Matthias Uecker

PERFORMING THE MODERN GERMAN

PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

Since the late 1990s, German cinema has gone through a period of astonishing productivity and success that has made it the focus of scholarly analysis once more. What can contemporary German cinema tell us about current German society and its problems? What are the distinguishing features of filmmaking in Germany today?

This book analyses the representation of individual and collective behaviour in post-unification German cinema. It looks at performances of gender, ethnicity and nationality in a wide range of contemporary German films. Using Performance Theory as a framework, the book discusses how modern German identities are presented as conformist, liberating or subversive responses to external challenges.

Theoretical considerations regarding the efficacy of performance and the dialectical relationship between transgression, resistance and normalization form the background for an analysis that investigates contemporary German films in terms of their function within the restructuring of post-unification German society.

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Performance and Identity in Contemporary German Cinema

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Acknowledgements

The Power of Performance

1. Some examples …

At the start of Andreas Dresen's comedy, *Sommer vorm Balkon* (*Summer on the Balcony*, 2005), Katrin, a forty-year-old woman enters an office, extends her hand to greet a man and whispers her name to introduce herself. She is offered a chair and coffee, and some small talk takes place before it transpires that this is a job interview. Right from the start, Katrin appears nervous and insecure, and she flounders eventually when she is asked to explain how she would work within a team.

While the audience of Dresen's film will at this point have no clear idea of the purpose of the scene or the significance of either of the two participants, the situation itself seems to require as little explanation as Katrin's behaviour. Focusing the camera tightly on her face and upper body, the film invites the audience to observe and analyse her performance as a job applicant. But before such an analysis can be concluded, Dresen alters the frame in which this little scene has taken place: suddenly, the camera moves back and pans across the room, revealing an attentive audience and a man with a video camera who interrupts the interview and invites comments from the audience. As it turns out, we have not been watching a job interview at all but rather a rehearsal, part of a training course for the unemployed designed to give them the 'presentational skills' they need to get work again.

The situation of the job interview creates a set of complex and possibly contradictory expectations, as the applicant has to demonstrate a range of professional and interpersonal skills while at the same time impressing the interviewer with her likeable personality. The artificial situation of a

competitive test must be infused with a sense of authenticity. High-powered performance is competing with an attempt to communicate spontaneity.[1] 'In der Bewerbung geht es ja darum, dass man sich präsentiert, verkauft' [A job interview is about presenting yourself, selling yourself], says a young Turkish woman in a headscarf in Dresen's scene, and everyone agrees that Katrin hasn't exactly 'sold' herself convincingly. Several commentators remark upon her body language and lack of eye contact which – they say – indicated her nervousness throughout.

As they draw attention to specific aspects of Katrin's behaviour, she attempts to digest these comments by trying to look at herself literally from the outside – she contorts her body to see how her sitting position may have signalled her lack of confidence or, as one observer remarks, have even made her less secure by not providing a stable basis. But the trainer has a better way of demonstrating to Katrin how she appears. As he has recorded the entire scene on video, he can play it back, freeze frames to highlight specific problems and give advice to Katrin and the rest of his class. In fact, the teacher's advice soon transcends the specific scene he has recorded to impress upon his class the significance of a fully controlled performance: even before they enter the interviewing room, they must constantly expect to be observed and evaluated by their potential employer and conduct themselves accordingly. A momentary lapse, just for a few seconds, can spoil everything and cancel out the hard work they have put into their written applications, he warns them.

A later scene in the film demonstrates that Katrin's willingness or perhaps her ability to learn from such advice is limited. When she turns up for a real job interview, she makes sure to sit down properly, but ignores almost everything else she has been taught: instead of crossing her legs she sits down with her legs spread apart, and she gladly accepts the offer of a cup of coffee although that was earlier shown to expose her nervousness. And when she tries to maintain eye contact with her interviewer she concentrates so much on looking at him rather than engaging with his

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1   See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1990), 219.

questions that he feels not reassured but irritated: 'Warum schauen Sie mich denn so an? Mache ich Ihnen Angst?' [Why are you looking at me like that? Do I scare you?]

In both scenes, the focus is on Katrin's behaviour rather than the dialogue. As she is presented with the task of performing the role of a competent job applicant, her observers assess this performance against a range of criteria designed to evaluate her competence on the basis of her 'body language' rather than any job-specific knowledge. The fact that Katrin is a reluctant performer who is unwilling or unable to fully mask her state of mind merely draws attention even more to her performance and its deficits. Her reluctance may appear as an attempt to show her 'real personality' rather than 'selling herself', but the film's story also reveals her behavioural problems connected to long-term unemployment, low self-esteem and borderline alcoholism. Katrin's resistance to the required norms is thus at least partly the result of her limited competence as a performer and her fear of failure.

