



How do performances fuse societies?

Erik Ringmar¹

© Springer Nature Limited 2019

Abstract

This article discusses Jeffrey Alexander’s work on social performances. All societies, says Alexander, need a measure of integration—they need to be “fused”—for a common, properly social, life to be possible. In simple societies, this is achieved by means of rituals; in complex societies, it is achieved by means of the theater. In both cases, performances are understood in analogy with “texts” which are “read.” Although explicit interpretations indeed are crucial for our understanding of a performance, audience members make sense of what they see in more direct, more embodied, ways as well. Cognitive neuroscience can help us understand how performances affect us and thereby how societies are fused.

Keywords Social performance · Jeffrey Alexander · Cognitive neuroscience · Constructivism · Ritual · Embodiment

There is a long tradition of thinking of society in theatrical terms. The world is a stage, we are told, and we are merely players, we have our exits and our entrances and in our lives we play many parts. And if we do not take the Bard’s word for it, there is always Émile Durkheim to rely on, or, depending on our theoretical predilections, George Herbert Mead, Ervin Goffman, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Guy Debord or Judith Butler. Another oft-cited author who puts the theater center-stage is Jeffrey Alexander. Culture has an independent role to play in social explanations, Alexander insists, and it is more than anything through “social performances” that this independence is exercised (Alexander et al. 2006, pp. 29–30; Alexander 2004, 2006a, 2010, 2011; Mast and Alexander 2019). Social performances “fuse” societies; meaning, they allow its members to attain a measure of consensus and cohesion. This is true even in today’s diverse and cleavage-ridden societies. Social performances are the pragmatics by means of which culture is reinvented and diffused. Much like other seminal contributions to the genre, Alexander’s work has inspired a number of subsequent authors, establishing a distinct school of cultural sociology.

✉ Erik Ringmar
erik@ringmar.net

¹ Ibn Haldun University, Ulubatlı Hasan Cad. No. 2, Başakşehir, 34494 Istanbul, Turkey



Under this program, what cultural sociologists should do more than anything is to study the impact that social performances have on the societies in which they are staged. The suggestion to be developed in this article is that theatrical approaches to social life, including Alexander's, have much to learn from recent research in cognitive neuroscience. Given his astute insights into human psychology, William Shakespeare may indeed have anticipated some of these results, and the same can possibly be said regarding the roster of recent scholars. Yet there are limits to how far sheer intuition can take us. This is particularly the case when it comes to our understanding of how theatrical performances achieve their effects. Not considering this research, or not considering it in sufficient detail, cultural sociologists of Alexandrian persuasions have ignored evidence which would strengthen their arguments.¹

Strikingly, theater scholars have not been equally reticent. There is today a burgeoning field of neuro-cognitive theater studies whose contributors have no qualms whatsoever about reaching out to the hard sciences (McConachie 2008; McConachie and Hart 2010; Blair 2008; Lutterbie 2011; Cook 2010). What these scholars want to know is *inter alia* how performances are interpreted by audiences; how attention, memory and imagination work; and how our explicit interpretation of a play relates to our intuitive appreciation of it (McConachie 2010, p. x). Addressing questions such as these, Bruce McConachie, one of the pioneering scholars, relies heavily on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on metaphors and embodiment, while Rhonda Blair, another pioneer, invokes Antonio Damasio, Gilles Fauconnier, Mark Turner and Joseph LeDoux (McConachie 2008, pp. 23–63; cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003; Blair 2008, 2009; Damasio 1994; Fauconnier and Turner 2003; LeDoux 1996). Meanwhile, Amy Cook discusses the cognitive mechanisms that allowed actors in Shakespeare's time to remember their lines, and John Lutterbie draws on the writings of Evan Thompson, Marc Lewis, and J.A. Scott Kelso in developing nothing less than a "general theory of acting" (Cook 2010; Lutterbie 2011, pp. 21–128; cf. Kelso 1995; Lewis 2005; Thompson 2010). Yet there are many other scholars who write on the same themes. Indeed, the field is rapidly becoming institutionalized—with cohorts of PhD students, annual conferences, edited volumes and special issues of academic journals.²

The suggestion to be developed in this article is that the work of these neuro-cognitive theater scholars has much to contribute to discussions taking place among cultural sociologists. More specifically, their perspective would add a layer of scientific understanding to work done on the cultural sociology of performances. Cultural sociologists too need to ask how it is that social performances achieve their effects: how social performances are interpreted by their audiences; how public imagination, attention and memory work; and how shared processes of explicit deliberation relate

¹ In what follows other versions of cultural sociology will not be discussed. On the implications of a neuro-cognitive perspective for Collins (2004); see, *inter alia*, Heinskou and Liebst (2016), Liebst (2019), Heider and Warner (2010).

