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Philosophy and Drama

Performance, Interpretation, and Intentionality

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The Philosophy of Theater

The purpose of this article is to probe one of the central questions of the philosophy of theater, namely, "What is drama?" However, before broaching the issue of the nature of drama, there is a more basic question: how are we to understand the very notion of a philosophy of theater? For surely one's conception of the philosophy of theater will influence one's approach to answering the query, "What is drama?" So let me begin by saying briefly where I am coming from philosophically before we plunge into the more substantive topic of the nature of drama.

The brand of philosophy to be mobilized in this essay is often referred to as analytic philosophy. So a first step in clarifying what is involved in this sort of philosophy is to say what it is that analytic philosophers analyze. If one is a philosopher of theater, upon what aspects of theater does one focus?

Notice that the label—the philosophy of theater—is reminiscent structurally of the philosophies of so much else. It is the philosophy *of* something. What fills in the blank in the "philosophy of ——?" Usually the name of some practice—like the philosophy of law. Often these are practices of inquiry—for example, the philosophy of science or of mathematics or of history. But there may also be a philosophy of some practical activity or set of activities—like the philosophy of sport. The philosophy of theater is this sort of activity or practice—primarily a matter of making and doing, rather than one of pure inquiry.

Practices, moreover, have a conceptual dimension. That is, practices are

organized by certain deep concepts that make the practice possible or, to put it differently, that constitute the practice as the practice it is. For instance, law is a practice. In order to conduct legal activities a whole set of often interrelated concepts are presupposed, including guilt, personhood, intentionality, and, of course, the very idea of law itself. The analytic philosophy of law takes as its fundamental task the analysis of the concepts that make a practice like the law possible.[1] A philosopher of law asks what constitutes legal personhood, guilt, *mens rea,* and, most importantly, what makes something a law. Is something a law in virtue of its relation to some transcendent morality, sometimes called natural law, or is it merely that which has been promulgated by a duly appointed body of legislators applying recognized procedures in the right way?

Just as the philosophy of law attempts to clarify the nature of the concepts that make the practice of law possible, similarly the philosophy of theater interrogates or analyzes the founding concepts of the art of theater. One such concept is that of drama. In this essay, I attempt to elucidate the notion of drama. One discovery about the concept of drama that I will attempt to defend is that it involves not one concept, but at least two. That is, the concept *drama* can apply to either a play text or play-plan, on the one hand, or to a play performance, on the other hand. I will then go on to try to illuminate the distinction between these two applications of *drama.* One conclusion that I will draw is that drama-as-performance differs in profound ontological respects from mass mediatized performances. This finding is at odds with the position recently and ably defended by Philip Auslander.[2] So the final section of this essay will address the kinds of objections Auslander raises to the type of analysis advanced of drama-as-performance.

What Is Drama?

One of the fundamental concepts that organizes the practice of theater is *drama.* According to Aristotle, the concept of drama was derived from a Greek word for "doing" or "acting."[3] Aristotle used this word to refer to the representation of action. But, of course, the action that concerned Aristotle could be represented in two ways: by means of the play text, as composed by a Sophocles, or by means of a performance of the play text by some ancient Athenian troupe or a contemporary one. This duality in the notion of drama is mirrored in our own usage. For example, if we want to

find the play scripts in the bookstore, we will have to go to the drama section. On the other hand, if we want to take courses in acting, directing, stage designing, or lighting for the theater, we will enroll in what is often called the Drama Department or the Department of Dramatic Arts. Moreover, such departments may or may not have courses in playwriting, though they will always have courses in acting, reflecting the fact that their emphasis is on the performance of plays, rather than their composition.[4]

Though *drama* is one word, for the purposes of the philosophy of the art of theater, that one word applies to two distinguishable art forms: the art of composing play texts (or, more broadly, performance plans) and the art of performing them. Drama, in this respect, is a dual-tracked or two-tiered art form.[5] This duality, of course, is openly acknowledged by theater academics, who sort themselves under the headings of "stage" and "page." On the one hand, as typically practiced in contemporary Western theater, drama is a literary art; a drama is a verbal construction that can be appreciated and evaluated by being read, just as one might read a novel. On the other hand, drama is also a performing art; it belongs to the same family as music and dance, and, qua performing art, it can only be appreciated and evaluated through enactment.

