

# Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy

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From its very beginnings, the social study of culture has been polarized between structuralist theories that treat meaning as a text and investigate the patterning that provides relative autonomy and pragmatist theories that treat meaning as emerging from the contingencies of individual and collective action – so-called practices – and that analyze cultural patterns as reflections of power and material interest. In this chapter, I present a theory of cultural pragmatics that transcends this division, bringing meaning structures, contingency, power, and materiality together in a new way. My argument is that the materiality of practices should be replaced by the more multidimensional concept of performances. Drawing on the new field of performance studies, cultural pragmatics demonstrates how social performances, whether individual or collective, can be analogized systematically to theatrical ones. After defining the elements of social performance, I suggest that these elements have become “de-fused” as societies have become more complex. Performances are successful only insofar as they can “re-fuse” these increasingly disentangled elements. In a fused performance, audiences identify with actors, and cultural scripts achieve verisimilitude through effective *mise-en-scène*. Performances fail when this relinking process is incomplete: the elements of performance remain apart, and social action seems inauthentic and artificial, failing to persuade. Re-fusion, by contrast, allows actors to communicate the meanings of their actions successfully and thus to pursue their interests effectively.

Rituals are episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication’s symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions. It is because of this shared understanding of intention and content, and in the intrinsic validity of the interaction, that rituals have their effect and affect. Ritual effectiveness energizes the participants and attaches them to each other,

increases their identification with the symbolic objects of communication, and intensifies the connection of the participants and the symbolic objects with the observing audience, the relevant “community” at large.

If there is one cultural quality that marks the earliest forms of human social organization, it is the centrality of rituals. From births to conjugal relationships, from peaceful foreign relations to the preparation for war, from the healing of the sick to the celebration of collective well-being, from transitions through the age structure to the assumption of new occupational and political roles, the affirmation of leadership and the celebration of anniversaries – in earlier forms of society such social processes tended to be marked by ritualized symbolic communication. If there is one cultural quality that differentiates more contemporary, large-scale, and complex social organizations from earlier forms, it is that the centrality of such ritual processes has been displaced. Contemporary societies revolve around open-ended conflicts between parties who do not necessarily share beliefs, frequently do not accept the validity of one another’s intention, and often disagree even about the descriptions that people offer for acts.

Social observers, whether they are more scientific or more philosophical, have found innumerable ways to conceptualize this historical transformation, starting with such thoroughly discredited evolutionary contrasts as primitive/advanced or barbarian/civilized, and moving on to more legitimate but still overly binary distinctions such as traditional/modern, oral/literate, or simple/complex. One does not have to be an evolutionist or to accept the simplifying dichotomies of metahistory to see that a broad change has occurred. Max Weber pitted his contingent historical approach against every shred of evolutionary thinking, yet this decentering of ritual was precisely what he meant by the movement from charisma to routinization and from traditional to value and goal-rational society. Rather than being organized primarily through rituals that affirm metaphysical and consensual beliefs, contemporary societies have opened themselves to processes of negotiations and reflexivity about means and ends, with the result that conflict, disappointment, and feelings of bad faith are at least as common as integration, affirmation, and the energizing of the collective spirit.

Still, most of us who live in these more reflexive and fragmented societies are also aware that, for better and for worse, such processes of rationalization in fact have not completely won the day (Alexander 2003a). There is a continuing symbolic intensity based on repeated and simplified cognitive and moral frames (Goffman 1967, 1974) that continues to mark all sorts of individual and private relationships. More public and collective processes – from social movements (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) to wars (Smith 1993), revolutions (Apter and Saich 1994; Hunt 1984; Sewell 1980), and political

transitions (Giesen, this volume; Edles 1998), and even to the construction of scientific communities (Hagstrom 1965) – continue to depend on the simplifying structures of symbolic communications and on cultural interactions that rely on, and to some degree can generate, intuitive and unreflective trust (Sztompka 1999; Barber 1983). It might even be said that, in a differentiated, stratified, and reflexive society, a strategy's success depends on belief in the validity of the cultural contents of the strategist's symbolic communication and on accepting the authenticity and even the sincerity of another's strategic intentions. Virtually every kind of modern collectivity, moreover, seems to depend at one time or another on integrative processes that create some sense of shared identity (Giesen 1998; Spillman 1997; Ringmar 1996), even if these are forged, as they all too often are, in opposition to simplistic constructions of those who are putatively on the other side (Jacobs 2000; Ku 1999; Chan 1999).

At both the micro and the macro levels, both among individuals and between and within collectivities, our societies still seem to be permeated by symbolic, ritual-like activities. It is precisely this notion of "ritual-like," however, that indicates the puzzle we face. We are aware that very central processes in complex societies are symbolic, and that sometimes they are also integrative, at the group, inter-group, and even societal level. But we also clearly sense that these processes are not rituals in the traditional sense (cf. Lukes 1977). Even when they affirm validity and authenticity and produce integration, their effervescence is short-lived. If they have achieved simplicity, it is unlikely they will be repeated. If they are repeated, it is unlikely that the symbolic communication can ever be so simplified in the same way again.

This is the puzzle to which the present chapter is addressed. Is it possible to develop a theory that can explain how the integration of particular groups and sometimes even whole collectivities can be achieved through symbolic communications, while continuing to account for cultural complexity and contradiction, for institutional differentiation, contending social power, and segmentation? Can a theory give full credence to the continuing role of belief while acknowledging that unbelief and criticism are also the central hallmarks of our time?

In order to solve this puzzle, I will develop a systematic, macro-sociological model of social action as cultural performance. In so doing, I will enter not only into the historical origins of theatrical performance and dramaturgical theory (e.g. Turner 2002; Schechner 2002; Auslander 1997; Carlson 1996; Geertz 1980; Goffman 1974; Burke 1965; Austin 1957) but also into the history and theories of social performance.<sup>1</sup> This means looking at how, and why, symbolic action moved from ritual to theatre (Turner 1982) and why it so often moves back to "ritual-like" processes again (Schechner 1976).

The gist of my argument can be stated simply. The more simple the collective organization, the less its social and cultural parts are segmented and differentiated, the more the elements of social performances are *fused*. The more complex, segmented, and differentiated the collectivity, the more these elements of social performance become *de-fused*. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of *re-fusion*. To the degree they achieve re-fusion, social performances become convincing and effective – more ritual-like. To the degree that social performances remain de-fused, they seem artificial and contrived, less like rituals than like performances in the pejorative sense. They are less effective as a result. Failed performances are those in which the actor, whether individual or collective, has been unable to sew back together the elements of performance to make them seem connected seamlessly. This performative failure makes it much more difficult for the actor to realize his or her intentions in a practical way.

This argument points immediately to the question of just what the elements of social performance are. I will elucidate these in the section immediately following. Then, with this analytical model of social performance safely in hand, I will turn back to the historical questions of what allowed earlier societies to more frequently make their performances into rituals and how later social developments created the ambiguous and slippery contexts for performative action in which we find ourselves today. Once this historical argument is established, I will come back to the model of performative success and failure and will elaborate its interdependent elements in more detail.

### **The elements of cultural performance**

Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation. This meaning may or may not be one to which they themselves subjectively adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe. In order for their display to be effective, actors must offer a plausible performance, one that leads those to whom their actions and gestures are directed to accept their motives and explanations as a reasonable account (Scott and Lyman 1968; Garfinkel 1967). As Gerth and Mills (1964: 55) once put it, “Our gestures do not necessarily ‘express’ our prior feelings,” but rather “they make available to others a sign.” Successful performance depends on the ability to convince others that one’s performance is true, with all the ambiguities that the notion of aesthetic truth implies. Once we understand cultural performance in this way, we can easily make out the basic elements that compose it.

*Systems of collective representation: background symbols and foreground scripts*

Marx ([1852] 1962: 247) observed that “just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed,” social actors “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.” Marx is describing here the systems of collective representations that background every performative act.

Actors present themselves as being motivated by and towards existential, emotional, and moral concerns, the meanings of which are defined by patterns of signifiers whose referents are the social, physical, natural, and cosmological worlds within which actors and audiences live. One part of this symbolic reference provides the deep background of collective representations for social performance; another part composes the foreground, the scripts that are the immediate referent for action. These latter can be understood as constituting the performance’s immediate referential text. As constructed by the performative imagination, background and foreground symbols are structured by codes that provide analogies and antipathies and by narratives that provide chronologies. In symbolizing actors’ and audiences’ worlds, these narratives and codes simultaneously condense and elaborate, and they employ a wide range of rhetorical devices, from metaphor to synecdoche, to configure social and emotional life in compelling and coherent ways. Systems of collective representations range from “time immemorial” myths to invented traditions created right on the spot, from oral traditions to scripts prepared by such specialists as playwrights, journalists, and speech writers.

Like any other text, these collective representations, whether background or foreground, can be evaluated for their dramatic effectiveness. I will say more about this later, but what is important at this point is to see that no matter how intrinsically effective, collective representations do not speak themselves. Boulton (1960: 3) once described theatre as “literature that walks and talks before our eyes.” It is this need for walking and talking – and seeing and listening to the walking and talking – that makes the practical pragmatics of performance different from the cultural logic of texts. It is at this juncture that cultural pragmatics is born.

*Actors*

These patterned representations are put into practice, or are encoded (Hall 1980), by flesh-and-blood people. As Reiss (1971: 138) suggested in his study



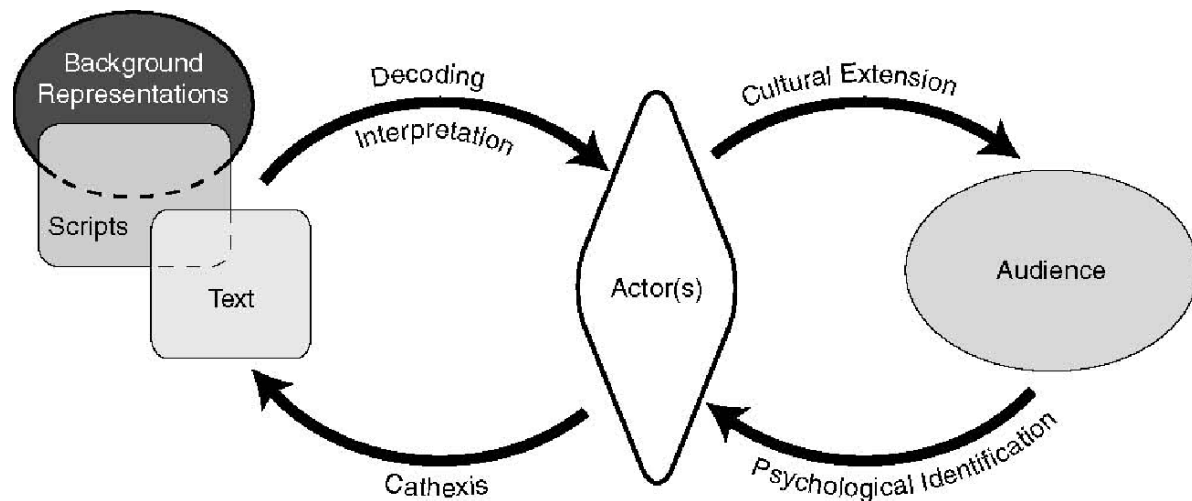


Figure 1.1 Successful performance: re-fusion

of the relation between theatrical technique and meaning in seventeenth-century French theatre, “the actor is as real as the spectator; he is in fact present in their midst.” Whether or not they are consciously aware of the distinction between collective representations and their walking and talking, the actor’s aim is to make this distinction disappear. As Reiss (1971: 142) put it, the actor’s desire is “to cause the spectator to confuse his emotions with those of the stage character.” While performers must be oriented to background and foreground representations, their motivations vis-à-vis these patterns are contingent. In psychological terms, the relation between actor and text depends on cathexis. The relation between actor and audience, in turn, depends on the ability to project these emotions and textual patterns as moral evaluations. If those who perform cultural scripts do not possess the requisite skills (Bauman 1989), then they may fail miserably in the effort to project their meanings effectively.

### *Observers/audience*

Cultural texts are performed so that meanings can be displayed to others. “Others” constitute the audience of observers for cultural performance. They decode what actors have encoded (Hall 1980), but they do so in variable ways. If cultural texts are to be communicated convincingly, there needs to be a process of cultural extension that expands from script and actor to audience. Cultural extension must be accompanied by a process of psychological identification, such that the members of the audience project themselves into the characters they see onstage.

There is empirical variation in the extent to which cultural extension and psychological identification actually occur. Audiences may be focused or

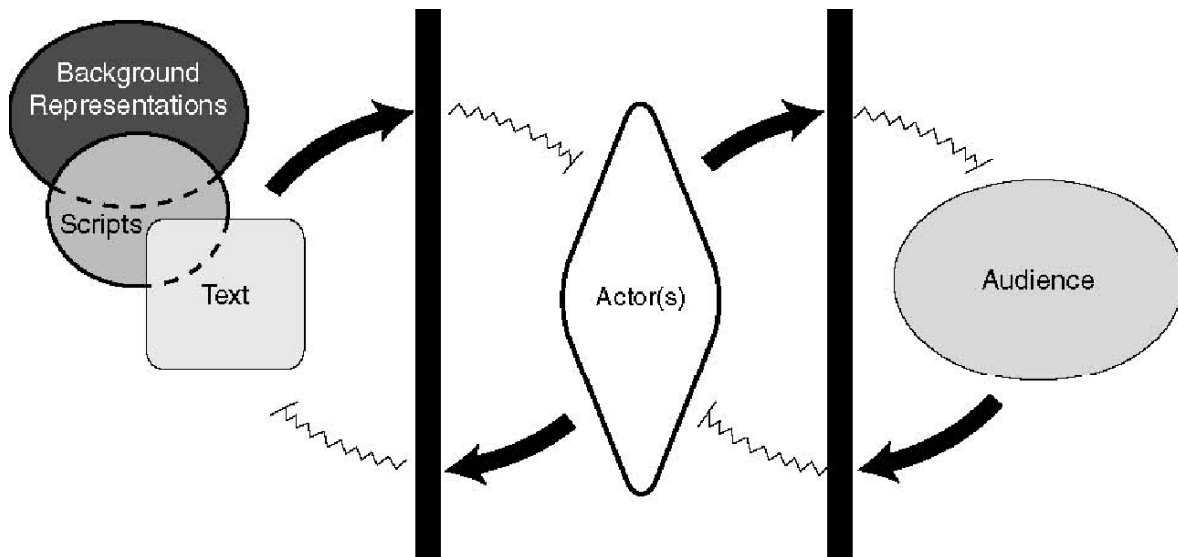


Figure 1.2 Performance failure: de-fusion

distracted, attentive or uninterested (Verdery 1991: 6; Berezin 1997: 28, 35, 250). Even if actors cathect to cultural texts, and even if they themselves possess high levels of cultural proficiency, their projections still may not be persuasive to the audience/observers. Observation can be merely cognitive. An audience can see and can understand without experiencing emotional or moral significance. As we will see in the [following section](#), there are often social explanations of this variability. Audiences may represent social statuses orthogonal to the status of performers. Audience attendance may not be required, or it may be merely compelled. Critics can intervene between performance and audience. There might not be an audience in the contemporary sense at all, but only participants observing themselves and their fellow performers. This latter condition facilitates cultural identification and psychological extension, though it is a condition much less frequently encountered in the complex societies of the present day.

### *Means of symbolic production*

In order to perform a cultural text before an audience, actors need access to the mundane material things that allow symbolic projections to be made. They need objects that can serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent. This material ranges from clothing to every other sort of “standardized expressive equipment” (Goffman 1956: 34–51). Actors also require a physical place to perform and the means to assure the transmission of their performance to an audience.

*Mise-en-scène*

With texts and means in hand, and audience(s) before them, social actors engage in dramatic social action, entering into and projecting the ensemble of physical and verbal gestures that constitutes performance. This ensemble of gestures involves more than the symbolic devices that structure a non-performed symbolic text. If a text is to walk and talk, it must be sequenced temporally and choreographed spatially (e.g. Berezin 1997: 156). The exigencies of time and space create specific aesthetic demands; at some historical juncture, new social roles like director and producer emerge that specialize in this task of putting text “into the scene.”

*Social power*

The distribution of power in society – the nature of its political, economic, and status hierarchies, and the relations among its elites – profoundly affects the performance process. Power establishes an external boundary for cultural pragmatics that parallels the internal boundary established by a performance’s background representations. Not all texts are equally legitimate in the eyes of the powers that be, whether possessors of material or interpretive power. Not all performances, and not all parts of a particular performance, are allowed to proceed. Will social power (Mann 1986) seek to eliminate certain parts of a cultural text? Who will be allowed to act in a performance, and with what means? Who will be allowed to attend? What kinds of responses will be permitted from audience/observer? Are there powers that have the authority to interpret performances independently of those that have the authority to produce them? Are these interpretive powers also independent of the actors and the audience itself, or are social power, symbolic knowledge, and interpretive authority much more closely linked?

