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Supplemental Aesthetics: Techniques in Live Performance

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In this essay, I make a bid for the incorporation of the Derridian supplement into aesthetic discourses as a means of understanding and evaluating live performance. I call this move “supplemental aesthetics,” which, in the end, expands the vocabulary of absence and presence. I contend that a method of supplemental aesthetics adapts Derridian vocabulary to account for the intertextual and multisensory experience of live performance, asking practitioners and scholars to account for both the present and absent aspects of staged production. Supplemental aesthetics encourages a dialectic understanding of aesthetics: we make meaning by the simultaneous experience of reading what is present and what is absent on stage.

Keywords: Presence; Aesthetics; Derrida; Performance Methods; Criticism

The terms presence and absence have recently surfaced as important theoretical considerations in performance (Kilgard 15, Machon 25). In fact, the National Communication Association’s 100th anniversary foregrounds presence in the 2014 theme, “the Presence of Our Past(s)” (Blair para. 1), demonstrating the current trend in communication scholarship to theorize questions of presence. In this essay, I make a bid to incorporate Derrida’s notion of the supplement into aesthetic discourses as a means of understanding and evaluating live performance. I call this move “supplemental aesthetics,” which, in the end, expands the vocabulary of presence and absence. I contend that a method of supplemental aesthetics adapts a Derridian vocabulary to account for the intertextual and multisensory experience of live performance by asking practitioners and scholars to account for both the present and absent aspects of staged production. Rather than methods that privilege descriptions of what was merely seen, I encourage a dialectical understanding of aesthetics: we make meaning by the simultaneous experience of reading what is present *and* what is absent on stage. Such a method encourages a language for performers and performance critics alike to examine the happenings of conspicuous performance and challenges practitioners to reflexively examine not only what to place on stage—what is present—but also a recognition that absence—what is lost—is also meaningful. I begin

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with a summary and explanation of Derrida's notion of supplement and finish by articulating what a method of supplemental aesthetics looks like and accomplishes.

Jacques Derrida articulates the supplement in his work *Of Grammatology*. As a post-structural theorist, Derrida approaches texts with suspicion; questioning what knowledge the writer/reader presumes to be present and mapping how the text is informed by other texts (i.e., intertextuality). No text exists in a vacuum. Such post-structural underpinnings define the supplement. The supplement, an idea he traces to Rousseau, works both as an *addition to* and *substitution for*. As an addition to, "the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plentitude enriching another plentitude, the fullest measure of presence" (Derrida 146). At the same time, it functions as a substitution for, or as he describes, "the supplement supplements. It only adds to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void" (146). Thus the supplement—both addition and substitution—exists/is located between presence and absence. To substitute is to stand in for, to represent or point to an absence. Substitution mandates the original is not present. An addition, then, brings something into presence, at times, an excessive presence.

The supplement inherently rests on the presence of an original as to "stand in" for or "add to" presupposes there is an original to be supplemented. For Rousseau, such an origin exists within Nature. Rousseau's example of an original ideal is speech. Rousseau describes speech as the most natural form of expression of thought. Writing supplements speech. "[Writing] is the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it is actually absent" (Derrida 145). Rousseau finds this supplement a dangerous one and prefers the more natural presence of speech. Trifonas explains, "Rousseau thus rejected the supplementarity of writing as a dangerous and ineffective supplement to a more immediate and, therefore, natural or truthful form of expression, speech" (245). As this quotation suggests, Rousseau was interested in finding the natural, the original, and pure presence of a thing itself (in this case, through speech). Thus, given that any supplement detracts from that origin and is only a ghostly fragment of the origin, the supplement should be rejected.

Derrida, however, rejects the existence of an origin. To assume an origin is to assume some sort of absolute truth or central location of knowledge. Thus, although a supplement may exist, it does not supplement an original, as the original is only a supplement to something else. He argues, "One can no longer see disease in substitution when one sees that the substitute is substituted for a substitute" (315). Speech, or linguistically based communication, does not constitute a natural or original idea as language was and is influenced by multiple untraceable ideas.