Of course, the preceding distinction needs to be immediately amended and qualified somewhat. The way in which it has been stated is too parochial, tied, as it is, to contemporary Western practice. Not everything we may be disposed to call drama in the first sense need be associated with a literary or written text, even if that has become the standard case nowadays. The script, so to speak, of a performance may live in memory of the performers—who may be a troupe of actors or the members of some subculture enacting a ritual whose instructions have been passed down orally through the ages. Though we think first of a written text in this context, it may be more fruitful to think of this dimension of drama as a play plan or performance plan. The play or performance plan can be discussed and evaluated in its own right, that is, apart from its performance. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of the text of the well-made play. But an untranscribed harvest ceremony also has a performance plan, albeit unwritten, that can be analyzed and appreciated independently of its performance, just as a traditional folk dance has a design that can be scrutinized in isolation from any particular performance of it. Improvised theater, as well, also usually has a performance plan broadly construed—a set of scenarios, strategies, gambits, or riffs that the performers call upon and then elaborate on the spot.

The first step in developing a philosophical analysis of the notion of the art of drama, then, is to note that there are two concepts here. We might call them drama as composition and drama as performance. In order to elucidate the concept of drama as composition, let us use the example of the well-made play, and then go on to add the necessary qualifications for dramas that do not possess written texts.

The play as a literary work—our leading example of drama as composition—is created by a playwright (or playwrights) who is (are) the author(s). This artist or collaborative group of artists is a *creator;* the creator brings the play text or performance plan into existence, though in some cases we may not know the name or names of these creators. In contrast, there are another group of artistic functions involved in making the performance plan manifest. In contemporary theater, these roles include the actors, directors, designers, music directors, and so on, who literally embody the performance plan. Whereas the artist with respect to drama as composition is a creator, the artists with respect to drama as performance are *executors.* To simplify matters drastically: Edward Albee created *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf;* Uta Hagen, among others, *executed* it. The different kinds of artists here signal different arts of drama: the art of composition or creation, and the art of performance or execution.

Needless to say, the same person could be both the creator of a play, its author, and one of its executors—its director or a player, for instance. Shakespeare, in point of fact, was both an author-creator and a player-executor with respect to his artworks. However, the roles of creator and executor are nevertheless categorically distinguishable. As the choreographer is to the dancer troupe, and the composer is to the conductor-cum-orchestra, so normally the author of the play text is to the director, actors, designers, and so forth. In these cases there are two discriminable arts: the art of composition and the art of performance. The creation of the author—the play text—is fixed by her intentions. The art of the performance is variable. Just as we expect different violinists to bring out different qualities in a musical score, so we expect actors and directors to disclose different aspects of the relevant composition, at least in contemporary Western theater. We prize texts for the singularity of their design, but performances are valued for their variability and diversity.[6]

In this regard, we are really making a virtue out of necessity. No text, no performance plan, no matter how elaborate, is determinate with respect to every feature relevant to its manifestation or implementation in performance. There are always some questions unanswered by the text or per-

formance plan about matters like how a character looks, how she speaks, how the performance space is shaped, what motivates a line reading, what gesture goes with it, and on and on. Different performances make different choices concerning these questions. In order to produce a performance, the executors must go beyond what is given in the play text or performance plan.

We evaluate performances in contemporary theater in virtue of the choices they make in this respect, noting their insight, profundity, and inventiveness—often comparing and contrasting the performance at hand with other variations on the same play text or performance plan. Though there are significant debates about the latitude or degree of compliance performers should respect in filling in the unavoidable indeterminacies of the text, no one can deny that all performances involve interpretations of play texts or play plans in the sense that dramatic performances must go beyond what is given in the text or play plan.[7] That is, there is always a latitude of *play*—some scope for invention in putting flesh on a performance plan. A performance plan needs to be filled out by performances; that is why performances are often called interpretations: they are interpretations of performance plans, or, in the typical case nowadays, they are interpretations of play texts.