Every social performance, whether individual or collective, is affected fundamentally by each of the elements presented here. In the language of hermeneutics, this sketch of interdependent elements provides a framework for the interpretive reconstruction of the meanings of performative action. In the language of explanation, it provides a model of causality. One can say that every social performance is determined partly by each of the elements I have laid out – that each is a necessary but not sufficient cause of every performative act. While empirically interrelated, each element has some autonomy, not only analytically but empirically vis-à-vis the others. Taken together, they determine, and measure, whether and how a performance occurs, and the degree to which it succeeds or fails in its effect. Two pathways lead out from the discussion thus far. The analytic model can be developed further, elaborating the nature of each



factor and its interrelations with the others. I will take up this task in a later section. Before doing so, I will engage in a historical discussion. I wish to explore how the analytical model I have just laid out, despite the fact it is so far only presented very simply, already provides significant insight into the central puzzle of ritual and rationalization with which I introduced this chapter and that defines its central question.

### **The conditions for performativity: historical transformations**

The model of performance I am developing here provides a new way of looking at cultural and organizational change over broad spans of historical time. We can see differently how and why rituals were once so central to band and tribal societies and why the nature of symbolic action changed so remarkably with the rise of states, empires, and churches. We can understand why both the theatre and the democratic *polis* arose for the first time in ancient Greece and why theatre emerged once again during the early modern period at the same time as open-ended social dramas became central to determining the nature of social and political authority. We can understand why Romanticism, secularization, and industrial society made the authenticity of symbolic action such a central question for modern times.

#### *Old-fashioned rituals: symbolic performances in early societies*

Colonial and modernist thinkers were deeply impressed by the ritualistic processes that explorers and anthropologists observed when they encountered societies that had not experienced “civilization” or “modernity.” Some associated the frequency of rituals with the putative purity of early societies (Huizinga [1938] 1950) and others with some sort of distinctively primitive, non-rational mentality (Lévy-Bruhl 1923). Huizinga ([1938] 1950: 14), for example, stressed that rituals create not a “sham reality” but “a mystical one,” in which “something invisible and inactual takes beautiful, actual, holy form.” Less romantic observers still emphasized the automatic, predictable, engulfing, and spontaneous qualities of ritual life. Weber exemplified this understanding in a sociological manner; it also marked the modern anthropological approach to ritual that became paradigmatic. Turner (1977: 183) defined rituals as “stereotyped” and as “sequestered”; Goody (1986: 21) called them “homeostatic”; and Leach (1972: 334), insisting also on “repetition,” expresses his wonderment at how, in the rituals he observed, “everything in fact happened just as predicted” (1972: 199).

Against these arguments for the essential and fundamental difference of symbolic interactions in earlier societies, critical and postmodern anthropologists

have argued for their more “conjunctural” (Clifford 1988: 11) quality. Those mysterious rituals that aroused such intense admiration and curiosity among earlier observers, it is argued, should be seen not as expressions of some distinctive essence but simply as a different kind of practice (Conquergood 1992). The model I am developing here allows us to frame this important insight in a more nuanced, less polemical, and more empirically oriented way. Rituals in early societies, I wish to suggest, were not so much *practices* as *performances*, and in this they indeed are made of the same stuff as social actions in more complex societies. In an introduction to his edition of Turner’s posthumous essays, Schechner (1987: 7) suggested that “all performance has at its core a ritual action.” It is better, I think, to reverse this statement, and to say that all ritual has at its core a performative act.

This is not to deny the differences between rituals and performances of other kinds. What it does suggest, however, is that they exist on the same continuum and that the difference between them is a matter of variation, not fundamental type. Ritual performances reflect the social structures and cultures of their historically situated societies. They are distinctive in that they are fused. Fusion is much more likely to be achieved in the conditions of less complex societies, but it occurs in complex societies as well.

To see why performances in simpler societies more frequently became rituals, we must examine how early social structure and culture defined the elements of performance and related them to one another in a distinctive way. The explanation can be found in their much smaller size and scale; in the more mythical and metaphysical nature of their beliefs; and in the more integrated and overlapping nature of their institutions, culture, and social structures. Membership in the earliest human societies (Service 1962, 1979) was organized around the axes of kinship, age, and gender. Forming collectivities of sixty to eighty members, people supported themselves by hunting and gathering and participated in a small set of social roles with which every person was thoroughly familiar. By all accounts, the subjectivity that corresponded with this kind of social organization resembled what Stanner (1972), when speaking of the Australian Aboriginals, called “dream time.” Such consciousness merged mundane and practical dimensions with the sacred and metaphysical to the extent that religion did not exist as a separate form. In such societies, as Service (1962: 109) once remarked, “there is no religious organization” that is “separated from family and band.”

The structural and cultural organization of such early forms of societies suggests differences in the kinds of social performance they can produce. The collective representations to which these social performances refer are not texts composed by specialists for segmented subgroups in complex and contentious social orders. Nor do these collective representations form a critical

“metacommentary” (Geertz 1973) on social life, for there does not yet exist deep tension between mundane and transcendental spheres (Goody 1986; Habermas 1982–3; Eisenstadt 1982; Bellah 1970). The early anthropologists Spencer and Gillen (1927) were right at least in this, for they suggested that the Engwura ritual cycle of the Australian Arunta recapitulated the actual lifestyle of the Arunta males. A century later, when Schechner (1976: 197) observed the Tsembaga dance of the Kaiko, he confirmed that “all the basic moves and sounds – even the charge into the central space – are adaptations and direct lifts from battle.”

The tight intertwining of cultural text and social structure that marks social performances in early societies provides a contextual frame for Durkheim’s theoretical argument about religion as simply society writ large. While claiming to propose a paradigm for studying every religion at all times, Durkheim might better be understood as describing the context for social performances in early societies. Durkheim insists that culture is identical with religion, that any “proper” religious belief is shared by every member of the group, and that these shared beliefs are always translated into the practices he calls rituals, or rites. “Not only are they individually accepted by *all members* of that group, but they also belong *to* the group and *unify* it . . . A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relation with the profane world *in the same way*, and because they *translate* this common representation into identical practices, is called a Church” (Durkheim [1912] 1995: 41, italics added).<sup>2</sup>

In such ritualized performances, the belief dimension is experienced as personal, immediate, and iconographic. Through the painting, masking, and reconfiguring of the physical body, the actors in these performances seek not only metaphorically but literally to become the text, their goal being to project the fusion of human and totem, “man and God,” sacred and mundane. The symbolic roles that define participation in such ritualized performances emerge directly, and without mediation, from the other social roles actors play. In the Engwura ritual (Spencer and Gillen 1927), the Arunta males performed the parts they actually held in everyday Arunta life. When social actors perform such roles, they do not have a sense of separation from them; they have little self-consciousness about themselves as actors. For participants and observers, rituals are not considered to be a performance in the contemporary sense at all but rather to be a natural and necessary dimension of ongoing social life. As for the means of symbolic production, while not always immediately available, they generally are near at hand – a ditch dug with the sharp bones of animals, a line drawn from the red coloring of wild flowers, a headdress made from bird feathers, an amulet fashioned from a parrot’s beak (Turner 1969: 23–37).

In this type of social organization, participation in ritual performance is not contingent, either for the actors or the observers. Participation is determined by

the established and accepted hierarchies of gender and age, not by individual choices that respond to the sanctions and rewards of social powers or segmented social groups. Every relevant party in the band or tribe must attend to ritual performances. Many ceremonies involve the entire community, for they “regard their collective well-being to be dependent upon a common body of ritual performances” (Rappaport 1968, in Schechner 1976: 211). Turner (1982: 31, original italics) attested that “the *whole* community goes through the *entire* ritual round.” Durkheim ([1912] 1995) also emphasized obligation, connecting it with the internal coherence of the audience. In the ritual phase of Aboriginal society, he wrote, “the population comes together, concentrating itself at specific places . . . The concentration takes place when a clan or a portion of the tribe is summoned to come together” ([1912] 1995: 217).

Nor are attendees only observers. At various points in the ritual, those merely watching the ritual performance are called upon to participate – sometimes as principals and at other times as members of an attentive chorus providing remonstrations of approval through such demonstrative acts as shouting, crying, and applause. At key phases in male initiation ceremonies, for example, women attend closely and, at particular moments, play significant ritual roles (Schechner 2002). They express indifference and rejection early in the performance and display physical signs of welcome and admiration in order to mark its end. Even when they do not participate, ritual audiences are hardly strangers. They are linked to performers by direct or indirect family ties.

In terms of the elementary model I have laid out already, it seems clear that such ritualized social actions fuse the various components of performance – actors, audiences, representations, means of symbolic production, social power, and *mise-en-scène*.

It is the actor/audience part of this fusion to which Service (1962: 109) referred when he wrote that “the congregation is the camp itself.” Lévi-Strauss (1963: 179) meant to emphasize the same fusing when he spoke of the “fabulation” of ritual as a “threefold experience.” It consists “first of the shaman himself, who, if his calling is a true one . . . undergoes specific states of a psychosomatic nature; second, that of the sick person, who may or may not experience an improvement of his condition; and, finally, that of the public, who also participates in the cure, experiencing an enthusiasm and an intellectual and emotional satisfaction which produce collective support.” In the studies of shamanistic rituals offered by postmodern performance theorists, we can read their ethnographic accounts as suggesting fusion in much the same way. “They derive their power from listening to the others and absorbing daily realities. While they cure, they take into them their patients’ possessions and obsessions and let the latter’s illnesses become theirs . . . The very close relationship these

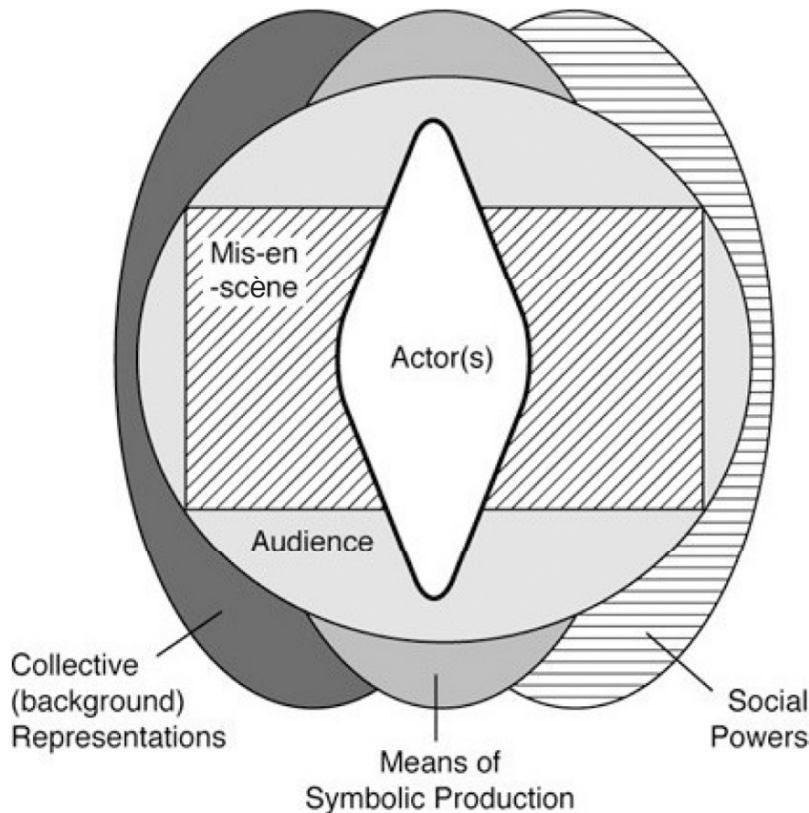


Figure 1.3 The fused elements of performance inside simple social organization

healers maintain with their patients remains the determining factor of the cure” (Trinh 1989, in Conquergood 1992: 44).

With sacred texts tied to mundane society, actors’ roles tied to social roles, performance directly expressing symbolic text and social life, obligatory participation, and homogeneous and attentive audiences it is hardly surprising that the effects of ritual performances tend to be immediate and only infrequently depart from the expectations of actors and scripts (cf. Schechner 1976: 205, 1981: 92–4). As Lévi-Strauss attested (1963: 168, italics added), “There is . . . no reason to doubt the efficacy of certain magical practices” precisely because “the efficacy of magic implies *a belief in magic*.” Rites not only mark transitions but also create them, such that the participants become something or somebody else as a result. Ritual performance not only symbolizes a social relationship or change; it also actualizes it. There is a direct effect, without mediation.

Anthropologists who have studied rituals in earlier forms of society reported that the tricks of ritual specialists rarely were scrutinized. Lévi-Strauss (1963: 179) emphasized the role of “group consensus” when he began his famous retelling of Boas’s ethnography of Quesalid. The Kwakiutl Indian was so unusually curious as to insist (at first) that the sorcerer’s rituals indeed were tricks. Yet after persuading ritual specialists to teach him the tricks of their trade, Quesalid himself went on to become a great shaman. “Quesalid did not become a great



shaman because he cured his patients,” Lévi-Strauss assures us; rather, “he cured his patients because he had *become* a great shaman” (1963: 180, italics added). Shamans effect cures, individual and social, because participants and observers of their performances believe they have the force to which they lay claim. Shamans, in other words, are institutionalized masters of ritual performance. The success of this performance depends, in the first place, on their dramatic skills, but these skills are intertwined with the other dimensions that allow performances to be fused in simple social organizations.

### *Social complexity and post-ritual performances*

Fused performances creating ritual-like effects remain important in more complex societies. There are two senses in which this is true. First, and less importantly for the argument I am developing here, in primary groups such as families, gangs, and intergenerationally stable ethnic communities, role performances often seem to reproduce the macrocosm in the microcosm (Slater 1966). Even inside of complex societies, audiences in such primary groups are relatively homogeneous, actors are familiar, situations are repeated, and texts and traditions, while once invented, eventually take on a time immemorial quality. The second sense in which ritual-like effects remain central, more importantly for my argument here, is that fusion remains the goal of performances even in complex societies. It is the context for performative success that has changed.

As I noted earlier, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have analyzed the sporadic and uneven processes that created larger-scale societies in innumerable different ways. There is sharply contrasting theorizing about the causes and pathways of the movement away from simpler social organization in which ritual played a central role to more complex social forms, which feature more strategic, reflexive, and managed forms of symbolic communication. But there is wide consensus that such a transformation did occur, that the processes of “complexification,” “rationalization,” or “differentiation” (Thrift 1999; Luhmann 1995; Champagne 1992; Alexander and Colomy 1990; Habermas 1982–3; Eisenstadt 1963) produce different kinds of symbolic communications today. Even Goody (1986: 22) spoke confidently of the transition “from world-view to ideology.”

This emphasis on ideology is telling, and it leads directly to the argument about changes in the conditions for performativity that I am making here. Earlier sociological and anthropological investigations into the social causes of the transition from simple forms of social organization emphasized the determining role of economic change. Technological shifts created more productivity, which led to surplus and the class system, and finally to the first distinctive political institutions, whose task was to organize the newly stratified society and to administer

material and organizational needs. By the end of the 1950s, however, anthropologists already had begun to speak less of technological changes than shifts in economic orientations and regimes. When Fried (1971: 103) explained “the move from egalitarian to rank society,” he described a shift “from an economy dominated by reciprocity to one having redistribution as a major device.” In the same kind of anti-determinist vein, when Service (1962: 171) explained movement beyond the monolithic structures of early societies to the “twin forms of authority” that sustained distinctive economic and political elites, he described it as “made *possible* by greater productivity” (1962: 143, italics added). Sahlins (1972) built on such arguments to suggest that it was not the economic inability to create surplus that prevented growth but the ideological desire to maintain a less productivity-driven, more leisurely style of life. Nolan and Lenski (1995) made the point of this conceptual-cum-empirical development impossible to overlook: “Technological advance created the possibility of a surplus, but to transform that possibility into a reality required an ideology that *motivated* farmers to produce more than they needed to stay alive and productive, and *persuaded* them to turn that surplus over to someone else” (1995: 157, italics added). As this last comment makes clear, this whole historiographic transition in the anthropology of early transitions points to the critical role of ideological projects. The creation of surplus depended on new motivations, which could come about only through the creation of symbolic performances to persuade others, not through their material coercion.