In addition to presenting Katrin's character, both the role play and the job interview also reveal an important aspect of the structure of the performance situation in which she finds herself. In both cases, her interviewers are middle-aged men who seem to pay far less attention to their own appearance and performance than to that of the applicant. Although the trainer at the rehearsal applauds the realism of the interviewer's questions and his attempt to entrap Katrin with the offer of an alcoholic beverage, neither interviewer seems to perceive his own role in terms of a performance. Instead, they are charged with the task of judging Katrin's performance and constructing a number of tests or obstacles for her that might bring out hidden aspects of her character. While they play a significant role in structuring the performance situation, they do not consider themselves as a part of it.

The asymmetrical distribution of power becomes visible as the film adds an additional layer to the performance situation: from the point of view of an external audience, both Katrin and her interviewers are performing specific roles and providing clues about themselves through their body language and general appearance. In fact, the film creates a rather complex constellation, as Katrin's performance is observed by three different

audiences. Her interviewers are there to be impressed and convinced into hiring her while at the same time contributing to her performance; the teacher and class in the rehearsal evaluate her performance and provide feedback that might help to improve her performance; and the film's audience watch both scenes as part of an extended narrative about Katrin's life as a single, unemployed mother in contemporary Berlin.

While this scene is perhaps not entirely typical of the film which it opens, it is nevertheless characteristic of a peculiar aspect of recent German film-making. In focusing on the performative aspects of social behaviour, Dresen's opening scene emulates a formula which can be found – albeit in a variety of guises – in a growing number of contemporary German films in a broad variety of genres: the technique of drawing attention to the way in which characters fashion and shape their behaviour according to social expectations in order to please or manipulate audiences. Again and again, these films show us their protagonists behaving like actors who carefully construct their actions as 'performances' for an audience who encourage and demand self-reflexive observation of all behavioural features as both symptoms of hidden personality traits and as displays of performative control over just such personal peculiarities.

Let us consider a second case: In Marc Rothemund's comedy *Das merkwürdige Verhalten geschlechtsreifer Großstädter zur Paarungszeit* (*The Strange Behaviour of Sexually Mature City-Dwellers During Mating Season*, 1998), two teenage lovers have been searching for a safe place to have sex for the first time. The public toilet which had been recommended by some classmates turns out to be a sterile and unerotic environment which merely enhances the pair's anxieties over what they are about to do. Just as they agree to postpone the act and search for a more appropriate location, their classmates turn up, intending to observe and embarrass the couple. But their arrival has unexpected consequences: hidden in their cubicle, the couple start after a while to make more and more suggestive noises which simulate the sexual activities they had just decided to postpone. Their audience, unaware of the deception, are impressed and not a little intimidated by the performance, as the seemingly authentic expression of sexual excitement and fulfilment more than exceeds any of their own experiences. They consider the act they are witnessing as a performance which is not

intended to entertain or educate an audience, but one to be measured and evaluated against well-established (and possibly unattainable) performance standards. But as the primary audience are unaware of the deceptive, theatrical nature of the performance they are witnessing, the performers have managed to turn the tables on their audience and have assumed control of the situation and its appearance. Rather than being judged, they have managed to make the audience assess themselves against the standard they believe to be witnessing.

But this performance has another important effect. The two performers who had previously been timidly apprehensive, torn between high expectations and fears of embarrassment, develop a new confidence and intimacy through their shared performance. As they simulate the sounds of intercourse, they become ready for the real thing – no longer performing to impress an audience, but rather for the benefit and enjoyment of their partner. Seen from this perspective, performance has set in motion a dynamic which empowers the performers. By manipulating their audience they develop a sense of control which was previously missing, and through their shared simulation they learn to trust each other and themselves to do things right.

The film's viewers are once more in a privileged position: we are aware of the theatrical nature of the performance and can observe its effects both on the performing couple and their profilmic audience. However, the mise-en-scene does not invite us to judge the artistic merits of this performance. It is the fictional characters of two teenagers who are being observed and assessed here, not the two actors who impersonate these characters. Attention is clearly focused on the function and effects of performance within the more or less credible representation of a realistic social situation, and not on the actorly techniques and achievements of the participating actors. And as the viewers are fully aware of the make-believe both of the specific situation as well as the filmic story as a whole, they are unlikely to attribute the effect of the performance in question – preparation for real sexual intercourse – to the teenage actors whose response to the script and the situation they are charged with representing remains beyond the spectatorial gaze.

Our two examples have much in common: they both present social behaviour in – more or less – realistic situations as theatrical performances, designed to adhere to perceived social values and expectations of a powerful audience who must be impressed and convinced of the performers' merits. In both situations, theatrical techniques are employed for the purposes of satisfying such an audience by showing – rightly or wrongly – that the performers are capable of emulating or surpassing established performance standards. As evaluators of the performance, such audiences can be powerful, but skilled and successful performers can shift the balance of power in their own favour if they manage to convince audiences of their skills while making them forget the theatrical nature of the performance.