As literary art, play texts (dramas-as-compositions) are types from which copies are derived. Moreover, your copy of *Middlemarch* and my copy are both tokens of the type created by George Eliot. These tokens are material objects that grant us access to the abstract type, the artwork *Middlemarch.* If my copy of *Middlemarch* is destroyed by fire, the novel by George Eliot nevertheless continues to exist. For it is an abstract object, a type, and it cannot be burned. Moreover, this type is complete. Save the discovery of a hidden manuscript by George Eliot that reveals her intentions on the matter, there are no new words to be added to *Middlemarch.*

It is true that the reader will have to presuppose certain mandated details that are not stated on the page—such as that Casaubon has a four-chambered heart. But otherwise the book is closed; the artwork is fixed. Likewise, a drama as a literary work—*The Master Builder,* for example—is fixed as the art type it is for all time in terms of the relevant aesthetic elements that constitute it as determined by the intentions of its author, Ibsen.

However, dramatic performances are variable. This is because when viewed from the perspective of drama as a performing art, play texts are regarded simply as recipes—semiporous formulas to be filled in by execu-

tors in the process of producing performance artworks—rather than as fixed artworks in their own right. They are blueprints rather than finished buildings, figuratively speaking. That is, they are sets of instructions to be elaborated upon—embroidered even—and executed by actors, directors, and so on. Play texts specify the ingredients of the performance—such as lines of dialogue, characters, and perhaps some props—as well as the range of global emotional tones or flavors appropriate to the work. But just as a culinary recipe calls for the cook to interpret how much vinegar a "dash" is, so the executors of the play text must exercise judgment in arriving at, for example, the precise tempo of a performance. However, this does not allow the executors of the play text to do anything they wish with the text, just as the cook cannot legitimately "interpret" a "dash" of vinegar as an instruction to add a pint of cream.

Nevertheless, the play text as recipe permits a robust space for variations and inventions—for *play*—as do recipes in the culinary arts and scores in music, though, of course, within the bounds of a set of indeterminate instructions. (Where those boundaries lie, needless to say, is subject to much dispute; for example, should performances be constrained by an author's, such as Chekov's, original intentions, or by the hypothetical intentions that we infer someone like Chekov would have had were he alive today, or are the constraints proffered by the text even looser still?) In order to be incarnated as a performance, every play text requires interpretive activity on the parts of the executors who must extrapolate beyond what has been written or otherwise previously stipulated (as in the case of orally transmitted performance plans).

Some play texts—like Megan Terry's script for *Comings and Goings*—permit a generous scope for improvisation, while others may attempt to exercise more authorial control. But inasmuch as any performance plan will be, necessarily, riven with indeterminacies to be filled in by executors, every dramatic artwork qua performance will be an interpretation. Moreover, it is because the play text is always inevitably somewhat indeterminate, in the way of a culinary recipe, that it makes sense that we savor different performances in the way that we do different preparations by different chefs of the same sauce. Each variation brings out different aspects of the recipe-type.

Both the dramatic artwork as composition and the dramatic artwork as performance are types. However, the manner in which tokens of these two types are brought into existence is notably different. Where the dramatic artwork is a literary work, nowadays tokens of it typically come to us in the

form of printed matter. Generally, these tokens are mass produced by some mechanical or electronic system of replication. Moreover, if they are hand-made—done by quill as one supposes Shakespeare's folios were composed—I suggest that the manuscripts were still mechanically produced in the sense that ideally they were rote transcriptions where the scribe's penmanship was artistically indifferent (if a scribe refigures such a play type imaginatively, perhaps by adding illustrations or illuminations, then the writing becomes a singular artwork in its own right and is not merely a token of the pertinent type).

Tokens of Shakespearean dramatic compositions are generated mechanically. Either by anonymous scriveners striving to achieve the status of carbon paper or, nowadays, by machine processes; once the type is set, token copies of it are stamped out mechanically (or electronically). At this point, the tokens are generated by a series of sheer physical processes. A token of a particular play by Shakespeare—my copy of it—is an object, brought into the world by a sequence of brute causal events.

However, a token of a play by Shakespeare from the perspective of drama as performance is a very different affair. Because of the duality of drama, plays have as tokens both objects and performances. Considered as a literary work, a token of *The Libation Bearers* is a graphic text of the same ontological order as my copy of *Middlemarch.* But considered from the perspective of drama as performance, a token of *Libation Bearers* is something else again. It is an event, rather than an object. Indeed, it is a specific kind of an event; it is a human action. The production of a token instance of *Libation Bearers* by way of performance requires intentionality. It is not a consequence of a process of physical causation. It involves mentation (where the mark of the mental, as Franz Brentano proposed, is intentionality).