The most striking social innovation that crystallized such a cultural shift to ideology was the emergence of written texts. According to Goody (1986: 12), the emergence of text-based culture allowed and demanded “the decontextualization or generalization” of collective representations, which in oral societies were intertwined more tightly with local social structures and meanings. With writing, the “communicative context has changed dramatically both as regards the emitter and as regards the receivers” (1986: 13): “In their very nature written statements of the law, of norms, of rules, have had to be abstracted from particular situations in order to be addressed to a universal audience out there, rather than delivered face-to-face to a specific group of people at a particular time and place” (1986: 13). Only symbolic projection beyond the local would allow groups to use economic surplus to create more segmented, unequal, and differentiated societies. Without the capacity for such ideological projection, how else would these kinds of more fragmented social orders ever be coordinated, much less integrated in an asymmetrical way?

These structural and ideological processes suggest a decisive shift in actors’ relation to the means of symbolic production. In text-based societies, literacy is essential if the symbolic processes that legitimate social structure are to be carried out successfully. Because literacy is difficult and expensive, priests

“have privileged access to the sacred texts.” This allows “the effective control of the means of literate communication,” concentrating interpretive authority in elite hands (Goody 1986: 16–17). Alongside this new emergence of monopoly power, indeed because of it, there emerges the necessity for exercising tight control over performance in order to project this ideological control over distanced and subordinate groups. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 172, italics added) once wrote that, in order to “allow him to *play the part he plays* in feuds and quarrels,” the Nuer chief needs only “ritual qualifications.” Because the Nuer “have no law or government,” or any significant social stratification, obeying their chief follows from the perception that “they are sacred persons” (1940: 173). In his study of the origins of political empires, Eisenstadt (1963: 65) demonstrated, by contrast, that: with the “relative autonomy of the religious sphere and its ‘disembeddedness’ from the total community and from the other institutional spheres,” everything about political legitimation has changed. The sacredness of the economic, political, and ideological elites now has to be achieved, not assigned. As Eisenstadt put it, these elites now “*tried to maintain dominance*” (1963: 65, italics added); it was not given automatically to them. “In all societies studied here, the rulers *attempted to portray* themselves and the political systems they established as the bearers of special cultural symbols and missions. They *tried to depict* themselves as transmitting distinct civilizations . . . The rulers of these societies invariably *tried to be perceived* as the propagators and upholders of [their] traditions [and they] desire[d] to minimize any group’s pretensions to having the right *to judge and evaluate* the rulers or to sanction their legitimation” (Eisenstadt 1963: 141, italics added).

The most ambitious recent investigation into pharaonic Egypt finds the same processes at work. “A state imposed by force and coercing its subjects to pay taxes and perform civil and military service,” Assmann (2002: 74) wrote, “could hardly have maintained itself if it had not rested on a core semiology that was as persuasive as the state itself was demanding.” Reconstructing “the semantics that underlie the establishment of the state” (2002: 75), Assmann finds that in the Old Kingdom Egyptians “clung to the graphic realism of hieroglyphic writing” with an “astounding tenacity.” This “aspiration to permanence” meant that state rituals involved “maximum care . . . to prevent deviation and improvisation.” Only the lector priest’s “knowledge of the script and his ability to recite accurately” could “ensure that precisely the same text was repeated at precisely the same time in the context of the same ritual event, thus bringing meaning, duration, and action into precise alignment” (2002: 70–1). By the time of the Middle Kingdom, Assmann reported (2002: 118–19), “the kings of the Twelfth Dynasty were in a fundamentally different position.” Social and cultural complexity had proceeded to such an extent that the pharaonic rulers “had to assert themselves against a largely literate and economically and militarily powerful

aristocracy . . . and win over the lower strata.” These objectives “could not be achieved by force alone,” Assmann wrote, “but only by the power of eloquence and explanation.”

The assertion of political power was no longer a matter of apodictic self-glorification, but was accomplished . . . by the power of the word. “Be an artist in speech,” recommends one text, “then you will be victorious. For behold: the sword-arm of a king is his tongue. Stronger is the word than all fighting.” The kings of the Twelfth Dynasty understood the close links between politics and the instantiation of meaning. (2002: 118–19)

In terms of the model I am developing here, these empirical accounts suggest de-fusion among the elements of performance: (1) the separation of written foreground texts from background collective representations; (2) the estrangement of the means of symbolic production from the mass of social actors; and (3) the separation of the elites who carried out central symbolic actions from their mass audiences. The appearance of seamlessness that made symbolic action seem ritualistic gives way to the appearance of greater artifice and planning. Performative action becomes more achieved and less automatic.

### *The emergence of theatrical from ritual performance*

To this point in our historical discussion, my references to performance have been generated analytically, which is to say they have been warranted by the theoretical considerations presented in the [first section](#). While it seems clear that the emergence of more segmented, complex, and stratified societies created the conditions – and even the necessity – for transforming rituals into performances, the latter, more contingent processes of symbolic communication were not understood by their creators or their audiences as contrived or theatrical in the contemporary sense. There was social and cultural differentiation, and the compulsion to project and not merely to assume the effects of symbolic action, but the elements of performance were still not defused enough to create self-consciousness about the artificiality of that process.

Thus, when Frankfort (1948: 135–6) insisted on the “absence of drama” in ancient Egypt, he emphasized both the continuing fusion of sacred texts and actors and the relative inflexibility, or resistance to change, of ancient societies (cf. Kemp 1989: 1–16). “It is true,” Frankfort conceded, “that within the Egyptian ritual the gods were sometimes represented by actors.” For example, an embalming priest might be “wearing a jackal mask” to impersonate the god Anubis. In fact, one of the best-preserved Egyptian texts, the *Mystery Play of the Succession*, “was performed when a new king came to the throne.” Nonetheless, Frankfort insists, such performances “do not represent a new art form.” He calls them “simply the ‘books’ of rituals.” They may be “dramatic,” but “they

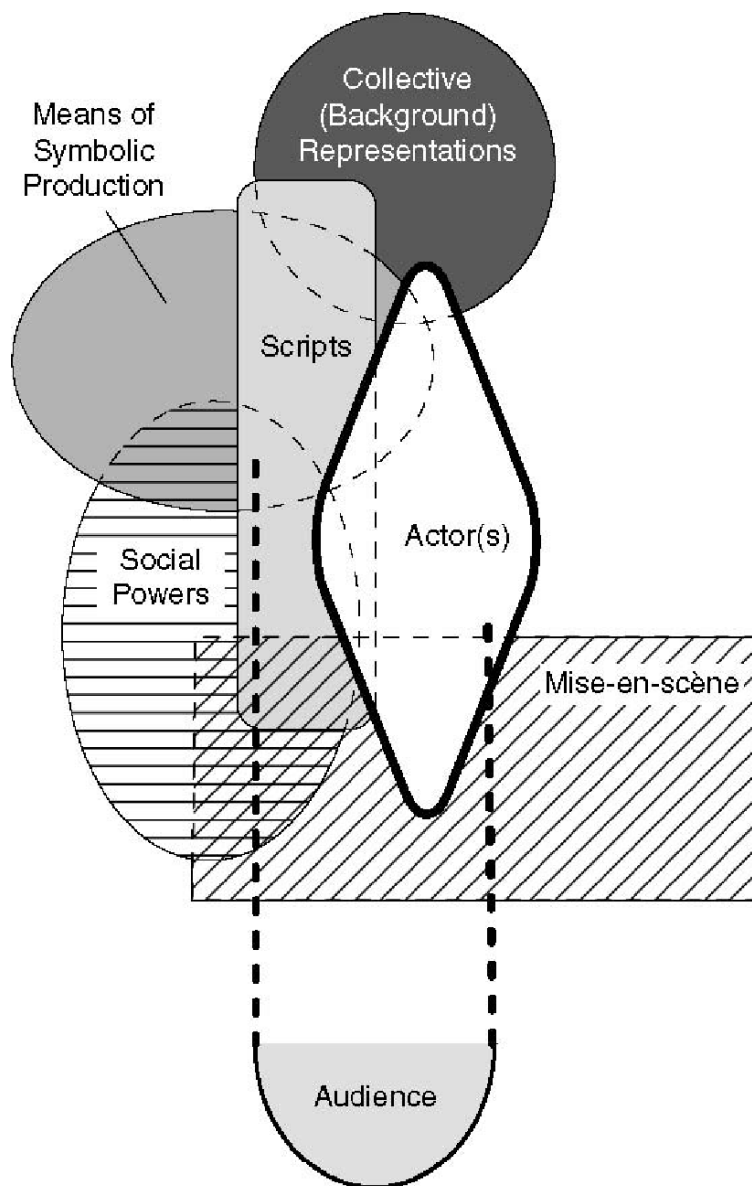


Figure 1.4 The de-fused elements of performance inside complex social organization

certainly are not drama.” In drama, the meaning and consequences of action unfold, and in this sense are caused by, the theatrical challenge of *mise-en-scène*: “In drama, language is integrated with action and a change is shown to be a consequence of that action.” In Egyptian rites, by contrast, as in Durkheim’s Aboriginal ones, the “purpose is to *translate* actuality in the unchanging form of myth . . . The gods appear and speak once more the words they spoke ‘the first time’” (Frankfort 1948: 135–6, italics added). It is the actuality of myth that marks ritual.

Only in the Greek city-states did drama in the contemporary sense emerge. The social organizational and cultural background for these developments was crucial, of course, even as the emergence of dramatic performance fed back into social and cultural organization in turn. As compared to the fused and ascriptive



hierarchies that ruled urban societies in the Asian empires, in Greece there emerged urban structures of a new, more republican kind. They were organized and ruled by elites, to be sure, but these elites were internally democratic. As Schachermeyr ([1953] 1971: 201) emphasized in his widely cited essay, the historically unprecedented “autonomy of the citizen body” in the Greek cities was accompanied by the equally distinctive “emancipation of intellectual life from Greek mythology.” These new forms of organizational and culture differentiation fostered, according to Schachermeyr, a “revolutionary spirit” that engaged in “a constant fight against the monarchical, dictatorial, or oligarchic forms of government.”

This marked opening up of social and cultural space focused attention on the projective, performative dimension of social action, subjecting the ritualized performances of more traditional life to increased scrutiny and strain (e.g. Plato 1980). In Greek society, we can observe the transition from ritual to performance literally and not just metaphorically. We actually see the de-fusion of the elements of performance in concrete terms. They became more than analytically identifiable: their empirical separation became institutionalized in specialized forms of social structure and available to common-sense reflection in cultural life.

Greek theatre emerged from within religious rituals organized around Dionysus, the god of wine (Hartnoll 1968: 7–31). In the ritual’s traditional form, a dithyramb, or unison hymn, was performed around the altar of Dionysus by a chorus of fifty men drawn from the entire ethnos. In terms of the present discussion, this meant continuing fusion: actors, collective representations, audiences, and society were united in a putatively homogeneous, still mythical way. In expressing his nostalgia for those earlier, pre-Socratic days, Nietzsche ([1872] 1956: 51–5, 78–9) put it this way: “In the dithyramb we see a community of unconscious actors all of whom see one another as enchanted . . . Audience and chorus were never fundamentally set over against each other . . . An audience of spectators, such as we know it, was unknown . . . Each spectator could quite literally imagine himself, in the fullness of seeing, as a chorist [sic].”

As Greek society entered its period of intense and unprecedented social and cultural differentiation (Gouldner 1965), the content of the dithyramb gradually widened to include tales of the demi-gods and fully secular heroes whom contemporary Greeks considered their ancestors. The background representational system, in other words, began to symbolize – to code and to narrate – human and not only sacred life. This interjection of the mundane into the sacred introduced symbolic dynamics directly into everyday life and vice versa. During communal festivals dedicated to performing these new cultural texts, the good and bad deeds of secular heroes were recounted along with their feuds, marriages, and adulteries, the wars they started, the ethnic and religious ties

they betrayed, and the sufferings they brought on their parents and successors. Such social conflicts now provided sources of dramatic tension that religious performers could link to sacred conflicts and could perform on ritual occasions.

As the background representations became reconfigured in a more socially oriented and dramaturgical way – as everyday life became subject to such symbolic reconstruction – the other elements of performance were affected as well. The most extraordinary development was that the social role of actor emerged. Thespis, for whom the very art of theatrical performance eventually came to be named, stepped out of the dithyramb chorus to become its leader. During ritual performance, he would assume the role of protagonist, either god or hero, and would carry on a dialogue with the chorus. Thespis formed a traveling troupe of professional actors. Collecting the means of symbolic production in a cart whose floor and tailboard could serve also as a stage, Thespis traveled from his birthplace, Icaria, to one communal festival after another, eventually landing in Athens where, in 492 BC, he won the acting prize just then established by the City Dionysus festival.

During this same critical period of social development, systems of collective representations began for the first time not only to be written down, or to become actual texts, but also to separate themselves concretely from religious life. In fifth-century Athens, theatre writing became a specialty; prestigious writing contests were held, and prizes were awarded to such figures as Aeschylus and Sophocles. Such secular imagists soon became more renowned than temple priests. At first, playwrights chose and trained their own actors, but eventually officials of the Athenian festival assigned actors to playwrights by lot. In our terms, this can be seen as having the effect of emphasizing and highlighting the autonomy of the dramatic script vis-à-vis the intentions or charisma of its creators (cf. Gouldner 1965: 114).

As such an innovation suggests, the independent institution of performance criticism also had emerged, mediating and pluralizing social power in a new way. Rather than being absorbed by the performance, as on ritual occasions, interpretation now confronted actors and writers in the guise of judges, who represented aesthetic criteria separated from religious and even moral considerations. At the same time, judges also represented the city that sponsored the performance, and members of the *polis* attended performances as a detached audience of potentially critical observers. Huizinga ([1938] 1950: 145) emphasized that, because the state did not organize theatrical competitions, “audience criticism was extremely pointed.” He also suggested that the public audience shared “the tension of the contest like a crowd at a football match,” but it seems clear that they were not there simply to be entertained. The masked performers of Greek tragedies remained larger than life, and their texts talked and walked with compelling emotional and aesthetic force, linking performance to

the most serious and morally weighted civic issues of the day. From Aeschylus to Sophocles to Euripedes, Greek tragic drama (Jaeger 1945: 232–381) addressed civic virtue and corruption, exploring whether there existed a natural moral order more powerful than the fatally flawed order of human social life. These questions were critical for sustaining the rule of law and an independent and democratic civil life.

Nietzsche ([1872] 1956: 78–9) complained that, with the birth of tragedy, “the poet who writes dramatized narrative can no more become one with his images” and that he “transfigures the most horrible deeds before our eyes by the charm of illusion.” In fact, however, the de-fusion of performative elements that instigated the emergence of theatre did not necessarily eliminate performative power; it just made this power more difficult to achieve. This increased difficulty might well have provided the social stimulus for Aristotle’s aesthetic philosophy. In terms of the theoretical framework I am developing here, Aristotle’s poetics can be understood in a new way. It aimed to crystallize, in abstract theoretical terms, the empirical differentiation among the elements of performance that pushed ritual to theatre. What ritual performers once had known in their guts – without having to be told, much less having to read – Aristotle (1987) now felt compelled to write down. His *Poetics* makes the natural artificial. It provides a kind of philosophical cookbook, instructions for meaning-making and effective performance for a society that had moved from fusion to conscious artifice. Aristotle explained that performances consisted of plots and that effective plotting demanded narratives with a beginning, middle, and end. In his theory of catharsis, he explained, not teleologically but empirically, how dramas could affect an audience: tragedies would have to evoke sensations of “terror and pity” if emotional effect were to be achieved.

This sketch of how theatre emerged from ritual is not teleological or evolutionary. What I have proposed, rather, is a universally shared form of social development, one that responds to growing complexity in social and cultural structure. Ritual moved towards theatre throughout the world’s civilizations in response to similar social and cultural developments – the emergence of cities and states, of religious specialists, of intellectuals, and of needs for political legitimation. “There were religious and ritual origins of the Jewish drama, the Chinese drama, all European Christian drama and probably the Indian drama,” Boulton (1960: 194) informed us, and “in South America the conquering Spaniards brought Miracle Plays to Indians who already had a dramatic tradition that had development out of their primitive cults.”