Given his frame, performance as a system or structure exists via the compilation of multiple supplements, constantly evolving; maintaining

some traditions while shifting and modernizing as well. The supplement, in one basic sense, adds methodologically to broader theatrical conventions as it forces recognition of the unoriginality of ideas, asking a performer to be held accountable for the traces or supplements drawn on (and from) in a performance. Questions, however, remain: does this mean the supplement is everything and, if so, what is its use? Admittedly, all language is a supplement to speech. If a supplement fills an absence via addition, all language is a supplement as it attempts to mediate and represent truth or reality, however futile an attempt. This realization, however, does not preclude the use of the supplement, particularly as a method within live performance criticism.

Identification of a supplement highlights what is absent or what the supplement stands in for, is a substitute for. Because the supplement works to recapture its lost origin (Singer 40), to think through “the supplement, of supplementarity and substitution, inevitably leads to a rethinking of what we might formerly have supposed was the non-supplementary” (Royle 62), even if the supplement stand in for another supplement. By identifying the supplement within performance, it becomes possible to analyze what about the/a supplement (i.e., a given performance choice) presumes to be absent and/or present; the act of “pointing to” the supplemental can be significant in terms of contextualizing meaning for the show. Because “there is no experience consisting of pure presence but only a chain of differential marks” (Derrida qtd. in Royle 69), I argue it is useful to determine where the chain of differential marks comes from or leads to in a performance. If the presence of a supplement inherently points to an absence, how is that absence made present, if at all?

Although Derrida’s supplement exists most clearly in relation to language, I argue the supplement exists in important aesthetic ways. Machon defines aesthetics “as the subjective creation, experience and criticism of artistic practice” (14). Although general, I argue aesthetics constitutes the experience of live performance holistically. When placed in relation to the supplement, there are two major contributions I will articulate here. First, the supplement forces us to ask difficult questions in relation to language. Language in live performance functions aesthetically. Machon argues how “the ‘language’ of the performing body alongside the visceral impact of any other sensual element of the performance work is experienced by the audience through the traces of this language in our own flesh” (6). I argue that supplemental aesthetics asks audience members, practitioners, and performance critics to explore questions such as whose language is represented? What absent explanations hinder or affect accessible witnesses of language for the audience?

Second, supplemental aesthetics contributes to non-linguistic factors present on stage: objects, props, and the performing body. When props or objects are used, practitioners must negotiate what function to bring forth. In

other words, do you use the object for its intended use? Do you re-imagine its function? Thus, as an audience, we have to negotiate the prop's present uses and deployments on stage in light of our own conceptual understanding of its absent semiotic history. Although such supplemental meaning making may be inevitable, as a method, supplemental aesthetics questions the object's use within the contextual situation of the show. It allows questions, such as what historical legacy is connected to the object? Is the object used in conjunction and compliance with such historical legacy? Does the performer assume the audience shares this history? If not, how is the object re-imagined? Does adding new or re-imagined functions transcend the historical traces of its "intended" use?

Performance scholar Kilgard reminds me, "Bodies are constitutive elements in performance that may be read in multiple ways"(7). Thus, when casting individuals within performance or acting as performance critics, supplemental aesthetics creates a language for understanding how the physicality of bodies have traces that performers and directors bring present while other aspects may remain hidden or less visible. Bodies are not neutral. Gender, sexuality, ability, and race are read through the audience even if such elements are not explicitly staged in overt ways and as performance scholars we must remember that "audience members are always making meaning" (Kilgard 15). Although the ability to account for, know, and explain all ways such meanings are made exists is an impossible task, supplemental aesthetics, as a method, creates a vocabulary for performers and critics to read bodies in two specific ways. First, supplemental aesthetics asks performers and/or directors to take seriously the historical relevance of what bodies are cast in a given performance and in what particular roles. For example, racial differentials matter on stage, particularly in the context of what content is present within the staged portions of the show and script. Second, for critics, supplemental aesthetics allows the language to say, "From my positionality, the presence of all able-bodied performers mean..." or "Dynamics arose between two performers of different races that were not addressed in the script itself that mattered because..." I argue understanding the body—as itself a supplement—means asking, how does the physicality of this particular body create additions to the script? What new meanings might those additions make? These are questions I find necessary within live performance and, in particular, cast performances where content may be written before individuals are cast in certain roles.