The production of my copy of *Libation Bearers*—which grants me access to the dramatic artwork as composition that Aeschylus created—required a template (either hot type or an electronic file); this template itself is a mere physical entity or process that unlike the type, *Libation Bearers,* is spatially situated and can be destroyed physically. The production of a performance token of *Libation Bearers,* on the other hand, requires something above and beyond mere bodies in motion, causally interacting. As we have seen, it requires an interpretation given the indeterminacies of the play text. For, as we have already argued, the play type by Aeschylus—when viewed from the perspective of performance—is akin to a recipe that must be filled out by executors, including actors, directors, and the rest.

This interpretation, moreover, is a conception of the play type, and it is this conception of the production that governs the performances from night to night. These interpretations, furthermore, may be performed in different theaters, consider touring companies; and they may even be revived after a hiatus. Thus, these interpretations of the recipe are themselves types that then generate performance tokens. The relation of the play type to its performances is mediated by an interpretation, suggesting, then, that an interpretation is a type within a type. What gets us from the play type qua recipe to the token performance of it is an interpretation that is itself a type. On the other hand, what gets us from the dramatic artwork qua composition to a token instance (my copy of *Libation Bearers*) is a template that is a token.

The action of the template token in the production of the token instance of the literary art type *Libation Bearers* is starkly a matter of physical causation. The action of the interpretation type in the production of the token performance of *Libation Bearers* is quite different. Not only is it the case of a type rather than a token in action, but the type in question involves, ineliminably, mental or intentional components. Indeed, not only is the interpretation that governs the performance itself intentional; to enact that interpretation, to instantiate it tonight onstage requires thought—requires an interpretation of the interpretation relevant to the immediate circumstances of the live performance.

So far then, we have argued that drama is a two-tiered or double-decker art form. There is drama as composition and drama as performance. Drama as composition involves an author who creates an artwork—a play text or performance plan. Drama as performance involves executors—performers who make the performance plan qua recipe manifest by way of an interpretation (or an iterated series of interpretations). Token instances of dramatic artworks as compositions are material objects generated mechanically by templates; token instances of dramatic artworks as performances are events generated intentionally by interpretive acts. Moreover, we call an art a performing art just in case it exhibits this duality.

Two possible counterexamples to our claim about the duality of drama are plays created with no intention that they be performed (Seneca's tragedies, for example); and works of pure improvisation, that is, improvisations with no previous production plan. For my own part, I am very suspicious of the notion of utterly pure improvisations—ones engaged without any previous planning or entered into with altogether no background repertory of strategies or tested response patterns to certain types of situa-

tions or challenges. Even the improv comic, asked to enact a scene on the spot, pauses for a moment to think out a plan (and, I suspect, to rummage through past skits for pieces for the new one). Furthermore, though some plays may be written with no thought of performance, that does not entail that they literally cannot be performed. And finally, if my rejoinders to these counterexamples strike you as too ad hoc, it might also be noted in favor of the duality thesis that the concept as such of drama may still be dual even if there are some dramas that are only dramatic compositions and others that are only dramatic performances.

What is drama? Drama is a two-tiered art form, an art form comprised of two kinds of artworks: creations, on the one hand, and performances, on the other hand. Drama, moreover, is a paradigmatic performing art, where a performing art is one marked by precisely this sort of duality.[8]

Can Dramatic Performances Be Mediatized?

If the preceding discussion of drama as performance is correct, then it follows that there is a categorical distinction between dramatic performance and what may be called the mass-mediatized arts of film, television, and computer-generated imaging. In order to see why this is so, let us quickly review again the way in which a performance of a token of a mass-mediatized artwork, like a film, reaches its audience versus the way in which a performance token, like the enactment of a well-made play, reaches spectators.