Social complexity waxes and wanes, and with it the development of theatre from ritual. Rome continued Greek theatricality, but with the decline of the empire and the rise of European feudalism the ritual forms of religious performance dominated once again. What happened in ancient Greece was reiterated

later in medieval Europe, when secular drama developed from the Easter passion plays. In twelfth-century Autun, a center of Burgundian religious activity, an astute observer named Honorius actually made an analogy between the effects of the Easter Mass and the efforts of the ancient tragedians (Schechner 1976: 210; Hardison 1965: 40). “It is known,” Honorius wrote, “that those who recited tragedies in theatres presented the actions of opponents by gestures before the people.” He went on to suggest that, “in the theatre of the Church before the Christian people,” the struggle of Christ against his persecutors is presented by a similar set of “gestures” that “teaches to them the victory of his redemption.” Honorius compared each movement of the Mass to an equivalent movement in tragic drama and described what he believed were similar – tightly bound and fused, in our terms – audience effects. “When the sacrifice has been completed, peace and communion are given by the celebrant to the people,” he wrote, and “then, by the *Ite, missa est*, they are ordered to return to their homes [and] they shout *Deo gratias* and return home rejoicing.” It is no wonder that Boulton (1960) equated such early religious pageants with acting. Suggesting that “the earliest acting was done by priests and their assistants,” she notes that “one of the causes of the increasing secularization of the drama was that laymen had soon to be called in to fill in parts in the expanding ‘cast’” (1960: 195).

By the early seventeenth century in Europe, after the rise of city-states, absolutist regimes, the scientific revolution, and internal religious reforms, the institution of criticism was already fully formed: “Nearly every play had a prologue asking for the goodwill of the critics” (Boulton 1960: 195). Long before the rise of the novel and the newspaper, theatrical performances became arenas for articulating powerful social criticisms. Playwrights wove texts from the fabric of contemporary social life, but they employed their imagination to do so in a sharply accented, highly stimulating, and provocative manner. The performance of these scripted representations were furnaces that forged metaphors circulating back to society, marking a kind of figure-eight movement (Turner 1982: 73–4; Schechner 1977) from society to theatre and back to society again. Secular criticism did not emerge only from rationalist philosophy or from the idealized arguments in urban cafés (Habermas [1962] 1989) but also from theatrical performances that projected moral valuation even while they entertained. While providing sophisticated amusement, Molière pilloried not only the rising bourgeois but also the Catholic Church, both of which returned his vituperation in kind. Shakespeare wrote such amusing plays that he was patronized as low-brow by the more intellectual playwrights and critics of his day. Yet Shakespeare satirized every sort of conventional authority and dramatized the immorality of every sort of social power. Reviled by the Puritan divines, such Elizabethan drama was subject to strenuous efforts at censorship.

The Restoration comedies that followed were no less caustic in their social ambitions or stinging in their effects. In his study of seventeenth-century drama, Reiss (1971: 122) observed that “the loss of illusion follows when the *mise-en-scène* is designed with no attempt at *vraisemblance*,” and he concludes that “the theater relied . . . on the unreality of the theatrical situation itself . . . to maintain a distance” (1971: 144). Taking advantage of performative de-fusion, these playwrights used stagecraft to emphasize artificiality rather than to make it invisible, producing a critical and ironic space between the audience and the mores of their day.

### *The emergence of social drama*

The historical story I am telling here addresses the puzzle at the core of this chapter: Why do ritually organized societies give way not to social orders regulated simply by instrumentally rational action but instead to those in which ritual-like processes remain vital in some central way?

It is vital for this story to see that the emergence of theatre was more or less simultaneous with the emergence of the public sphere as a compelling social stage. For it was, in fact, roughly during the same period as theatrical drama emerged that social drama became a major form of social organization – and for reasons that are much the same.

When society becomes more complex, culture more critical, and authority less ascriptive, social spaces open up that organizations must negotiate if they are to succeed in getting their way. Rather than responding to authoritative commands and prescriptions, social processes become more contingent, more subject to conflict and argumentation. Rationalist philosophers (Habermas [1962] 1989) speak of the rise of the public sphere as a forum for deliberative and considered debate. A more sociological formulation would point to the rise of a public stage, a symbolic forum in which actors have increasing freedom to create and to project performances of their reasons, dramas tailored to audiences whose voices have become more legitimate references in political and social conflicts. Responding to the same historical changes that denaturalized ritual performance, collective action in the wider society comes increasingly to take on an overtly performative cast.

In earlier, more archaic forms of complex societies, such as the imperial orders of Egypt or Yucatán, social hierarchies simply could issue commands, and ritualized ideological performances would provide symbolic mystification. In more loosely knit forms of complex social organization, authority becomes more open to challenge, the distribution of ideal and material resources more subject to contention, and contests for social power more open-ended and contingent. Often, these dramatic contests unfold without any settled script.



Through their success at prosecuting such dramas, individual and collective actors gain legitimacy as authoritative interpreters of social texts.

It is a commonplace not only of philosophical but also of political history (e.g. Bendix 1964) that during the early modern period the masses of powerless persons gradually became transformed into citizens. With the model of social performance more firmly in hand, it seems more accurate to say that non-elites also were transformed from passive receptacles to more active, interpreting audiences.<sup>3</sup> With the constitution of audience publics, even such strategic actors as organizations and class fractions were compelled to develop effective forms of expressive communication. In order to preserve their social power and their ability to exercise social control, elites had to transform their interest conflicts into widely available performances that could project persuasive symbolic forms. As peripheries gradually became incorporated into centers, pretenders to social power strived to frame their conflicts as dramas. They portrayed themselves as protagonists in simplified narratives, projecting their positions, arguments, and actions as exemplifications of sacred religious and secular texts. In turn, they “cast” their opponents as narrative antagonists, as insincere and artificial actors who were only role playing to advance their interests.

These are, of course, broad historical generalizations. My aim here is not to provide empirical explanations but to sketch out theoretical alternatives, to show how a performative dimension should be added to more traditional political and sociological perspectives. But while my ambition is mainly theoretical, it certainly can be amplified with illustrations that are empirical in a more straightforward way. What follows are examples of how social processes that are well known both to historical and lay students of this period can be reconstructed with the model of performance in mind.

(i) *Thomas Becket*. When Thomas Becket opposed the effort of Henry II to exercise political control over the English church, he felt compelled to create a grand social drama that personalized and amplified his plight (Turner 1974: 60–97). He employed as background representation the dramatic paradigm of Christ’s martyrdom to legitimate his contemporary script of antagonism to the king. While Henry defeated Sir Thomas in instrumental political terms, the drama Becket enacted captured the English imagination and provided a new background text of moral action for centuries after.

(ii) *Savonarola*. In the Renaissance city-states (Brucker 1969), conflicts between church and state were played out graphically in the great public squares, not only figuratively but often also literally before the eyes of the increasingly enfranchised *populo*. Heteronomy of social power was neither merely doctrine nor institutional structure. It was also public performance. Savonarola began his mass popular movement to cleanse the Florentine Republic with a dramatic announcement in the Piazza della Signoria, where open meetings

had taken place already. Savonarola's public hanging, and the burning of his corpse that followed, were staged in the same civil space. Observed by an overflowing audience of citizens and semi-citizens – some horrified, others grimly satisfied (Brucker 1969: 271) – the performance instigated by Savonarola's arrest, confession, and execution graphically drew the curtain on the reformer's spiritual renewal campaign. It is hardly coincidental that Machiavelli's advice to Italian princes offered during this same period concerned not only how to muster dispersed administrative power but also instructions about how to display power of a more symbolic kind. He wished to instruct the prince about how to perform like one so that he could appear, no matter what the actual circumstances, to exercise power in a ruthlessly efficient and supremely confident way.

(iii) *The American Revolution*. In 1773, small bands of anti-British American colonialists boarded three merchant ships in the Boston harbor and threw 90,000 tons of Indian tea into the sea. The immediate, material effect of what immediately became represented in the popular imagination as “the Boston tea party” was negligible, but its expressive power was so powerful that it created great political effects (Labaree 1979: 246ff.). The collective performance successfully dramatized colonial opposition to the British crown,<sup>4</sup> clarified a key issue in the antagonism, and mobilized fervent public support. Later, the inaugural military battle of the American Revolution, in Lexington, Massachusetts, was represented in terms of theatrical metaphor as “the shot heard ‘round the world.’” In contemporary memorials of the event, social dramatic exigencies have exercised powerful sway. American and British soldiers are portrayed in the brightly colored uniforms of opposed performers. Paul Revere is portrayed as performing prologue, riding through the streets and shouting, “The Redcoats are coming, the Redcoats are coming,” though he probably did not. The long lines of soldiers on both sides are often depicted as accompanied by fifes and drums. Bloody and often confusing battles of the War of American Independence have been narrated retrospectively as fateful and dramatic contests, their victors transformed into icons by stamps and etchings.

(iv) *The French Revolution*. The similar staging of radical collective action as social drama also deeply affected the Revolution in France. During its early days, *sans-culottes* women sought to enlist a promise of regular bread from King Louis. They staged the “momentous march of women to Versailles,” an extravagantly theatrical pilgrimage that one leading feminist historian described as “the recasting of traditional female behavior within a republican mode” (Landes 1988: 109–11). As the Revolution unfolded, heroes and villains switched places according to the agonistic logic of dramatic discourse (Furet 1981) and theatrical configuring (Hunt 1984), not only in response to political calculation. No matter how violent or bloodthirsty in reality, the victors and martyrs were

painted, retrospectively, in classical Republican poses and togas, as in David's celebrated portrait of Marat Sade (Nochlin 1993).

It was Turner (1974, 1982) who introduced the concept of social drama into the vocabulary of social science more than thirty years ago. For a time, this idea promised to open macro-sociology to the symbolic dynamics of public life (e.g. Moore and Myerhoff 1975, 1977), but with a few significant exceptions (e.g. Edles 1998; Alexander 1988; Wagner-Pacifici 1986) the concept has largely faded from view, even in the field of performance studies. One reason has to do with the triumph of instrumental reason in rational-choice and critical theories of postmodern life. There were also, however, basic weaknesses in the original conceptualization itself. Turner simplified and moralized social performance in a manner that obscured the autonomy of the elements that composed it. Searching for a kind of natural history of social drama on the one hand and for a gateway to ideological *communitas* on the other, Turner spoke (1982: 75) of the "full formal development" of social dramas, of their "full phase structure." While acknowledging that social complexity created the conditions for social drama, he insisted that it "remains to the last simple and ineradicable," locating it in "the developmental cycle of all groups" (1982: 78). He believed that the "values and ends" of performances were "distributed over a range of actors" and were projected "into a system . . . of shared or consensual meaning" (1982: 75). Social dramas can take place, Turner (1987) insisted, only "among those members of a given group . . . who feel strongly about their membership [and] are impelled to enter into relationships with others which become fully 'meaningful', in the sense that the beliefs, values, norms, and symbolism 'carried' in the group's culture become . . . a major part of what s/he might regard as his/her identity" (1987: 46; for similar emphases, see Myerhoff 1978: 32; Schechner 1987).

However, from the perspective on social dramas I am developing here, this is exactly what does not take place. The elements of social-dramatic performances are de-fused, not automatically hung together, which is precisely why the organizational form of social drama first emerged. Social drama is a successor to ritual, not its continuation in another form.

We are now in a position to elaborate the propositions about performative success and failure set forth in the [first section](#).

### **Re-fusion and authenticity: the criteria for performative success and failure**

The goal of secular performances, whether on stage or in society, remains the same as the ambition of sacred ritual. They stand or fall on their ability to produce psychological identification and cultural extension. The aim is to create,

via skillful and affecting performance, the emotional connection of audience with actor and text and thereby to create the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience. To the extent these two conditions have been achieved, one can say that the elements of performance have become fused.

Nietzsche elegized the “bringing to life [of] the plastic world of myth” ([1872] 1956: 126) as one of those “moments of paroxysm that lift man beyond the confines of space, time, and individuation” ([1872] 1956:125). He was right to be mournful. As society becomes more complex, such moments of fusion become much more difficult to achieve. The elements of performance become separated and independently variable, and it becomes ever more challenging to bring texts into life.

The challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies, whether on stage or in society at large, is to infuse meaning by re-fusing performance. Since Romanticism, this modern challenge has been articulated existentially and philosophically as the problem of authenticity (Taylor 1989). While the discourse about authenticity is parochial, in the sense that it is specifically European, it provides a familiar nomenclature for communicating the sense of what performative success and failure mean. On the level of everyday life, authenticity is thematized by such questions as whether a person is “real” – straightforward, truthful, and sincere. Action will be viewed as real if it appears *sui generis*, the product of a self-generating actor who is not pulled like a puppet by the strings of society. An authentic person seems to act without artifice, without self-consciousness, without reference to some laboriously thought-out plan or text, without concern for manipulating the context of her actions, and without worries about that action’s audience or its effects. The attribution of authenticity, in other words, depends on an actor’s ability to sew the disparate elements of performance back into a seamless and convincing whole. If authenticity marks success, then failure suggests that a performance will seem insincere and faked: the actor seems out of role, merely to be reading from an impersonal script, pushed and pulled by the forces of society, acting not from sincere motives but to manipulate the audience.

Such an understanding allows us to move beyond the simplistic polarities of ritual versus rationality or, more broadly, of cultural versus practical action. We can say, instead, that re-fusion allows ritual-like behavior, a kind of temporary recovery of the ritual process. It allows contemporaries to experience ritual because it stitches seamlessly together the disconnected elements of cultural performance. In her performative approach to gender, Butler (1999: 179) insisted that gender identity is merely “the stylized repetition of acts through time” and “not a seemingly seamless identity.” Yet seamless is exactly what the successful performance of gender in everyday life makes it appear to be.

“In what sense,” Butler (1999: 178) then asks, “is gender an act?” In the same sense, she answers, “as in other ritual social dramas . . . the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.”

In psychological terms, it is this seamless re-fusion that Csikszentmihalyi (1975) described as “flow” (cf. Schechner 1976) in his innovative research on virtuoso performance in art, sport, and games. In the terms I am developing here, what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) discovered in these widely varying activities was the merging of text, context, and actor, a merging that resulted in the loss of self-consciousness and a lack of concern for – even awareness of – the scrutiny of observers outside the action itself. Because of “the merging of action and awareness,” Csikszentmihalyi (1975: 38) wrote, “a person in flow has no dualistic perspective.” The fusion of the elements of performance allows not only actors but also audiences to experience flow, which means they focus their attention on the performed text to the exclusion of any other possible interpretive reference: “The steps for experiencing flow . . . involve the . . . process of delimiting reality, controlling some aspect of it, and responding to the feedback with a concentration that excludes anything else as irrelevant” (Csikszentmihalyi 1975: 53–4).

Performances in complex societies seek to overcome fragmentation by creating flow and achieving authenticity. They try to recover a momentary experience of ritual, to eliminate or to negate the effects of social and cultural de-fusion. Speaking epigrammatically, one might say that successful performances re-fuse history. They break down the barriers that history has erected – the divisions between background culture and scripted text, between scripted text and actors, between audience and *mise-en-scène*. Successful performances overcome the deferral of meaning that Derrida (1991) recognized as *différance*. In a successful performance, the signifiers seem actually to become what they signify. Symbols and referents are one. Script, direction, actor, background culture, *mise-en-scène*, audience, means of symbolic production – all these separate elements of performance become indivisible and invisible. The mere action of performing accomplishes the performance’s intended effect (cf. Austin 1957). The actor seems to be Hamlet; the man who takes the oath of office seems to be the president.

While re-fusion is made possible only by the deposition of social power, the very success of a performance masks its existence. When performance is successful, social powers manifest themselves not as external or hegemonic forces that facilitate or oppose the unfolding performance but merely as sign-vehicles, as means of representation, as conveyors of the intended meaning. This is very much what Bourdieu ([1968] 1990: 211) had in mind when he



spoke of the exercise of graceful artistic taste as culture “becoming natural.” The connoisseur’s poised display of aesthetic judgment might be thought of as a successful performance in the sense that it thoroughly conceals the manner in which this gracefulness is “artificial and artificially acquired,” the result of a lengthy socialization resting upon class privilege. “The virtuosi of the judgment of taste,” Bourdieu wrote, present their knowledge of art casually, as if it were natural. Their aim is to present “an experience of aesthetic grace” that appears “completely freed from the constraints of culture,” a performance “little marked by the long, patient training of which it is the product.”

Attacking the hegemonic exercise of sexual rather than class power, Butler (1999) makes a similar argument. The successful performance of gender, she claims, makes invisible the patriarchal power behind it. The difference is that, by drawing upon the theories of Austin and Turner, Butler can explicitly employ the language of performance. “Gender is . . . a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions . . . The appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (1999: 179).

When post-ritual drama emerged in ancient Greece, Aristotle (1987) explained that a play is “an imitation of action, not the action itself.” When refusal occurs, this cautionary note goes unheeded. The performance achieves verisimilitude – the appearance of reality. It seems to be action, not its imitation. This achievement of the appearance of reality via skillful performance and flow is what Barthes ([1957] 1972) described in his celebrated essay on “true wrestling.” He insisted that the “public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience at a suburban cinema . . . The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the context is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees” ([1957] 1972:15).