A method of supplemental aesthetics functions dually for the performer/director and performance critics. Expanding methodological vocabularies for performers and critics alike encourages new and creative assessments of how presence and absence functions in performance. I foresee supplemental aesthetics filling such a language gap in current performance work. Pulling from Derridian post-structural work, I argue that supplemental aesthetics embodies the slippage that occurs between language in, and audiencing

of, a performance. Given that live performance creates conditions for complex resonances that are evoked (Kilgard 8), I contend supplemental aesthetics encourages differing interpretations; however, the supplement as vocabulary aids the critic and performer in putting into words what was made present, what pulled their attention, how absence affects or how objects were pulled forward, and other similar lines of thought. Machon reminds me that immediate witnessing of a live performance creates a “presentness” (25), drawing the audience into the ephemeral experience of the performance. Supplemental aesthetics aids in making sense of such inherent presentness and, similarly, how absence aids in understanding or discussing the content of performance. Finally, I encourage new explorations that utilize the vocabulary of supplemental aesthetics in audiencing practices of more mundane and everyday performances. Although the vocabulary I expand here focuses specifically on live performance, non-conspicuous and everyday performances also summon traces of presence and absence for the listener(s); thus, I hope such interactions are further theorized through supplemental aesthetics.

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Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque: Calling for a Balanced Analysis within Organizational Communication Studies

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Bakhtin's perspective and concepts have generated great interest in American and Western European academic circles in recent years. This review describes Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque and how it has been utilized in organizational communication research. The synopsis of the carnival application in organizational communication scholarship shows, however, very limited usage of a Burkean approach to Bakhtinian theory. In this paper, I call for a more balanced application of Bakhtinian carnival concept in the organizational communication field by including both Goffman's and Burke's frameworks to analyze organizational communication.

Keywords: Carnival, Theatre, Bakhtin, Burke, Goffman

Scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, psychology, literary studies, and social theory have uncovered and applied Mikhail Bakhtin's perspectives and concepts in their works. In the past 20 years, communication scholars, particularly in interpersonal communication (e.g. Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), and more recently in organizational communication, have utilized his framework in their research (e.g. Beyes & Steyaert, 2006; Boje, & Rhodes, 2006). His concepts represent "a timely arrival at the scene of transition from modern to postmodern perspectives in the organizational field." (Belova, King & Sliwa, 2008, p. 494), and offer exciting possibilities for critical-qualitative analyses in communication studies. However, organizational communication scholars seem to be lagging behind their interpersonal communication colleagues, who have been exploring Bakhtin's concepts for nearly twenty years. There are some relatively underutilized Bakhtinian concepts that might be of interest for critical organizational communication scholars. In this essay, I will explore the concept of the carnivalesque from Goffmanesque and Burkean perspectives as a medium for criticizing organizational power. I argue that the primary benefit of this approach is to create a space for those from the margins within corporate spaces to find, create, and/or use their voice. In

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order to achieve this goal, I first explicate Bakhtin's notion of the carnival before then showing some of the ways that organizational communication scholars can take up this term in their own scholarship.

The Carnival

Tracing the term "carnival" through history, Clark and Holquist (1984) argue that the carnival played a very important role in the life of European people during the Middle Ages. In large cities, carnivals could last an average of three months each year. As described by Clark and Holquist (1984) in a literal sense,

At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes the individual to feel he is a part of the collectivity, at which point he ceases to be himself. It is at this point through costume and mask, an individual exchanges bodies and is renewed. (p. 302)

Normally dominant constraints and hierarchies were temporarily lifted during the carnival. During this time of feasting, music, dance and street performances, all people, paupers and upper class members interacted (and sometimes played) together. Social class distance was temporarily nonexistent, the poor could make fun of rich, and the rich could dance with poor. Laughter, irony, sarcasm, and criticism of social rules and barriers were encouraged.

