An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance

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In Summary

GESTURES
OF CLOSURE

THROUGH A close-up on contemporary culture at 'location Germany,' this study set out to map the aesthetics of the present moment as an aesthetics of narrative performance: a set of techniques that develop narrative in performative and performance in narrative forms—widely different in many respects but also attesting to shared preoccupations. The argument for thus conceptualizing contemporary culture was made on both theoretical and historical grounds. In theoretical terms, I demonstrated that the critical opposition of narrative vs. performance, which shaped the mainstream arts as well as cultural theory throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and continues to do so even beyond its explicit questioning in different contexts today, does not hold up to a closer look at the ways in which narrative as well as performance have been conceptualized. On the most general level, the performative turn in narrative theory has by now brought widespread acknowledgment that narrative is always also a performative act. Although the same does not hold vice versa, I argued that even radical affirmations of performative antinarrativity in phenomenological and deconstructive performance theory have remained haunted by their proponents' implicit concessions that aesthetic acts of communication in any medium necessarily proceed as acts of (narrative) reconfiguration, even
under the conditions of intentional bracketing characterizing much contemporary performance. This overarching epistemological point constitutes the basis of my intervention; it enabled me to define my concept of narrative performance, on the most abstract level, as this process of reconfiguration, which develops, or minimally allows audiences to develop, new narrative connections in variously challenging existing tropes, topoi, and larger socio-symbolic scripts while also drawing on them. Moving beyond this general point, however, the focus of my study was on the level of aesthetic conceptualization. Here, I demonstrated that diverging definitions of narrative and performance—privileging diegesis and theatricality vs. mimesis and presence, respectively—align some of these two notions’ respective uses more closely with each other than with other conceptualizations of the same notion. Based on these conceptual divergences, I began my own project of mapping the aesthetics of narrative performance by distinguishing two clusters of techniques from the respective angles of narratology and performance theory: on the one hand, those of scenic (= highly mimetic, presumably immediate) narrative and theatricalized narrative (= narrative that dramatizes the process of narrative mediation), on the other hand, those of (implicitly narrative, or mimesis) presencing and presentification, and (implicitly or explicitly narrative, or diegetic) theatricalization.

In historical terms, I argued that the aesthetics of narrative performance develops a particular significance for contemporary culture around the turn of the twenty-first century, which has been shaped by overlapping ‘performative’ and ‘narrative’ turns. At this moment, where modernist and postmodernist critiques of narrative meet both its alternative reconceptualizations and increasingly dominant calls for a return to more classical forms of narrative, the aesthetics of narrative performance finds its center of gravity, as I suggested, in its affinity with the critique of narrative authority. Widespread associations of both scenic/presencing and theatricalized forms with challenges to authoritative narration do not, however, translate into a clear-cut diagnosis such as ‘the aesthetics of narrative performance undoes’ or even primarily ‘questions narrative authority.’ Rather, this aesthetics enables a range of responses to the fact that such authority cannot be taken for granted at the turn of the twenty-first century, while it still forms the vanishing point of both playful assertions of (contingent) narrative power and serious cultural investments in narrative’s orientation functions, as well as a foil for a range of attempts to democratize narrative authority by empowering marginalized voices and developing explicitly nonsovereign, dialogic models of telling. My readings pursued this range of responses by analyzing individual texts and productions in three different media, detailing the effects of specific tech-
niques and configurations of techniques in concrete artistic projects shaped by their medial and cultural context.

Using my initial distinction between presence-oriented and theatricalizing techniques as a rough historical mapping tool, I characterized the—in prevailing critical lingua, postmodern—culture of the 1990s as shaped by an overall dominance of scholarly as well as aesthetic theatricality paradigms. In my primary materials, this influence is most directly visible in the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century films with which I began in chapter II. Drawing on film-theoretical investigations into the relations between narrative and spectacle, as well as the aesthetics of attraction, I returned, once more, to the promises of performative subversion that 1990s scholarship located in the workings of theatricality. I did so with the twofold intent of severely complicating these promises and also, as I write at a cultural moment in the early 2000s (and now 2010s) in which the diagnosed critical career of theatricality seems to have come to its end, halfway ‘rescuing’ theatricality paradigms by specifying in which ways and contexts they do in fact unfold a significant critical productivity. My readings in chapter II concretized the theoretical notion of narrative performance as (more or less critical) reconfiguration outlined in chapter I by detailing the ways in which the analyzed films combine various techniques of flamboyant, playful theatricality—the melodramatic mise-en-scène and comedic replay of cultural tropes in _Lola und Bilidikid_ and the exhibitionist and parodistic voice-overs, the metaleptic and montage practices of the unification comedies—with an emphasis on plot development. The effect of such narrative theatricality then depends not, as critical cliché has it, on the absence or presence of narrative integration as such but on the details of the established configuration of techniques and motifs. While _Lola und Bilidikid_ stages both the power of hegemonic figurations and the possibility of challenging them with comic doubles, the two unification comedies _Sonnenallee_ and _Good Bye, Lenin!_, although at first glance quite similar, develop opposite effects by championing a playful fantasy of (sovereignly contingent) narrative performance in the realm of the imagination vs. the force of real-life history, respectively.

