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Theatre and Embodied Collective Reflexivity

Tobin Nellhaus

Theatre is a distinctive type of social reflexivity. The question is how, like other social practices, theatre's social function shapes its form. By examining theatre in relation to social ontology, the components of agency, and the requirements of an embodied form of collective reflexivity, one finds that theatre is characterized by a double homology with social ontology. Furthermore, conducting embodied collective reflexivity requires the performer/character distinction, which is fundamental to theatrical performance. Social ontology, then, sharpens our concept of theatre's structure and the meaning of its practice.

Keywords: *social ontology, collective reflexivity, agency, embodiment, Peirce*

Social practices arise to serve some social purpose, and to a greater or lesser extent social forms will follow their functions. Over time a practice will usually change, but nonetheless it arises for a reason, even if we do not know what purpose it fulfills. The point applies to theatre—a necessarily collective event. I have argued elsewhere that theatre is a form of social reflexivity and a model of social agency.¹ Here I will extend the social theory behind that analysis, focusing on the structure of embodied collective reflexivity, and drawing methodologically from both critical realism and Charles S. Peirce. Given space limitations, this article will consider only the paradigmatic form of theatre, consisting of the live performance of scripted drama—a paradigm that arose in Europe, South Asia, and East Asia. Other genres, such as performance art and postdramatic theatre, will await exploration elsewhere.

General Social Ontology

Analysis of social forms and practices is grounded by a key issue: the relationship between social structures and agents. Most theories have viewed society in one of three ways: solely as individuals and small groups; individuals as functions of larger social forces; or structures and agents as so mutually constitutive that they are effectively two sides of the same thing.² The position adopted here is a critical realist one that largely follows the analysis developed by sociologist Margaret S. Archer, who holds that structures and agents are distinct and irreducible, but

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continuously interact. More, society actually possesses not two but three “levels”: structures, agents, and discourses.³

Social structures, as Archer defines them, depend on relationships connected to material resources, such as the use or possession of land, livestock, buildings, and equipment. Human bodies are also material resources, which can be used for labor or procreation. The second plane of social ontology consists of agents, especially their social interactions, alliances, groups, conflicts, and the like. Individual agents operate within these networks via their personal capabilities, affinities, and so forth. Finally, there are discourses of all sorts (political, religious, scientific, artistic, etc.), or more generally, ideas, words, images, and so on.⁴

For the present argument, however, we need a finer-grained concept of the levels than Archer offers. Examined more concretely, each level has material, social, and conceptual elements. Ideas develop in society and can only be communicated via some material means, such as voice or writing.⁵ At the agential level, friendship, dating, and marriage are shaped by distinctive sets of concepts, bodily interactions, and dynamics such as power and cooperation within the couple and their relationships with people beyond themselves. And the centrality of material objects in social structures does not mean structures *are* those objects: ideas identify what sort of relationship with an object obtains, and mold people’s actions in connection with it. For instance, owning, renting, and squatting are all possible relationships to the same physical building. The structural, agential, and discursive levels derive their distinguishing properties from the relative primacy of their material, social, and conceptual elements, and the ramifications that fall from that.⁶

Under this theory of social ontology, people as social agents strive to achieve their goals under the preconditions of whatever social structures and discourses surround them (which may alter as a result of agents’ activities). The analysis corresponds to lived experience: for instance, in a down economy an actor may find few opportunities to be cast, but when she does get roles she discovers herself persistently typecast; likewise, an instructor may attempt to follow her guiding beliefs and values but struggle to implement them in the face of growing class sizes arising from university budget cuts. Social activity consists of and is explained by the three elements’ development and interplay.

Individual agents have a strikingly similar ontology, in a manner consonant with my refinement of Archer’s theory. Agents are characterized by their embodiment, their intentionality, and their power to take action: in critical realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar’s phrase, we must think of agents in terms of their “embodied intentional causal agency.”⁷ These three aspects—embodiment, intentionality, and causal efficacy—are fundamental to what I will call embodied collective reflexivity. Agents’ intentionality has a key role: as Bhaskar observes, “The capacity for a reflexive self-monitoring of one’s own causal interventions in the world, to be aware of one’s own states of awareness during one’s activity (to monitor the monitoring

of one's activity), is intimately connected to our possession of a language" (or, I would add, other sign systems).⁸

Although individuals and organizations are different, individuals' three basic characteristics have counterparts in organizations and organized activities. Organized activities are embodied in the sense that they utilize material resources, which provide various concrete capacities and are fundamental to their operation. Organized activities also involve ideas and aims, including such things as corporate culture and public presentation. Finally, through the group's individual members, each with their roles and abilities, the organization obtains efficacy within the world. A university, for example, has a material structure encompassing buildings, faculty, library collections, etc.; discourses, including curricula, a "mission," an institutional culture; and a wide variety of agential activities, among them instruction, research, and faculty meetings. Since organizations have such strong similarities to individual agents, they can be described as agents writ large—collective agents.⁹ At the same time, organizations arise within society as entities formed within society's larger conditions and resources. Organizations and organized activities, then, are bidirectionally emergent: inwardly from society as a whole and outwardly from individual agents, but identical to neither. They are simultaneously microcosms of society and macrocosms of individual agents—macro/microcosms.

The ontological similarity between society, individual agents, and organizations—their common trifold structure—arises because any social entity emerging from agents' interactions will have to possess agents' own ontological features. Their similarity is not mimetic, just as the skeletal similarity between a human arm and a bird's wing is not mimetic, and is more than an analogy. The similarity derives from their common origin: agential, organizational, and societal ontologies are *homologous*.¹⁰

The Social Ontology of Theatre

As an organized activity, theatre is a collective agent, and so it develops structural, agential, and discursive components. At the structural level, the only absolutely essential material resources in theatre are the performers and audience members as watchable, physically productive, and responsive bodies along with some type of performance space, but of course costumes, props, sets, and the like are commonplace; material elements can also include ticket booths, concessions, and other resources not directly part of a performance. Essentially, the material resources constitute a set of possibilities that exist before, during, and after a performance—while the theatre is dark, so to speak. At the agential level, theatrical performance always includes the performers and the audience as active beings; today they usually also include directors, designers, office staff, and so on. The discursive component encompasses such things as the concepts guiding the group's

artistic choices, stated and unstated goals, audience appeal, inner culture, production history, and plays under consideration.