² The field is summarized in contributions to McConachie and Hart (2010) and in special issues of the *Theatre Journal*, 59:4, 2007, and the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 25:2, 2011. A leading publisher, Palgrave, has launched a book series on the theme of "cognitive studies in literature and performance," edited by Bruce McConachie and Blakey Vermeule.



to other, more tacit, forms of knowledge. Looking for answer to questions such as these, the pragmatics of culture can be given a neuro-cognitive foundation. Instead of merely insisting that social performances fuse societies, we should investigate how they do it.

Performing culture

Alexander's argument takes off from an ideal-typical distinction between two kinds of societies—between “simple” societies and “complex” (Alexander 2004, p. 529). Simple societies are “fused,” meaning *inter alia* that their inhabitants are united around a shared sets of beliefs, values and meanings. Complex societies, by contrast, are “defused,” meaning that unity and integration are far more difficult to achieve (Alexander 2004, p. 528). This is a problem since all societies require its members to attain a measure of agreement on basic principles if a common life is to be possible. In all societies, Alexander explains, fusion is achieved by performative means. And here he makes another ideal-typical distinction between performances of two kinds—rituals and the theater. It is rituals that characterize simple societies while theatrical performances characterize complex societies. In rituals, the whole community joins together to perform certain actions; in the theater, by contrast, most people are members of audiences who watch actors performing on a stage. This is the case with ordinary theatrical productions, but it is also the case for what Alexander refers to as “social performances,” performances staged by social and political actors in front of other members of society in order to make points, argue cases, arouse emotions and instill values.

Although Alexander's two societies may remind us of hardy perennials such as the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* or between “enchantment” and “disenchantment,” he is, in contrast to the first generation of sociologists, not describing a process of modernization. After all, Greece of the fifth century BCE too made frequent use of the theater and classical Greece was not modern. What matters is rather whether a society has a public space in which people gather to reflect on themselves and on the lives they have in common. Such a public space provides a stage on which theatrical performances can be presented; and it is by making something appear in public that other members of society are forced to pay attention and to react (Alexander 2004, p. 543, cf. 2006b, pp. 250–252, 303–306). Theatrical performances belong to societies in which politics has become a common concern and where people, including their leaders, need to convince each other of the wisdom of a certain action, policy or outlook. The theater is a part of the mechanics of communal deliberation.

In all social performances, both ritualistic and theatrical, it is a society's culture that is being performed, or what Alexander refers to as, “the universe of basic narratives and codes and the cookbook of rhetorical configurations from which every performance draws” (Alexander 2004, p. 550). He compares culture to a text, to a semiotic system, but insists that texts must be read for their meanings to be interpreted. Culture requires a “pragmatics” and this is what performances provide. It is as performed that culture is expressed and experienced. In simple societies, says



Alexander, with a nod to the effervescence of Durkheim's Aborigines, participants use their bodies in order to "literally become the text"—"their goal being to project the fusion of human and totem, 'man and God,' sacred and mundane" (Alexander 2004, p. 535). In complex societies, by contrast, performances are based on scripts—"the action-oriented subset of background understandings"—created by specific authors or improvised by specific actors (Alexander 2004, p. 550). "It is not 'culture' that creates scripts, but pragmatic efforts to project particular cultural meanings in pursuit of practical goals" (Alexander 2006a, p. 91).

