

The Fetish of the Ephemeral, the Praxis of Repetition, and the Logic of the Archive

PÉTER P. MÜLLER¹

Abstract: When the very special nature of performance's evanescence gets emphasized, it is the logic of the archive that lurks beneath the argument, the logic which opposes the residue with the lost and vanished. For a good part of theater scholars, it is the lost and vanished that is valuable; for the archivist it is always the remainder, haunted forever by what's lost. This paper shall not offer a theoretical overview of the scholarship on repetition or its philosophical interpretations; instead, it will use the concept exclusively in relation with theater plays, theater art, and more broadly the so-called performance arts, in order to reaffirm the bodily dimension of preservation and archiving the theatrical experience.

Keywords: theatre, repetition, theatre communication, spectatorship, archive

Theater artists and theater studies incessantly stress that each theater performance is unique and unrepeatable. At the beginning of the 20th century, when Edward Gordon Craig questioned whether theater is an art form, among other things he referred to theater's ephemerality, unrepeatability, and the changeability of the performers' disposition. In his 1908 essay, *The Actor and the Über-marionette*, Craig argued, that

1. University of Pécs, Hungary. muller.peter@pte.hu. Translated from Hungarian by Petra Bakos.

...acting is not an art. (...). For accident is an enemy of the artist. (...) In order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials. (...) In the modern theatre (...) all which is presented (...) is of an accidental nature. The actions of the actor's body, the expression of his face, the sounds of his voice, all are at the mercy of the winds of his emotions.²

All those characteristics which Craig mentions as the foremost features of a theater play – accidentality, contingency, being at the mercy of emotions – suggest that a performance is indeed unique and unrepeatable, and this is exactly what Craig condemns as theater's greatest fallacy. According to him theater could be regarded an art if it could create performances that are repeatable in their entirety, i.e., if permanence and not ephemerality would characterize theater production.

The present writing shall not offer a theoretical overview of the scholarship on repetition or its philosophical interpretations; instead, it will use the concept exclusively in relation with theater plays, theater art, and more broadly the so-called performance arts. It is a valid and viable question whether repetition is possible at all, or every single thing in a performance is unique and unrepeatable. "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really, how can there be?" states Gertrude Stein in her 1934 *Lectures in America*.³ Later on she adds that if, for instance, the same story is told repeatedly, it takes a different form each time. Later again, Stein argues that "remembering is repetition, anybody can know that."⁴ I shall return to this hypothesis about the connection of theater and remembrance.

From the 1960s those features of theater that Craig considered its fallacies were increasingly counted as the art form's ontological characteristics. That a theater play cannot be repeated thus became theater's *differentia specifica* with a novel theater theory placing performance's ephemeral, fleeting character in its center. Richard Schechner began to emphasize the ephemeral nature of

2. Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," *The Mask* 1, no. 2 (April 1908): 3–16.

3. Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (London: Virago, 1988), 166.

4. *Ibid.*, 178.

performance in the 1970s and played a determining role in the solidification of this theory. In 1982, Herbert Blau further accentuated the vanishing, dissolving nature of theater performance by placing it in the subtitle of his book, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*. In the book itself, Blau arrived to the following definition: "In theater as in love, the subject is disappearance."⁵ In 1993, Peggy Phelan went as far as to argue that performance "becomes itself through disappearance,"⁶ meaning that it is impossible to repeat a performance because it vanishes as soon as it takes form: "it can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as 'different.'"⁷ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett broadened even further the scope of ephemerality: she considered that it is a feature of all forms of live action. In 1998 she argued, "the ephemeral encompasses all forms of behavior – everyday activities, storytelling, ritual, dance, speech, performance of all kinds."⁸

As Rebecca Schneider pointed out, the above quoted books were without exception written while their authors worked at New York University's Department of Performance Studies (Blau was the department's guest professor when his book was published). According to Schneider, in the 1990s, when she studied there, one of the lecturers (not listed above) ironically suggested that the department should change its name to Department of Ephemeral Studies.⁹

Obviously, Craig condemned the same feature of theater that the researchers of New York University's Department of Performance Studies fetishized, i.e., its unrepeatability. But what is exactly unrepeatable in a theater play, and does that differentiate it from other life events, i.e., is there such a specificity of performance arts?

The pianist and philosopher Thomas Carson Mark, in his 2012 book, claims that performances (like concerts) are not permanent objects, but events just like *any* action.

5. Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 94.

6. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), 30.

9. *Ibid.*

We may talk casually of repeating an action or a performance, but that is not really possible. We can't do the same individual action again (...). All we can do is carry out another action similar to the first. A repeat of a performance is *another* performance.¹⁰

This point of view is markedly similar to Gertrude Stein's. Yet, Mark also draws attention to the fact that the concept and praxis of repetition is still present in performance arts as exemplified by the French word for rehearsal.