Thus, as with any other social practice, there is a homological relationship between the theatre and society. However, theatre possesses the structure/agents/discourses ontology not just as an organized material activity but also *in the activity itself*. The theatrical level, which can also be described as the performance event, is a material structure involving not just the actors and spectators but also the *mise en scène*, the space, and so forth—but only those entities involved in the performance itself, not those when the theatre is dark.¹¹ The dramatic level is the performed event *per se*, centered on the characters as (fictional) agents acting within their (fictional) world. Finally, although dramatic performance is guided by a script of some sort, that script can consist of just a rough scenario, a set of stage directions, or merely rudimentary ideas of character and intention. These are sufficient to constitute the scriptive level, which we might also call the performance score. Taking these three levels together, we again find a social ontology consisting of structures, agents, and discourses, making dramatic performance ontologically homologous with society in general.¹²

These two ontological homologies—between society and organized practices, and between society and theatrical performance—are fundamental to the social ontology of theatre. Looking at them in further detail, we can position several other components of performance. The theatrical level is internally structured by two dualities. One is the polarity between spectator and performer (observer and observed). In principle, individuals can switch between the poles instantaneously, as they do, in different ways, in improvisational theatre and Augusto Boal's forum theatre.¹³ In the other duality, performers and audience members alike maintain two concurrent cognitive states. Actors never truly disappear into their characters, and continue to have their own consciousness. They are always simultaneously out of character and in character. However, the audience maintains a dual consciousness as well: spectatorship as such always occurs in the nonfictional world, but spectators watch people who they accept as fictional characters—in that respect, the audience is cognitively “in world.” One can describe the status of being in character and in world as the *intrinsic* aspect of the theatrical level: the creation of a shared fictional world, in which a real human plays, for example, the fictional Rosalind while a backdrop portrays the Forest of Arden. The theatrical level's *extrinsic* aspect—out of character and out of world—is the one in which the actors hit their marks, access a misplaced prop, or wait for laughter to peak, and in which spectators interpret stage dialogue, admire the actors' skill, suppress a sneeze, and struggle to see around someone tall. The extrinsic aspect also includes spatial elements such as the shape of the stage and the arrangement of audience seating. The dualities shaping the theatrical level are illustrated in figure 1.

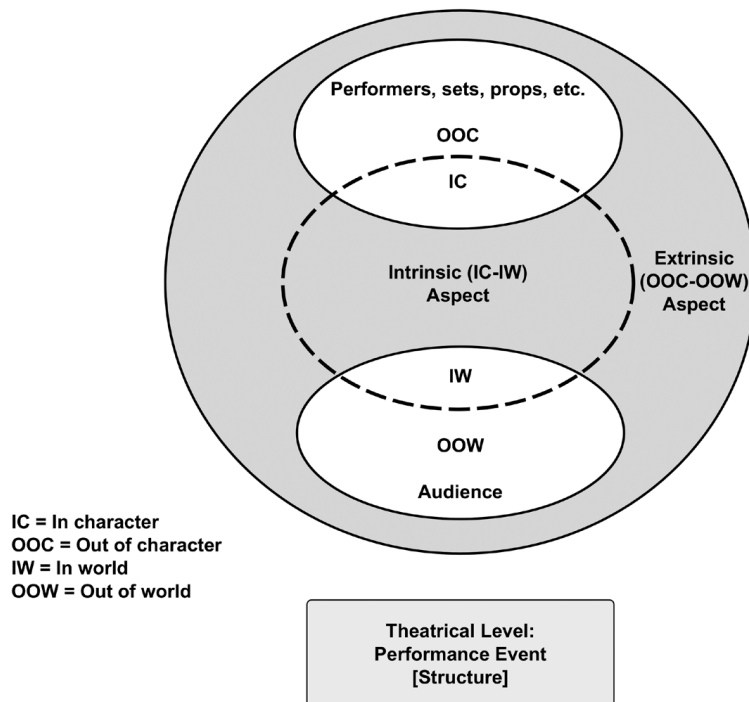


Fig. 1: Internal structure of the theatrical level.¹⁴

However, it is vital to recognize that we are speaking of two necessary aspects of the performance event, which exist in a dynamic, changeable relationship (somewhat like how speaking and listening are both requisite and dynamic aspects of conversation). For that reason they open many possibilities in performance. One aspect can “invade” the other, as happens in Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*: the Police Chief, bragging that he has informants everywhere, says, “Even tonight, in the audience, I guarantee there are a few of our men, as always . . . do you want to see?” He claps his hands, and several men scattered about the auditorium declare their readiness for duty. The Fool then reassures the audience that those were just actors—the real agents are keeping mum.¹⁵

Despite the fact that the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects are cognitively different, one can mistake the two, as when an actor gets injured but the audience thinks it is part of the show. Some productions attempt to blur the line altogether, as though the spectators are to be confronted by the actors themselves; an obvious example is Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience*, in which the performers insult and flatter the audience, and do not create characters in a traditional sense at all. Characters can also speak to the audience as though it too is part of the fictional universe, say, by addressing it as citizens of Rome. And because the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of performance are concurrent cognitive processes tied to practical activities, spectators can become performers and vice versa. However, such errors,

effacements, infringements, and alternations presuppose the cognitive distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of performance, which remain real and distinct, even as they interact.

The “performers” part of the theatrical level has its own main components. On the one hand are all the contributors to the performance event: the actors’ bodies, the set, music, and the rest. On the other hand is what they are doing: producing a performance. Simply put, this is the distinction between actor and acting. The acting is conducted on the basis of the script, in the broad sense above; however, in certain respects the script too is functionally a material element—raw material—whether it is physical script or only ideas. Scripts can be cut, adapted, and in other ways changed, and the interpretative activity inherent to acting makes raw material of the script as well. The performers use the script to produce the drama (the events performed), which itself has two basic elements. One is the set of characters and their circumstances; the other is the plot or action arising from them.

Beyond the theatrical performance per se, theatre’s ontology is completed by the audience’s experience of the performance, which they take home: imagery, metaphors, feelings and other emotive responses generated by the performance; the references and allusions pointing from the performance to a world beyond it, often needed for understanding the performance itself; and whatever interpretations and themes the spectators may draw. Thus we have the following components of theatre:

- 1) Organizational structure and resources
- 2) Audience during the performance
- 3) Actors, mise en scène, etc., in performance
- 4) Acting, including the active influence of the mise en scène, etc.
- 5) Script
- 6) Characters and circumstances
- 7) Action or plot
- 8) Feelings, metaphors
- 9) References, allusions
- 10) Themes and interpretations

But if social forms are structured to meet some function, this structure cannot have arisen by happenstance, and needs to be explained. To do so we must consider one of the key aspects of agency: reflexivity.

Reflexivity, Recursion, and Acts that Speak

Most discussions of reflexivity concern the individual, and it is useful to begin there before considering collective reflexivity. Under the definition of reflexivity adopted here, two aspects are key. Reflexivity is *self-targeted*: the agent herself is the object of reference and/or action. More precisely, reflexivity is recursive.

It creates self-similarity, in which a part is similar to the whole. Recursion arises in many realms. In the natural world, it appears in such forms as the branching patterns of fern leaves and various trees. In human culture, it is used in imagery of self-containment (such as microcosms, the *matryoshka* doll, and the *mise en abyme*), spirals, fractals, and other geometrical designs. And recursion is manifested in areas of social activity—in particular, organizations and collective activities can be understood both as miniature societies and as large agents, so that they are micro/macrocossms of them. The structure of recursion is central to the argument I will be making.