However, this last point also highlights one of the significant differences between the two scenes. Rothemund's little scene appears to be much more positive and optimistic about the social implications of such performance situations than Dresen does. While in Andreas Dresen's film the rehearsal interview functioned merely as an intimidating exposure of weaknesses and failed to provide the performer with sufficient knowledge and confidence to improve her performance technique, in Rothemund's film the bond between the performers is strengthened as a result of their shared, successful deception of the audience. In this, as in other scenes in the film, performances are portrayed as opportunities for the performers to develop or discover hidden skills and to incorporate the theatrical, acted behaviour into their authentic personas. Rather than focusing merely on the intimidating social expectations and pressures which shape the performance, Rothemund presents it as an opportunity for change and transformation for the performers.

Such transformative powers may also extend to audiences, as a scene from Michael Hofman's drama *Sophiiiie!* (2002) demonstrates. The film tells the story of a disturbed young woman who is shown racing through a big city during one night, trying to make up her mind about her pregnancy. Exposing herself to danger and physical abuse, she searches for clues that might help her identify what she really wants, testing her will to live – or die. Reviewers have remarked upon the extreme nature of Sophie's character and the equally revealing and courageous quality of Katharina

Schüttler's performance of this role,[2] but I want to focus here on the film's portrayal of the different effects of a musical performance on audiences. Its final sequence shows the protagonist, Sophie, sitting silently and lonely on a bench at a suburban railway station. She is approached by a man – the last in a long line of very different men who have approached her during the film – who tries to make conversation and eventually tells her that he is part of a Polish travelling band who play 'Texas two-step' music. 'Is fun, is big fun', he tells her in broken English before he proceeds to gather his colleagues for a performance that is clearly designed to cheer Sophie up.

The focus then shifts to the Polish street musicians who start playing their instruments, singing in English and dancing on the crowded platform. At first, the waiting passengers are shown to continue their private conversations or stare away blankly, but very quickly they are drawn into the musical performance and start to pick up the rhythm of the music, their faces animated by happy smiles, with some even taking part in the dancing. Were it not for the realistic atmosphere of the setting and the slightly jumpy camerawork, this scene could come straight out of a cheesy musical in which the entire set will eventually break out in glorious song and a carefully choreographed dance routine. Things never go quite so far, but the film certainly shows how the drab atmosphere of this railway station is completely transformed by the infectious mood of a musical performance.

The only person who seems to be able to resist the gentle power of this performance is Sophie. She looks on with bewilderment, utterly alienated by the sudden happiness of the crowd and clearly feeling even more isolated and excluded than before. That she should be in no mood to join the celebrations comes as no surprise after her harrowing experiences of the previous night, but the collective performance that is being carried out for her benefit does not leave her unaffected: instead of cheering her up, however, it makes her even more miserable, as it demonstrates her complete

2   See Martina Knoben, 'Mädchen, Mädchen: Ernsthaft, widerständig und verletzlich – die aufregenden jungen Frauen des deutschen Films', <http://www.filmportal.de/thema/maedchen-maedchen-ernsthaft-widerstaendig-und-verletzlich-die-aufreg-enden-jungen-frauen-des-deutschen-films>.

separation from her environment. As she evades the musicians' attempts to involve her in the dancing, she can be seen moving away from the scene, walking along the platform while a high-speed train is driving towards the station. As the train passes by without stopping, one of the musicians starts looking for Sophie and when the train moves away he stares in horror down at the tracks, confirming what the film's audience will have expected at this point: Sophie's body can be seen lying by the tracks, suggesting that she deliberately jumped in front of the train to escape from the musical performance and her unhappy life.

But what may have been a desperate response to a musical performance that failed to provide consolation turns out to have been a deliberate, oppositional performance itself. As the camera cuts away from the musician's horrified face, the final frames show Sophie's body unharmed, and as she opens her eyes to look into the camera, her expression appears defiant rather than suicidal. Throughout his film, Michael Hofmann time and again showed the very different responses of Sophie's environment to her strange behaviour, inviting the audience to observe the girl encounter various forms of aggression, compassion, exploitation, support and rejection. But Sophie's final, defiant look at the camera directly involves the audience, challenging us to respond to her performance, rather than merely observing other characters' responses.

These three examples have shown three very different aspects of performances and their effects. In Andreas Dresen's *Sommer vorm Balkon*, we encountered a character who resists the performative expectations and pressures of a job interview, highlighting the alienating effect of a performance situation that has been imposed on her. Stubbornly, she refuses to perform her assigned role, but it is doubtful that this resistance generates any sense of satisfaction or reassurance for her. In stark contrast to this scene, Marc Rothemund's comedy *Das merkwürdige Verhalten geschlechtsreifer Großstädter zur Paarungszeit* celebrates the transformative and liberating power of performance, its ability to impress audiences and – more importantly – to create new skills and abilities in the performers, allowing them to incorporate parts of the performed situation into their authentic selves. Abandoning themselves to the performance situation and its requirements,

Rothemund's teenage couple learn to fulfil their desire. Michael Hofmann's drama *Sophiiiie!*, finally, demonstrates both the transformative power of performance on an appreciative audience and the limits of this power. Performances can create an infectious mood of collective identity, but they can also exclude parts of the audience from participation in this collective.