In many important respects, the story about how the token instance of the mass-mediatized artwork reaches its audience repeats what we have already said about the way in which the token instance of the drama type as composition is transmitted to its readers. Just as my copy of *Baal* gives me access to the type created by Bertolt Brecht, so the token performance of *Finding Neverland* (its screening), in my neighborhood cineplex, gives me access to the film type *Finding Neverland*. If my copy of *Baal* were torn apart or if the showing of *Finding Neverland* was canceled midway due to a bomb threat, neither event would imperil the existence of the relevant art types. These mishaps would be a matter of the destruction of token instances of the artworks in question; the pertinent artworks, as types, would continue to exist.

Mass-mediatized artworks of the sort that immediately concern us—fictional narratives—are types in the sense that they can be incarnated by an indeterminately large number of tokens. Unlike paintings and sculp-

tures, they support multiple instantiations of the same artwork. Identical tokens of the same mass-mediatized artwork can be consumed simultaneously by people in different locales. Among other things, this is what makes a mass-mediatized artwork so potentially lucrative. You can show it—like a soap opera—all over the world at the same time, thereby commanding immense audiences.

But drama is also a multiple instance artform. There can be many token performances of *Cats*—indeed of the same production of *Cats*—in different places and yet at the same time. There may, for example, be touring companies. And perhaps with enough touring companies, *Cats* could reach comparably sized audiences across as many different locales as *Finding Neverland* does. This would be extremely expensive, but not literally impossible.

So it looks like mass-mediatized artworks and some theater performances might be on a par. Both examples are type artworks and, in some cases, the type in question can be exhibited simultaneously at different reception sites. This is what the WPA Federal Theater project attempted with its production in 1936 of *It Can't Happen Here,* which, after a movie company dropped out, opened in eighteen cities at once. Does this suggest that mass-mediatized art and drama as performance are in the same boat ontologically? I contend that they are not, because there are subtle, but important, differences between the delivery of mass-mediatized artworks to their audiences versus the way in which a token of a work of dramatic art as performance makes its way from the type to the stage.

Contrast how you get from the type *Finding Neverland* to its token performance (the screening) in my multiplex tonight with a token performance of *Baal* at the university theater down the road in the same neighborhood at the same time. To produce a token instance—a performance/showing—of *Finding Neverland,* you need a template, for example, a film print, which itself is a token of the type *Finding Neverland.* Once the film projector is adjusted properly, you run the template, the print, on the mechanism. You flip on the switch and certain mechanical and electronic processes take over automatically, generating a token performance of *Finding Neverland.*

But this is not how you generate a token performance of *Baal* nor, for that matter, even a token performance by one of the touring companies of *Cats.* These live performances are not generated automatically from a template. Rather, the performers have access to a script and perhaps to a set of directorial instructions that, in turn, constitute a recipe or blueprint—

rather than a template—which the executors go on to interpret in order to bring a token instance of the play to life.

The live performance—whether of *Baal* or *Cats*—is the result of the executors's intentions, beliefs, and desires, and not the mere consequence of fully automatic mechanical, chemical, and/or electronic processes. Live performance tokens of plays like *Baal* and *Cats* (and of all those other recipes here unsung) are the result, first and foremost, of *mental processes*—interpretive acts; whereas token performances of *Finding Neverland* are not—once the projector starts humming—immediately a matter of a series of mental acts, but a matter of brute, scientifically law-governed, physical processes. What the projector operator believes about the fiction has no impact on the unfolding of the celluloid story world frame by frame.

What gives rise to tonight's 7:30 P.M. performance of *Finding Neverland* is a mechanical-electronic apparatus engaging a chemically fixed, predetermined template in accordance with certain technical procedures and natural laws. The process can be completely automated; it's mostly pure physics. But what gives rise to tonight's token performance of *Cats* are continuous processes of judgment about how to interpret the production recipe on the part of the actors, dancers, singers, lighting crews, and the like.

If you ask yourself why you are seeing three characters screen left in tonight's showing of *Finding Neverland,* the answer has to do with the physical structure of the template; the images and the positions of the three characters are chemically fixed in the template. What you see in *Finding Neverland* is counterfactually dependent upon the physical structure of the template. Had the physical structure of the template been different, that is, the image would have been different. If there had not been three characters imprinted on the template, you would not be seeing their image. Had the three characters—contrary to fact (or counterfactually)—been on the right side of the image instead of the left, you would be seeing them screen right.