The counterpart to these readings can be found in chapter VI, which traces the aesthetics of—in part now also programmatically narrative—presence that, as I argued, overall displaced that of theatricality in both theoretical and cultural trends of the 2000s. In detailing the workings of new filmic realisms and no longer playful documentary forms in the theater, I discussed the heterogeneity of forms enabled by this aesthetics of presence. Thus, Petzold’s _Yella_ pursues a radically phenomenological approach that renounces interiority and, in continuity with some aspects of postmodernism, unsettles
epistemological securities by bracketing, although not undoing, narrative. In contrast, Veiel’s *Der Kick* pursues his protagonists’ interior lives, producing empathy by aesthetically approaching them under the guidance of the narratives of universalism that have returned onto the critical stage in the 2000s. Despite these divergent findings, my readings in this chapter found a gravity center in the diagnosis that the new aesthetics of presence, which I suspected of political quietism in my initial theoretical readings, develops its potential strength and, in fact, its own critical productivity in the creation of affective disturbances. In different ways and to different degrees, the films and productions discussed in this chapter probe a surrender of narrative authority to the voices—and faces—of contemporary society’s radicals and perpetrators: Zaimoğlu’s Islamist “Black Virgins,” Veiel’s East German neo-Nazi youths, Bertele’s traumatized, violent Afghanistan veteran, and even Petzold’s ruthless player in the sphere of crisis capitalism. However, the critical productivity of the discomfort thereby effected also crucially depends on the details of how this audience alignment is nonetheless configured with narrative guidance—be it in Veiel’s minimalist gestures of distanciation or in Bertele’s explicit clues toward a clear-cut critical narrative.

The second larger vector of my investigations unfolded along the hypothesis that the overall shift from the aesthetics of narrative theatricality to that of presence is complicated by media-specific trajectories. These divergent trajectories attest to the relative importance of institutional frames as well as aesthetic traditions in a cultural landscape that is, as I argued, simultaneously constituted through the prevalent use of intermedia analogies and transfers of aesthetic techniques. On the one hand, strong conceptual investments in presence—indicative of their creators’ (neo)avant-garde–inflected agendas—shaped both literature (chapter III) and mainstream experimental theater (chapter IV) even during the heyday of postmodern theatricality paradigms. On the other hand, the subsequent twenty-first-century trend toward more authoritative forms of narration in literature (chapter V) brought a certain resurgence of theatricality precisely in the ostensible move beyond postmodernism. While these complications are crucial for my argument regarding the overarching, and lasting, significance of narrative performance for the contemporary moment, they do not flatten the historical diagnosis regarding an overall shift from theatricality to presence since 2000.

Thus, my readings in chapters III and IV demonstrated how in both literature and theater at the turn of the twenty-first century, programmatic affiliations with presence paradigms were nonetheless amalgamated with theatricalizing techniques, to the effect of creating complex configurations of narrative performance. In their different production contexts and through
their specific forms of signification, literary texts and theater works produced intriguingly resonating configurations. For example, the imbrication of (electronic media–inspired) recording techniques with theatricalizing self-reflexivity in Goetz’s (Berlin) diary/novel *Abfall für alle* compares to Wright’s and Kaufman’s use of the tropes and objects of recording for their queer history theater project in *I Am My Own Wife*. Inspired by African diaspora forms, Zaimoğlu’s *Kanak Sprak* and Popoola’s “This is not about sadness” pursue overlapping projects of (Bakhtinian) double-voiced sense-making through the ways they invest their explicitly theatricalized narrators with the power of (virtual) bodily presence, and Zeh’s technique of epic recording in *Eagles and Angels* presents a literary analogue to Pollesch’s use of epic mimesis in *Telefavela*. However, none of these analogies detracts from the fact that similar configurations of techniques and topoi may produce strikingly diverging effects in different works and contexts. Most dramatically, this was evidenced by the transatlantic adaptation of Wright’s and Kaufman’s intellectual Broadway success at the commercial Renaissance Theater in Berlin, which twisted the empathy-driven investigation of Charlotte’s experiential authority over her life stories into an uncritical presentification of German memory objects—spiced up, for liberal Berlin audiences, with a spectacle of crazy queerness. Less surprisingly, Wright’s and Kaufman’s use of objects and metaphors of recording for enabling affective engagement with Charlotte’s (questionable) life stories differs radically also from Goetz’s aggressive recording of Berlin’s abject Real. Between these two poles, Özdamar’s technique of autobiographical montage narration as presentification-at-a-distance in *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* interweaves the aesthetics of abjection with a loving take at left-wing German histories.