Alexander talks about performances as a "process of cultural extension," referring to the way in which the meanings and values of the script are extended from the actors to the members of the audience. "When this is done successfully, the audience will identify psychologically with the characters on the stage and project themselves into them" (Alexander 2004, p. 531). The result is a sense of flow, a "loss of self-consciousness and a lack of concern for—even awareness of—the scrutiny of observers outside the action itself" (Alexander 2004, p. 548). This is how also contemporary, complex, societies achieve a degree of fusion. Alexander gives the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an example (Alexander 2006a, pp. 91–114). The attack on the World Trade Center in New York was a social performance staged by Al-Qaeda, but the counter-performance staged in American media—in which heroic firemen and bereaved relatives featured prominently—"revealed the strength of an ideal American core" (Alexander 2006a, p. 99). By means of this counter-performance, a normally quite de-fused society was suddenly fused.

Texts, performances and interpretations

Consider first how to define culture. Alexander, as we saw, talks about culture as a "universe of basic narratives and codes" and as a "cookbook of rhetorical configurations." Culture, on this account, is understood as a text. At the same time, he tells us, what matters is not actually the text itself as much as the way it is performed (Alexander 2004, p. 562). A performance is an example of the pragmatics of culture. A performance is an event, something that happens before us and an experience which we go through together. In rituals, participants and observers "share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication's symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another's intentions" (Alexander 2004, p. 527). It is because of this shared understanding that rituals are able to achieve fusion. We make sense of social performances in a similar fashion. Alexander talks about "the psychological identification of audience with enacted text," and makes the point that the degree of identification varies depending on factors such as people's socio-economic background (Alexander 2006a, pp. 92–93).

By seeing social life as a text, Alexander defines interpretation as a matter of "reading." This makes sense. It is by reading texts, after all, that we understand them. Yet as the neuro-cognitive theater scholars are quick to point out, this is not actually how we interpret performances (Diamond 2000, pp. 31–43; Mancing 2010). The text/reading metaphor is far too logocentric. That is, it puts too much emphasis on explicit cognitive processes. A text is a text, but a performance is a



performance. The difference is that performances are rich in bodily expressions, conveying experiences which appeal to all of our senses at once. The bodies of the actors have posture and gait; they walk, slouch and dance; they sweat, cry and gesticulate; they whisper, their eyebrows are raised, their arms embrace. When making sense of what is going on here, the conscious minds of the audience members are barely engaged. Instead our comprehension is automatic and instantaneous. What we hear is not a “noise,” but a closing door; what we see is not an “object,” put a loaded revolver. Alternatively, we might say that reading is far more of a tacit activity than we commonly realize. Texts too—the text of a book—are first and foremost understood by our bodies and only explicitly interpreted once they are felt. The written word evokes moods—giving us goosebumps, queasy feelings, a persistent sense of tedium—and it is in the moods thus evoked that our explicit interpretations later come to take place (Rokotnitz 2017, pp. 273–293; Thiele 2006, pp. 245–257; Ringmar 2017, 2018b).

That performances are different from texts becomes obvious if we consider how to make sense of dance. Modern dance is surely about something, yet any attempt to express its meaning in words is bound to fail. It is only by means of the performance itself that its “aboutness” can be expressed. This is why we dance, after all. “Judgments, belief, interpretations are suspended,” as the phenomenologist and dance scholar Maxine Sheets-Johnstone puts it. “Our experience of the dance is free of any manner of reflection. We are spontaneously and wholly intent upon the continuously emerging form which appears before us thoroughly engrossed in its unfolding” (Sheets-Johnstone 2015, p. 1; cf. Strukus 2011; www.watchingdance.org). For Alexander, dance is an integral part of rituals, and it is by means of rituals, as he explains, that simple societies are fused. Drawing heavily on the functionalist tradition in sociology, dance is here reduced to a function. Yet as Sheets-Johnstone reminds us, dance has a phenomenology, too. There is a certain way it feels to move. All human beings can make sense of dance since we know what movements feel like. The world of the dancer, and the dance audience, is meaningful in exactly the same way as the worlds of animals or newborn children. Animals and newborn children have no knowledge of cultural texts, they do no “reading,” and yet their worlds make perfect sense to them (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, pp. 430–447).