Literary critics, particularly Bakhtin (1984), utilize these ideas to argue that carnivals were not only festivities, but were also the only time when powerless members of the society could interact as equals with the powerful. The term carnival became prominent in literary criticism after the publication of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* in 1965, now considered a classic study of the Renaissance. In this book, Bakhtin conducted an analysis of the Renaissance social system along with its discursive practices based on literary work of the 16th century author Rabelais (e.g. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*). According to Bakhtin (1984), Rabelais' greatest inspiration came from the folk humor of the Middle Ages that manifested in the social practice of carnival. As a result, Bakhtin identified the carnival as a social institution and grotesque realism with its irony and parody as a literary mode. Clark and Holquist (1984) state that, for Bakhtin (1981), the carnival could be understood:

Not (merely a) spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 7)

Stallybrass and White (1986) point out that by the late 19th century the middle class had, both culturally and legally, rejected the carnival tradition. Although

the carnival was no longer practiced, it reemerged in the form of popular culture. In this sense then, the meaning of carnival has transformed from its literal sense of play and festivities on the streets to the more metaphorical sense used by contemporary individuals.

The Carnival in Organizational Communication Scholarship

The anti-authoritarian aspects of the carnival have been used in critical postmodern perspectives of organizational life (Boje, Luhman, & Cunliffe, 2003). Everyone can participate in the carnival, and by using the language of irony, can criticize dominant power structures. Boje, Luhman and Cunliffe (2003) indicate that “the field of organization studies uses ‘theatre’ as a metaphor for organization life in two particular ways: first, ‘organizing-is-like-theatre,’ and second, the more literal ‘organizing-is-theatre’” (p. 7). Organizational communication scholars use these two approaches to portray dominant corporate structures. The first approach, emerging from sociology in general and the writings of Goffman (1959, 1974) in particular, uses the theatrical metaphor to study social processes in organization, whereby the employees are like actors who perform various roles (Morgan, 1980). The second approach draws from philosophy, literary criticism, and Burkean traditions. Burke believed that social action and organizing is literally dramatic and theatrical. What differentiates Goffman from Burke is that the former uses theatrical metaphors to explain social processes in organization (e.g., framing, scripting, staging, and performing), while the latter focuses on language analysis and discursive practices, which shape meaning (Boje et. al., 2003). The Bakhtinian concept of carnival integrates these two approaches, Goffman’s descriptions of social interactions between people and Burkean interpretation of their discourse. According to Boje, Luhman, and Cunliffe (2003):

Carnival is a theatrics of rant and madness seeking to repair felt separation and alienation. It is a call for release from corporate power, a cry of distress and repression mixed with laughter and humorous exhibition meant to jolt state and corporate power into awareness of the psychic cage of work and consumptive life (p. 8).

Currently, the majority of organizational communication studies that have utilized a Goffmanesque approach to Bakhtinian theory have a limited view (e.g. Beyes & Steyaert, 2006; Boje & Rhodes, 2006; Rhodes, 2001). Organizations are described from Goffman’s perspective of “organizing-is-like-theatre,” that is, as stages in theatre with actors who are performing their roles in their interactions with others (i.e., by acting or costuming). There are powerful kings and queens (managers and supervisors) and clowns (critics of the status quo). The emphasis in this type of analysis is on social structure and power dominance shown through the position one occupies on the social ladder, not through the analysis of discourses among characters.