On the other hand, when you see three characters on stage left in *Cats,* that is because the actors in question have interpreted the production recipe in such a way that they *believe* that they should be on stage left at that moment. What you see onstage, in other words, is counterfactually dependent upon the beliefs of the performers. Quite simply, if they did not believe that they should be on stage left, they wouldn't be there, and, for that very reason, you wouldn't see them there.

What you see onscreen then is counterfactually dependent upon the structure of the template as it is processed primarily through a series of sheerly physico-causal processes. What you see in a live performance of a play, however, is generated by the interpretative acts and beliefs of the performers. The token performance of *Finding Neverland* is generated through mindless physical procedures, whereas the live token of *Cats,* as a dramatic performance, is generated intentionally—it is proximately mediated, moment by moment, by the beliefs and judgments of performers striving to interpret the production recipe. Call this the difference between generation by intentional systems (systems of mediation operating through intentional or mental states) versus generation by physical systems (systems of mediation operating through exclusively physical states).

This is an important ontological distinction. Put into a crude slogan—one that admittedly requires further refinement—it is the difference between mental properties and physical properties. Since mass-mediatized artworks are type artworks that rely upon templates to produce token performances, mass-mediatized artworks differ categorically from dramatic performances that rely on intentional states—interpretative acts—in order to be made manifest. It is the role of intentional states in the generation of token dramatic performances that I believe disposes us to call these events live. For, were *Cats* performed by zombies, I do not think we would be comfortable with calling the performance live nor the troupe a living theater. For, though zombies are supposedly animate, they have no intentions of their own.

But, in any event, the performance of the mass-mediatized token is almost exclusively an affair of matter in motion, whereas the token dramatic performance is ineliminably an artifact of mind. Or, mediatized-mass art tokens are to tokens of dramatic performance as matter is to mind. Thus, a token dramatic performance as a work of art in its own right cannot be a mass-media artwork.

One reason for this is that the token performance of a mass-mediatized artwork is not itself an artwork. Recall: a token performance of *Finding Neverland* is brought about by putting the template—a reel of film—on the projection mechanism and operating the machine strictly according to established routines. On the other hand, a token performance of a dramatic performance is an artwork in its own right, just because it depends on the mindfulness of the performers.

A successful token performance of *Finding Neverland*—the projection of the film or the running of a videocassette or DVD—does not command

aesthetic appreciation, since it is not an artwork. We do not applaud the projectionist as we do a pianist at the end of a successful performance. We may complain when the film burns up in the middle of the screening and may even demand our money back. But we regard this as a technical failure, not an artistic failure. If we regarded this as a matter of artistry, then we would expect people to cheer when the film does not burn, but they don't. For the happy film performance only depends on operating the apparatus as it was designed to be operated, and, since that involves no more than often quite minimal mechanical savvy, running the template through the machine is not held to be an aesthetic accomplishment. The projectionist is, in other words, not an artist of any sort, let alone a performing (or interpreting) artist.

On the other hand, the successful delivery of a token dramatic performance involves a token interpretation of an interpretation type, and, inasmuch as that depends on artistic understanding and judgment, it is a suitable object of aesthetic appreciation. This is why the token *performance* of a mass-mediatized artwork is not an appropriate object of artistic evaluation, whereas the token dramatic performance is. For it is the mentation of the executors that merits praise or blame, not merely matter in motion.

Perhaps another, more scandalous way of putting this point is to say that the pertinent mass-mediatized art forms—notably film and television—are not performing arts in terms of the framework developed in this chapter. This may sound incredibly bizarre, since many of the people who contribute to the making of a motion picture are what we usually think of as performing artists—actors, directors, lighting and sound engineers, set designers, costumers, choreographers, fight coaches, and so on. However, it is essential to note that whatever the interpretive activities and performances that these artists contribute to artwork are indissolubly integrated into the motion picture type as constitutent parts in a way that is determinately fixed forever at the inception of the final version of the type. The acting is not adjusted or reinterpreted given the exigencies of different theaters or audiences. Once the motion picture has been edited and put in the can for good, there is no opportunity left for intentionality; token performances of the type will be as alike as two quarters, though token performances of the dramatic type *Baal* can be very different, because they are different inerpretations.