There is a sort of secret knowledge deposited in our bodies which we rely on when making sense of what is happening in a performance (Fuchs and Koch 2014, pp. 1–2). Our bodies are constantly busy interpreting their environment and attuning themselves to the moods of the situations in which they find themselves. Embodied interpretations are happening all the time, within us but without us. However, by means of cognitive theory and neuroscience many of these processes can be documented and studied. Thus, our bodies remember. For example: we recall negative events more easily when sitting in a slumped position and more positive events when sitting in an upright position (Riskind 1984). Our bodies interpret. We are more likely to find a cartoon funny if we are forced to keep a pencil between our teeth which activates the muscles we use when smiling (Strack et al. 1988). Our bodies evaluate. For example: we are more likely to judge a person as “warm” and friendly if we are holding a cup of hot coffee in our hands than if we are holding a cup of cold coffee (Williams and Bargh 2008). Our bodies react. For example: people who



experience social ostracism are more likely to take warm bath (Bargh and Shalev 2012). But our bodies also inhibit reactions. For example: a person whose frowning muscles have been injected with botox has more problems understanding the negative content of a text (Havas et al. 2010). As a result of body-based processes such as these, there is often no need for our conscious minds to engage. Our bodies have already understood the situation—behind our backs, as it were.

This is not to say that interpretation is all a matter of neurophysiology. There is a cultural life of the body too (Ringmar 2018a). There are ways to stand in an elevator which differs from one culture to the next; a certain way in which French women walk which is different from that of American women; and boys and girls throw balls in quite distinctive ways—at least they did so back in the 1970s (Young 1980, pp. 137–156; cf. Johnson 2008, pp. 22–23). These are prelinguistic, yet socially determined and thereby cultural, differences, and preconceptions for the way we make sense of our interaction with others. We learn the ways of the body already in the womb and later in school or in any of the many other disciplinary institutions our societies have set up. Sometimes the teaching is explicit, but often it is only tacitly conveyed (Wacquant 2005, pp. 445–474; Lande 2007, pp. 95–108). In the end, our postures and our movements become habits; something we do, unreflectively, without thinking much about it (Camic 1986, p. 1056). The body is encultured, just as culture is embodied. We need a definition of culture which includes these bodily effects, and a cultural sociology of performance needs it urgently.

Rituals and fusion

With the help of recent research in the cognitive neurosciences, we can say far more about how these embodied interpretations take place. Rituals provide an example. In a ritual, the bodies of the participants are communicating with each other directly and automatically, unimpeded by explicit deliberations. Such effects occur whenever the bodies of the performers are in close physical proximity to each other and when they go through the same, or very similar, actions at the same time. Synchronizing the actions by means of a rhythm helps too, such as when we dance, or march, together. “Words are inadequate to describe the emotions aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved,” William McNeill noted when remembering the military exercises he went through during the Second World War (McNeill 2008, p. 2). “A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to the participation in collective ritual.” McNeill refers to this swelling out as “muscular bonding.”

Neuroscience can explain what is going on here. Whenever bodies in close proximity to each other engage in synchronized movements, a number of physiological processes are synchronized too, including breathing and heart beats, blood pressures, gastric and endocrinal processes (Weinstein et al. 2016, pp. 152–158; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009, pp. 1–5; Pearce et al. 2016, pp. 596–612). This in turn leads to a synchronization of various psychological and cognitive processes and states. Thus people who sing, pray or row a boat together are more likely to



empathize with each other and appreciate each other's opinions; they are even more likely to think about the same things and in a similar fashion (Vacharkulksemsuk and Fredrickson 2012, pp. 399–400; Sebanz et al. 2006, pp. 70–76; Hove and Risen 2009, pp. 949–960). Likewise, when we dance or march in goose-step, dopamine levels in the brain are raised (Chanda and Levitin 2013). We are happy to be together and much happier than if we had danced or marched alone. By moving together each individual body attunes itself to the bodies of others and together the bodies attune themselves to the situation in which they find themselves. We are moved as we move (Fuchs and Koch 2014). These results obtain between total strangers too, and even in the absence of any other form of communication. Singing together we come to identify with the group as a whole even if we do not know any of the other members (Wiltermuth and Heath 2009; cf. Hopkins et al. 2016). From the point of view of evolutionary biology all of this makes perfect sense. After all, it is easy to imagine ways in which dopamine release in response to coordinated physical activity is favored by biological evolution.