Répétition in French, just like *repetición* in Spanish, *Wiederholung* in German, and, although to a lesser extent, *repetition* in English, is used both for the systematic training of performers and for theater rehearsals. This is what Patrice Pavis put forward in his *Dictionary of the Theatre's* short, merely 16 lines long entry on "Rehearsal", quoting Peter Brook: "the French word *répétition* evokes a mechanical kind of work, while rehearsals are always different and sometimes creative."¹¹

Repetition and practice in theater and music has a twofold meaning – it marks the process through which a piece of art emerges, and which may last days, weeks, or months on end; and the systematic repetitions through which the performers (the actors or musicians) master the actions they shall execute in a future performance. In other words, in front of the audiences, the performers repeat something that they have already practiced beforehand.

The rehearsal (or practice) is not the only way through which repetition is present in theater. Most modern theater programs are built on repetition: the same performances are played over and over again, in repertoire or in en-suite systems. Therefore, in principle, a performance can be watched multiple times. Can it really?

In 2012, London's St. Martin's Theatre celebrated the diamond jubilee, i.e., the 60-year continuous run of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, advertised as the world's longest-running play. A few years ago, in Budapest, the Madách Theater's billboards and website heralded that "*The Cats* turned 30". There

10. Thomas Carson Mark, *Motion, Emotion, and Love: The Nature of Artistic Performance* (Chicago: GIA, 2012), 16.

11. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, trans. Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 308.

are numerous more present and past examples of long running performances, so the question emerges whether the audiences visiting these plays see a different performance, each and every time. Did they see *The Mousetrap* or *The Cats* or didn't they? Are the performances so deeply affected by the autopoietic feedback loop that they take a different form each and every time?

This concept, introduced by Erika Fischer-Lichte, attempts to theoretically capture the way the physical co-presence of actors and spectators affects theater performances and allegedly turns them into different performances each time. In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte, echoing Peggy Phelan, arrives to the viewpoint that "the performance brings forth its materiality (...) and immediately destroys it again the moment it is created, setting in motion a continuous cycle."¹²

Yes, this may be valid for performance as an event, but not for performance as a work of art. Besides staged crime fictions, musicals, dramas etc. there are further theater genres, which, though they contain no words or music only bodily motions, can be performed and watched multiple times. Dance pieces and ballets can be repeatedly performed though they are not recorded anywhere else but in the performers' bodies. For instance, in 2010 the Ballet Pécs staged Imre Eck's *Az iszonyat balladája* (The Ballad of Horror), although Eck passed away in 1999 and the piece originally premiered January 1st 1961. The so-called revivals of musical or dance pieces are actually re-stagings of earlier theatrical creations.

The view that performance is an event—and not a work of art—supports the hypothesis that performance is ephemeral. Erika Fischer-Lichte devoted a whole chapter to the characteristics of performance as an event. In order to be able to do so, she overleaped those features, which prove the presence and significance of repeatability. For instance, she argues, "we must clearly distinguish here between the intensive preparation of theatrical performances, often lasting several weeks or even months, and the performance itself."¹³

12. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskia Iris Jain (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 76.

13. *Ibid.*, 164.

What she asks us to do is to separate “preparation” from performance. Needless to say, “preparation” is an essential condition of performance as a work of art, but not necessarily an essential condition of events. In the same chapter, Fischer-Lichte’s mantra of liminality, a leitmotiv of her previous work,¹⁴ also makes an appearance. However, when she references liminality and the rites of passage as discussed by van Gennepe and Victor Turner, Fischer-Lichte forgets – or remains silent about – the fact that repetition, replay, repeated action are essential elements of liminal processes.

Wilmar Sauter, who devoted a whole monograph to theater as event, also assumes a clear separation between performance as a work of art and performance as an event, in order to emphasize the uniqueness of the performer-spectator interaction. According to Sauter “together the actions and reactions constitute the theatrical event.”¹⁵ Therefore they are unrepeatable, we may add. In which case it is easier to comprehend Craig’s stance: what kind of a work of art is that which can be modified at will by its spectators’ intentional and unintentional reactions that can challenge even the consistency of the players’ action?

Despite various scholars’ relentless advocacy of performance’s ephemeral nature, a plethora of performances and events that allegedly vanish upon inception have been repeated in practice, as examples of both artistic and everyday nature amply evidence it. Besides the obvious examples provided by theatrical or concert repertoires, we should mention the repetitions of unique artistic events and actions, such as the 23 works of art / productions exhibited / performed as part of the *History Will Repeat Itself*¹⁶ exhibition at the KunstWerke Berlin in 2007-2008, or the series of events titled *The Artist is Present* in the New York MoMA in the spring of 2010, when past performances by Marina Abramović got revived by others. The reenactments of significant social events, such as the battles of the American civil war and

14. E.g. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre*, trans. Jo Riley (London: Routledge, 2001), 36-38.

15. Wilmar Sauter, *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 11.

16. Inke Arns and Gabriele Horn, eds., *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-Enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007).

other historical occurrences, exemplify that non-artistic event may also be repeated.¹⁷

The stance about the changeable and ephemeral nature of performance opposes performance arts and theater with those art forms and human creations, which exist in a tangible form. This stance suggests that the specificity and value of theater is exactly its alleged impairment. Yet, the dichotomy, which emphasizes performance's ephemerality in opposition with other arts' archival features, does not take in consideration two facts. Firstly, not only performances vanish but everything else: documents, objects, artworks too. Secondly, it assumes that without materialization there is no remembrance, although – as Gertrude Stein emphasized – remembrance is: repetition.

