing, and performing-arts traditions. By describing "energy" as *qi*, I point toward how Fischer-Lichte's concept might expand and eclipse the need for Derridean *différance* as a micro-level description nested within a general description of art.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » The Science II approach of Andreas Bäckér's target article offers a strong general description of art as a site of multi-level interactions inclusive of the physical, psychic, and social levels (§5). The author uses Derrida's *différance* as the description of the systemic activity on the micro level of the relational/operational processes, having found no sufficient micro-level-systemic description in the approaches of Humberto Maturana, Niklas Luhmann, Bruce Clarke (via Heinz von Foerster), or Erika Fischer-Lichte. The author shows how *différance* does propose a certain dynamism in the micro level of systemic activities. I suggest, however, that it may not be the most apt descriptive tool for performance. To open a door to what an autopoietically inclined micro-level description might look like, in my commentary, I show how to develop one description that was discarded by the target-article author, i.e., Fischer-Lichte's concept

of the "autopoietic feedback loop" in performance. In so doing, I propose that the author might be better off cleaving to descriptions that have more grounding in the embodied aspects of performance. However, to do this, I suggest that it may be necessary to move beyond Western¹ boundaries of what constitutes embodiment and observation.

« 2 » Bäckér's insertion of *différance* into his general description of art does make use of the concept's poststructuralist power to destabilize the fixity of the relational and operational processes, highlighting a dynamism at the micro level of performance. I would suggest, however, that this Derridean destabilization is of a very particular kind – a destabilization through negation. While negation can be considered a part of the process of distinction, if we look toward the concept of autopoiesis, distinction and self-generation go hand in hand. I find the emphasis on negation that comes with *différance* too strong to apply to a general description of art, without a robust enough positive complement of self-generation. It makes me wonder: Why prioritize a concept developed out of a description of language when so many other concepts have taken more overt account of the many embodied factors of performance (including but not limited to physicality, cognition, consciousness, relationality, presence, and co-presence)? « 1 » With Bäckér's interest in cross-systemic resonance as correspondences to felt emotional determination in social relationships such as artist experience, I also see an emphasis in his own work on what resonance *creates*, rather than what distinction *negates*. Furthermore, this emphasis on generativity (or what *to do*) – in a dynamic sphere of coordinations, distinctions, and self-constitutions – is also germane to contemporary performer training and performance approaches. Even if Bäckér finds

1 | As I use variations of the terms "West," I do so with an awareness of the histories and asymmetries of intercultural contact, cross-pollination of ideas and practices, and Orientalism that shaped it and the development of Euro-American movement-based performer training since the 19th century. I retain it in all its complexities here because this shorthand is still used in global performance-training discourse and contexts, even while users often simultaneously interrogate it.

that (often biologically inclined) versions of autopoiesis do not yet suit the target article's micro level of description, would it not be better to develop those further, rather than leaving the realm of autopoiesis altogether?

« 2 » Because Bäckér's case study is contemporary dance, I suggest that performance scholarship and performer training is a good place to look for articulations of micro-level systemic descriptions to re-enter into a second-order explanation of art.

« 3 » I will start with the case of Fischer-Lichte's (2008) description of the "autopoietic feedback loop" addressed by the target-article author. I am in agreement with Bäckér that this concept of autopoiesis in performance does not yet entirely work as a detailed enough description of the relational/operational system incorporating performer and spectator. In Footnote 10 in Murphy (2021), I suggested that one way to recuperate her "blunt" (my term) and "quasi-mystical" (Bäckér's term §24) use of "energy" as the constitutive element of the relational/operational system might be to employ a more specific description of "energy": the highly honed concept of *qi*² employed in Asian martial, meditative, artistic, and healing modalities. While this footnote was a kind of offhanded wish, in order to open the door to alternatives to *différance* for Bäckér's general description of art, I will sketch out how replacing "energy" with *qi* can point toward a micro-level description that is more grounded in embodied dynamism and positive cross-systemic resonance, rather than negation.