While these examples can by no means claim to be representative of contemporary German cinema, a review of a much broader sample of German films of the last ten to fifteen years reveals an abundance of comparable situations in which the behaviour of central characters is framed and constructed in terms of a performance. To be sure, performances of one kind or another have always been part of the cinema – the actors' performance for the camera has provided the starting point and main focus of much of mainstream narrative cinema since the beginning, and the comical or sinister effects of deceptive character performances have provided crucial dramatic substance for a host of stories. And yet, it seems that something slightly different, and new, has been appearing in recent German films. Together with and alongside these traditional performance features of the cinema, a growing body of films have been concerned with the portrayal of 'normal', realistic behaviour of more or less average characters as performances. Society as a whole is portrayed in these films as a huge theatrical stage on which all social encounters must be played out according to dramatic scripts or routines that are judged and evaluated with a view towards their efficacy. Characters are seen – both by the films' audiences and themselves – as actors who play specific social roles in order to define their own social and cultural position as well as influence or manipulate their audiences. To identify this trend as a 'performative turn' would perhaps be an exaggeration, but at the very least one can identify the appearance of a 'performance paradigm' in contemporary German cinema.

As my initial examples should have demonstrated, this paradigm does not provide a unified, homogeneous explanation of the causes and effects of performative behaviour, but rather a bundle of varied and sometimes contradictory or mutually exclusive descriptions of how individuals behave in society. What unites these examples is their common approach in portraying behaviour as performed, even if they rarely agree on the benefits and dangers of such performances. It is unlikely that this commonality is

based on any conscious, deliberate reference to performance theory, and the lack of any clearly defined conceptual basis is perhaps also reflected in the lack of attention which this paradigm has so far attracted in accounts of recent German cinema. Only rarely have film scholars devoted any substantial thought to the performance paradigm, and when they observe the performative character of certain identities, this observation is usually lacking in theoretical depth, suggesting awareness of current fashions in Cultural Studies, but little engagement with the actual performative processes that can be observed in the cinema.

This is, then, the concern of my project: to trace the appearances of the performance paradigm in a wide range of recent German films, to demonstrate its significance in the construction of characters, their behaviour and their interactions, and to ask what this cinematic version of the performance paradigm might tell us about developments in contemporary German society. Admittedly, such a project cannot be located comfortably within current developments in Film Studies and Film Theory. To focus on a specific aspect of the profilmic event and treat it as the representation and construction (not of social reality itself, but) of a significant discourse about that reality seems to undercut a neoformalist agenda which locates the object of Film Studies in the identification and demarcation of various cinematic styles.[3] At the same time, the attempt to construct the discourse in question on the basis of a sample that is defined by its origins in a brief period of a particular national cinema would seem to side-line much of recent Film Theory which seeks to evade established paradigms of nation and genre in favour of the 'trans'-national and -generic of new and as yet unclassified formations.[4]

Indeed, for some, the project pursued here may look altogether old-fashioned and suspicious, as it appears to share common ground with Siegfried Kracauer's notorious attempt at explaining the peculiarities of

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3   See David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

4   See Janet Harbord, *The Evolution of Film: Rethinking Film Studies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 40.

German politics and society in the inter-war period through a reading of the cinema of the Weimar Republic.[5] From the vantage point of a political refugee in the United States, Kracauer reconstructed the development of German cinema during the Weimar Republic as the pre-history and preparation of National Socialism, discerning the prefiguration of the failings and eventual collapse of German democracy in the films that had been produced by it. The lack of a democratic mind-set, of liberal values and the acceptance of contingency which enabled the rise of totalitarian politics was – in Kracauer's view – reflected in Weimar cinema from the outset. Storylines and character constellations over and over again seemed to reveal and strengthen fundamentally authoritarian attitudes, and even the technical achievements of Weimar cinema could be portrayed as reflections of a controlling, technocratic mind-set that would culminate in the glorification of the mass ornament. Kracauer's narrative and methodology have since been criticized with good reason, and his project of discovering the unified and homogeneous 'spirit' of a particular society reflected and expressed in its popular arts has perhaps lost much of its original appeal. Reiterating a position that is now firmly established in Film Studies, Janet Harbord recently cautioned against a classification which 'binds film to a sense of place, a place of origin, which leads inevitably to notions of representation of a national culture'. Such a position, she argues, invariably requires the assumption of analogies 'between the social context of the nation and a metaphorical reading of the text',[6] tying film to a pre-existing reality rather than analysing its own construction.