Reflexivity is also *motivated*: it arises from uncertainty and/or underdetermination. Archer, a major figure in the study of reflexivity, puts it this way: “People are necessarily reflexive about their ‘context’ or ‘circumstances’ when they ask themselves quotidian questions (in internal or external conversation) such as: ‘What shall we have for dinner?’, ‘Do I need to visit the dentist?’, or ‘Can one of us get back from work in time to pick the kids up from school?’”¹⁶ (Archer borrows the phrase “internal conversation” from Charles S. Peirce as a way to describe individual reflexivity.) The central point here is that the motivations for reflexivity are *questions*. Although Archer’s examples happen to concern the future, the questions can equally refer to the past: “Should I have said that to her?,” “Where did I put my keys?” The temporal reference involved in reflexivity highlights the fact that agency always occupies time: it is situated in history as a process in which the agent creates change and is herself changed. An agent’s activity becomes summarized and understood through a narrative.

Additional issues arise when we turn to collective reflexivity, whether the number of people involved is two or two thousand. In a discussion of collective reflexivity, Archer offers examples ranging from couples to department meetings; scale introduces no essential differences in the reflexive process.¹⁷ But I want to examine collective reflexivity in more performative terms than Archer provides. Take the example of meetings: they are (like individual reflexivity) conducted principally through language, as when faculty members discuss curricula, budgeting, special events, and so forth. However, as anyone attentive to meetings knows, plenty may be communicated through nonlinguistic means—which is even truer in ordinary interpersonal interactions. During any social interaction people must discern others’ intentions, emotions, and perspectives, which they do by listening to others’ words, and by noting (often subconsciously) the facial expressions, vocal tone, gestures, and other bodily elements, within whatever context seems appropriate.

Others, of course, observe their own characteristics, words, and behaviors in order to make inferences about one’s own mental states. In a further act of reflexivity, it is possible to consciously shape one’s own behavior in order to utilize the fact that others interpret it, in the hope of achieving a particular impact. The point recalls the

argument that agents do not simply consist of their intentionality and their power of reflexivity: agency is also necessarily embodied and capable of taking action.

The fact that both self and other conduct bodily communication suggests the possibility of collective reflexivity in which all three levels of agency are involved. In other words, embodied collective reflexivity would involve observation and interpretation not only *of* others' embodiment, but also *through* embodiment (both others' and one's own). The question, then, is what would be required for a group to be reflexive collectively, not just through language but through their entire being—simultaneously intentional, efficacious, and embodied.

First, nothing agents do ever consists purely of either discourse or the body: to a greater or lesser degree, both are involved. Even such seemingly disembodied activities as reading involve physical activity. However, in embodied collective reflexivity, embodiment plays a *sui generis* role because of the need to intuit others' intentionality and mental states through their outward behavior.

Reflexivity aims to achieve or assess agential efficacy in the world. Efficacy comes in varied forms. As is well known, J. L. Austin argued that all utterances are speech acts—a type of action or way to do things—from the obvious like declarations that a meeting is adjourned to the more subtle like logical proofs: they accomplish things. His term for speech acts is *performatives*. To be clear, Austin is sometimes taken as proposing performatives as one of two classes of utterance, but this view ignores his eleventh lecture on speech acts, which explodes that distinction. All speech, then, is performative.¹⁸

But not just speech. Consider that, on the one hand, self-awareness and embodiment are inseparable from agents' causal efficacy; and, on the other hand, we always "read" people's "body language" to understand their intentions. Together these indicate that embodied intentional activities (and often unintentional activities) tend to bear meaning. Actions can in effect be utterances, sometimes via conventional means. One can answer a question negatively by saying no, but also by shaking one's head or even becoming motionless. The meaningfulness of action is not (or not just) semiotic; it is also experiential, emotive, and social. It infuses a person's habits, their gestures and physical styles, whether and how they touch others, the quality of their voice, their sense of timing, the way they inhabit their body and the space around them—the way, for example, some people "own" a space as soon as they enter it, while others seem to make themselves disappear.¹⁹ Most current acting styles focus on a refined grasp of the meaningfulness of physical action.²⁰ Expanding the concept of performatives to embrace not only speech acts but also what I will call "acts that speak" allows us to conceptualize a form of reflexivity that is conducted bodily, not (or not only) verbally.

Reflexivity must be a particular type of performative. This is where reflexivity's recursive structure becomes salient. In individual reflexivity, each self-directed question generates a new round of internal conversation, not so much in a circle

as in a spiral; with each round, discourse further enfolds the agent. To the extent that collective reflexivity is mainly discursive (such as during a meeting), it has the same spiraling structure. However, in the spiral of discourse, the only capacity undergoing recursion is semiosis. In contrast, if all three elements of agentiality are to undergo recursion, we cannot assume they each recurse in the same way, because their interrelation is not symmetrical. The definition of agency as embodied, efficacious, and intentional describes a *stratified* and *emergent* structure. Discursive recursion has one layer alone; it is “flat.” In contrast, embodied recursion is multilayered; that is, stratified.

The nature of a stratified, emergent structure might most easily be understood historically. At the foundation of agency is basic physical existence—a feature we share with stones and water—which provides the matrix of possibility for all else. From core materiality emerged entities with the power to act upon the environment, a power all biological forms possess and which transforms the living being’s physical composition into its body, its corporeal being. Through their bodies lifeforms obtain food, protect themselves from danger, and reproduce. Humans do many other things, of course, but the emergent ability to act upon the environment is the causal efficacy necessary for all agency. Finally, the emergent powers of intentionality, language, and reflexivity arose within humans; actions become not just physical but meaningful—that is, embodied. Intentionality would be nothing without the ability to act, which in turn depends on corporeality. Due to the unidirectional line of dependency and the different natures of these three characteristics, the structure of embodied reflexivity must involve not simply the recursion of all three layers of embodied intentional agency but recursion governed by their stratification and emergence.

Trichotomous Recursion

Just such a structure of trifold, asymmetrical recursion was developed by Charles S. Peirce. Peirce is principally known for his work in semiotics, but I will instead draw primarily on his philosophical ideas, which he believed applied to many if not all fields.²¹ I noted above that Peirce’s concept of reflexivity has already influenced critical realism (as have some of his ideas in logic and semiotics). Here I want to introduce another element of his philosophical work: his recursive methodology. It underlies his semiotics, but it also offers an extraordinary technique for analyzing the anatomy of emergent, stratified entities and processes that are only partly semiotic (and possibly those that are nonsemiotic as well)—and embodied intentional agency is just such an entity. The method is rooted in his three fundamental categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. These are, respectively, (1) qualities and possibilities; (2) action/reaction and actual being; and (3) relationship, mediation, and rule-boundedness.²² The categories’ exact meaning adjusts to the context. Although Peirce’s categories may seem unduly abstract, in practical application they prove remarkably useful and revealing.