### **How does cultural pragmatics work? The inner structures of social performance**

Having elaborated the criteria of performative failure and success, I now turn to a more detailed discussion of the elements and relations that sustain it. I will draw upon the insights of drama theory to decompose the basic elements of performance into their more complex component parts, and I will link these insights to the social dramas that compose the public sphere. To be able to

move back and forth between theatrical and social drama enriches both sides of the argument; it also helps document my core empirical claim. Social action in complex societies so often is ritual-like because it remains performative. The social conditions that gave rise to theatre also gave rise to post-ritual forms of symbolic action.

*The challenge of the script: re-fusing background representations with contingent performance*

Behind every actor's social and theatrical performance lies the already established skein of collective representations that compose culture – the universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws. In a theatrical performance, the actor strives to realize “individual character,” as Turner (1982: 94) put it, but he or she can do so only by taking “partly for granted the culturally defined roles supposedly played by that character: father, businessman, friend, lover, fiancé, trade union leader, farmer, poet” (1982: 94). For Turner (1982: 94), “these roles are made up of collective representations shared by actors and audience, who are usually members of the same culture,” but we do not have to accept his consensual assumptions to get his point. The ability to understand the most elementary contours of a performance depends on an audience knowing already, without thinking about it, the categories within which actors behave. In a complex social order, this knowledge is always a matter of degree. In contrast with Turner (1982), I do not presume that social performance is ritualistic; I wish to explain whether and how and to what degree.

It is precisely at this joint of contingency or possible friction between background representations and the categorical assumptions of actors and audience that scripts enter into the scene. The emergence of the script as an independent element reflects the relative freedom of performance from background representations. From within a broader universe of meanings, performers make conscious and unconscious choices about the paths they wish to take and the specific set of meanings they wish to project. These choices are the scripts – the action-oriented subset of background understandings. If script is meaning primed to performance, in theatrical drama this priming is usually, though not always, sketched out beforehand. In social drama, by contrast, scripts more often are inferred by actors. In a meaning-searching process that stretches from the more intuitive to the more witting, actors and audiences reflect on performance in the process of its unfolding, gleaning a script upon which the performance “must have” been based.

In such social-dramatic scripting, actors and audiences actively engage in drawing the hermeneutical circle (Dilthey 1976). Performances become the

foreground parts upon which wholes are constructed, the latter being understood as the scripts that allow the sense of an action to be ascertained. These scripts become, in turn, the parts of future wholes. It seems only sensible to suggest that an authentic script is one that rings true to the background culture. Thus, as one critic of rock music suggests, “authenticity is often located in current music’s relationship to an earlier, ‘purer’ moment in a mythic history of the music” (Auslander 1999: 71). Yet, while this seems sensible, it would be misleading, since it suggests the naturalistic fallacy. It is actually the illusory circularity of hermeneutic interpretation that creates the sense of authenticity, and not the other way around. A script seems to ring true to the background culture precisely because it has an audience-fusing effect. This effectiveness has to do with the manner in which it articulates the relationship among culture, situation, and audience. Another recent music critic (Margolick 2000: 56) argued against the claim that Billie Holiday’s recording of “Strange Fruit” – the now almost-mythical, hypnotic ballad about black lynching – succeeded because lynching was “already a conspicuous theme in black fiction, theater, and art.” She had success, rather, because “it was really the first time that anyone had so . . . poetically transmitted the message.” The existence of the background theme is a given; what is contingent is the dramatic technique, which is designed to elicit an effective audience response. In our terms, this is a matter of fusing the script in two directions, with background culture on the one side and with audience on the other. If the script creates such fusion, it seems truthful to background representations and real to the audience. The former allows cultural extension; the latter psychological identification.

The craft of script writing addresses these possibilities. The writer aims to “achieve concentration” (Boulton 1960: 12–13) of background meaning. Effective scripts compress the background meanings of culture by changing proportion and by increasing intensity. They provide such condensation (cf. Freud [1900] 1950) through dramatic techniques.

(i) *Cognitive simplification*. “In a play,” Boulton (1960: 12–13) wrote, “there are often repetitions even of quite simple facts, careful explanations, addressing of people by their names more frequently than in real conversation and various oversimplifications which to the reader of a play in a study may seem almost infantile.” The same sort of simplifying condensation affects the less consciously formed scripts of successful social dramas. As they strive to become protagonists in their chosen narrative, such social performers as politicians, activists, teachers, therapists, or ministers go over time and time again the basic story line they wish to project. They provide not complex but stereotyped accounts of their positive qualities as heroes or victims, and they melodramatically exaggerate (Brooks 1976) the malevolent motives of the actors they wish to identify as their antagonists, depicting them as evildoers or fools.

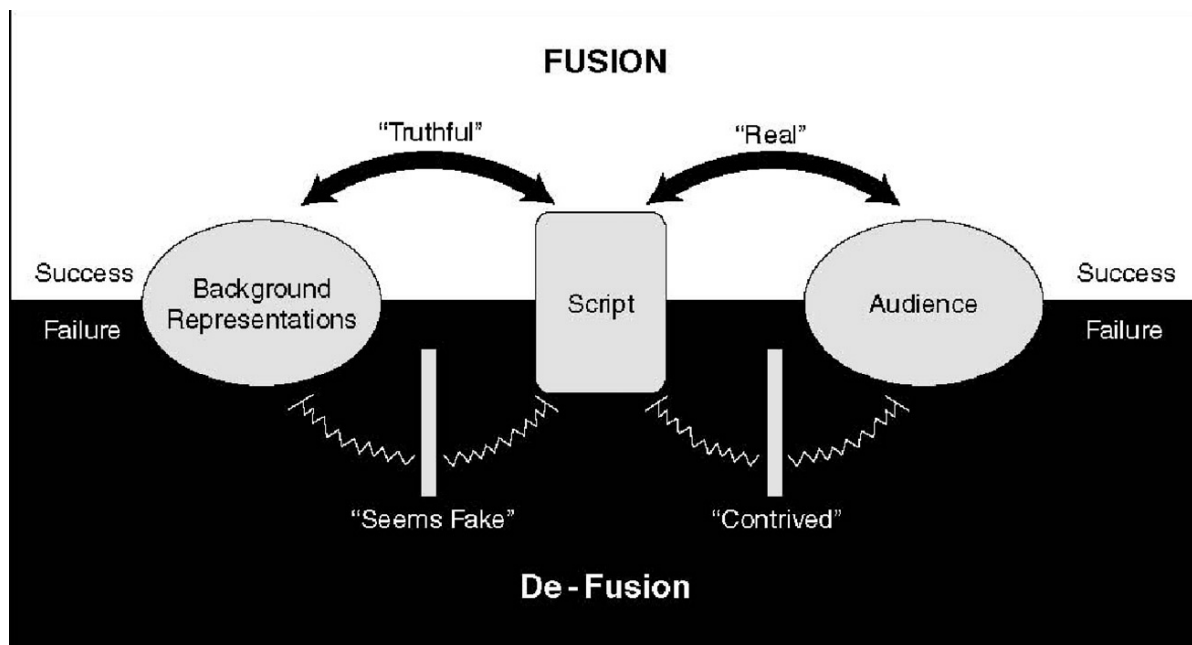


Figure 1.5 Fusion/de-fusion of background representation, script, and audience

Professional speechwriters plotting social dramas are as sensitive to this technical exigency as screen writers and playwrights plotting theatrical ones. In Noonan's (1998) manual *On Speaking Well*, the much-heralded speech writer for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush emphasized time and time again that simplification is the key to achieving the fusion among speaker, audience, and background culture (cf. Flesch 1946). "You should treat the members of the audience as if they're friends," Noonan (1998: 23) instructs, which means "that you're going to talk to them the way you talk to your friends, with the same candor and trust and respect." Noting the "often unadorned quality to sections of great speeches, a directness and simplicity of expression," Noonan (1998: 48) attributes this to the fact that "the speaker is so committed to making his point, to being understood and capturing the truth." Sentences "must be short and sayable," she warns, because "your listeners [are] trying to absorb what you say" (1998: 35). Noonan praised Bush's acceptance speech at the 1988 Republican Convention in terms of this two-way fusion. On the one hand, her script allowed Bush to connect his own life to the background representations of American society. Bush "was not only telling about his life in a way that was truthful and specific [but] was also connecting his life to history – the history of those who'd fought World War II and then come home to the cities, and married, and gone on to invent the suburbs of American, the Levittowns and Hempsteads and Midlands." On the other hand, the script also allowed Bush to fuse speaker with audience: "He was also connecting his life to yours, to everyone who's had a child and lived the life that children bring with them . . . You were part of the saga" (1998: 28–9).

(ii) *Time–space compression*. Responding to the emergence of theatre from ritual, Aristotle (1987) theorized that every successful drama contains the temporal sequence of beginning, middle, and end. In early modern Europe, when ritual was secularized and de-fused once again, the demand for narrative coherence became a stricture that dramatists must stress “three unities” – of action, place, and time (Boulton 1960: 13ff.). Given the material and behavioral constraints on performance, the classic dramatists argued, theatrical action must be clearly of one piece. If the background culture is to be articulated clearly and if the audience is to absorb it, then performance must take place in the confines of one dramatic scene – in one narrative place – and must unfold in one continuous time.

Such social dramas as congressional hearings or televised investigations strive strenuously to compress time and space in the same way. With large visual charts, lead investigators display time lines for critical events, retrospective plottings whose aim is to suggest continuous action punctuated by clearly interlinked causes and effects. Daytime television is interrupted so that the representations of these investigations themselves can unfold in continuous and real, and thus forcefully dramatic time. Ordinary parliamentary business is suspended so that such political-cultural performances, whether grandiose or grandiloquent, can achieve the unity of action, place, and time.

(iii) *Moral agonism*. The fusion achieved by successful scripting does not suggest harmonious plots. To be effective, in fact, scripts must structure meaning in an agonistic way (Benhabib 1996; Arendt 1958). Agonism implies a dynamic movement that hinges on a conflict pitting good against evil (Bataille 1985), creating a wave-like dialectic that highlights the existential and metaphysical contrast between sacred and profane. “Performing the binaries” (Alexander 2003a) creates the basic codes and propels narratives to pass through them. The drama’s protagonists are aligned forcefully with the sacred themes and figures of cultural myth and, through this embodiment, become new icons and create new texts themselves. Signaling their antipathy to the profane, to the evil themes and figures that threaten to pollute and to overwhelm the good, one group of actors casts doubt on the sincerity and verisimilitude of another. If a protagonist successfully performs the binaries, audiences will pronounce the performer to be an “honest man,” the movement to be “truly democratic,” an action to be the “very epitome of the Christian spirit.” If the performance is energetically and skillfully implanted in moral binaries, in other words, psychological identification can be achieved and elements from the background culture can be extended dramatically.

Agonistic scripting is exhibited most clearly in grandiloquent performance. Geertz (1973: 420–1) portrayed the Balinese cockfight as “a blood sacrifice offered . . . to the demons,” in which “man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened



animality fuse in a bloody drama.” Barthes ([1957] 1972: 17) recounted how the wrestler’s “treacheries, cruelties, and acts of cowardice” are based in an “image of ignobility” portrayed by “an obese and sagging body” whose “asexual hideousness always inspires . . . a particularly repulsive quality.” But performing the binaries is also fundamental to the emergent scripts of everyday political life. In 1980, in the debate among Republican and Democratic candidates for vice president of the United States, the Republican contender from Indiana, Senator Dan Quayle, sought to gain credibility by citing the martyred former president John F. Kennedy. Quayle’s opponent, Texas Senator Lloyd Benton, responded with a remark that not merely scored major debating points but also achieved folkloric status in the years following: “Senator, I had the honor of knowing Jack Kennedy, and you’re no Jack Kennedy.” Speaking directly to his political opponent, but implicitly to the television audiences adjudicating the authenticity of the candidates, Senator Benton wished to separate his opponent’s script from the nation’s sacred background representations. To prove they were not aligned would block Senator Quayle from assuming an iconic role. As it turned out, of course, while Senator Quayle’s debate performance failed, he was elected anyway.

(iv) *Twisting and turning*. Explicating “the general artistic laws of plot development,” Boulton (1960: 41ff.) observed that “a play must have twists and turns to keep interest until the end.” To keep the audience attentive and engaged, staged dramas “must develop from one crisis to another.” After an initial clarification, in which “we learn who the chief characters are, what they are there for and what are the problems with which they start,” there must be “some startling development giving rise to new problems.” This first crisis will be followed by others, which “succeed one another as causes and effects.”

Turner (1974) found almost exactly the same plot structure at work in social drama. He conceptualized it as involving successive phase movements, from breach to crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism. The initial breach that triggers a drama “may be deliberately, even calculatedly, contrived by a person or party disposed to demonstrate or challenge entrenched authority.” But a breach also “may emerge [simply] from a scene of heated feelings” (Turner 1982: 70), in which case the initiation of a social drama is imputed, or scripted, by the audience, even when it is not intended by the actors themselves.

The naturalism underlying Turner’s dramaturgical theory prevents him from seeing twisting and turning as a contingent effort to re-fuse background culture and audience with performative text. In her revisions of Turner’s scheme, Wagner-Pacifici (1986, 1994, 2000) demonstrated just how difficult it is for even the most powerful social actors to plot the kind of dramatic sequencing that an effective script demands. Her study of the 1978 kidnapping and assassination of the Italian prime minister Aldo Moro (Wagner-Pacifici 1986) can be

read as a case study of failed performance. Despite Moro's status as the most influential Italian political figure of his day, the popular prime minister could not convince other influential collective actors to interpret his kidnapping in terms of his own projected script. He wished to portray himself as still a hero, as the risk-taking and powerful protagonist in a performance that would continue to demonstrate the need for a historic "opening to the left" and, thus, the necessity to negotiate with his terrorist kidnappers to save his life. Against this projected script, other social interpreters, who turned out to be more influential, insisted that Moro's kidnapping illuminated a script not of romantic heroism but of a tragic martyrdom, which pointed to a narrative not of reconciliation but of revenge against a terrorist left. Wagner-Pacifici herself attributes the failure of Moro's performance primarily to unequal social power and the control that anti-Moro forces exercised over the means of symbolic production. The more multidimensional model I am elaborating here would suggest other critically important causes of the failed performance as well.

*The challenge of mise-en-scène: re-fusing script, action,  
and performative space*

Even after a script has been constructed that allows background culture to walk and talk, the "action" of the performance must begin in real time and at a particular place. This can be conceptualized as the challenge of instantiating a scripted text, in theatrical terms as *mise-en-scène*, which translates literally as "putting into the scene." Defining *mise-en-scène* as the "confrontation of text and performance," Pavis (1988: 87) spoke of it as "bringing together or confrontation, in a given space and time, of different signifying systems, for an audience." This potential confrontation has developed because of the segmentation that social complexity renders among the elements of performance. It is a challenge to put them back together in a particular scene.

Rouse (1992: 146) saw the "relationship between dramatic text and theatrical performance" as "a central element in the Occidental theatre." Acknowledging that "most productions here continue to be productions 'of' a preexisting play text," he insists that "exactly what the word 'of' means in terms of [actual] practices is, however, far from clear," and he suggests that "the 'of' of theatrical activity is subject to a fair degree of oscillation." It seems clear that the specialized dramatic role of director has emerged to control this potential oscillation. In Western societies, theatrical performances long had been sponsored financially by producers and had been organized, in their dramatic specifics, by playwrights and actors. As society became more complex, and the elements of performance more differentiated, the coordinating tasks became more demanding. By the late nineteenth century, according

to Chinoy (1963: 3, in McConachie 1992: 176), there was “so pressing a need” that the new role of director “quickly preempted the hegemony that had rested for centuries with playwrights and actors.” Chinoy (1963) believes that “the appearance of the director ushered in a new theatrical epoch,” such that “his experiments, his failures, and his triumphs set and sustained the stage” (1963: 3).

When Boulton (1960:182–3) warned that “overdirected scripts leave the producer no discretion,” she meant to suggest that, because writers cannot know the particular challenges of *mise-en-scène*, they should not write specific stage directions into their script. Writers must leave directors “plenty of scope for inventions.” Given the contingency of performance, those staging it will need a large space within which to exercise their theatrical imagination. They will need to coach actors on the right tone of voice, to choreograph the space and timing among actors, to design costumes, to construct props, and to arrange lights. When Barthes ([1957] 1972: 15) argued that “what makes the circus or the arena what they are is not the sky [but] the drenching and vertical quality of the flood of light,” he points to such directorial effect. If the script demands grandiloquence, Barthes observes, it must contrast darkness with light, for “a light without shadow generates an emotion without reserve” ([1957] 1972: 15).