« 4 » Fischer-Lichte points toward the concept that "energy" is a perceivable quality of a life system – "it is no phantasm" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 32, 59). In order to consider an "energy system" for re-entry into a second-order description of art, we would need to consider how it is observable or perceivable. According to a key performance prac-

2 | *Qi* is the term used in Chinese traditions, but the same phenomenon is called *ki* in both Japanese and Korean languages, and *prana* in Indian traditions. Due to the historical spread of philosophy, religion, martial arts, and performing arts across Asia, the terms can be considered to be describing the same thing even though different traditions might conceive of it or manage it a bit differently (Yuasa 1993).

tioner and scholar who has brought Asian articulations of *qi* into global contemporary actor-training discourse, Phillip Zarrilli, *qi* is an enlivening force that is understood as perceptible (Zarrilli 2009: 19–21). It includes the breath but is not reducible to it, and can be coaxed forth and strengthened by training in the martial, artistic, and spiritual methods designed to cultivate it. As it circulates in individuals it links mind and body, and as it circulates among people and environments it links larger multi-unit systems. It is perceptible by being felt by the organisms, and sensitivity to feeling it can be cultivated through *qi*-centred trainings. Daniel Mroz, another theatre practitioner who has integrated his long-term study of martial arts into actor training and creation writes:

“[A] *qigong* student learns to give attention to subtle sensations within the body provoked and revealed by practice. These [...] include feelings of heat in the body, of weight in the limbs and lower abdomen, of pleasurable vibration in the body and a feeling of physical and mental expansiveness. Western terms for such sensations might include proprioception, interoception and relaxation response.” (Mroz 2009: 168f)

« 5 » In this light, observation and perception of *qi* is possible, but requires training. While a full discussion and description of *qi* would necessarily include the workings of the meridian system (i.e., the maps of the network of *qi* channels), in this commentary, I can only emphasize how this “energy system” is understood to obtain and dynamically circulate among all organisms, even in social situations like performance. Zarrilli explains that according to philosopher Yasuo Yuasa, the circulation of *qi* “brings into awareness what he calls ‘the emotion–instinct circuit’” (Zarrilli 2009: 39). In this way, a fuller description of *qi* overtly binds more general Western notions of “energy” to “emotion” and “instinct,” i.e., qualities key to Bäckers’ description of *Soul Chain* (§§28–33). Zarrilli explains how a *qi*-sensitive person, or a performer who has cultivated such sensitivity, “is able to channel this energy throughout the body and is able to control and extend it out from the body, whether through vocal or physical action or into active images” (ibid). In comparison with the generalized manner in which Western performers and perfor-

mance scholars often use the term “energy,” I see this culturally specific detailed description of the *qi* system as a more nuanced explanation of the phenomenon that is anchored in its perceptibility, i.e., observation. By connecting his writings on *qi* to Fischer-Lichte’s work on the autopoietic feedback loop, Zarrilli also suggests that when performance scholars address “energy” in broader terms, they are referring to *qi* in different language (Zarrilli 2020: 69). So, perhaps through better descriptions of “energy” it becomes less (or more than?) “mystical,” and more a micro-level systemic description of performance at the individual organismic level.

« 6 » With this proposal I am pointing to how an alternative vocabulary of micro-level systems already at use in the performing arts (not to mention Asian medical and body-cultivation practices) might provide a description of dynamism that is found in positive relations and coordinations, rather than through relations marked by difference and negation. While *différance* might create dynamism, Fischer-Lichte’s energetic autopoiesis as described through the specificities of *qi* might not only demonstrate a positively oriented dynamism, but also provide a description closer to what experts in performance already use.

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Maiya Murphy works at the confluence of performer training, creation, movement, and cognitive approaches to understanding theatre. She is the author of *Enacting Lecoq: Movement in Theatre, Cognition, and Life* (2019) and the forthcoming *Practice, Research, and Cognition in Devised Performance* (2025). Her work has also appeared in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, *Constructivist Foundations*, *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *Theatre Survey*, and in edited collections. She is Associate Professor in the Department of ELTS at the National University of Singapore and makes theatre with the collective, Autopoetics.

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The Dance Experience as Transient and Rhythmic Co-Presence

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> Abstract • Key aspects of spectatorship and the experience of dance are discussed, with focus on the choreographer’s and the spectator’s role. The concept of co-presence, as well as transient and rhythmic interaction systems, is proposed as opening up a space where dance can be its own form.

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« 1 » In his target article, Andreas Bäckers addresses the need for an integrative theory of art coordinating the complex relational, multilevel system that artistic practice and spectatorship requires as explanation. He refers to structural determinism, second-order cybernetics, the interpenetration of psychic and social systems, deconstructive *différance*, and an autopoietic feedback loop to discuss *Soul Chain* by Sharon Eyal.