The categories are fundamental to Peirce's semiotics. Firstness concerns qualitative elements that can make a sign similar to its object, and thus these signs consist of images, analogues, models—in Peirce's terminology, icons. Icons can be as varied as a drawing of the moon, a mathematical formula modeling electron flow, and a metaphor that tells us "Juliet is the sun." Next, indexes involve Secondness because they represent real connections. Thus, effects are indexes that indicate causes (as chirping is an index that a bird is nearby); a pointing finger is an index directing or referring one's attention to some place or thing. Symbols are a semiotic form of Thirdness because they involve conventions—the application of a general rule. Language is the usual example; for instance, the word "book" is a symbol (conventional sign) that applies to any book. There also are nonlinguistic symbols, such as the yellow triangular hazard sign. Sign-types can combine: there are, for instance, conventional indexes (such as arrows as directional pointers) and conventional icons (like the smiley face ☺). Moreover, Peirce argued, every index contains an iconic element, and every symbol contains both an indexical and an iconic element. The icon/index/symbol distinction is the simplest of Peirce's classifications of signs; partly to account for "mixed" signs like conventional icons, he developed a taxonomy identifying ten different types of signs, which most Peirce scholars consider more important than the three initial types.²³

The way Peirce identified the ten sign-types (rather than the signs themselves) is my central interest here. He applied the three fundamental categories *methodologically*, in order to detail further categories, characteristics, and components. His method consisted of trichotomies, which can be described as trifold recursive subdivisions in which each of the primary categories iteratively subdivides in a different manner.²⁴ Under this system, Firstness continues as Firstness; Secondness subdivides as both itself and its embedded Firstness; and Thirdness subdivides as itself and its embedded Secondness and Firstness.²⁵ The same rules are then applied to each sub-element, creating a complex branching structure, as illustrated in figure 2, which shows the results of three recursions. (The dashes between numbers demarcate the successive outcomes or subcategories.) In Peirce's semiotics, these results are the ten classes of signs.

Still more germane, Peirce's three categories stand in an emergent relationship themselves. Secondness includes Firstness, but introduces a new and irreducible element: the transition from possibility to actuality. Similarly, Thirdness depends upon Secondness and Firstness, but relationships, governing laws, and meaning cannot be collapsed into the instantiations given by actuality.²⁶

The ontology of agency, I argue, can be conceptualized in accord with the three categories. Its Firstness consists of the agent's embodiment (with its qualities and possibilities).²⁷ Its Secondness is activity and its causal efficacy. And its Thirdness is intentionality (which is discursive; i.e., semiotic). I hold that, likewise, the categories match social ontology of structures, agents and their activities, and

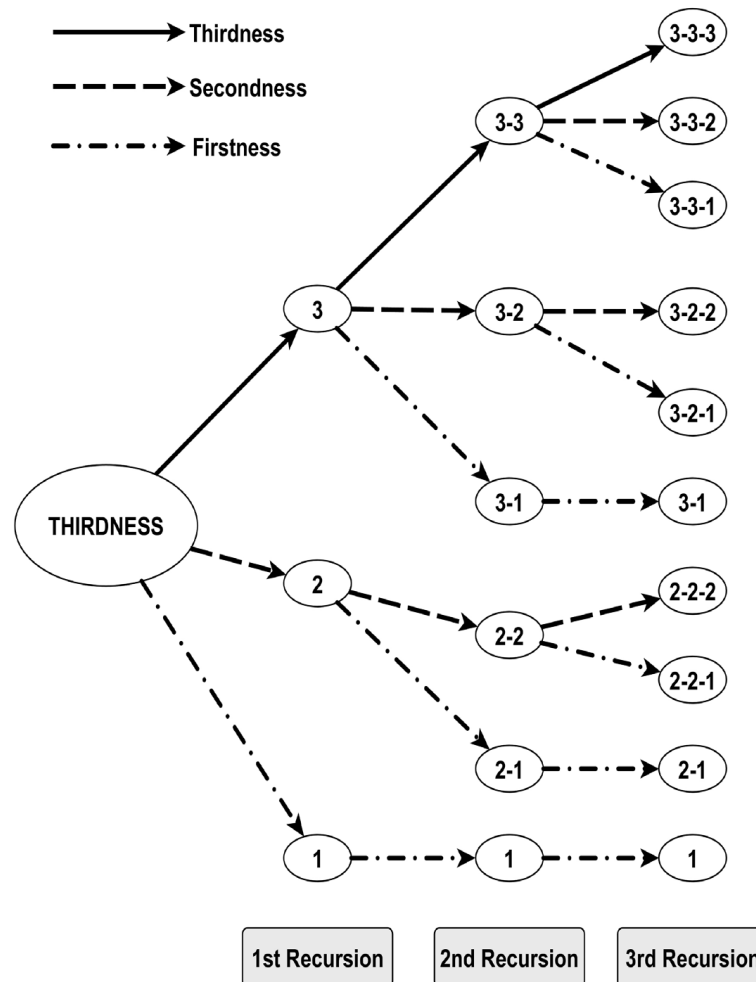


Fig. 2: Trichotomous recursions of Peirce's categories.

meaningful discourses (respectively); and the ontology of collective agency as well. The definition of agency as embodied, efficacious, and intentional also demarcates a line of emergence and stratification. Material embodiment, as an array of powers and possibilities, is as it is. Since causal efficacy is emergent from material embodiment (as a realm of potentiality), it both depends on materiality and includes it as an aspect of itself. Last, intentionality is emergent from causal efficacy and therefore is dependent on and contains both it and material being. Consequently we can utilize trichotomous recursion in order to specify the structure of embodied performatives. The first level, embodiment, iterates simply as embodiment. The level of action (causal efficacy) iterates with two branches: the embodied source of action, and the action per se, which entails something acted upon (including the case where one acts upon oneself). And finally, intentionality (semiosis) iterates

with three subtypes reflecting its respective forms of semiosis, action, and embodiment. The same process applies at each further iteration.

Figure 3 depicts the first three recursions in embodied performatives. It begins with the basic breakdown of agential ontology between embodiment (E), causal efficacy as action (A), and intentionality as semiosis (S). I will describe the outcome of three recursions; analysis of subsequent recursions is unnecessary here.

Each node covers a variety of instances and components—consider the numerous and complex aspects of embodiment alone—so they should not be taken as representing a single thing, but rather as a particular type of distinction, difference, category, or relationship. The recursion of embodiment (E), as noted above, is simply embodiment: although over time the body changes with age, nutrition, injury, and the like, at any particular moment of reflexivity one has the body and embodied experience one has, providing the grounds of possibility for the rest. The recursion of activity involves two different aspects, one being the agent's embodied power to act and susceptibility to being acted upon (A-E), the other the independent object that one could act on or might act on oneself (A-A). This is the distinction between self and world. The independent object in turn has two aspects of its own: its material or social qualities, characteristics or powers *in potentia* (A-A-E), and its actual activity (A-A-A). For example, “Uh-oh, that’s a lion. Oh good, it’s sleep-