For social dramas, in which scripts are attributed in a more contemporaneous and often retrospective way, *mise-en-scène* more likely is initiated within the act of performance itself. This coordination is triggered by the witting or unwitting sensibilities of collective actors, by the observing ego of the individual – in Mead’s terms, her “I” as compared with her “me” – or by suggestions from an actor’s agents, advisers, advance men, or event planners. This task of instantiating scripts and representations in an actual scene underscores, once again, the relative autonomy of symbolic action from its so-called social base. The underlying strains or interest conflicts in a social situation simply do not “express” themselves. Social problems not only must be symbolically plotted, or framed (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Snow et al. 1986), but also must be performed on the scene. In analyzing “how social movements move,” Eyerman (this volume) highlights “the physical, geographical aspects of staging and managing collective actions.” In theorizing the standoff, Wagner-Pacifici (2000: 192–3) distinguishes between “ur-texts” and “texts-in-action,” explaining how the often deadly standoffs between armed legal authorities and their quarries are triggered by “rules of engagement” (2000: 157) that establish “set points” (2000: 47) in a physical scene, such as barricades. Temporal deadlines also are established, so that the “rhythm of siege” becomes structured by the “clock ticking” (2000: 64). Standoffs are ended by violent assault only when dramatic violations occur vis-à-vis these specific spatial and temporal markers in a particular scene.

*The challenge of the material base: social power and the means of symbolic production*

While *mise-en-scène* has its own independent requirements, it remains interdependent with the other performative elements. One thing on which its success clearly depends is access to the appropriate means of symbolic production. Goffman's (1956) early admonishment has not been sufficiently taken to heart: "We have given insufficient attention to the assemblages of sign-equipment which large numbers of performers can call their own" (1956: 22–3). Of course, in the more typically fused performances of small-scale societies, access to such means was not usually problematic. Yet even for such naturalistic and fused performances, the varied elements of symbolic production did not appear from nowhere. In his study of the Tsembaga, for example, Schechner (1976) found that peace could be established among the warring tribes when they performed the *konj kaiko* ritual. While the ritual centered on an extended feast of wild pig, it took "years to allow the raising of sufficient pigs to stage a *konj kaiko*" (1976: 198). War and peace thus depended on a ritual process that was "tied to the fortunes of the pig population" (1976: 198).

One can easily imagine just how much more difficult and consequential access to the means of symbolic production becomes in large-scale complex societies. Most basic of all is the acquisition of a venue. Without a theatre or simply some makeshift stage, there can be no performance, much less an audience. Likewise, without some functional equivalent of the venerable soapbox, there can be no social drama. The American presidency is called "the bully pulpit" because the office provides its occupant with extraordinary access to the means for projecting dramatic messages to citizens of the United States.

Once a performative space is attained, moreover, it must be shaped materially. Aston and Savona (1991: 114) remarked that "the shape of a playing space can be altered by means of set construction." There is, in the literal and not the figurative or metaphysical sense, a material "base" for every symbolic production. The latter are not simply shaky superstructures in the vulgar Marxist manner, but neither can cultural performances stand up all by themselves. The *Micro-Robert Poche* (1992) defines *mise-en-scène* as "*l'organisation matérielle de la représentation,*" and the means of symbolic production refers to the first half of this definition, the material organization. Still, even the physical platforms of performance must be given symbolic shape. Every theatre is marked by "the style in which it is designed and built," said Aston and Savona (1991: 112), and social dramas are affected equally by the design of their place. During the Clinton impeachment, it was noted widely that the hearings were being held in the old Senate office building, an ornate setting whose symbolic gravitas had been reinforced by the civil theatrics of Watergate decades before.

Yet the design of theatrical space depends, in part, on technological means. In the pre-industrial age, according to Aston and Savona (1991), the “confines” of the “large and inflexible venue” (1991: 114) of open-air theatres placed dramatic limits on the intimacy that performers could communicate, whatever the director’s theatrical powers or the artistry of the script. Later, the introduction of lighting “established the convention of the darkened auditorium” and “limited the spectator’s spatial awareness to the stage area” (1991: 114). Once attention is focused in this manner, as Barthes ([1957] 1972) also suggested in his observations on spectacle (as mentioned previously), a “space can be created within a space” (Aston and Savona 1991: 114), and greater communicative intimacy is possible.

Equally significant dramatic effects have followed from other technical innovations in the means of symbolic production. The small size of the television as compared with the movie screen limited the use of long-distance and ensemble shots, demanded more close-up camera work, and required more editing cuts to create a scene. Greater possibilities for dramatic intimacy and agonistic dialogue entered into televised performance as a result. The availability of amplification pushed the symbolic content of performance in the opposite way. With the new technological means for electronically recording and projecting the human voice, recordings proliferated and large-scale commercial musicals became amplified electronically through microphones. Such developments changed the criteria of authenticity. Soon, not only concerts but also most non-musical plays needed to be amplified as well, “because the results sound more ‘natural’ to an audience whose ears have been conditioned by stereo television, high fidelity LPs, and compact disks” (Copeland 1990, in Auslander 1999: 34).

It is here that social power enters into performance in particular ways. Certainly, censorship and intimidation have always been employed to prevent the production and distribution of symbolic communication and, thus, to prevent or control political dissent. What is more interesting theoretically and empirically, however, and perhaps more normatively relevant in complex semi-democratic and even democratic societies, is the manner in which social power affects performance by mediating access to the means of symbolic production (e.g. Berezin 1991, 1994). The use of powerful arc lights, for example, was essential to Leni Riefenstahl’s *mise-en-scène* in her infamous propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, which reconstructed Adolph Hitler’s triumphant evening arrival at the Nuremberg rally in 1933. Whether Riefenstahl had the opportunity to put her imagination into place, however, was determined by the distribution of German political and economic power. Because Hitler’s party had triumphed at the level of the state, Nazis controlled the means of symbolic production. As an artist, Riefenstahl herself was infatuated by the Nazi cause, and she wrote



a script that cast Hitler in a heroic light. But the tools for making her drama were controlled by others. It was Goebbels who could hire the brilliant young filmmaker and provide her with the means for staging her widely influential work.

In most social-dramatic performances, the effect of social power is even less direct. To continue with our lachrymose example, while the Nazi concentration camps remained under control of the Third Reich, their genocidal purpose could not be dramatized. Performative access to the camps – the critical “props” for any story – was denied to all but the most sympathetic, pro-Nazi journalists, still photographers, and producers of newsreels and films. On the few occasions when independent and potentially critical observers were brought to the camps, moreover, they were presented with falsified displays and props that presented the treatment of Jewish prisoners in a fundamentally misleading way. This control over the means of symbolic production shifted through force of arms (Alexander 2003b). Only after allied troops liberated the western camps did it become possible to produce the horrifying newsreels of dead and emaciated Jewish prisoners and to distribute them worldwide (Zelizer 1998). It would be hard to think of a better example of performance having a material base and of this base depending on power in turn.

As this last example suggests, in complex societies social power not only provides the means of symbolic production but of symbolic distribution as well. The more dependent a dramatic form is on technology, the more these two performative phases become temporally distinct. It is one thing to perform a drama, and even to film it, and it is quite another to make it available to audiences throughout the land. In the movie industry, distribution deals develop only after films are made, for those who represent theatre syndicates insist on first examining the performances under which they intend to draw their bottom line. Similarly, video technology has separated the distribution of social dramas from live-action transmission. Media events (Dayan and Katz 1992; Boorstin 1961) are social performances whose contents are dictated by writers and photographers and whose distribution is decided by corporate or state organization. If the former represent “hermeneutical power” and the latter social power in the more traditional sense, then there is a double mediation between performance and audience. As we will see, there are, in fact, many more mediations than that.

Whether those who “report” media effects are employed by institutions whose interests are separated from – and possibly even are opposed to – those of the performers is a critical issue for whether or not social power affects performance in a democratic way. Because control over media is so vital for connecting performances with audience publics, it is hardly surprising that newspapers for so long remained financially and organizationally fused with particular ideological,

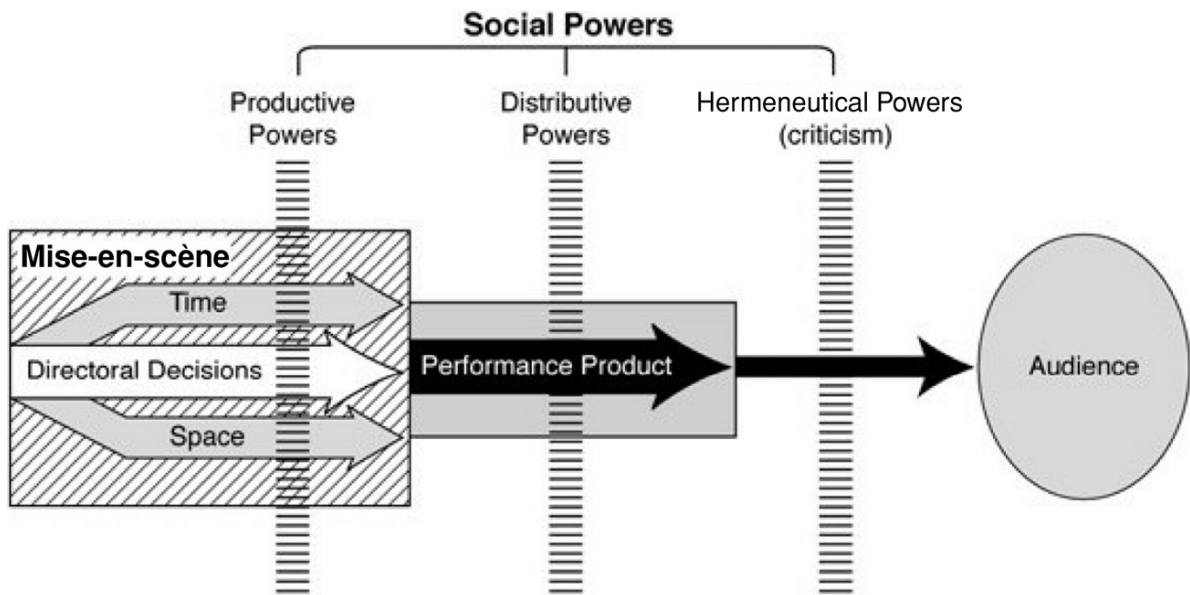


Figure 1.6 *Mise-en-scène* interfacing with social powers

economic, and political powers (Schudson 1981). This fusion allowed those who held hegemonic structural positions to decide which of their performances should be distributed and how they would be framed.

As social power becomes more pluralized, the means of recording and distributing social dramas have been distributed more widely, media interpretation has become more subject to disputation, and performative success more contingent. Even in the “iron cage” of nineteenth-century capitalism, British parliamentary investigations into factory conditions were able to project their often highly critical performances on the public stage. Their hearings were reported widely in the press (Osborne 1970: 88–90), and their findings were distributed in highly influential “white papers” throughout the class system (Smelser 1959: 291–2). Even after Bismarck outlawed the socialist party in late nineteenth-century Germany, powerful performances by militant labor leaders and working-class movements challenged him in “rhetorical duels” that were recorded and were distributed by radical and conservative newspapers alike (Roth 1963: 119–35). In mid-twentieth-century America, the civil rights movement would have failed if Southern white media had monopolized coverage of African-American protest activities. It was critical that reporters from independent Northern-owned media were empowered to record and to distribute sympathetic interpretations, which allowed psychological identification and cultural extension with the black movement’s cause (Halberstam 1999).

Differentiating the elements of performance, then, is not just a social and cultural process but a political one as well. It has significant repercussions for the pluralization of power and the democratization of society. As the elements

of performance become separated and relatively autonomous, there emerge new sources of professional authority. Each of the de-fused elements of performance eventually becomes subject to institutions of independent criticism, which judge it in relation to criteria that establish not only aesthetic form but also the legitimacy of the exercise of this particular kind of performative power. Such judgments issue from “critics,” whether they are specialized journalists employed by the media of popular or high culture or intellectuals who work in academic milieux.

Such critical judgments, moreover, do not enter performance only from the outside. They also are generated from within. Around each of the de-fused elements of drama there have developed specialized performative communities, which maintain and deploy their own critical, sometimes quite unforgiving, standards of judgment. The distance from the first drama prizes awarded by the City Dionysius festival in ancient Greece to the Academy Awards in postmodern Hollywood may be great in geographic, historical, and aesthetic terms, but the institutional logic (Friedland and Alford 1991) has remained the same. The aim is to employ, and deploy, autonomous criteria in the evaluation of social performance. As the elements of performance have been differentiated, the reach of hegemonizing, hierarchical power has necessarily declined. Collegial associations, whether conceived as institutional elites, guilds, or professional associations, increasingly regulate and evaluate the performance of specialized cultural goods. In complex societies, continuous critical evaluations are generated from within every performative medium and emergent genre – whether theatre or feature film, documentary or cartoon, country-and-western song or rap, classical recording, sitcom, soap opera, news story, news photo, editorial, feature, or nightly newscast. Such self-policing devices aim to “improve” the possibilities for projecting performance in effective ways. These judgments and awards are determined by peer evaluations. Despite the power of the studios and mega-media corporations, it is the actors, cinematographers, editors, directors, script and speechwriters, reporters, and costume designers themselves who create the aesthetic standards and prestige hierarchies in their respective performative communities.

In less formal ways, critical interpretive judgments circulate freely and endlessly throughout dramatic life, in both its theatrical and social forms. The public relations industry, new in the twentieth century, aims to condition and structure the interpretations such critics apply. Such judgments are also the concern of agents and handlers, of experts in focus groups, of privately hired pollsters. The more complex and pluralized the society, the tighter this circle of criticism and self-evaluation is wound. Normative and empirical theories of power and legitimacy in the contemporary world must come to terms with how the conditions of performativity have changed everywhere.

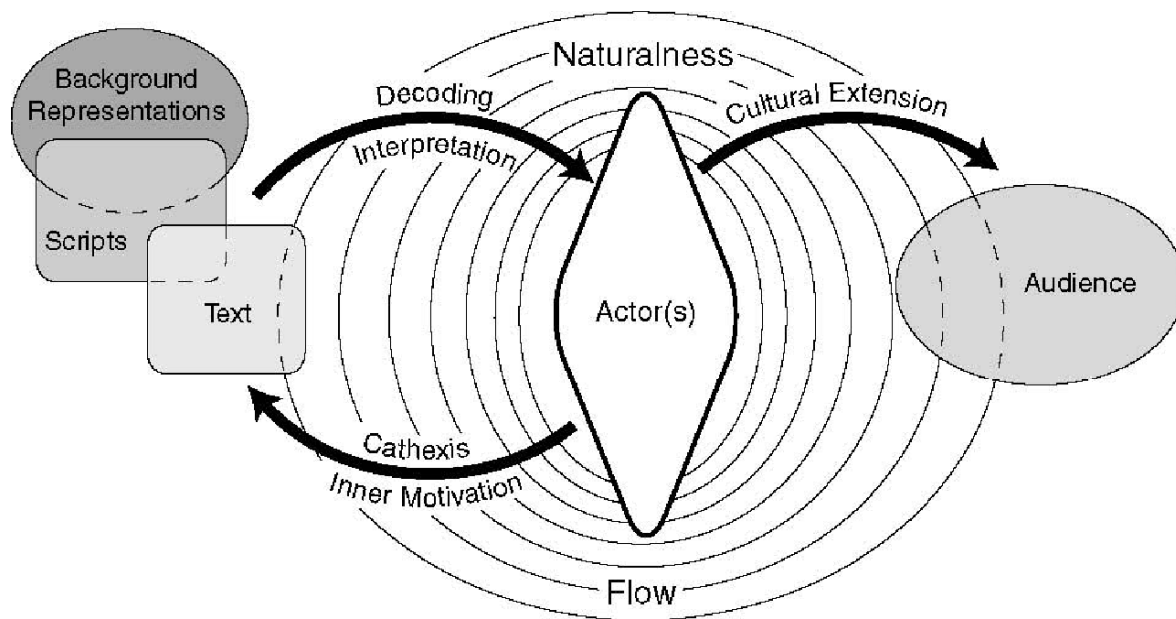


Figure 1.7 Double fusion: text-actor-audience

*The challenge of being natural: re-fusing actor and role*

Even if the means of symbolic production are sufficient, the script powerfully written, and the *mise-en-scène* skillfully set in place, there is no guarantee that the performance will succeed. There remains the extraordinary challenge of acting it out. Actors must perform their roles effectively, and they often are not up to the task. Thus, while Veltrusky (1964: 84) acknowledges that signifying power resides in “various objects, from parts of the costume to the set,” he insists, nevertheless, that “the important thing is . . . that the actor centers their meanings upon himself.”

In smaller-scale societies, ritual performers act out roles they have played in actual social life or from sacred myths with which they are intimately familiar. In post ritual societies, the situation is much more complex. In theatrical performances, actors are professionals who have no off-screen relation to their scripted role.

