

Joanna Ostrowska

## The Performances of Memory

**Summary.** In her text, the author discusses the issues of performance studies methodology and their Polish variant taken from the Jerzy Kmita's socio-regulatory theory of culture. In the context of Diane Taylor's book *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in Americas*, she wonders what is the place of Polish reflection on culture in the anti-colonization dichotomy described by the American researcher between Western Science and Indigenous knowledge.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, performance from remembrance, socio-regulatory theory of culture

Joanna Ostrowska, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, Institute of Cultural Studies, Szamarzewskiego 89A, 60–568 Poznań, Poland, e-mail: joanna.ostrowska@amu.edu.pl.

Diane Tylor starts her book *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* with the following statement: "As a child growing up in small mining town in the north of Mexico I learned that the Americas were one, that we shared a hemisphere."<sup>1</sup> I decided to start my article also with a personal statement: as a child growing up in a pretty big city in central Poland, I learned that there is not one Europe, there is no hemisphere that is shared. I knew by heart that there was proper Europe (the Western one) and *presque*, almost Europe – the East, although geograph-

---

<sup>1</sup> D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in Americas*, Durham – London, 2003, p. xiv.

ically my country lies in the centre of the continent, but the concept of 'Mitteleurope' died together with the Habsburg Empire. Maybe this is the reason why I still feel some ambivalence whenever I read in scientific books about "Western science," "Western methodology," "Western positioning" or "Eurocentrism." Does "eurocentrism" really cover "Western science, positioning or methodology"? Do I – a Polish researcher – already belong to this milieu?

I value the book by Diana Tylor very highly and I find her writing extremely interesting and very inspiring for my own research. I use quotations from her work mainly because I am now working on a project that concerns the cultural and historical heritage of performing in Europe. My topic is: performances of remembrance in the context of a shared yet traumatic past (mostly the World War I and World War II). Let me now say a few words on how I combine cultural studies with performances of remembrance. In my work, the historical question "what happened" is replaced with "how is what happened talked about?" This approach is of course the result of what Marvin Carlson described as the performative turn in the humanities, where there was a "shift from 'what' to 'how'; from collecting social, cultural, psychological, political or linguistic data – to reflect on how this material is created, evaluated and changed; how it lives and functions in culture through its actions."<sup>1</sup>

A few words are necessary to explain the sense in which I use the term the "performance of remembrance" and what distinguishes it, for example, from "memory studies." What certainly links them is the study of how the memory of what happened influenced the shaping of both individual and group identity. In my view, "remembrance performances" are conscious and deliberate actions to shape an "European" identity through various acts of participation in culture that evoke cultural and historical memory. However, while the memory studies deal in a large part with the study of what was – for example, studies of archives, but also the inclusion in historical research of sources previously neglected by Western scientists (e.g. oral history, studies on cultural heritage), or are part of the "sociology of retrospection," in my study, the historical question "what happened" or "how was the picture created?" is replaced by "how is what happened talked about?" and "for what purpose is this story created in this way now?" The performances of remembrance are therefore related to activity, the actions of people visiting places in which an event occurred; difficult, traumatic, potentially dividing various categories of visitors, which are carried out by them in accordance with the scenario prepared by those in charge of this place. The term "performance of remembrance" combines two concepts that I would like to explain at the beginning.

Instead of defining "what performance is" I will explain in what sense I use the term by combining the concepts developed by performance studies and Jerzy Kmi-

ta's socio-regulatory concept of culture. Performance is, in my view, a purposefully planned (or only imitated) form of behaviour that takes place in the awareness of the presence of other people who can perceive it, and which situates its goals in reality itself, in order to change or maintain its shape. For this reason, performance is for me a way of creating a culture that regulates social practice as well as a form of participation in it. I use the term "remembrance" instead of the notion of "memory," which is more widely used in the context of humanistic reflection (a similar distinction also exists in other languages, e.g. *souvenir* / *memoire*, *remembrance* / *memory*). *Souvenir* is also a gift, an expression of memory, and remembrance also has this aspect of being "a greeting or gift." What is more important for me is that such a "gift of remembrance" is an expression of "invoking or expressing friendship or feelings" (according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It shows that "remembering," as I understand it, is more than a record of a memory. Instead, it is a gift, a form of a wish that the present is composed of the past, not only to remember about it, but also to express the feelings of contemporary people, their views and goals.

