

richard schechner performance studies an introduction

richard schechner performance studies an introduction to the foundational concepts and enduring legacy of one of the most influential thinkers in the field. This comprehensive overview delves into Schechner's groundbreaking work, exploring his theories on performance, ritual, the body, and cultural practices. We will examine his seminal texts, his development of performance studies as an academic discipline, and his impact on understanding the ways humans engage in and interpret staged and everyday performances. Prepare for an in-depth exploration of how Richard Schechner has reshaped our understanding of performance and its vital role in society.

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The Genesis of Performance Studies with Richard Schechner

Richard Schechner stands as a pivotal figure in the establishment and academic legitimization of performance studies as a distinct field of inquiry. Before his extensive contributions, the study of performance was often fragmented, dispersed across disciplines like theatre, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Schechner, through his theoretical writings, pedagogical innovations, and extensive fieldwork, coalesced these disparate threads into a coherent and interdisciplinary approach. He recognized that performance was not solely confined to the theatrical stage but permeated everyday life, social interactions, and cultural rituals. This expansive definition allowed for a broader and deeper understanding of human behavior and its inherent performative qualities.

Defining Performance Studies: A Schechnerian Outlook

Schechner's definition of performance is intentionally broad, encompassing not just formal theatrical productions but also everyday actions, social rituals, political demonstrations, and even biological processes. He views performance as "twice-behaved behavior," meaning actions that are rehearsed, learned, and then enacted. This concept highlights the social and cultural construction of behavior, suggesting that even our most spontaneous actions are influenced by learned patterns and expectations. This foundational idea is crucial for understanding the scope of performance studies as envisioned by Schechner, moving beyond the confines of traditional theatre to embrace a vast spectrum of human activity.

The Interdisciplinary Nature of Performance Studies

A hallmark of Schechner's approach is its inherent interdisciplinarity. He drew heavily from anthropology, particularly the work of Victor Turner, to understand the relationship between ritual and performance. Sociology provided frameworks for analyzing social interaction and collective behavior, while theatre studies offered insights into aesthetics and dramatic structure. Cultural studies provided a lens through which to examine power dynamics, representation, and the broader societal implications of performance. This synthesis allowed Schechner to build a robust theoretical framework that could analyze a wide array of human phenomena through the prism of performance.

Core Concepts in Richard Schechner's Performance Theory

Richard Schechner's theoretical contributions are marked by a series of interconnected concepts that provide a robust framework for analyzing performance in its myriad forms. His work emphasizes the social, cultural, and political dimensions of performance, moving beyond purely aesthetic considerations. Understanding these core concepts is essential for grasping the depth and breadth of his influence on the field.

Restored Behavior and Twice-Behaved Behavior

Perhaps Schechner's most famous conceptualization is that of "restored behavior" and "twice-behaved behavior." Restored behavior refers to any behavior that has been cut off from its original context and is now being presented as performance. This could be a historical reenactment, a traditional dance, or even a gesture that is repeated out of its original social setting. "Twice-behaved behavior" is a broader category that includes restored behavior but also encompasses any action that is consciously performed and observed by others. This concept underscores the performative nature of much of human interaction, suggesting that

we are constantly enacting and re-enacting learned behaviors.

Performance and Ritual: A Symbiotic Relationship

Schechner has extensively explored the intricate relationship between performance and ritual. He argues that ritual is a form of performance, but not all performances are rituals. Rituals, for Schechner, are characterized by their *communitas*, liminality, and transformative potential. They often involve prescribed sequences of actions, symbolic gestures, and a focus on group cohesion and collective experience. He sees a dynamic interplay where ritualistic elements can inform theatrical performance, and theatrical techniques can be used to enhance or analyze ritual. This connection is central to his understanding of how performance functions within societies.

The Body in Performance

The physical body is a fundamental element in Schechner's performance theory. He emphasizes that performance is embodied, and the body is not merely a vehicle for conveying meaning but an active participant in its creation. Schechner's work encourages an examination of how bodies are trained, disciplined, and made to perform specific actions and embody particular identities. This includes an analysis of gesture, movement, vocalization, and the presence of the performer's physicality in shaping the audience's experience and understanding of the performance.

Ritual, Performance, and the Body in Schechner's Framework

The interconnectedness of ritual, performance, and the body forms a cornerstone of Richard Schechner's theoretical edifice. He posits that these elements are not separate entities but deeply interwoven, each influencing and shaping the other within the context of human cultural expression and social interaction.

Exploring Communitas and Liminality

Drawing heavily from Victor Turner's anthropological research, Schechner frequently discusses the concepts of *communitas* and liminality. *Communitas* refers to a state of intense, unstructured community, often experienced during rituals or heightened performances, where social hierarchies dissolve and a sense of egalitarian connection prevails. Liminality, on the other hand, describes the transitional state of being "betwixt and between" established social structures or stages of life. Schechner analyzes how performances, particularly those with ritualistic elements, can induce these states in participants and audiences, leading to

profound personal and collective experiences.