As Film Theory has rejected Kracauer's focus on cinema as a medium that reflects and reproduces the 'real world', pursuing instead the cinematic construction of the cinema itself in its various guises, Cultural Studies has also abandoned the assumption that cultural products, including the mass media, directly reproduce and reflect a unified 'Zeitgeist', favouring instead the analysis and celebration of fault lines and contradictions which promise

5   Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).
6   Harbord, *Evolution of Film*, 98–99.

to subvert any dominant discourse through popular entertainment. And yet, some of the questions which motivated Kracauer's work still seem worth asking again, and a multitude of (mostly American and British) publications on the construction of identity in recent German cinema testify to the continuing value of such a search for 'analogies' between social developments and cultural production.[7]

One observation which may help to reconnect such projects to some of the central paradigms of current Film Theory and Cultural Studies can be found in Janet Harbord's reflections on the development of new theoretical perspectives in Film Studies. While film 'does not operate as a trustworthy representation of cultures, places or people', and should not be 'trusted as the guarantor of truth', it can still be credited with an exceptional power in creating 'the diverse and diffuse experiences of the conditions of capital rather than knowledge of it.' By introducing 'experience' as a central category, Harbord seems to offer a small foothold for concrete and specific aspects of the real in Film Theory, even if – in a characteristic gesture – she opts for a strangely abstract characterization of 'experience' as 'the sense of energy as it flows into and animates space and bodies, or conversely eddies and falters.'[8]

Our focus on performance attempts to provide a more concrete content to 'experience'. As my introductory examples show, performances both reflect and express a range of very specific experiences which individuals can make in contemporary German society, or indeed more generally under capitalism, providing them with behavioural strategies for locating themselves within this society and structuring their interactions with others. While there is clearly a cognitive aspect to these strategies, the performance itself seems more important and powerful than any generalized knowledge of social norms and expectations which are actualized,

7   The relevant critical literature on recent German cinema will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters. A representative and highly useful example of the dominant approaches can be found in David Clarke, ed., *German Cinema Since Unification* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006).

8   Harbord, *Evolution of Film*, 148.

embodied and experienced in the performance. What the characters know about society, who they are and who they can become is all channelled through performances.

The following chapters will attempt to pursue this notion through a range of readings which are organized mainly around social, ethnic and gender roles, constructing such roles not primarily as 'identities', but rather as performances in which identities may be grounded and created. But before such an analysis is possible, the central terms and categories of this project require some clarification. The remaining sections of this chapter will therefore first discuss the theoretical landscape in which the study of performance has developed, before turning to notions of 'normality' and 'normalization' which have become crucial to recent discussions of post-unification German culture and society.

2. Elements of a theory of performance

This is not the place for a systematic account and analysis of Performance Studies.[9] But in order to locate the project undertaken in this book within a wider discursive field and to justify its peculiar approach, it will be necessary to trace at least a few of the concepts which have moved 'performance' to the foreground of a discourse concerned at once with the workings of certain art forms and with the mechanisms which enable and sustain social integration in modern societies.

At first sight, there seems little originality in the view that social life bears some resemblance to the theatre with individuals playing roles and consciously presenting themselves to a wider audience. Renaissance theatre employed this idea as a justification for its own aesthetic strategies: if all the world's a stage, then the dramatic stage with its fictional stories

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9   For an overview see Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

and characters can justifiably claim to show things and actions which are
of real interest to its audience as they represent – perhaps in an idealized
form – performance techniques and strategies which characterize all social
life. This justification of the social and political relevance of the theatre
has periodically been renewed by playwrights, actors and critics, but more
important has been its transformation into a critical metaphor employed
by modern sociology and anthropology in the analysis of both collective
and individual behaviour.

The modern – and, as we shall see, postmodern – pre-occupation with
this metaphor can perhaps be traced back to the work of American sociolo-
gist Erving Goffman who in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday
Life* (1956) offered a comprehensive catalogue of forms of social behaviour
as instances of theatrical performance and analysed the conditions which
enable such performed behaviour. For Goffman, performativity was a
universal aspect of the human condition, as he conceived all communica-
tion as based on an act of faith that needs to be sustained by performance:

> Taking communication in both its narrow and broad sense, one finds that when the
> individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory
> character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith,
> offering him a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something
> whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence.[10]

This opening results in some peculiar implications which come to domi-
nate Goffman's analysis of social interaction as performance. In his model,
communication is not geared towards truth and authenticity, but towards
success. And rather than establishing an unforced and equal exchange,
performative communication aims to achieve control over the situation.
'This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the sit-
uation by expressing [oneself] in such a way as to give [the others] the
kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance
with [one's] own plan.'[11] Communication must thus be 'performed' and

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10   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 14.
11   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 15.

carefully designed, because it aims at power over others and control of a situation through impression management. What ensues is a competition – 'a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery'[12] – in which all participants constantly check on each other in order to establish trust and credibility. What one says must be supported by physical appearance and expressions, as the 'more controllable aspects of behaviour' will be compared to the 'less controllable' in the attempt to establish the credibility of a performance.[13] It is perhaps the central paradox of this approach, that as successful communication relies on trust, and suspicion threatens to undermine all communicative efforts, even the most 'sincere' and authentic communicator sees himself forced to control his behaviour as if it were a performance in order to avoid inconsistencies and amplify those signs and signals which engender trust – thus infecting all authenticity with the germ of deception.[14]

The techniques used by performers to achieve control are set out by Goffman in great detail and with an abundance of contemporary examples. But while he is ostensibly exploring the depths of the theatrical model, distinguishing verbal and physical expression, scripts and idioms, or front-stage and back-stage behaviour, the underlying concern of Goffman's account is with impending failure. The 'impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing',[15] and 'a single off key can disrupt the tone of an entire performance', forcing 'an acutely embarrassing wedge between the official projection and reality'.[16] The image of the performer that emerges from Goffman's account is that of 'a solitary player involved in a harried concern for his production. Behind many masks and many characters, each performer tends to wear a single look, a look of concentration, a look of one who is privately engaged in a difficult, treacherous task.'[17]

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12   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 20.
13   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 19.
14   See Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 40–41, 72, 244.
15   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 63.
16   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 60.
17   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 228.