The distinction that Taylor makes when writing about Western and non-Western traditions makes me think about where I belong – with my culture and notion of it, or the methodology of cultural research. When writing about anthropological roots of performance studies, Taylor mainly highlights two disciplines: anthropology and theatre, and sees performance studies as a bridge between them. Maybe this concept of the bridge which usually joins only two river banks resulted in a binary division: Western (theatre-based knowledge) and non-Western (anthropology with its interest in the remote other). When I read: "While performance scholars readily adopted the project of taking embodiment enactments seriously as a way of understanding how people manage their lives, they also absorbed the Western positioning of anthropology that continued to wrestle with its colonial heritage. [...] The 'us' studying and writing about 'them' was of course a part of colonist project,"<sup>2</sup> am I rather "us" or "them"? Western or non-Western? Am I as a European a coloniser, or am I rather being colonised by this new discipline I incorporated into my research, namely performance studies? Or maybe – with my background in the cultural studies that were developed in the 1970s in Poland – I don't belong to any of these distinct worlds. So here is my voice from the fringe.

Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist and philosopher who worked for many years in the UK, stated that "understanding can be spoiled by either too much distance (a lack of not enough common points of shared experience) to make understanding satisfactory, or too much intimacy (not enough unclear objects without

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 8–9.

an obvious ultimate designatum) to begin the effort of translation.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe this is the problem: researchers from non-Western Europe seem to be too close to distinguish our work as an object worthy of recognition, and as a result we become part of Western world, not the first one but the second. I can identify with one side of this sentence: “‘They’ did not have access to ‘our’ writing. This one-way writing practice revealed the ongoing ambivalence as to whether ‘they’ occupied a different world.” Of course Diana Tylor is fully aware of this in the context of her research on “performing cultural memory in the Americas” when she writes:

[...] the problem of untranslatability, as I see it, is actually positive one, a necessary stumbling block that reminds us that “we” – whether in our various disciplines, or languages, or geographical localisations [...] do not simply or unproblematically understand each other.<sup>4</sup>

But to my great surprise when I found myself in Department of Performance Studies in NYC after I had finished my third year of Polish Cultural Studies in the Cultural Studies Institute, Adam Mickiewicz University at Poznań, I discovered that I could “understand” Performance Studies even though I came from a different discipline, language and localisation. I discovered that the agendas in our department and in performance studies are quite similar, and they share a similar approach toward the subjects of culture and performance. This happens, despite the differences that Taylor identified between Cultural Studies and Performance Studies.

Some scholars turn to cultural studies and no longer limit themselves to the examination of texts, but their training in close readings and textual analysis might well turn everything they view into text or narrative [...]. The tendency in cultural studies to treat all phenomena as textual differentiates it from performance studies. As cultural studies expands the range of materials under consideration, it still leaves all the explanatory power with the *letrados* while occluding other forms of transmission. As Dwight Conquergood carries the point further in a recent essay: “Only middle-class academics could blithely assume that all the world is a text because texts and reading are central to their life-world, and occupational security.”<sup>5</sup>

Am I, and my colleagues from Cultural Studies Institute, Adam Mickiewicz University at Poznań, Poland by definition, “middle-class academics”? However, the research in our Institute is not based on (Western of course) notion of “the text” de-

<sup>3</sup> Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność czyli dekonstrukcja nieśmiertelności*, “Kultura Współczesna” vol. 1–2, 1996, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire...*, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

rived from semiology. So, are such Cultural Studies “our” invention or “their” invalid version of performance studies?

Now let me explain the methodological basis for Poznań Culture Studies, which was the second Polish department of this newly established discipline. The Poznań school of Cultural Studies was created in the mid-1970s (exactly like PS) by Professor Jerzy Kmita – a Polish philosopher and culture researcher. Kmita created his own socio-regulative conception of culture wherein culture determines actions ) undertaken by people representing a given community (so it is not totally an archive, but rather a repertoire, to stick to Taylor’s terms). The emphasis placed on the actions undertaken by people makes Kmita’s theory close to those connected with Performance Studies, for example expressed in *‘Points of Contact’ revisited* by Richard Schechner: “The sources of human culture are performative.”<sup>6</sup> For Kmita, culture

[...] as such consists of normative and directive beliefs commonly followed in that given community. Normative beliefs indicate value-ends that actions aim at, whereas directive beliefs indicate which actions are sufficient and/or necessary means to the ends.<sup>7</sup>

So my background as a theatre/performance researcher is not in literature (which is the case for most theatre scholars in Poland), but culture studies, where culture is not defined as a group of artefacts (e.g. plays) or, as structuralists view it, as a text which can be “read,” but rather as a way of being in the world; as an action through which one achieves aims and fulfills values. Culture is a feature that regulates ways of doing things that are called social practice.