Evanescence, disappearance, and vanishing, despite Schechner's, Phelan's and Fischer-Lichte's argumentation, are not the opposites of existence and preservation. As Rebecca Schneider pointed out, "it is one of the primary insights of poststructuralism that disappearance is that which marks *all* documents, *all* records, and *all* material remains. Indeed, remains become themselves through disappearance as well."¹⁸ When the very special nature of performance's evanescence gets emphasized, it is the logic of the archive that lurks beneath the argument, the logic, which opposes the residue with the lost and vanished. For the quoted theater scholars, it is the lost and vanished that is valuable, for the archivist it is always the remainder, haunted forever by what's lost. As Derrida put it, "the structure of the archive is *spectral*. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh', neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another (...)"¹⁹

The logic of the archive is apparent in the views about theater's ephemerality also because it is the archivist who treasures materialized forms only: for them bodily gestures are irrelevant. Although Erika Fischer-Lichte and the like-minded theoreticians are ostensibly on "the side of the body," their argumentation reproduces body-negating stances. These stances hold that oration, storytelling, improvisation, or embodied ritual practices

17. See Péter P. Müller, "Színház És Háború [Theatre and War]," in *A Magyar Színháztudomány Kortárs Irányai [Contemporary Trends in Hungarian Theatre Studies]*, ed. Zsófia Balassa, Péter P. Müller, and Krisztina Rosner (Pecs: Kronosz, 2012), 21-24.

18. Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 102.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 84).

do not belong to history,²⁰ because they vanish upon inception just like the “event” of the performance.

Herein lies another contradiction. These body-based genres are passed down *through repetition*. They survive because they are repeated (told, played, done) repeatedly. Still, past that lives on in actions (as opposed to past that lives on in written or objectified form) is often considered “mythical” or is not considered memory proper (unlike documents and objects). Oral history is characterized by performative components, variability, the aim to reconstruct, and a lack of closure.²¹

In a theater performance gestures, genres, images, relations repeat past gestures and actions in the present. The event of the performance is open towards evanescence but also towards the dimension of bequeathment, preservation, and remembrance. As Rebecca Schneider put it,

...when we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the *act* of remaining and a means of re-appearance and ‘re-participation’ (...) we are almost immediately forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh. Here the body (...) becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory.²²

In other words, through the bodies involved performance, though connected with evanescence, is also connected with viability and preservation. Moreover, performance, exactly *because* repetition is its constitutive element, challenges evanescence, impermanence, and demise.

Bequeathment is about repetition hence alternations and varieties are necessarily essential parts of it. Therefore, performance would never fit Craig’s ideal about the entirely self-same and unchangeable work of art, which is a typical modernist ideal that disregards an essential feature of previous eras’ artworks, i.e., that they virtually existed in varieties only. At the same time, exactly because of its repeatability, theater performance may (also) function as the medium of remembrance and bequeathment.

20. Compare with Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 100.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 101.

REFERENCES

- Arns, Inke, and Gabriele Horn, eds. *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-Enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*. Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007.
- Blau, Herbert. *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- Craig, Edward Gordon. "The Actor and the Über-Marionette." *The Mask* 1, no. 2 (April 1908): 3–16.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *History of European Drama and Theatre*. Translated by Jo Riley. London: Routledge, 2001.
- . *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*. Translated by Saskia Iris Jain. London & New York: Routledge, 2008.
- . *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*. London & New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Mark, Thomas Carson. *Motion, Emotion, and Love: The Nature of Artistic Performance*. Chicago: GIA, 2012.
- P. Müller, Péter. "Színház És Háború [Theatre and War]." In *A Magyar Színháztudomány Kortárs Irányai [Contemporary Trends in Hungarian Theatre Studies]*, edited by Zsófia Balassa, Péter P. Müller, and Krisztina Rosner, 19–28. Pécs: Kronosz, 2012.
- Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of the Theatre*. Translated by Christine Shantz. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Sauter, Wilmar. *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London & New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Stein, Gertrude. *Lectures in America*. London: Virago, 1988.

PÉTER P. MÜLLER is Professor at the University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, in the Department of Modern Literature and Literary Theory. He is director of the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies. From 1999 to 2004 he was director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute in Budapest. In the 1990/91, 1993/94, and

2016/17 academic years he was Visiting Professor in the USA. In 1996 and 1999 he held a research scholarship at Darwin College, Cambridge (UK), in 2014 and 2015 at the University of Kent (UK). In 1998 he awarded the four years long Széchenyi Professorship. He published eleven books so far, most in Hungarian, including, From Hamlet to the Hamletmachine (2008), From the Rite to the Media (in Croatian – 2009), Body and Theatricality (2009), Hungarian Drama at the Millennium (2014), The Conquest of Stage/Space (2015), and Theatre Beyond its Boundaries (2021).