In a neglected essay, Simmel (1968: 92) put the problem very clearly: “The role of the actor, as it is expressed in written drama, is not a total person . . . not a man, but a complex of things which can be said about a person through literary devices.” In social dramas, actors perform a role they often do occupy, but their ability to maintain their role incumbency is always in doubt; their legitimacy is subject to continuous scrutiny; and their feeling for the role is often marked by unfamiliarity.<sup>5</sup>

As the actor in theatrical drama increasingly became separated from the role, the challenge of double fusion – actor and text on the one side and actor with audience on the other – became a topic of increasing intellectual attention.

When social texts were more authoritative, less contested, and less separated from familiar social roles, professional actors could achieve re-fusion in a more indexical than iconographic way. In what later came to be seen as histrionic, “picture acting,” performers merely would point to a text rather than seeking actually to embody it. This overt exhibition of the separation of actor and role could have theatrical purchase (Aston and Savona 1991: 118) only because dramatic texts had a more deeply mythical status than they typically have today. By the late eighteenth century, when sacred and traditional social structures were being reconstructed by secular revolutions (Brooks 1976), this “anti-emotionalist” method came under criticism. In *The Paradox of Acting*, Diderot ([1830] 1957) attacked acting that communicated feelings by gesture rather than embodiment. But it was not until the so-called new drama of the late nineteenth century – when social and culture de-fusion were considerably more elaborate – that the intensely psychological and introspective theatre initiated by Strindberg and Ibsen demanded an acting method that placed a premium on subjective embodiment, or facsimile.

Just as Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* as a cookbook for script-writing once myth had lost its sway, the Russian inventor of modern dramatic technique, Constantin Stanislavski ([1934] 1989), invented “the system” to teach professional actors how to make their artificial performances seem natural and unassuming. He began by emphasizing the isolation of the actor from scripted text. “What do you think?” he admonished the novice actor. “Does the dramatist supply everything that the actors need to know about the play? Can you, [even] in a hundred pages, give a full account of the life of the *dramatis personae*? For example, does the author give sufficient details of what has happened before the play begins? Does he let you know what will happen when it is ended, or what goes on behind the scenes?” ([1934] 1989: 55).

That the answer to each of these rhetorical questions is “no” demonstrates the challenge of re-fusion that contemporary actors face. “We bring to life what is hidden under the words; we put our thoughts into the author’s lines, and we establish our own relationships to other characters in the play, and the conditions of their lives; we filter through ourselves all the materials that we receive from the author and the director; we work over them, supplementing them out of our own imagination” (Stanislavski [1934] 1989: 52).

The art of acting aims at eliminating the appearance of autonomy. The ambition is to make it seem that the actor has not exercised her imagination – that she has no self except the one that is scripted on stage. “Let me see what you would do,” Stanislavski advised the neophyte, “if my supposed facts were true” ([1934] 1989: 46). He suggested that the actor should adopt an “as if” attitude, pretending that the scripted situation is the actor’s in real life. In this way, “the feelings aroused” in the actor “will express themselves in the acts of this



imaginary person” – as if she had actually “been placed in the circumstances made by the play” ([1934] 1989: 49; cf. Goffman 1956: 48). If the actor believes herself “actually” to be in the circumstances that the script describes, she will act in a natural way. She will assume the inner motivation of the scripted character, in this way refusing the separation of actor and script. Only by possessing this subjectivity can an artfully contrived performance seem honest and real (Auslander 1997: 29). “Such an artist is not speaking in the person of an imaginary Hamlet,” Stanislavski concludes, “but he speaks in his own right as one placed in the circumstances created by the play” ([1934] 1989: 248).

All action in the theater must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real . . . With this special quality of *if* . . . everything is clear, honest and above board . . . The secret of the effect of *if* lies in the fact that it does not . . . make the artist do anything. On the contrary, it reassures him through its honesty and encourages him to have confidence in a supposed situation . . . It arouses an inner and real activity, and does this by natural means. ([1934] 1989: 46–7, italics altered)

If social and cultural de-fusion has shifted the focus of theatrical acting, we should not be surprised that the acting requirements for effective social drama have changed in a parallel way. When social and political roles were ascribed, whether through inheritance or through social sponsorship, individuals could be clumsy in their portrayal of their public roles, for they would continue to possess them even if their performances failed. With increasing social differentiation, those who assume social roles, whether ascriptive or achieved, can continue to inhabit them only if they learn to enact them in an apparently natural manner (e.g. Bumiller 2003; Von Hoffman 1978). This is all the more true in social dramas that instantiate meanings without the benefit of a script, and sometimes without any prior clarification of an actor’s roles.

It is not at all uncommon, for example, for the putative actors in an emergent political drama to refuse to play their parts. During the televised Watergate hearings in the summer of 1973, even Republican senators who privately supported President Richard Nixon felt compelled to join their fellow Democrats in their expressions of outrage and indignation at the Republican president’s behavior (Alexander 2003c; McCarthy 1974). By contrast, during the televised Clinton impeachment hearings in 1998, the Democrats on the House panel distanced themselves from the script, refusing to participate seriously in what Republican leaders tried to perform as a tragic public event (Mast 2003, this volume). Their refusal destroyed the verisimilitude of the social drama. Actors on both sides of the aisle seemed “political,” offering what appeared to be contrived and artificial performances. Despite the tried-and-true authenticity of the political script, the political drama failed because the actors could not, or would not, fuse with their parts.

The causal import of acting to performative success is so large that even bad plays can be a great theatrical success. “We know where a bad play has achieved world fame,” Stanislavski ([1934] 1989: 52) said, “because of having been re-created by a great actor.” Simmel (1968: 93) also emphasized that the “impression of falsehood is generated only by a poor actor.” If an actor experiences flow, then he or she has succeeded in fusing with the scripted role. The idea, according to Stanislavski, is “to have the actor completely carried away by the play” so that “it all moves of its own accord, subconsciously and intuitively” ([1934] 1989: 13). Only when flow is achieved can the actor fuse with audience as well. To seem real to an audience, “it is necessary that the spectators *feel* his inner relationship to what he is saying” ([1934] 1989: 249, original italics; cf. Roach 1993: 16–17, 218).

Even the best acting, however, cannot ensure that the audience gets it right.

*The challenge of reception: re-fusing audience with performative text*

One-sided culturalist and pragmatic theories share one thing in common: each eliminates the contingent relationship between performative projection and audience reception. Viewing performance purely in textual terms, semioticians tie audience interpretation directly to the dramatic intentions of the actors and the culture structure that performance implies. The role of the spectator, according to Pavis (1988: 87), is simply to decipher the *mise-en-scène*, to “receive and interpret . . . the system elaborated by those responsible for the production.” If such a theoretical position makes psychological identification and cultural extension seem easy to achieve, then the purely pragmatic position makes it seem virtually impossible. The founder of audience response theory, Iser (1980: 109–10), spoke about “the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader,” asserting that the “lack of common situation and a common frame of reference” is so large as to create an “indeterminate, constitutive blank.” Speaking in a more historical vein, his French counterpart, Leenhardt (1980), observed that “with the formation of a new reading public,” the “organic relationship to the producer has nearly disappeared.” The “codes of production of literary works” have now become utterly “alien” to the “spontaneous codes of readers” (1980: 207–8).

It is a mark of social and cultural complexity that the audience has become differentiated from the act of performance. Reception is dictated neither by background nor foreground representations, nor by social power, effective direction, or thespian skill. Yet neither is reception *necessarily* in conflict with them. Every dramatic effort faces uncertainty, but re-fusion is still possible.

Boulton (1960) articulated this contingent possibility when she described the audience as the third side of “the great triangle of responses which is drama.”

Will the audience remain apart from the performative experience, or will it be “cooperative,” proving itself capable of “submitting itself to a new experience” (1960: 196–97)? Boulton pointed here to the psychological identification of audience with enacted text. By “accepting a sample of life and tasting it,” she wrote, an audience is “sharing in the lives of imaginary people not altogether unlike known live persons,” (1960: 196–97). It is revealing that the psychoanalyst who created psychodrama, J. L. Moreno, focuses also on the contingent relation between audience and stage and on the manner in which this gap is bridged by identification. “The more the spectator is able to accept the emotions, the role, and the developments on the stage as corresponding to his own private feelings, private roles, and private developments, the more thoroughly will his attentions and his fantasy be carried away by the performance” (Moreno 1975: 48). The paradox that defines the patient-performance is “that he is identifying himself with something with which he is not identical.” Overcoming this paradox is the key to therapeutic success: “The degree to which the spectator can enter into the life upon the stage, adjusting his own feelings to what is portrayed there, is the measure of the catharsis he is able to obtain on this occasion.”

The audience–performance split also has preoccupied the theatrical avant-garde. Some radical dramatists, such as Brecht (1964) or the Birmingham school of cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson 1976), have sought to accentuate de-fusion, in theory or in practice, in order to block the cultural extension of dominant ideology. By far the greater tendency among radical dramatists, however, has been the effort to overcome the de-fusion that makes theatrical performance artificial and audience participation vicarious and attenuated. Avant-garde performances have tried to create flow experiences, to transform mere theatre into rituals where script, actors, and audience become one. In his 1923 Geneva address, Copeau ([1923] 1955, in Auslander 1997: 16) observed that “there are nights when the house is full, yet there is no audience before us.” The true audience is marked by fusion, when its members “gather [and] wait together in a common urgency, and their tears or laughter incorporate them almost physically into the drama or comedy that we perform.” Exactly the same language of re-fusion is deployed fifty years later by Brook (1969) when he describes the aim of his “Holy Theatre.” Only when the process of “representation no longer separates actor and audience, show and public” can it “envelop them” in such a manner that “what is present for one is present for the other.” On a “good night,” he comments, the audience “assists” in the performance rather than maintaining “its watching role” (1969: 127).

Postmodern theatrical analysts are acutely aware of the fact that “theatre is attended by the ‘non-innocent’ spectator whose world view, cultural understanding or placement, class and gender condition and shape her/his response”

(Aston and Savona 1991: 120). Film and television producers and distributors try to protect their investments by targeting specific audience demographics and by staging test runs that can trigger textual readjustments in response. Politicians may be committed vocationally rather than aesthetically and financially to generating an audience, but they display an equally fervent interest in refusing the audience–performance gap. They “keep their ear to the ground” and try to gauge “feedback” from the grassroots in front of whom their social performances are staged. That this testing of the demographics and responses of potential audiences is now conducted by candidate-sponsored scientific polling (Mayhew 1997) does not change the performative principle involved. The goal remains to achieve performative success by overcoming social-dramatic defusion.

If large-scale societies were homogeneous, this segmentation of performance from an audience would be a matter of layering. Performances are projected first to an immediate audience of lay and professional interpreters and only subsequently to the impersonal audience that constitutes the vast beyond (cf. Lang and Lang 1968: 36–77). In real life, however, the problem is much more difficult than this. Audiences are not only separated from immediate contact with performers but also are internally divided among themselves. Even after the intensely observed ritual ceremonies that displayed the political consensus about Nixon’s impeachment, poll data revealed that some 20 percent of Americans did not agree that the President was guilty even of a legal violation, much less of moral turpitude (Lang and Lang 1983). In opposition to the vast majority of Americans, this highly conservative group interpreted the impeachment as political vengeance by Nixon’s enemies (O’Keefe and Mendelsohn 1974).

Copeau ([1923] 1955) rightly linked the fusion of audience and performance to the internal unity of the audience itself. “What I describe as an audience is a gathering in the same place of those brought together by the same need, the same desire, the same aspirations . . . for experiencing together human emotions – the ravishment of laughter and that of poetry – by means of a spectacle more fully realized than that of life itself” (in Auslander 1997: 16). In complex societies, the main structural barrier to re-fusing social drama and audience is the fragmentation of the citizenry. Social segmentation creates not only different interests but also orthogonal subcultures, “multiple public spheres” (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992), that produce distinctive pathways for cultural extension and distinctive objects of psychological identification. More and less divided by ideology, race, ethnicity, class, religion, and region, citizen-audiences can respond to social performances in diametrically opposed ways (Liebes and Katz 1990). For this reason, group-affirming social dramas are much easier to carry off than universalizing ones. This

particularistic strategy informs recent identity politics, but it has always been the default position of social drama in complex societies. When these structured divisions are exacerbated by political and cultural polarization, the seamless re-fusion of audience and performance becomes more difficult still (Hunt 1997).

Whether or not some shared culture framework “really exists” is not, however, simply a reflection of social structure and demographics. It is also a matter of interpretation. Audience interpretation is a process, not an automatic result. For example, Bauman (1989) suggested that a consciousness of doubleness is inherent in the interpretation of performance – that every performance is compared to an idealized or “remembered” model available from earlier experience. In other words, audience interpretation does not respond to the quality of the performative elements per se. Rather, audiences of social and theatrical dramas judge quality comparatively. Scripts, whether written or attributed, are compared to the great and convincing plots of earlier times. Did the fervor over President Reagan’s trading of arms for hostages constitute “another Watergate,” or did it pale by comparison (Schudson 1992b; Alexander 1987a)? In his role as chair of the House Impeachment Committee, how did Representative Henry Hyde’s efforts stack up against Sam Ervin’s bravura performance as chair of the Senate Select Committee during the Watergate hearings? How do the participants in today’s presidential debates compare to the towering model of the Lincoln–Douglas debates that, according to American mythology (Schudson 1992a), made civil-dramatic history more than a century ago?

When audiences interpret the meaning and importance of social dramas, it is such comparative questions that they keep firmly in mind. If their answers are negative, even those who are within easy demographic reach will be less likely to invest their affect in the performance. For those separated further, neither psychological identification nor cultural extension will likely occur. Fragmented performance interpretations feed back into the construction of subcultures, providing memories that in turn segment perceptions of later performances (Jacobs 2000). If there are some shared memories, by contrast, audiences will experience social drama in a deeper and broadened way. As audiences become more involved, performance can draw them out of demographic and subcultural niches into a more widely shared and possibly more universalistic liminal space.

### **Conclusion: cultural pragmatics as model and morality**

Why are even the most rationalized societies still enchanted and mystified in various ways? The old-fashioned rituals that marked simpler organizational forms



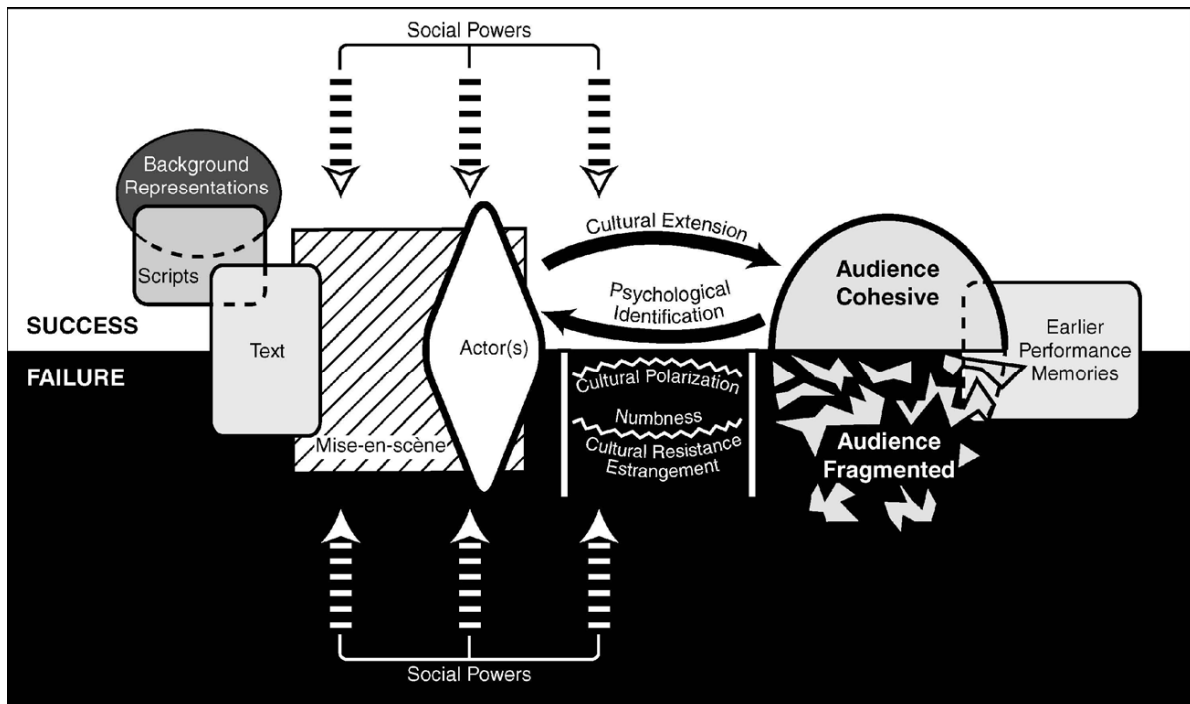


Figure 1.8 Audiences and performance

have largely disappeared, but ritual-like processes most decidedly remain. Individuals and collectivities strategically direct their actions and mobilize all their available resources, but their instrumental power usually depends on success of a cultural kind. This does not mean that the explanation of their success should be purely symbolic. It means that pragmatic and symbolic dimensions are intertwined.<sup>6</sup>

It is such a cultural-pragmatic perspective that has informed this work. I have developed a macro model of social action as cultural performance. In the [first section](#), I proposed that performances are composed of a small number of analytically distinguishable elements, which have remained constant throughout the history of social life although their relationship to one another has markedly changed. In the [second section](#), I demonstrated that, as social structure and culture have become more complex and segmented, so the elements that compose performance have become not only analytically but also concretely differentiated, separated, and de-fused in an empirical way. In the [third section](#), I showed that whether social and theatrical performances succeed or fail depends on whether actors can re-use the elements of which they are made. In the [fourth section](#), I explored the challenge of modern performance by investigating the complex nature of the demands that each of its different elements implies.