The Social and Political Dimensions of Performance

Schechner consistently highlights that performance is never divorced from its social and political context. He argues that performances can reinforce, challenge, or transform existing power structures and social norms. By examining who performs, what is performed, for whom, and in what circumstances, one can gain critical insights into the dynamics of society. This perspective moves beyond a purely aesthetic appreciation of performance to understand its role as a site of social negotiation, resistance, and identity formation.

Embodiment and the Performer's Presence

The physical presence of the performer is paramount in Schechner's framework. He posits that the performer's body is a primary site for the creation and reception of meaning. This involves understanding the techniques of embodied performance, how performers train and utilize their bodies to convey emotion, character, and narrative. Schechner's work encourages a nuanced analysis of how the performer's physicality, vocalization, and interaction with the performance space contribute to the overall impact and interpretation of the performance.

Schechner's Influence on Contemporary Performance Practice

Richard Schechner's theoretical contributions have had a profound and lasting impact on how contemporary performance is created, understood, and disseminated. His expansive definition of performance and his emphasis on interdisciplinarity have opened up new avenues for artists and scholars alike.

Devising and Directing: A Schechnerian Approach

Schechner's theories have heavily influenced the practice of devising theatre, where collaborative creation and exploration are prioritized over traditional script-based methods. His emphasis on "twice-behaved behavior" and the analysis of social rituals has inspired theatre makers to draw from a wider range of sources, including everyday life, historical events, and cultural practices. Directors and performers trained in or influenced by Schechner's work often engage in extensive research, experimentation, and improvisation to develop original performance pieces.

Performance Art and Experimental Theatre

The rise of performance art and avant-garde theatre in the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century owes a significant debt to Schechner's conceptual framework. His insistence on viewing performance as a broad cultural phenomenon has provided a theoretical justification for artists who push the boundaries of traditional theatrical forms. Performance artists, in particular, often engage with concepts like the body, ritual, and social interaction in ways that directly align with Schechner's analytical tools.

The Globalization of Performance Studies

Schechner's work has been instrumental in the global dissemination and academic acceptance of performance studies. His cross-cultural research and comparative analyses have highlighted the universal yet culturally specific nature of performance. This has fostered a more inclusive and diverse understanding of performance practices worldwide, encouraging dialogue and exchange between scholars and practitioners from different traditions and geographical locations.

Key Texts and Their Significance in Richard Schechner's Work

Richard Schechner's prolific output includes seminal texts that have shaped the trajectory of performance studies. These works are not merely theoretical treatises but often engage with practical examples and extensive fieldwork, making them accessible and impactful.

"Performance Studies: An Introduction"

This foundational text, often considered the essential starting point for anyone entering the field, lays out Schechner's core concepts and methodologies. It provides a comprehensive overview of performance studies, defining its scope, its relationship to other disciplines, and its key theoretical underpinnings. The book serves as a critical guide to understanding performance as a fundamental aspect of human life and culture.

"Performance Theory"

In "Performance Theory," Schechner further develops his ideas on ritual, restored behavior, and the social dimensions of performance. This work delves deeper into the theoretical frameworks that underpin his

understanding of how performances function within societies. It offers critical analyses of various performance traditions and explores the evolution of theatrical and ritualistic practices.

"Environmental Theater"

"Environmental Theater" explores a specific approach to theatrical production that breaks down the traditional proscenium arch and integrates the audience and performance space more intimately. This concept, which Schechner pioneered and theorized, emphasizes the creation of immersive and interactive performance environments. It highlights how the spatial configuration of a performance can significantly influence its meaning and impact.

The Evolution of Performance Studies: A Schechnerian Perspective

Richard Schechner's ongoing engagement with the field has allowed him to witness and actively contribute to its evolution. His work remains a touchstone for understanding the discipline's development and its future directions.

From Theatre to Performance Studies

Schechner's journey from a theatre director and scholar to a leading figure in performance studies reflects the broader shift in academic inquiry. He recognized the limitations of studying performance solely through the lens of traditional theatre and advocated for a more expansive, interdisciplinary approach. This transition has broadened the scope of academic research and created new fields of study.

Contemporary Applications and Future Directions

The concepts pioneered by Schechner continue to be relevant and applied to new forms of performance and cultural phenomena. From digital performance and virtual reality to activism and everyday social interactions, the analytical tools he developed offer valuable insights. Performance studies, as shaped by Schechner, remains a dynamic and evolving field, constantly adapting to new forms of expression and societal changes, promising continued exploration into the complex tapestry of human performance.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core concept of Richard Schechner's Performance Studies, as introduced in his foundational texts?

Schechner's Performance Studies, at its core, views 'performance' as a broad and inclusive category encompassing not just theatrical events but also rituals, ceremonies, social interactions, and everyday behaviors. It seeks to understand these performances through their dynamics, structures, and cultural significance, moving beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

How does Schechner differentiate between 'performance' and 'theatre'?