With respect to mass-mediatized art forms, a fixed interpretation of the script comes to be built into the very token template. The template is then run mechanically. There is no further interpretation of the script involved.

In this respect, the mass-mediatized artwork is not a two-tiered art form, but single-tiered, more like a novel than a performance. Consequently, since they lack the required duality, movies—whether film, broadcast TV, video, or CGI—are not works of performing art, though some of their contributors may have been trained as performing artists. Moreover, the person who is responsible for the performance of a movie—the projectionist—is not an artist, performing or otherwise. He or she is just a technician.

Undoubtedly, the hypothesis that movies are not a performing art will please neither the drama department or the cinema department. The drama folks will rue the loss of all those students who want to study acting in order to become movie stars; while the cinephiles will resent the loss of prestige they fear they will suffer, if they no longer sit at the same table with music, drama, and dance. However, neither money nor fame counts for much when it comes to ontology. And ontologically the mass-mediatized arts of narrative fiction are profoundly distinct categorically from drama qua performing art.

One theorist who has advocated the destabilization—even the deconstruction—of the distinction between mass-mediatized artworks and dramatic performances is Philip Auslander.[9] One reason that Auslander objects to the distinction is that he thinks it is motivated in contemporary circles by spurious political motivations.[10] He contends, for instance, that Peggy Phelan's characterization of live performance as a mode of disappearance—whose transience enables it to be politically resistant[11]—is false; Phelan's conception of live performance would not have the political ramifications she assigns to live performance even if her characterization of the difference between live performance and mass-mediatized art were compelling (which, of course, Auslander thinks it isn't).[12] However, even though I think that Auslander's objections to Phelan and to similarly disposed theater theorists are spot-on, I do not think that Auslander is correct in alleging that there are no significant ontological differences between mass-mediatized artworks and live dramatic performances.

For Auslander, there can be live, token dramatic performances that are functionally equivalent. That is, the token performance of the Disney staging of *Beauty and the Beast* in one city could be functionally equivalent to a counterpart token performance, enacted in another city, at precisely the same time of day. The actors playing the flatware, for example, would be made up in the same way, deliver the same lines, dance the same steps, and so on. From the orchestra pit, one might imagine, the performances will be pretty much perceptually indiscernible—presumably as indiscernible as

the projection of two different prints of the same film template.[13] Auslander, in fact, suggests that the California producer Barrie Wexler's *Tamara* "franchise" is another such example.[14]

But I am skeptical. Mass-mediatized artworks, such as movies, are types that require templates that generate token performances through automatic processes of sheer physical causation. They are solely the result of the movement of matter in accordance with scientific laws. Once the lens is focussed and the machine is activated, the rest is pretty much blind nature grinding through its paces. But no live performance, not even one of the *Tamara* franchises, is like that. Token dramatic performances require actors, lighting crews, and so on, who generate the relevant performance tokens through processes of ongoing decisions—mental acts—comprised of beliefs, judgments, and interpretations. Token performances of *Tamara* are not automated physical processes; they are mind-mediated through and through.

Even if, *per impossible,* a movie of *Tamara* and its token performances looked indiscernible and were functionally equivalent in every way, that would not entail that there are no ontological differences between them. For these perceptual and functional congruencies are not ontologically bedrock. They are only superficial or surface similarities insofar as these phenomena have radically different, metaphysically significant provenances. These similarities, in other words, are only skin-deep. But there are deeper distinctions here. One token performance reaches us by way of mind and the other by way of matter.

Auslander attempts to elude this conclusion by maintaining that the distinction that I draw between generation-by-template and generation-by-interpretation is not as sharp as I suppose.[15] Actors' interpretations, Auslander argues, can be as mechanical as a physical template, like a film print or a DVD disk. I see no compelling reason, even if one is a materialist about what exists, to believe that mental properties are fully reducible to physical properties. Mental causation is ontologically different from sheer physical causation in pertinent respects (while, also, obviously being related to physical processes). And given these distinctions, the differentiation between mass-mediatized artworks and live performance falls out naturally.

Auslander may think that many of the actors' interpretations in the *Tamara* franchise are *mechanical,* but surely "mechanical" in such a context would probably mean something like "uninspired" or "unimagina-

tive." It cannot literally pertain to the decision making and judgments of the performers in question. For, they are not machine-tables churning out mindless sequences of behavior.