While Goffman's gaze is focused firmly on the performer and his techniques or tricks, there is never any doubt that ultimately all the performer's activities are motivated by his assumptions about his audience. The theatrical 'presentation of self' must 'incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society' and work as 'an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community.'[18] The performative 'presentation of self' is thus construed as a highly conformist and conservative activity which subdues not only any true individuality, but also represses conflicts about values in favour of creating a community of performers who all – out of fear of losing their status or credibility – affirm those established values which they assume everyone else adheres to.

Goffman's examples of performative activity in everyday life are invariably drawn from the observation of contemporary behaviour, and more specifically, from the range of American white, middle-class roles, but he refrained from any explicit attempt at developing a theory of contemporary American society, favouring instead an approach that seemed to identify universal principles and categories rather than culture-specific forms of behaviour. But the fear of failure which characterizes so many of the scenes described by Goffman aligns his study with a central concern of 1950s American sociology: the analysis of a newly emerging type of socialization and social integration which seemed to characterize a post-war society whose most prominent features were consumerism and individualization. The sense of the emergence of a new 'type' was most prominently captured in David Riesman's study *The Lonely Crowd* which described the displacement of traditional, 'inner-directed', strong and stable characters by 'outer-directed', insecure and constantly changing individuals who shape their behaviour not around a core of moral beliefs and values, but in response to constantly changing external signals or stimuli, anxiously attempting to conform to what they think is expected of them, but never quite certain of success.[19] Riesman did not employ the theatrical model of

18   Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*, 45.
19   David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character*
      (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950).

role-play which became central to Goffman's work, but his analysis of conformist behaviour, shaped in response to the expectations of peer-groups and the models represented in the media, bears remarkable similarities to Goffman's phenomenology. A parallel reading of both books reveals that Riesman's 'outer-directed' character is in fact a habitual performer. Both books describe a character – if that is in fact still an appropriate term – whose behaviour adapts flexibly to changing external expectations and standards, no longer expressing a stable identity, but instead developing a fluid and malleable sense of self whose validation springs less from a sense of continuity and authenticity of self than from the ability to fulfil social expectations and exploit them as fully as possible in order to achieve maximum status and income.

There is, however, one significant difference to be noted in the accounts of Riesman and Goffman. Goffman's performers are concerned about accidental loss of control of their performance skills, but have no doubts or difficulties in establishing the roles and values they are supposed to represent. Their world is essentially still stable and provides clear values and role profiles. Riesman's subjects, on the other hand, live in a constantly changing environment of conflicting signals and expectations. They fear not so much an embarrassing slip-up in their performances, but rather a sudden change in audience expectations which will leave them isolated and unpopular.

Goffman's concern with the constant threat of failing performances was shared by a contemporary whose conceptualization of performance seems otherwise entirely cut off from the sociological approach which initially characterized the performance paradigm. In the early 1960s, the philosopher and linguist John L. Austin introduced the notion of 'performatives' as a tool for the analysis of language as a form of action or behaviour. Austin applied a rudimentary form of performance theory to the field of linguistics in a series of lectures that set out to explain *How to Do Things With Words*. His analysis reconceives performance not as a theatrical act, but as a 'speech act', and proposes to distinguish two fundamental types of speech acts: the 'constative' which is employed to make statements or describe situations and objects, and the 'performative'. 'The name is derived, of course, from

"perform", the usual verb with the noun "action": it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action'.[20] The 'performative', Austin claims, is peculiar because it enacts what it says by saying it.

Although Austin is aware of the significance of social contexts and conventions as the enabling framework for such performances, he takes great care to distance his use of the performance concept from any notion of theatricality, make-belief or fiction, basing his definition instead on the more general notion of performance as any kind of act or action. In fact, Austin explicitly excludes theatrical performances from his notion of the 'performative': 'a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use'.[21] The ability of the theatre to isolate and highlight specific features of everyday behaviour or to provide a model for its analysis is dismissed in favour of a clear-cut distinction between genuine and 'parasitic' usage that eliminates the central assumption of performance theory.

At the same time, however, Austin recognizes that certain ritual and indeed theatrical conditions are required to perform a 'performative' speech act successfully and effectively. Among the six conditions framing the functioning of the 'performative', he lists as the first and perhaps foremost: 'There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances'.[22] In order to do or effect something by saying it, the speaker must possess a specific authority and observe a number of pre-requisites, otherwise the performative fails.