I will try to explain how Kmita’s concept of culture made a very good basis for the further development of performance studies in Poland. In his own words Kmita wanted

[...] to find out the intentional determinants of sufficiently many actions performed in a given community. [...] For it is culture that, on my interpretation, determines actions. [...] Those cultural beliefs are not necessarily consciously accepted or realized. They might be held in the sense that they are merely followed or observed and as such they can only be reconstructed through the analysis of the actions that they determine.<sup>8</sup>

Doesn’t this sound similar to McKenzie’s much later observation?

---

<sup>6</sup> R. Schechner, *‘Points of contact’ revisited*, [https://www.academia.edu/3715338/Points\\_of\\_Contact\\_Revisited](https://www.academia.edu/3715338/Points_of_Contact_Revisited) [7.09.2019].

<sup>7</sup> J. Kmita, *Toward Cultural Relativism “with a Small ‘R,’”* *“Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Science and the Humanities”* vol. 47, 1996, p. 578.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

That is, at the heart of its movement of generalisation, Performances Studies scholars have constructed cultural performance as an engagement of social norms, as an ensemble of activities with potential to uphold societal arrangements or, alternatively, to change people and societies.<sup>9</sup>

One of my favourite parts of Kmita's explanation of his theories concerns the "rational act." The term itself seems to be very much connected with the Cartesian notion of rationality. We, Western people (or just Central European scholars) connect rationality with our, "Western" rational knowledge, which is based on observable and quantifiable cause-effect relations, following Descartes' philosophy. I remember, being a first-year student, my fascination with Kmita's explanation of the Native Americans' Rain Dance as a "rational act." In his theory, each act is rational when on the basis of one's knowledge it will bring the expected outcome (so if I know that a dance will bring rain during dry period I have to dance to end the drought). Although on the basis of Western science there is no connection between the dance and rain, for Native Americans it was a rational act (not to mention the issue of culture transmission through embodied practice). This concept of rationality fills the gap between an art work perceived as metaphor (e.g. theatre), not "serious" human activity, and "tough," serious reality. As one can see from the above example, the notion of "culture" has nothing to do with the "text."

With Kmita's theory as a background and source, I would call performance a consciously designed (or just merely followed) way of behaviour, which is designed to be viewed, and which has its aims in the realms of reality in order to change or sustain its shape. Performances can be treated as a form of culture-making, culture that regulates our social practice. Is this what makes Kmita and his concept of culture the "forefather" of Polish Performance Studies? Maybe his theory will attain at least the status of "local" or "indigenous" knowledge valued both in anthropology and performance studies?

Here let me recall the discussion we had during last year's conference of the Federation for Cultural Research. One of the Polish professors (let's call him X), quoted a review of somebody's else article where his name was mentioned: "too much X, not enough English speaking scholars." In the Polish Academic context, one has to know the work of our Western colleagues to prove that his/her research is "internationalized." This led me to the question: is the mobility of performance studies both as ontology, methodology and epistemology an example of "self-imposed colonialism"? Let me go back to one already quoted sentence from Diane Taylor: "'They' did not have access to 'our' writing," which for many years was the case of Polish scholars.

---

<sup>9</sup> J. McKenzie, *Perform or else. From Discipline to Performance*, London – New York 2001, p. 30.

And to reverse this question: "Do "they" have access to "our" writing? Maybe behind the tendency of internationalisation lies the faith that if "we" have an access to "their" writing it will make "us" one of "them"? Will it take Polish scholars from "the fringe" or the invisible "second world" and move them into the "club of us"? Or is this mobility of performance studies another colonial, imperialistic American move? Or rather, can we adapt anthropologically oriented performance studies to develop cultural performance studies as applied cultural studies?

## Literature

Bauman Z., *Ponowoczesność czyli dekonstrukcja nieśmiertelności*, "Kultura Współczesna" vol. 1–2, 1996.

Kmita J., *Toward Cultural Relativism "with a Small 'R,'"* "Poznań Studies in the Philosophy of the Science and the Humanities" vol. 47, 1996.

McKenzie J., *Perform or else. From Discipline to Performance*, London – New York 2001.

Schechner R., *'Points of contact' revisited*, [https://www.academia.edu/3715338/Points\\_of\\_Contact\\_Revisited](https://www.academia.edu/3715338/Points_of_Contact_Revisited) [7.09.2019].

Taylor D., *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in Americas*, Durham – London 2003.