In simpler societies, Durkheim believed ([1912] 1995), rituals are made at one time and place, after which the participants scatter to engage in activities of a more instrumental and individualistic kind. In complex societies, things are rarely so cut and dried. All actions are symbolic to some degree. In social

science, it is best to convert such dichotomous either/or questions into matters of variation. The aim is to discover the invariant structures that vary and to suggest the forces that propel this change over time.

In complex societies, the relative autonomy and concrete interdependence (Kane 1991) of performative elements ensures variation both within and between groups. Even for members of relatively homogeneous communities, performances will range from those that seem utterly authentic to those that seem utterly false, with “somewhat convincing,” “plausible,” and “unlikely but not impossible” coming somewhere in between. For performances that project across groups, the range is the same, but attributions of authenticity are made less frequently. Such attributions also can be seen to vary broadly across historical time.

It might be worthwhile to offer a figurative rendering of the discussion I have presented here. Figure 1.9 presents a graphical, highly simplified schematization. The x-axis plots the variation in social and cultural structures, from simpler to more complex; the y-axis plots the elements that compose/organize a performance, from fused to de-fused. Three empirical lines are plotted in a hypothetical way. The higher horizontal plot line (a) traces performances that achieve fusion – ritual or ritual-like status – no matter what the degree of social complexity. The lower horizontal plot line (b) graphs failed performances, or those that fail to re-fuse the elements of performance, once again without regard for the state of social complexity. The diagonal plot line (c) graphs the average expectations for successful performance, which decline in stepwise and symmetrical fashion with each increment of social complexity. It has a downward, 45-degree slope, for each increase in social and cultural complexity stretches farther apart – farther de-fuses – the elements of performances, which makes success that much more difficult to achieve. Performances above the diagonal (c) are more successful than expected, given the historical conditions of performance; those below are less.

Wariness about authenticity is intrinsic to the pluralism and openness of complex societies, whether ancient, modern, or postmodern social life. Nietzsche ([1872] 1956: 136) bemoaned that “every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural and healthy creativity.” But from a moral point of view, it is often healthy to be skeptical of myths, to see through the efforts of actors to seamlessly re-fuse the elements of performance. When political democracy made its first historical appearance, in ancient Greece, Plato (1980) feared that demagoguery might easily sway the *polis* to undertake immoral acts. In terms of the perspective set out here, Plato was an implacable opponent of performance, deeply suspicious of its cultural-pragmatic effects. In one of his dialogues, he portrayed a master of oratory, Gorgias, as bragging about its extraordinary persuasive powers. “You might well be amazed, Socrates, if you

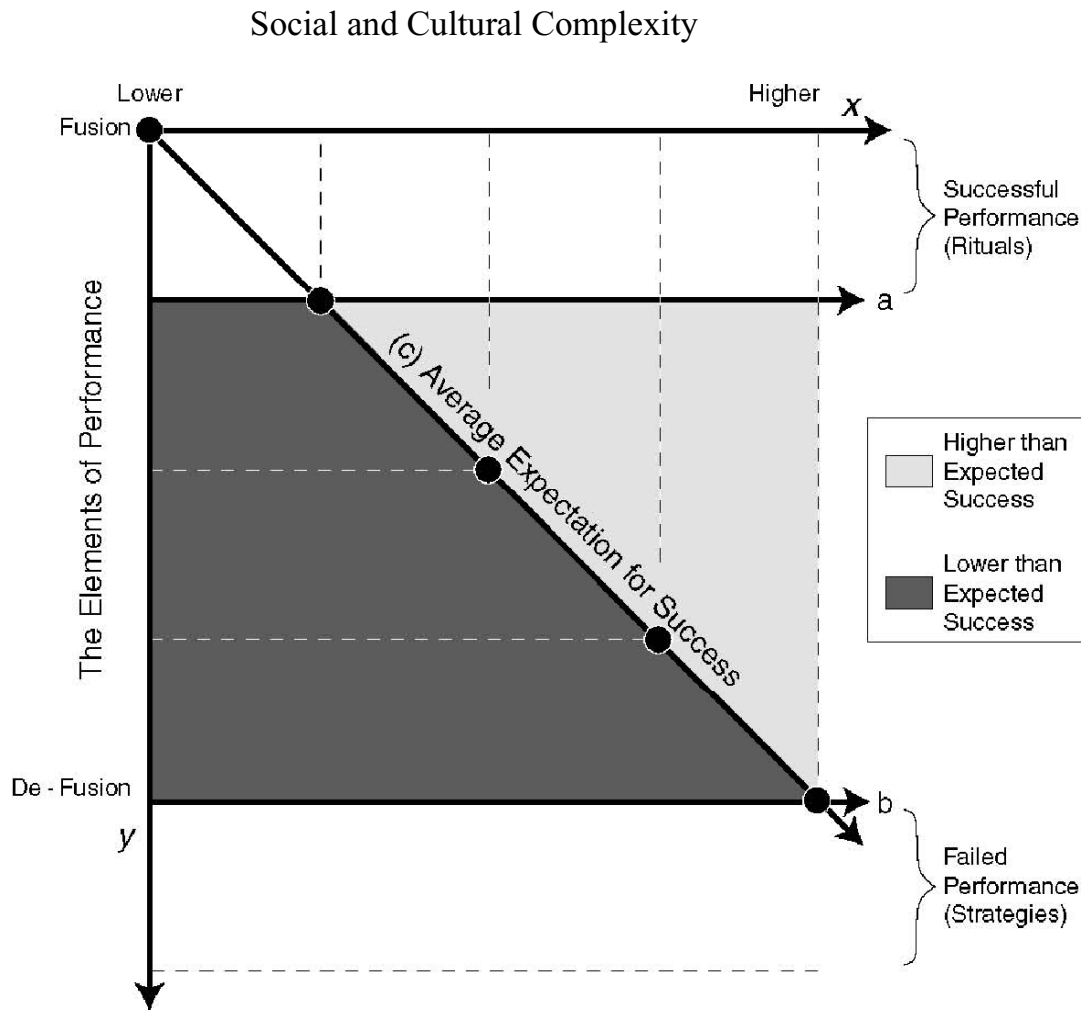


Figure 1.9 The historical conditions of social performance: structured variation

knew . . . that oratory embraces and controls almost all other spheres of human activity . . . The orator can speak on any subject against any opposition in such a way as to prevail on any topic he chooses.” Socrates answered caustically, relativizing performative skill by connecting success to mere audience acceptance. “The orator need have no knowledge of the truth about things,” Socrates exclaims; “it is enough for him to have discovered a knack of convincing the ignorant that he knows more than the experts.” Socrates continues in an equally sarcastic vein: “What happens is that an ignorant person is more convincing than the expert before an equally ignorant audience. Am I right?” Gorgias responds cynically, asking: “Isn’t it a great comfort, Socrates, to be able to meet specialists in all the other arts on equal terms without going to the trouble of acquiring more than this single one?” By this time, Socrates is furious. He acknowledges that orators need “a shrewd and bold spirit together with an aptitude for dealing with men,” but he denies that it can be called an art. “Oratory certainly isn’t a fine or honorable pursuit,” he avows; indeed, “the generic name which I should give it is pandering.” As a moral philosopher, Plato sees sincerity as the victim

of performance. He insists that “the supreme object of a man’s efforts, in public and in private life, must be the reality rather than the appearance of goodness.”

From the normative point of view, performative fusion must be unmasked, and rational deliberation provides the means. From a cultural-sociological perspective, however, embracing rationality as a norm does not mean seeing social action as rational in an empirical way. Culture is less toolkit than storybook. Why else are critical efforts to question a performance almost always accompanied by creative efforts to mount counterperformances in turn (Alexander 2004)? Re-fusion remains critically important to complex societies. One must insist that social power be justified and that authority be accountable, but one also must acknowledge that even the most democratic and individuated societies depend on the ability to sustain collective belief. Myths are generated by ritual-like social performance (Giesen, this volume). Only if performances achieve fusion can they reinvigorate collective codes, allowing them to be “ubiquitous and unnoticed, presiding over the growth of the child’s mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles,” as Nietzsche ([1872] 1956: 136–7) astutely observed.

### Notes

I am grateful to the members of the Yale-Konstanz seminars for feedback on earlier versions of this essay, and particularly to Bernhard Giesen and Jason Mast.

1. The aim of the present chapter is to develop theory at the middle range. For a more metatheoretical investigation of the intellectual history of performance theory and its relationship to more textual cultural theories, and for the positioning of cultural pragmatics vis-à-vis other contemporary theoretical orientations in the social sciences and humanities, see Alexander and Mast (introduction, this volume).
2. Because Durkheim is the founder of virtually every strong program for cultural analysis in the human sciences (Smith and Alexander, *forthcoming*), it is particularly unfortunate that he equated socially meaningful symbolic action with ritual rather than conceptualizing ritual as one moment along a continuum of social performance that ranges from fused to defused. One result has been the very broad usage of “ritual” as a synonym for symbolic action (e.g. Goffman 1967; Collins 2004), a usage that camouflages the contingency of symbolic action. Another result has been the restriction of symbolic action to highly integrated and repetitive, i.e. “ritualized,” situations, a restriction that conceptualizes acultural, strategic, and materialistic “practices” as taking up the rest of the action space. In his “religious sociology” of aboriginal societies, Durkheim wished to establish the basic elements of a cultural sociology of contemporary life. While he succeeded in laying the foundations for such a theory, he failed to sufficiently differentiate, in an analytical manner, the conditions for symbolic action in simpler and more complex societies. He could not have fully succeeded in his ambition, then, without the kind of differentiated and variable theory of the social conditions for symbolic activity I am presenting here.

3. Normative theorizing about the deliberative aspects of democracy has been allergic to its aesthetic and symbolic dimensions, implicitly equating the latter with anti-democratic, irrationalist commitments. The cultural pragmatics of social performance can provide an important corrective. For their part, Marxian hegemony and Foucauldian power-knowledge perspectives fail to conceptualize the myriad of contingencies that successful symbolic reproduction entails. It is very difficult to hyphenate power with knowledge and to gain the fusion that is indicated by an audience's inability to perceptually differentiate these two dimensions.
4. "The undertaking had all the signs of a well-planned operation . . . The rain had stopped, and some people showed up with lanterns to supplement the bright moonlight that now illuminated the scene . . . As work progressed, a large crowd gathered at the wharf to watch the proceedings in silent approval. It was so quiet that a witness standing at some distance could hear the steady whack-whack of the hatchets . . . 'This is the most magnificent Movement of all,' wrote John Adams in his diary the next day. 'There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity in this last Effort of the Patriots that I great admire . . . This Destruction of the Tea,' he concluded, 'is so bold, so daring to form, intrepid, and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences and so lasting, that I cannot but consider it as an Epocha [sic] in History' " (Labaree 1979: 144–5).
5. The relative autonomy of the "actor" element in contemporary social drama was demonstrated in a world-historical manner by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose televised speech to the United Nations Security Council on February 5, 2003, provided the crucial legitimation that allowed America and its allies to launch the Iraq war. By that late date, billions of dollars had been spent already on preparation, American military forces were primed and ready, and the most powerful military and political leaders in the world's most powerful nation were intent on launching the invasion. By their own accounts, however, they felt that they could not do so unless the war was legitimated on the public stage. This legitimation depended on making the case that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that their use was imminent. After several failed efforts to prepare for such a performance, those who were directing it decided that only one man could play the critical role. In the following account, the veteran reporter Bob Woodward continually makes resort to performative concepts, including rehearsal, preparation, background scripts, symbolic polarization, actor motivation and skillfulness, *mise-en-scène*, the reading of audience perspective, the role of critics, and audience response.

[President George] Bush and [National Security Advisor Condoleezza] Rice had asked the CIA to put together the best information in a written document – the "slam dunk" case [for WMDs] that [CIA Director George] Tenet had promised . . . The President was determined to hand the evidence over to experienced lawyers who could use it to make the best possible case. The document was given to . . . Scooter Libby . . . On Saturday, January 25, Libby gave a lengthy presentation in the Situation Room . . . Holding a thick sheaf of paper, Libby outlined the latest version of the case against Saddam . . .



The most important response came from [former presidential assistant] Karen Hughes. As a communications exercise, she said, it didn't work . . . This was a communications problem, not a legal one . . . So who then should present the public case? . . . Powell was the logical choice . . . To have maximum credibility, it would be best to go counter to type and everyone knew that Powell was soft on Iraq [and] when Powell was prepared, he was very persuasive . . . "I want you to do it," Bush told the Secretary of State. "You have the credibility to do it." Powell was flattered to be asked to do what no one else could. Rice and Hughes told Powell that he should get three days for the presentation to the Security Council . . . "No way," Powell said. "I'm doing it once." Okay, [then] it might be three or four hours long. "No, it won't," Powell insisted. "You can't hold these guys for three to four hours." They would fall asleep . . . Powell won agreement that the length and content would be his decision . . . Public expectation was building on Powell's presentation. Newspaper stories and cable television were running with it hard: Will Powell deliver a knockout blow? What does he have? What secrets will finally be let out of the box? Will Saddam be exposed? Will Powell have an Adlai Stevenson moment? Will Saddam fold? Will Powell fold? Powell was well aware that the credibility of the United States, of the president, and his own, were going to be in the Security Council room that day . . . After the final rehearsal in Washington, Tenet announced that he thought their case was ironclad . . . "You're coming with me," Powell said. He wanted Tenet sitting behind him at the U.N. as a visible, on-camera validation of the presentation, as if the CIA director were saying each word himself. Tenet was not the only prop. Powell had a sound and light show, audios and visuals to be presented on large hanging monitors in the Security Council chamber. He even had a teaspoon of simulated anthrax in a small vial to wave around. Millions around the world watched and listened on live television . . . Dressed in a dark suit and red tie, hands clasped on his desk, Powell began cautiously . . . He had decided to add his personal interpretation of the intercepts [of Iraqi military conversations] to his rehearsed script, taking them substantially further and casting them in the most negative light . . . He had learned in the Army that meaning had to be explained in clear English . . . The secretary's presentation took 76 minutes [but] the mixture of understatement, overstatement and personal passion made for riveting television. Mary McGrory, the renowned liberal columnist for the *Washington Post*, and a Bush critic, wrote in the lead column for the next day's op-ed page. . . . "I can only say that he Persuaded me, and I was as tough as France to convince . . . I'm not ready for war yet. But Colin Powell has convinced me that it might be the only way to stop a fiend, and that if we do go, there is reason." (Woodward 2004: 288–312)

6. Twentieth-century linguistic theory – which was central in creating social understandings of discourse – was marked by a struggle between structuralism and pragmatics. The present theoretical effort can be understood as a sociological extension, and reformulation, of the series of fundamentally significant philosophical-linguistic

efforts to transcend this divide, e.g. Bakhtin's (1986) concepts of dialogue and speech genre, Jakobson's dynamic synchrony (1990: 64) and code/message schema (1987: 66), and Morris' (1938) syntactic-semantic-pragmatic model. I am also following upon, while challenging and revising, significant synthetic efforts in sociological theory, e.g. Swidler (1986), Sewell (1992), and most especially Emirbayer and Mische (1998), which is closest to the analytic synthesis I am pursuing here. As these latter efforts suggest, twentieth-century sociological theory was marked by a sharp tension between pragmatic and structural approaches, against which some of my own earlier theoretical efforts were directed as well (Alexander 1998, 1987b, 1987c, 1982–3).

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