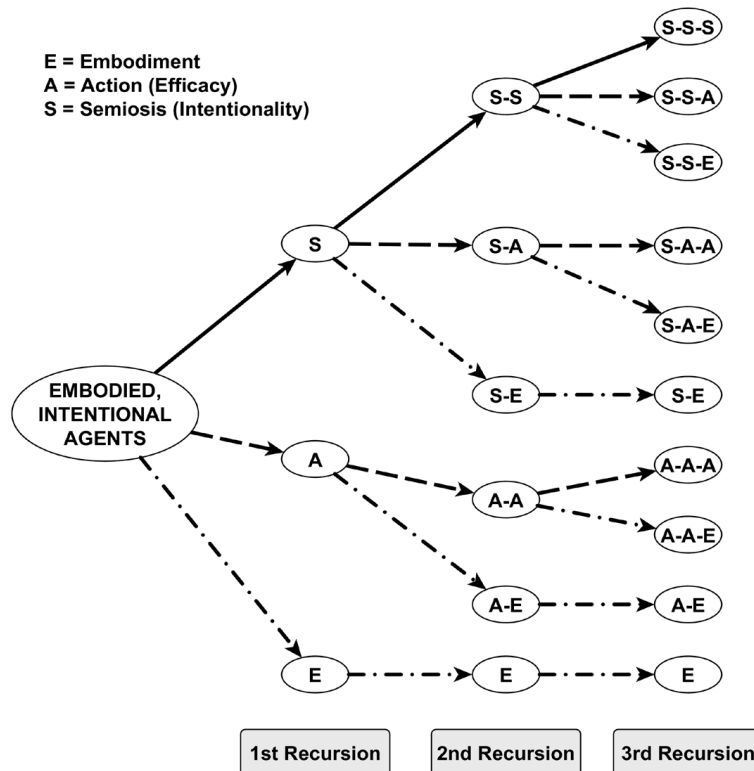


Fig. 3: The recursive structure of embodied performatives.

ing,” or “My dean is a sheep in wolf’s clothing.” Node S-E, the material aspect of semiosis, consists of sign vehicles, including writing, visual images, sounds, physical materials, body parts, and many other objects—objects also in the sense of things we work upon to produce meaning. They are not simply physical objects but meaningful ones: one can fling a book, but here our interest is in which book is flung (a novel? a Bible? Shakespeare?). Under this rubric as well are the words, images, etc., as stored in our memories. At node S-A is the activity of semiosis itself, that is, the process of generating particular performatives (whether speech acts or acts that speak). S-A-E and S-A-A distinguish between the identity of the speaker (the meaningfulness of who is speaking) and her speaking. Finally, there is the semiotic relationship itself (S-S). The signs at node S-S-E are icons, node S-S-A encompasses indexes, and at S-S-S we have symbols. Again, both indexes and symbols have a necessary iconic element, such as the metaphors within thought, as a cognitive substrate derived from our embodied engagement with the world.²⁸

In order to address reflexivity that is not simply discursive but rather involves all three aspects of agency in a collective context, we need the theory of embodied performatives I introduced above. An account of embodied collective reflexivity must meet each of its aspects. First, *embodied* reflexivity may and often does include discourse, but crucially, it is (also) conducted *through* the body; that is, through acts that speak to their observers, so that the body is an essential means of expression, even cognition. In short, embodied collective reflexivity is performative, involving both speech acts and acts that speak. They may be determined by social convention (such as a handshake or a kiss on each cheek), but equally they may work by direct effect (say, a hug or loud drumming) and by iconic and associative characteristics (for instance, looking downward upon someone can convey superiority).

Second, *collective* activity is not simply actions by multiple individuals. The participants have to view themselves as members of a larger unit; their activities are meant to achieve something useful or valued by the whole.²⁹ Generally speaking, the activity has to be at least minimally planned and organized, and parts of embodied performatives that might otherwise occur subconsciously must become explicit.

Finally, *reflexivity* is motivated by a question, such as a problem to be solved, the meaning of something, or speculation on how something might occur. For discursive reflexivity the problem or question could be the achievement of virtually any goal. But when reflexivity is conducted bodily, to some extent the issue must concern embodiment itself. For this reason, in addition to whatever other matters it might focus on, it does not need to be wholly goal-directed (or rather, it can be partly autotelic), and an important crux will be the encounter between self and other—our activity of inferring others’ mental states and intentions based on their outward behaviors and characteristics.

That returns us to the basic point: embodied reflexivity would be reflexivity that engages all three aspects of agency: embodiment, efficacy, and intentionality. This

reflexivity centers on agents' circumstances, characteristics, and actions; it consists of some sort of representation of, comment upon, reflection on, or self-reference toward agency. In other words, *agency itself*, including all of its elements, must be focal in a practice of embodied collective reflexivity.

Theatre and Embodied Collective Reflexivity

Theatrical performance meets all the criteria for embodied collective reflexivity, and even more interestingly, embodied collective reflexivity explains the ontology of theatrical performance.³⁰ This becomes visible when we conjoin (1) theatre's two ontological homologies; (2) the dualities of the performance event depicted in figure 1; (3) the structure of embodied collective reflexivity shown in figure 3; and (4) add the audience's experience of the performance. Starting from the agent embedded within social structures and discourses, performance's ontological structure is trichotomously recursive, as illustrated by figure 4. To help align this diagram with figure 3, I have encircled each node representing an aspect of theatrical practice with an ellipse that indicates its connection to the trichotomous structure of embodied performatives. For clarity the diagram leaves out the numerous interactions among the nodes, even the most basic ones; the reader should not be misled by their absence.

The first column depicts the three ontological levels of society. Out of agents' activities, however, all else develops. The next column shows theatrical organization as simultaneously emergent from agents' activities macrocosmically, and emergent from society microcosmically. The recursion shown in the third column is the crucial one, depicting the moment of collective reflexivity, which incorporates theatrical performance itself; the fourth breaks these down into the generally recognized elements of theatre.

In all recursions, the underlying level—the theatre organization and its material and human resources—continues (node E). Nodes A-E and A-A, consisting principally of agents, need to be understood together, because here we enter performance *per se*. The agents are present purposely, as a collectivity. This collectivity—the theatrical level—constitutes a structural plane in its own right, based principally on the social relationships between performers and audience, including theatre's watchable human bodies, the physical space, the set design, lighting, costumes, music, and all the other elements that constitute “spectacle.” These all belong to theatre's extrinsic aspect. Yet there is a division in this collectivity. As we saw in the outline of embodied reflexivity, nodes A-E and A-A demarcate the self/world distinction. In everyday life, whenever two or more people interact socially, that distinction becomes the difference and relationship between self and other, or the observer and the observed. We pay attention to others' speech, movements, expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc. (all of which are included at node A-A-A), and their personal characteristics (node A-A-E) such as bodily qualities (gender,