This coordination resembles the way individual bodies are coordinated in schools of fish or herds of deer. It is as though all individuals were united into a larger whole. Neuroscientists, without sociological training, have no qualms referring to such wholes as “superorganisms” (Hölldobler and Wilson 2008). If we find such language disconcerting, we could perhaps talk about these shared bodily effects as a matter of “entitativity,” “the perception of a group as a unified entity” (Sacchi et al. 2009, pp. 321–332). Entitativity is of course a topic that sociologists long have discussed, going back to the work of William McDougall in the 1920s and Donald Campbell in the 1950s (McDougall 1920; Campbell 1958). And in any case these superorganisms have no existence or status beyond the synchronized activities in which the individuals take part. Once the music stops, the movements cease, the individual bodies disperse and the shared body effect is gone. As a former member of such a superorganism we may feel as though we had woken up from a dream, or perhaps from a nightmare.

Rituals, Alexander insists, belong in simple societies whereas theatrical performances belong in complex societies. Comparing societies across space and time we can easily agree that this is the case. The question is only how this fact should be explained. As long as we only consider the functional effects of rituals—their ability to fuse societies—this is difficult to do. If anything, from a functionalist perspective we would expect the opposite outcome. In a ritual, after all, it does not matter what people think or believe as long as they perform the requisite acts in the required fashion. What matters is orthopraxy, not orthodoxy (Watson 1993, pp. 84–87). For this reason, one would predict that rituals characterized complex societies, not simple ones. It is in complex societies, after all, that there is little agreement on values, projects, interests, and identities. From a neurophysiological point of view, however, the observed facts make sense. Rituals require physical proximity, muscular bonding and the opportunity to synchronize bodies to the same rhythms. This is impossible to do in a large society where people live far away from each other and public gatherings are incidental and of only limited duration.



Doing and watching

Consider another puzzle to which neuro-cognitive theater scholars provide a solution. Rituals and theatrical performances, says Alexander, are both ways in which societies are fused, yet we may wonder why one kind of performance so successfully can substitute for the other. After all, the two are quite distinct. Theatrical performances have an explicit cognitive content whereas rituals, on the whole, do not. Or consider the positions of the people on whom the respective performances are supposed to achieve their effects. In rituals there is no distinction between participants and audience members—they are all active; chanting, dancing, praying together—but in the theater a proscenium frames the performance and separates actors from spectators. Even if they do take part too, the parts which the audience members take are far more passive. Yet in both cases, despite the differences in set-up, fusion is supposed to be the eventual result.

As neuroscientists have discovered, however, doing and watching are more closely related than we previously thought (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004, pp. 169–192; Gallese 2005, pp. 19–30; Summers-Effler et al. 2015). In the brain there are separate centers responsible for visual perception and intentional action. Curiously, however, when observing another person carrying out a certain task, it is not only the neurons in the visual center that fire but the neurons in the center responsible for actions too. As far as the brain is concerned, what is perceived is also enacted. This, neuroscientists have hypothesized, is how we come to understand what other people are doing and how we learn to ascribe intentions to their actions (Moore and Dunham 2014). If the motor cortices of infants resonate directly when they see their parents stick out their tongues, they have no need to consciously interpret what they see. This is not a learned behavior and it is not culturally constructed. Rather, our bodies are hard-wired to make sense of the world in a distinctly human fashion. A baby only 42 min old can do it (Meltzoff 2002, p. 23).

The most common way to think about this discovery is in terms of the potential for imitation—hence the moniker “mirror neurons” (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004). And there is no doubt that social life contains a lot of imitative behavior. By means of neuroimaging techniques, we can document the “chameleon effects” which occur whenever people automatically, and without quite realizing it, adopt similar bodily postures, fold their arms in the same way, yawn or laugh in the same fashion (Chartrand and Bargh 1999, pp. 893–910; Maister and Tsakiris 2016, pp. 108–113; Lakin et al. 2003, pp. 145–162; Schmidt et al. 2014, pp. 1–13). According to the rather overblown claims made on their behalf, mirror neurons can explain much-discussed social science topics such as the origin of empathy and perhaps even political solidarity (Gallese et al. 2007, pp. 150–153; cf. Singer and Lamm 2009). Yet mirroring cannot be the main task of these neurons. This should be obvious first of all since they initially were discovered in macaque monkeys. Although the members of a troop of monkeys react attentively and next to instantaneously to each other’s actions, monkeys engage in next to no imitative behavior. Monkeys, surprisingly, do not ape each other (Booth 2016, p. 11). Moreover, what typically is called for in social interaction is not imitation, but instead what we might think of as an adequate



response. If we, in a conversational setting, simply reiterate what others are saying, we will be considered eccentric or worse, and if we, as parents, respond to a crying child by ourselves crying, we fail in our parental duties. Realizing as much, some neuroscientist too have started questioning the notion of “mirroring” (Rochat and Passos-Ferreira 2010, pp. 201–207).