With respect to media-specific trajectories, I framed chapter III’s literary forms as critical responses to postunification calls for a return to (implicitly authoritative forms of) narrative as a possible foundation for the *Kulturation*, as well as chapter IV’s theater productions around complementary discussions of (theatrical and social) community and collective identity. Except for the Berlin adaptation of *I Am My Own Wife*, all the texts and productions discussed in these chapters share a commitment to probing alternative approaches to narrative sense-making and identity configuration—variously with egalitarian intent or from marginalized positions, emphasizing discontinuity or heterogeneity, and bottom-up or indirect procedure. My readings spelled out, and contextually evaluated, the range of forms thereby developed: Goetz’s individualist, perhaps all-too-exclusively negative focus on narrative leaps; Zaimoğlu’s similarly aggressive assertion of group identity through the reconfiguration of hate speech; Özdamar’s ‘undercover’ commentary on
polarized postunification memory discourses; Zeh's configuration of physical presence and epic alienation into a reading experience of sense-making horror; Popoola's dialogic exploration of the vicissitudes of layered collectivity formation; and Wright's and Kaufman's affective authorization of Charlotte's narratives for the project of inclusive theatrical community building. Finally, the deconstructive power of Pollesch's practices of affective commentary is supplemented with an explicit search for new narrative forms in Tele-favela's theory soap, configured through epic mimesis, and Plusfiliale's homage to alternative notions of humanity and bottom-up community formation through phenomenological figuration.

Rather than bringing the end of the aesthetics of narrative performance, the return of authoritative narration in the 2000s (chapter V) was shown to develop new configurations of narrative performance in response to growing discontent within the postmodern episteme. My reading of Zeh's Spieltrieb demonstrated how the author's programmatic call for godlike forms of narrative voice remained haunted by the legacy of twentieth-century critiques of narrative authority, as played out in the interwoven moves of authorizing and deauthorizing the novel's theatricalized narrator. The chapter's subsequent readings underlined the poetological impact also of the new century's fascinations with presence on the search for newly authoritative forms. The argument developed in these readings critically positioned (imaginary) effects of God-like power and sovereignty against what I conceptualized as more productive explorations of experientially grounded, explicitly first-person sense-making. Thus, I charged both Jelinek's Bambiland and Schlingensief's (almost text-free, but intermedially congenial) premiere of the piece with developing, despite their critical intentions, an aesthetics of pseudodivine subjection, in Jelinek's case through the God-summoning arrangement of the text's omnipresent media network chorus voice, in Schlingensief's through the overwhelming force of dispersed visual and aural clues centered around a metanarrative of self-reflexively unhappy artist sovereignty. In contrast, Gotscheff's Berlin production of Jelinek's intertext, The Persians, gestures at an alternative form of nonsovereign human authority in the messenger's scenic war report. A playfully serious development of such—strictly limited and fallible, or, in a nonmedical sense, borderline—authority is provided, I argued, by Foer's equally theatricalized and highly scenic September 11 novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. The point of including Foer's novel in this chapter was to emphasize that its main voice, although in some respects flamboyantly nonauthoritative, significantly differs from that of the narrators I pursued in chapter III. In focusing on the protagonist's project of working through his trauma both with his diegetic quest for sense-making and its sub-
sequent displacement into his extradiegetic narrative performance, the novel offers an explicitly earthly, democratic answer to the new longings for orientation that motivated twenty-first-century quests for authoritative narration.

The set of techniques, configurations, and effects thus unfolded in the course of my readings does not come with any claim to sovereign conclusiveness or closure. Rather, I hope that my ‘thick’ readings developed in cultural context usefully contribute to emerging conversations about the cultural forms of the present moment—a dialogue I have intended to move along on the preceding pages by remapping theoretical discourses and developing my intervention in terms of the aesthetics of narrative performance.