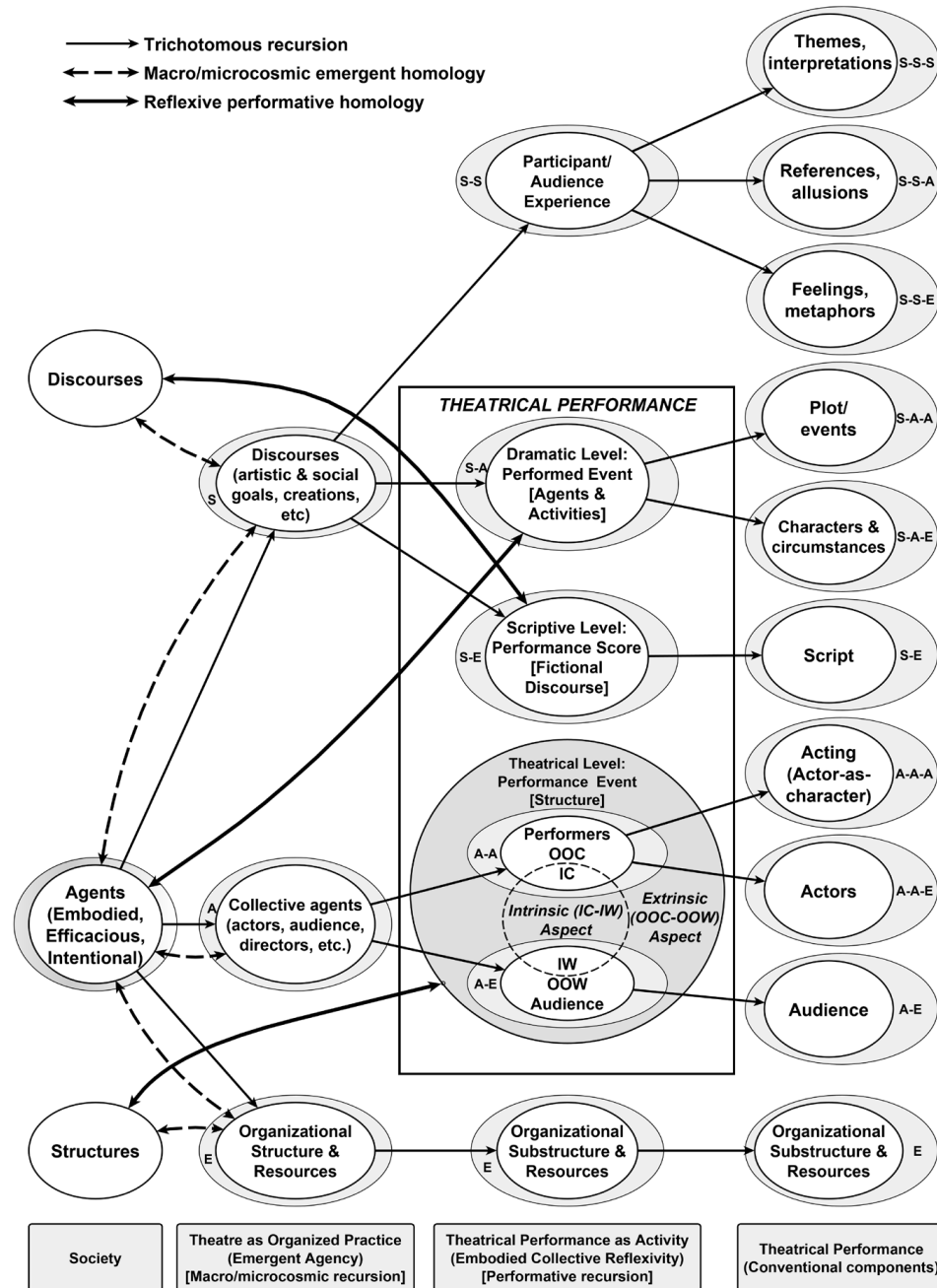


Fig. 4: The structure of embodied collectivity reflexivity in theatre.

age, ethnicity, size, and so on), clothing, accessories, social position (as far as that can be determined), perhaps taking into account their environment as well. Such observation of performers is theatre's intrinsic aspect. As shown in the fourth column, that contains a distinction between the actors (node A-A-E) and their acting (node A-A-A).

The theatrical level establishes the foundation for the scriptive and the dramatic levels. Together these three elements constitute theatrical performance (figure 4 encloses them within a rectangle). They are homologous with the three levels in society's ontology, as indicated by the heavy-lined arrows. However, as noted earlier, the scriptive material is not something that people are thinking so much as semiotic raw material (node S-E) that theatre artists utilize and transform in order to produce the performance. The basic product of theatrical performance per se is the dramatic level (node S-A), the performed event, in which fictional agents conduct their activities. The fundamental distinction within the dramatic level is between the characters, with their circumstances, goals, and so forth, who establish an array of potentialities (node S-A-E), and the actions they take; that is, the plot or narrative (node S-A-A). Narrative is important because, as I observed earlier, reflexivity is connected to temporality, whether the topic is the past, plans for the future, or imaginings about either. Conceptualizing agential activity requires a connection to narrative; "nothing happens" itself describes a concept of agency. Finally, from all three planes of theatrical performance arises the audience's experience of the performance: their feelings and their sense of the qualities and metaphors embodied in the performance (S-S-E), their perceptions of the beings and events represented in the performance, especially the referential element of performance (S-S-A), and any themes or interpretations they may draw out of it (SSS).

Historically there have been divergent views about which element is of greatest importance. For instance, Aristotle put plot first, and character second. The *Natyasastra* emphasizes *rasas* ("tastes" or "feelings"), which are a form of the qualitative element encompassed by node SSE.³¹ The literary scholar may focus on themes. And so on. Although it positions these elements within an overall structure, the social ontology of theatrical performance does not in itself suggest any such prioritization: if a culture assigns one of them primacy, that is a sociohistorical matter, not an ontological one.

The fourth column, then, encompasses the ten components of theatrical production discussed above, as generated by the trichotomous structure of embodied collective reflexivity—in short, theatre's form follows its function. Note that Handke's "assault" *Offending the Audience* and Beckett's acutely minimalist *Breath* are as much examples of embodied collective reflexivity as Hansberry's highly realistic *A Raisin in the Sun*. The notions of a "slice of life" or "holding a mirror up to nature" are irrelevant for understanding embodied collective reflexivity: the ontology of theatrical performance is what is at stake, not what it displays. The issue is less what theatrical performance shows than how it is structured in order to meet a social function.

Embodied Reflexivity, Fictionality, and the Role of Homology

Yet this seems a strange claim: “holding a mirror up to nature” sounds like what reflexivity of any sort *should* require. It is true that even at its most improbable, abstract, fantastical, or bizarre, theatrical performance has to reflect *something* recognizable about reality, such as our desires, fears, and obsessions. That is intrinsic to reflexivity. The problem, however, is more fundamental. Normally audiences do not take theatrical performance for reality or even a representation of literal reality—it is roundly understood as pretense. The duality between the intrinsic (in-character and in-world) and the extrinsic (out-of-character and out-of-world) aspects, which is vital to the structure of theatrical performance as a mode of reflexivity, is founded on the participants’ act of distinguishing between the factual and the fictional. Most other forms of collective reflexivity do not have this cast. A couple actually plans the weekend housecleaning; they do not pretend to plan it. It is similar with religious services, legislating, holding a political demonstration, and so forth. Yet in theatre, fiction is essential.