A great deal of effort is expended on defining the formal and linguistic conditions that are required for a successful performance – and it is

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20   John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1962), 6.
21   Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 22. For an account of Jacques Derrida's critique of this distinction see Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction. Theory & Practice* (London/New York: Methuen, 1982), 108–115.
22   Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 14.

clear that failure always looms large. As a speech act, the 'performative' is primarily characterized by its grammatical form:

> any utterance which is in fact a performative should be reducible, or expandable, or analysable into a form with a verb in the first person singular present indicative active (grammatical). [...] Unless the performative utterance is reduced to such an explicit form, it will regularly be possible to take it in a non-performative way.[23]

Typical and easily recognizable performatives are thus speech acts like 'I declare you husband and wife', 'I name you Dorothy', or 'I sentence you to three years in prison'.

But it is not sufficient to simply utter these performatives – the speaker must also possess the authority to implement their content as well as follow a number of expected procedures that legitimize the speech act as serious and authoritative. Despite Austin's rejection of the notion of theatricality, his concept of performative speech acts is ultimately dependent on a type of conventional or ritual performance which provides a crucial connection to the core of the performance paradigm and makes a clear-cut distinction between the 'performance' of social roles and 'performative' speech acts problematic.[24] Additionally, Austin's concern with failing performances and his recourse to convention as the defining characteristic of successful performance[25] point to an important, but unacknowledged connection to Erving Goffman's approach.

However, Austin's concept of 'performatives' has been included in this overview less for its significance to the discipline or its innovative perspective on performance, but rather because of its connection to the work of the philosopher Judith Butler, much of which has been concerned with a very specific type of performance and which has taken significant theoretical inspiration from Austin. Like Austin, Butler rejects a primarily 'theatrical' notion of performance in favour of an approach focused on ritualized and

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23 Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 61–62.
24 Such a distinction is claimed by Mieke Bal, *Kulturanalyse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 263–266.
25 See Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 105: 'We must notice that the illocutionary act is a conventional act: an act done as conforming to a convention.'

repeated speech acts which are conceived as 'performative' rather than
'performed', claiming that they do what they say instead of merely pretend-
ing. Like Austin, Butler also sidesteps or ignores the terminology and con-
cepts of Performance Theory drawing instead on a philosophical tradition
that augments Austin's pragmatic approach with seemingly incompatible
notions of French post-structuralism, especially Derrida's consideration of
repetition and 'citationality' and Foucault's discourse theory.

Much of Butler's work is focused on the performance of gender and sex
which – according to her theory – constitute any individual as a subject:

> Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the 'I' neither precedes nor follows
> the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender rela-
> tions themselves. [...] The 'activity' of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a
> human act or expression, a wilful appropriation, and it is certainly not a question of
> taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible,
> its enabling cultural condition.[26]

In this perspective, 'sex' appears as 'a sedimented effect of a reiterative or
ritual practice' which involves both regimes of bodily performance and
ideological interpellations which define and demarcate a tenable position
for the subject.[27] 'Performativity is construed as that power of discourse to
produce effects through reiteration.'[28] To assume a sexed position means
'repeating that norm, citing or miming that norm'[29] without necessarily
'knowing' or 'willing' it.[30]

The performances described in this approach are fundamental to the
formation of a subject – class and race should probably be included along-
side gender – and the performers are compelled to their performances
rather than choosing them. Quite apart from the mere 'threat of ostracism
and even death' that confronts those who might venture beyond such

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26   Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York/
      London: Routledge, 1993), 7.
27   Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10.
28   Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 20; see also 94–95.
29   Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 108.
30   Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York/London: Routledge, 2004), 1.

'ritualized production,'[31] subjects cannot exist outside the 'performative' matrix that is inscribed in their bodies and minds through endless repetition. Importantly, performativity is

> not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated.[32]

Butler performs a paradoxical turn: in rejecting the status of a single performance as an act in the present that may have the capacity to conceal a truth behind a carefully constructed façade, she reinscribes the notion of theatrical concealment at another, perhaps 'higher' or more 'fundamental' level. It is the notion of theatricality itself, so central to Performance Theory, which is now constructed as dissimulation. Butler argues that to construct everyday social behaviour as a performance (in the manner of Goffman) conceals the fundamental social mechanism from which such a performance emanates. But it could be argued that Butler's view of 'gender performance' occurring 'always and variously' in a 'situation of duress' and 'within compulsory systems'[33] merely radicalizes Goffman's earlier analysis of the performative enactment and confirmation of perceived social norms and conventions, making performances a matter of embodied identity rather than improvized acts. While Goffman noted performers' efforts to make their discrete performances appear 'natural' to their audiences and hide the theatrical tricks and devices that are needed to achieve this effect, Butler assumes that the performers themselves believe in the natural basis of what they do, asking where this pervasive belief in the natural, authentic character of performance comes from and how it is sustained.

But she goes far beyond Goffman's epistemological categories of authenticity and deception in her critique of such convenient distinctions.

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31   Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95.
32   Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12.
33   Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York/ London: Routledge, 1990), 139.