As is well known, actors adjust their performances to live audiences; they assay the temper of the crowd, and reinterpret their lines appropriately. Tonight add a dash of irony; tomorrow, be a pound more serious. This is an important distinction between movies and live theatrical performances, one noted by Walter Benjamin in his discussions of mechanical reproduction.[16]

The Purple Rose of Cairo notwithstanding, the actor in a token performance of a motion picture cannot modify his approach to suit the sentiments of the spectators in the house. But this is commonplace in token dramatic performances. Even where the actor relies on so-called technique, rather than inspiration, to get through the evening, there are always subtle reinterpretations of the recipe to fit the occasion. This is why it makes sense to say that the actor's performance, no matter how reliant upon technique, was better yesterday than it was today. But it would be absurd to say that Johnny Depp's acting in a token performance of *Finding Neverland* was better yesterday than it was today. And this very absurdity marks the differentia between a token performance of a mass-mediatized movie versus a token enactment of a specimen of drama-as-performance.[17]

Conclusions

Drama is not one art form, but two: the art of dramatic composition and the art of dramatic performance. Moreover, the art of drama as performance, though perceptually very much akin, in many respects, to the mass fictions projected by movies, is nevertheless radically, categorically different. Indeed, even if there were a point-perfect motion picture replica of a token instance of a dramatic artwork as performance, that was, in certain circumstances, effectively indiscernible from the original, that would be only at best a *recording* of the dramatic performance token. Moreover, a performance of that document—a screening—would not be an artwork in its own right.

Why?

Because it would be mindless.[18]

NOTES

1. This characterization of philosophy is developed in Noël Carroll and Sally Banes, "Theatre: Philosophy, Theory, and Criticism," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 16, no. 1 (2001): 155–63; and Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), introduction.

2. Philip Auslander, "Against Ontology: Making Distinctions between the Live and the Mediatized," *Performance Research* 2, no. 3 (1997): 50–55.

3. Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 5–6.

4. Parts of what follows have been adapted from my article "Text" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance,* ed. Dennis Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

5. J. O. Urmson treats literature as this sort of art form. I disagree with his contention that literature is two-tiered; nevertheless, I think the idea of two-tiered art forms is a useful one. See J. O. Urmson, "Literature," in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology,* ed. George Dickie and Richard Scalafani (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977).

6. These remarks pertain to contemporary drama. Ritual dramatic enactments may be evaluated primarily for their realization of some norm. I will attempt to take account of this in my analysis of the concept of drama as performance a bit further down the line in this essay.

7. An exception here might be improvisation, though I suspect that most improvisation involves a performance plan, albeit sketchy, that the performer has ruminated over, at least mentally. Of course, if there is pure improvisation, that would not show that there are not two art forms denominated by the notion of drama, but only that in some cases, some dramatic works only exist as pure performances.

8. This analysis follows the one offered in my "Defining the Moving Image," in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also my *Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), esp. chap. 3.

9. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).

10. Auslander, "Against Ontology," 50–52.

11. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

12. Auslander, "Against Ontology," 50–53.

13. Philip Auslander raised these sorts of considerations in an untitled essay that was supposed to be published, along with a comment by me, in an issue of *Performance Research.* Unfortunately, the exchange was never printed.

14. Auslander, "Against Ontology," 50–53.

15. Auslander in the unpublished essay cited in note 13.

16. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken, 1955), 217–51.

17. Unlike Auslander, I maintain that there are ontological differences between dramatic performances and mass-mediatized performances. However, I do not think that this disagreement ultimately compromises Auslander's work. For he has shown us many arresting ways in which recent live art has been influenced stylistically and

structurally by the mass media. His insightful observations do not seem to me to be undercut by the fact that there is an ontological distinction between mass art and dramatic performances. Borrowings can occur between ontologically discrete categories. Fashion designers can imitate foliage. Auslander's compelling comparisons between live performances and mass media do not require him to deconstruct or to abjure ontology. He can have everything he wants and some metaphysics too.

18. I would like to express my gratitude to Sally Banes for her help in the preparation of this chapter, though she is not responsible for any of the errors or infelicities herein.