The reason for fictionality lies in reflexivity’s fundamental operation: asking a question. A crucial part of reflexivity is that it places previous, current, or future thoughts or activities at a cognitive remove so they can be contemplated, critiqued, appreciated, imagined, or changed. For performance, that moment is the use of discourse as raw material—node S-E, the scriptive level, which seems to be in the wrong place compared to theatre’s homology with society, as indicated by the crossed lines that ought to be parallel. That transformation of discourse from the actively thought to the thought-about is the moment of reflexivity itself, the moment of asking questions about one’s world. By raising questions, reflexivity does more than motivate the agent to explore options: it creates the possibility that one can find options. Reflexivity opens the *possibility of possibilities*—the ability to consider what could be and what could be done.

In most forms of reflexivity (collective and individual), questioning is undertaken primarily or solely within language (speech acts), and action is subsequent. In contrast, an *embodied* form of collective reflexivity operates crucially through the body itself. In fact, it might operate without words at all, as in pantomime and dance. Physical bodies, not just discourse, must open the possibility of possibilities. But *bodies* can ask questions, creating the necessary cognitive relocation, only becoming other than themselves, thereby opening a distance from their own world, the world as it is. Bodies must be (seen as) symbolic, indexical, metaphoric. Performative reflexivity creates a split in cognitive modalities formulated as the duality between “out of character” and “in character,” the literal and the fictional, which establishes the structure’s extrinsic and intrinsic aspects. It is mimetic. It creates signs of signs.³² Thus bodies on stage displace the real world and produce in its stead an imagined world. In short, comprehensively agential reflexivity—reflexive activity that is simultaneously semiotic, social, and material, and incorporates the

dialectic between self and other—is undertaken through *a recursion in which agents performatively create/observe a fictional world*.³³

Above and beyond the recursion that generates the organizational macro/microcosm, the ontology of theatrical performance involves a double recursion. One recursion consists of the trichotomous structure of embodied performatives; the other is the trifold ontology of theatrical performance (the theatrical, dramatic, and scriptive levels), which creates its own microcosm of broader social ontology (structures, agents, and discourses). Hence an understanding of theatrical performance must go beyond what is perceptible, which consists of its limited number of people, and its characters, plot, and staging (which even under the dominant paradigm of theatre considered here may be thoroughly unrealistic or outright bizarre). Theatrical performance goes beyond even collective reflexivity. Due to its ontological homologies with society, theatre performs *societal* reflexivity; that is, reflexivity about being in a world with others, with all the material, discursive, and social limits and possibilities that entails. Societal reflexivity explains why theatre can be viewed as concerning “the human condition” despite the fact that theatre traditions are culturally specific. Further, beyond even its nature as societal reflexivity, theatre’s dense set of homologies with social ontology make it a model of social agency; that is, of agents’ embeddedness within structures and discourses. It is a model in its very structure.

Conclusion

A model only reveals so much. It is like a skeleton: human bones will not tell you whether a person was bright or dull, if they played the flute or the horseraces, who they loved, whether they were kind or cruel. And these are important things. But a skeleton reveals that humans have the ability to run, jump, and grasp objects; that they walk on two legs; that they have larger brains than most animals; that they are related to other animals. The capacities disclosed by a skeleton lie under all the individuals and unite them. So if one asks, “Is the animal in front of me a human or a rabbit?” starting with its skeleton—looking at how the creature is built—is better than starting with its hair color. The social ontology of theatre accomplishes that. Moreover, conceptualizing theatrical performance in terms of social ontology allows us to not only describe its structure but also *explain* it—its need for collectivity, its focus on embodiment, its multiple layers, its use of fictionality, and its function. In order to achieve this, my analysis avoids theorization based on aesthetics and simple analogy, and instead draws on ideas from critical realism and Peirce, in a way that is internally coherent. Finally, by presenting a definition of theatre, I am arguing that we can sharpen theatre studies’ object of analysis, while also posing questions on how best to define performance.

Notes

1. See Tobin Nellhaus, *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), esp. 24–35, 40–51, 149–62. The present article revises part of the theory formulated there. An earlier exploration along the current line of analysis, focusing on the social theory, appeared as Tobin Nellhaus, “Embodied Collective Reflexivity: Peircean Performatives,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 16, no. 1 (2017): 43–69, doi: 10.1080/14767430.2016.1257198. The present article abbreviates the social theory and expands the theatre theory.

2. Individualistic and holist (also called collectivist) approaches both have long histories, and there are significant variants and degrees of strictness within each school. Some proponents of individualism are Max Weber and Friedrich Hayek. Holists include Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. The idea that structure and individual agency mutually and simultaneously constitute each other, and in that sense are two sides of a unified whole, is a more recent development, associated most with Anthony Giddens and Peter Berger. See the discussions of these schools in Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6–12, 33–64, 93–133.

3. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, 135–94; and Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Archer is in many respects elaborating a position outlined by Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 31–37.

4. See especially Archer, *Realist Social Theory*. Archer actually uses the term “culture,” which is overly ambiguous and problematic. I have replaced it with “discourse,” essentially in Foucault’s sense: see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 193–94.

5. I explore the impact of changing communication practices on theatre in Nellhaus, *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism*.

6. Tobin Nellhaus, “Signs, Social Ontology, and Critical Realism,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 28, no. 1 (1998): 1–24; and also Nellhaus, *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism*, 40–49. Such distinguishing properties include, inter alia, logical and analogical relations at the discursive level; in-group and out-group positions at the agential level; and ownership and labor power at the structural level.

7. Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2008), 161.

8. Bhaskar, *Possibility of Naturalism*, 81.

9. Dave Elder-Vass, pursuing a different critical-realist matter, calls organizations “macro-actors”: Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 157, 179–80.

10. Brief explanations of homology can be found in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “homology,” accessed Apr. 8, 2019, <http://www.britannica.com/science/homology-evolution>, as well as Wikipedia and other sources.

11. Although in modern theatre things such as the concessions and the chimes signaling the end of an intermission are usually extraneous to the performance event, one can easily propose instances in which they should be included (for example, the bread distributed at a Bread and Puppet performance). The contours of what is and is not a material part of the performance event is a contingent matter. But that does not imply that no distinction exists: the back office and the restrooms are not part of the performance event unless the performers make them so.

12. Nellhaus, *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism*, 152–62. My argument for three ontological levels in theatrical performance converges with Alice Rayner’s phenomenological case for the presence of discursive, material, and performative dimensions of practice: see Alice Rayner, *To Act, to Do, to Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). The terms “performance event” and “performed event” are adapted from Jiří Veltrusky, who writes of the “acting event” and “enacted event,” in “Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting,” in *Sound, Sign and Meaning: Quinquagenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle*, ed. Ladislav Matejka (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1976), 553–606. However, Veltrusky does not identify anything comparable to the performance score.

13. In forum theatre, a group of people gather, and some (possibly professional actors) perform a skit on a problem that concerns the participants, along with a potential solution. The proposed solution is intentionally an unsatisfactory one, in order to spur group discussion. When someone in the group suggests that a character take an alternative approach, she replaces the original performer and the scene is replayed using the new solution; spectators can even interrupt the performance and replace a performer on the spot. The process may be repeated until everyone is satisfied. Thus everyone can be

both a spectator and an actor: what Boal called a “spect-actor.” See Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Urizen Books, 1979), 139–42; and Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 17–21.