The categories of sex and gender, which provide Butler's central example for the distinction between 'nature' and 'culture', are, in her view, problematic, as even a constructivist view of gender as the product of social and historical conventions can result in sex appearing as a 'natural' and unchanging phenomenon. Against this view, Butler suggests that gender be conceived as 'the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or a "natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts'.[34] The notion of a pre-performative and pre-discursive 'nature' is thus construed not as the primary ground of any performance, but rather as its result, making the distinction between a performed role and an underlying 'authentic' self of the performer problematic and showing instead that it is in fact a necessary by-product of the conditions under which subjects perform. What we think of as 'natural' is always already defined by the performance regime in which we have been inducted.

Butler's fierce rejection of the model of theatrical performance as a basis for an understanding of the forces that shape gender is rooted in a double motivation: on the one hand it is an attempt to redress or undo a 'misunderstanding' that arose from a section on drag in her book *Gender Trouble* which seemed to privilege the demonstratively theatrical performance of gender by transsexuals as an effective mode of exposing and subverting the 'normal' functioning of gender performance.[35] In response to the criticism which was levelled against this claim, Butler conceded that such overt performances need not automatically have a subversive effect, but could in fact stabilize the dominant gender matrix by articulating some of its central features.[36] At the same time, Butler's intention goes beyond the specific issues raised by drag. In her insistence that gender is performed 'under duress' and not out of choice, she not only rejects a concept of performance which implies that performers can don a variety of masks at

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34   Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7, see also viii–ix.
35   Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 135–147. For a discussion of Butler's original concept of 'drag' as a de-naturalizing, subversive practice see my later chapter on gender performances.
36   See Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 125.

will and without significant consequences. Perhaps more important is the implication that such performances cannot be properly distinguished from an 'authentic' core personality which rests behind its social masks, waiting to be freed from the compulsion to perform. Instead, Butler argues that such distinctions – between mask and character, or culturally determined gender and natural sex – are themselves the result of a performance regime which produces the notion of an 'original' natural state only as the necessary result of its own operations.

While Butler's insistence on the forced nature of gender performance is very close to Goffman's observations about the socially conservative nature of performance and its alignment with the enforcement of perceived dominant values, her critique of the notion of an untouched, authentic nature that lies beneath the culturally determined formations addresses an issue which Goffman left unresolved. Although he had theorized that performances would eventually come to shape identity rather than merely hide it, his distinction between on-stage and off-stage behaviour suggested that the performed identity can indeed be cast off and replaced by a more relaxed (and by implication: more authentic) behaviour when out of the public eye. Butler seems to leave no such space for the individual as she insists that the norms which govern the performance of gender have to be internalized completely. That shifts her discourse on performance to an altogether different, and highly problematic, territory: that of 'identity' or 'identification'.[37] As performativity is construed as the very basis of subject formation, its mechanisms become indistinguishable from the subject's concept of self.

In fact, one of the most important results of Butler's investigation was her deconstruction of the concepts of a biological, 'natural' or 'authentic' sex that could be clearly distinguished from the 'masquerade' or performance of gender. Instead, Butler has argued, the seemingly primary category must be seen as the effect of the dominant discourse and its distinctions: the notion of the authentic, in other words, only comes about as a result of performative practices that can be identified as cultural constructions, and it is, therefore, itself just such a construction. But deconstructing these categories should

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37   See Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 112.

not be confused with abolishing them. As Butler's theoretical efforts demonstrate, the discursive effects of the sex/gender distinction are no mere illusions, but powerful and highly productive. Performance Theory is thus faced with a serious paradox: while the 'authentic' must be identified as a questionable cultural construction, it cannot be abandoned as an analytical category, as many (if not all) performances are openly or implicitly geared towards creating an impression of authenticity or alternatively rejecting that very notion. No performance, it seems, can function without it and still be perceived and conceptualized as 'performance'.

The second distinctive feature of Butler's approach is both productive and problematic, given that her appropriation of Austinian speech-act theory may well be described as a mis-appropriation. Although Austin's initial, clear-cut and unequivocal distinction between performative and constative speech acts was questioned and deconstructed in the course of his own lectures, the crucial identification of performatives as speech acts which do or create what they say remained essential to his project. But Butler's use of the concept seems to go far beyond Austin's definition. It is true that her preferred example of a gendered performative – or the performative nature of gendering – can be shown to comply with Austin's prescription: in saying 'It's a girl!', the new-born is introduced into the symbolic order of gender and given her proper place – even if the baby herself does not understand and know it yet.[38] But far more important than this initiation into the symbolic order is a type of speech act which does not so much 'make' the addressee a boy, but rather exhorts him to 'be a man'. Such interpellations, while crucial to Butler's conceptualization of the performative structure of gendering, can hardly be described as performatives in the Austinian sense. They do not make what they say – or only in an indirect and circumspect way. They prescribe behaviour as a performance in an effort to align gender and sex, and they can certainly exert significant

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38   It should be noted, however, that even this basic formula does not comply with Austin's description of the normal grammatical form of the performative; without recourse to the agency of the first person singular, the formula can easily be read as constative.