Schechner argues that while theatre is a specific form of performance, not all performance is theatre. He defines theatre as a type of performance that is consciously organized, often with actors, an audience, and a text or scenario. Performance, in his broader definition, is the overarching phenomenon of 'doing' or 'enacting' within a cultural context.

What does Schechner mean by 'performance as ritual' and what are its implications?

Schechner posits a strong connection between performance and ritual, suggesting that many performances have ritualistic elements and vice versa. This implies that understanding performance requires examining its role in social cohesion, transformation, and the marking of significant moments, often with shared beliefs and symbolic actions.

What is the concept of 'performance in time and space' in Schechner's work?

Schechner emphasizes that performance is inherently temporal and spatial. Performances unfold over time and occupy specific locations, which are crucial to their meaning and reception. He analyzes how these elements are manipulated and experienced by performers and audiences.

How does Schechner address the relationship between performer and audience?

Schechner highlights the dynamic and often reciprocal relationship between performers and audiences. He argues that the audience is not a passive recipient but an active participant whose presence, reactions, and expectations shape the performance itself. This interaction is a key element of performance analysis.

What is the significance of 'liminality' in Schechner's theories of performance?

Liminality, borrowed from anthropology, refers to a state of transition or in-betweenness. Schechner applies this to performance, viewing it as a liminal space where ordinary rules are suspended, new identities can be explored, and social transformations can occur. It's a space of potential and change.

How has Schechner's approach to Performance Studies influenced contemporary scholarship?

Schechner's work has been instrumental in establishing Performance Studies as a distinct academic field. His broad definition of performance, interdisciplinary methodology, and focus on the social and cultural functions of performance have influenced scholars across theatre, anthropology, sociology, and other humanities and social sciences.

What are some of the key methodologies Schechner advocates for in studying performance?

Schechner advocates for a range of methodologies, including ethnographic observation, textual analysis (broadly defined to include non-literary forms), historical research, and critical theory. He emphasizes the importance of fieldwork and direct engagement with performances in their cultural contexts.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Richard Schechner's Performance Studies: An Introduction, along with short descriptions:

1. *The Ritual Aspects of Performance*

This work delves into the foundational connections between ritual and performance, exploring how ancient practices inform contemporary theatrical and everyday actions. It examines the symbolic language, communal participation, and transformative qualities inherent in both ritual and performance events. The book provides theoretical frameworks for understanding the deep-seated human need for structured, meaningful expressions of collective and individual experience.

2. *The Body in Performance: Embodiment and Representation*

This title focuses on the crucial role of the physical body in creating and experiencing performance. It investigates theories of embodiment, exploring how performers use their bodies to communicate meaning, emotion, and character. The book also analyzes how the body itself becomes a site of representation, reflecting cultural values, social identities, and political ideas.

3. *Beyond the Proscenium: Site-Specific and Environmental Performance*

This book challenges traditional theatrical conventions by examining performances that break free from the confines of the proscenium arch. It explores the concept of site-specificity, where the performance context dramatically influences its meaning and execution. The text analyzes how environmental factors, architecture, and the surrounding landscape become integral to the performative experience.

4. Everyday Performance: Social Interaction and Ritualized Behavior

This title expands the understanding of performance beyond formal theatrical settings into the realm of everyday life. It investigates how social interactions, from greetings to political rallies, are imbued with performative elements. The book draws parallels between spontaneous social behaviors and more formalized rituals, highlighting the performative nature of daily human engagement.

5. Performance and Globalization: Cultural Exchange and Hybridity

This work addresses how performance operates within an increasingly interconnected world. It examines the flow of performance traditions across cultural boundaries, leading to hybrid forms and new expressions. The book explores the impact of globalization on performance practices, including issues of authenticity, appropriation, and the creation of global performance circuits.

6. The Avant-Garde in Performance: Innovation and Disruption

This book focuses on the experimental and boundary-pushing movements within performance studies. It traces the history of avant-garde practices, highlighting their role in challenging established norms and conventional aesthetics. The text analyzes how artists have used performance to disrupt social, political, and artistic expectations, fostering new modes of creative expression.

7. Performance and Technology: Digital Interventions and New Media

This title investigates the profound impact of technology on contemporary performance. It explores how digital tools, virtual reality, and new media are being integrated into performance creation and reception. The book examines the evolving relationship between live performance and its technological extensions, questioning the boundaries of presence and audience experience.

8. Performance and Politics: Power, Resistance, and Social Change

This work examines the inherent political dimensions of performance. It explores how performance can be a powerful tool for challenging authority, voicing dissent, and advocating for social change. The book analyzes various forms of political performance, from protest theater to activist interventions, and their capacity to shape public discourse and inspire action.

9. The Future of Performance: Emerging Trends and Critical Debates

This book looks ahead at the evolving landscape of performance studies. It identifies key emerging trends, such as interdisciplinary collaborations, immersive experiences, and new theoretical approaches. The text engages with critical debates surrounding the definition, purpose, and ethical considerations of performance in the 21st century.

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