14. Figures 1 and 3 were previously published in Tobin Nellhaus, “Embodied Collective Reflexivity: Peircean Performatives,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 16, no. 1 (2017): 43–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2016.1257198>. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Taylor & Francis Ltd, <http://www.tandfonline.com>.

15. Dario Fo, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, trans. Suzanne Cowan, *Theatre* 10, no. 2 (1979): 37.

16. Margaret S. Archer, “Collective Reflexivity: A Relational Case for It,” in *Conceptualizing Relational Sociology: Ontological and Theoretical Issues*, ed. Christopher Powell and François Dépeleau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 145. See also Margaret S. Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 74–78, 95–116.

17. Archer, “Collective Reflexivity,” 145–61.

18. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

19. The meaningfulness of embodied activities and of subject-relations to the body is most frequently raised in terms of gender, but as Pierre Bourdieu argues, it can also be a matter of social class. Thus all sorts of meanings, including social attitudes and anxieties, are embedded in the body. See the discussion of bodily “hexis” in Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 81–89. Bourdieu extends the point to oral articulation itself, remarking that “language is a body technique” (86). See also the chapter “Belief and the Body” in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

20. Oratorical acting, which has an ancient pedigree and continued well into the eighteenth century, centered on sets of formalized gestures and “points” in which a pose representing an emotion was held for emphasis and admiration. The trend toward more detailed, “natural” acting (albeit not quite in our sense) began, at least in Anglophone theatre, with David Garrick. Modern attentiveness to gesture appears in Stanislavsky, who pointed out, for instance, the subtle differences between a young body’s movement and an elderly one’s, instructing acting students to “observe each of your movements, remembering what an old man can and can’t do”: Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor’s Work: A Student’s Diary*, trans. Jean Benedetti (New York: Routledge, 2008), 530. Brecht, despite contrasting with Stanislavsky in many ways, was similarly attentive to the meaningfulness of movement. His concept of social *Gestus* pertains to the particular qualities of gesture that reveal social circumstances and attitudes (a well-known instance was Helene Weigel, as Mother Courage, biting any coin she received to test its genuineness): Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 83, 104–5, 198. Weigel’s *Gestus* is cited in John Rouse, “Brecht and the Contradictory Actor,” *Theatre Journal* 36, no. 1 (1984): 36.

21. He sketched some examples in his famous essay “A Guess at the Riddle”: see Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1:245–79.

22. Peirce described the categories in numerous locations, with varying inflections. See, for example, Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 1:247–56, 2:160–64, 2:267–69.

23. For Peirce’s definitions of sign-types, see, for example, *Essential Peirce*, 2:163–64, 2:273–75, 2:289–99.

24. Although the terms *recursion* and *iteration* are mine, not his, Peirce clearly employs the concepts when describing his method of subcategorization in *Essential Peirce*, 2:161–64, where he also presents a diagram that serves as the model for figure 2. The passage is part of a group of essays that includes his introduction of ten classes of sign. To my knowledge the diagram was the only time Peirce depicted his method graphically; nevertheless, his later discussions clearly follow the recursive procedure. I have analyzed his method of trichotomous recursion in “Peirce’s Recursive Trichotomies,” *Tobin Nellhaus: Theater, Communication, Critical Realism* (blog), Sept. 6, 2018, <http://tobinnellhaus.com/2018/09/peirces-recursive-trichotomies/>.

25. Strictly speaking, each iteration involves a new type of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

26. Peirce’s “pragmaticist” philosophy pointed to the emergent, stratified relationship between the categories, as is evidenced in comments such as “Thirdness as such . . . can have no concrete being without action, as a separate object on which to work its government, just as action cannot exist without the immediate being of feeling on which to act” (*Essential Peirce*, 2:345). I discuss the categories’ emergent relationship more fully in “Peirce, Trichotomies, and Emergence,” *Tobin Nellhaus*:

Theater, Communication, Critical Realism (blog), Dec. 31, 2018, <http://tobinnellhaus.com/2018/12/peirce-trichotomies-and-emergence/>.

27. In saying this, I am advancing a particular interpretation of Firstness. Peirce made contradictory statements about materiality's position in the categories. At one point he declared matter to be a Second (*Essential Peirce*, 1:297). Elsewhere he described "the permanence of mass, momentum, and energy" as a type of Thirdness (*Essential Peirce*, 1:279), a position that reappears later (*Essential Peirce*, 2:186–87). There is a logic to both stances. But on another occasion, Peirce wrote more extensively:

We not only have an immediate acquaintance with Firstness in the qualities of feelings and sensations, but we attribute it to outward things. We think that a piece of iron has a quality in it that a piece of brass has not, which *consists* in the steadily continuing *possibility* of its being attracted by a magnet. In fact, it seems undeniable that there really are such possibilities, and that, though they are not existences [i.e., Seconds], they are not *nothing*. They are possibilities, and nothing more. But whether this be admitted or not, it is undeniable that such elements are in the objects as we commonly conceive them. (*Essential Peirce*, 2:269, Peirce's italics).

His emphasis on possibility suggests a position similar to critical realism, which identifies three ontological domains: the real, the actual, and the semiotic. The domain of the real consists of causal powers and generative mechanisms as affording *possibilities*, whether or not their powers are being exercised. These powers' interactions—their *cause-and-effect* relations—produce the events that constitute the domain of the actual. Finally, we perceive and *interpret* some portion of the actual: such interpretations compose the semiotic domain. (Strictly speaking, however, the domain of the real includes not just material entities but also ideas as causal powers.) For these reasons classing embodiment as a First (and my larger infusion of Peirce into critical realism) is defensible. I discuss the issues further in "The Place of Materiality in Peirce's Thought," *Tobin Nellhaus: Theater, Communication, Critical Realism* (blog), Jan. 5, 2019, <http://tobinnellhaus.com/2019/01/the-place-of-materiality-in-peirce-thought/>.

28. Peirce's distinctions between signs extend past what this diagram covers (as noted earlier, he identified ten categories), but the diagram is already quite dense.

29. Archer, "Collective Reflexivity," 152–56.

30. This is not to say that *only* theatre meets these criteria, which is a topic beyond the scope of this article, but theatre was the first and remains the paradigmatic form of embodied collective reflexivity.

31. Interestingly, in one of his few mentions of art, Peirce comments "a Firstness is exemplified in every quality of a total feeling. . . . Thus the tragedy of *King Lear* has its Firstness, its flavor *sui generis*." Charles S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur W. Burks, in *Past Masters* (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1994), electronic ed., vol. 1, sect. 531. His use of an example from dramatic literature is probably coincidental, but the connection between Firstness, iconicity, and flavor is not. The scope of what I am placing at node S-S-E is also supported by such remarks as "Of sensuous qualities and, indeed, of Feelings generally, Icons are the sole possible *ultimate* signs" (Peirce, *Essential Peirce*, 2:461).

32. On signs of signs, see, for example, Veltrusky, "Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting," 565–67; Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980), 7–9; and Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theatre*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 129–31.

33. Again, this does not mean theatre alone does this; I mentioned some other forms, like dance, above. But a full discussion exceeds the scope of this article.