Perhaps one of the best examples of a Goffmanesque approach to the Bakhtinian carnival concept is presented in the study of *The Simpsons* (Rhodes, 2001). Through the lenses of cultural perspective, the researcher examines how organizational life is represented in this popular cartoon series. Rhodes (2001) claims that “the carnivalesque spirit is alive and well in *The Simpsons* and that it provides a wealth of knowledge about contemporary understandings of work–knowledge whose laughter and parody provide the opportunity for a compelling critique of modern organizations”(p. 375). What Rhodes (2001) means by the carnivalesque spirit is the way characters are presented in the cartoon, not the way they talk. The star of the show, Homer Simpson, is presented as a bumbling, doughnut-eating, and beer drinking buffoon—a clown role from Goffman’s perspective, who constantly makes a parody of his employer, Montgomery C. Burns (a king role), the owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant (SNPP), and Yale graduate. As Rhodes (2001) claims, animation/cartoon is an ideal medium for the representation of grotesque realism because it draws attentions to “such bodily functions through, for example, the town drunk, Barney’s belching; Homer’s overeating and obesity; or Bart, Homer’s son, ‘mooning’” (Rhodes, 2001, p. 378). Rhodes’ emphasis on the importance of social positions, roles and presentation of the bodies shows the author’s reliance on a Goffmanesque understanding of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival. Goffman’s approach, and Rhodes in the above study, is very metaphoric, graphic and symbolic, and focuses on analyzing visual rather than verbal messages.

Unlike Goffman’s approach to Bakhtinian carnival, a Burkean understanding of theory focuses on analysis of verbal messages and discourses between actors/ characters. This perspective calls for a closer look at the verbal script used by organizational actors. Scholars using this approach focus on dialogue, instead of only analyzing the appearances of actors/characters and their bodily functions. There are many dialogues in *The Simpsons* between Burns and Homer that are full of irony and sarcasm.

Burns: We don’t have to be adversaries, Homer. We both want a fair union contract.

Homer’s brain: Why is Mr. Burns being so nice to me?

Burns: And if you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.

Homer’s brain: Oh my god! He is coming on to me!

Burns: After all, negotiations make strange bedfellows.

(Burns chuckles and winks at Homer.)

(Homer’s brain screams.)

Homer: Sorry, Mr. Burns, but I don’t go in for these backdoor

shenanigans. Sure, I'm flattered, maybe even a little curious, but the answer is no! (Cited in Richmond & Coffman, 1997, p. 110)

By adding a Burkean approach to the analysis of the carnival, critical scholars might be able to discover a more complex language of power and oppression in organizational studies. As the above dialogue shows, Homer and Mr. Burns still retain their clown/king roles (respectively); however, the exchange also features Homer's over-the-top aversion to Mr. Burns' "proposition." His reaction reveals a deep-seated heterosexism—an all-to-common trope in U.S. media (see Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Although Homer may be viewed as a figure that is diametrically opposed to Mr. Burns in terms of power, he is also the instigator of symbolic violence on LGB individuals by showing same-sex relationships as abnormal and undesirable. A Burkean approach to Bakhtinian theory shows how carnival language, not only bodily performances important to Goffman, contributes to unmasking/reinforcing systems of oppression. In other words, adding a Burkean approach can help organizational scholars create a more nuanced approach to power dynamics by going beyond the dichotomy of powerful/powerless.

The Bakhtinian concept of the carnival has been utilized in two ways, Goffmanesque and Burkean approaches, however, based on the review of studies in organizational communication field it has only received attention in one—Goffmanesque. This short synopsis attempted to show how a Goffmanesque understanding of organizational life might be enhanced by adding a Burkean lens to Bakhtinian theory. It does not mean that a purely Goffmanesque type of reading is “wrong” but rather that is limited. By adding Burkean type of analysis critical scholars should be able to provide a more holistic analysis of the system of dominance in society.

Conclusion

The Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque has recently been adapted to critical and cultural approaches, transformational leadership, change communication, and discourse analyses in organizational communication. Although the concept has gained increasing prominence in organization communication scholarship, the majority of work in this area relies on a Goffmanesque approach to Bakhtin's work. In this paper, I have offered that by adding Burkean analysis to this traditional approach, organizational scholars can expand their focus beyond the powerless/powerful dichotomy. This “balanced approach” to Bakhtinian analysis can help create a more nuanced view of power by showing how communicative exchanges within organizations draw upon and perpetuate discourses beyond the immediate context (e.g., worker-supervisor communication). Ultimately, I hope that scholars take up this balanced approach in order to account for the visual and textual components of organizational communication.

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