As all sociologists should know, we have been here before. Imitation was a fashionable topic at the end of the nineteenth-century, associated in particular with the writings of Gabriel Tarde, for whom mirroring was the basic mechanism by means of which society was established and maintained (Tarde 1903, pp. 11, 28). Yet, even back then, not everyone was convinced. George Herbert Mead, for one, regarded imitation at best as a derivative, secondary, process (Madzia 2013, p. 204). It is instead by taking the role of the other, and by seeing ourselves from a generalized point of view, that consciousness and a sense of self emerge. Role-taking is not imitation, but instead a question of knowing how to go on. First one of us initiates a movement—Mead called it an “attitude”—but before we have had a chance to complete it, our partners have initiated movements of their own, to which we in turn respond (Madzia 2013, pp. 207–210; Booth 2016, pp. 6–9; cf. Collins 2004). This action–reaction–action cascade is instantaneous and presymbolic. Our bodies, not our conscious minds, are in charge.

Mirror neurons explain how such action–reaction–action cascades are possible (Gallese 2001, p. 41). They also explain how audience members make sense of theater performances. Thus if, in a play, a woman touches a man, our brains immediately transform the visual stimulus into an activation of the brain areas involved in our own experience of touch; if a zipper is opened or a liquid slurped, the same motor systems are activated in us, resulting in a whole range of anticipations and premonitions (Rokotnitz 2008, pp. 412–413). Moreover, the feelings we associate with actions such as these, and the memories associated with those feelings, are activated too, making us understand what is going on well in advance of our explicit interpretation of it (Damasio 1994, pp. 180–191). The theater makes us feel, in the first instance, not by encouraging interpretations of feeling-states, but by activating our own experiences of those states (Cook 2009, pp. 114–115). The laughs and tears on the faces of the actors may be fake, but the laughs and tears on the faces of the audience members are real.

In this way a neuro-cognitive perspective on performances comes to reveal a cultural prejudice. Alexander inherits the distinction between rituals and the theater from the first generation of sociologists, and by implication he comes to presume the same separation between the modern and the primitive. We moderns are rational, cognitive, brain-based, creatures in control of our bodies and our movements; we attend public performances and react to them as we read them. Fusion, to the extent that it occurs, is thus a cognitive activity. Primitive people, by contrast, are irrational, emotional and body-based. For them fusion is enacted in rituals through which, as Alexander puts it, “the body literally becomes the text.” From a neuro-cognitive perspective, however, no such clear-cut distinctions can be made. Doing and watching are not that different from each other. Our bodies are still with us after all and they do what bodies always have done. Durkheim’s effervescent Aborigines are us.



Joint attention

Fusion is particularly difficult to achieve in complex societies, Alexander concludes, and given the importance of physical proximity, it is easy to understand why. Today social performances are more than anything likely to be staged in mass media, in front of TV cameras or on the internet. The public spaces which open up here are far larger than anything we can find in a theater and the publics paying attention to them are widely scattered. Chances are we are watching the performances alone, on our respective screens, and not even at the same time as others. The challenge is to explain how fusion can be achieved even under such dispersed conditions.

Consider this issue of as a question of joint attention. The propensity to pay attention to things together with others is another innate feature of our cognitive physiology. Thus newborns learn about the world by following their parents' gaze and by looking at whatever their parents are pointing at (Tomasello 1995, pp. 103–130). This too happens automatically, as if by itself, and it is not something that we need to learn. The tendency to follow the gaze of others remains with us throughout our lives and it has a number of far-reaching consequences (Boothby et al. 2014, pp. 2209–2216; Shteynberg et al. 2014, pp. 1102–1114). For example: we remember things in much greater detail if we observe them together with others, and joint attention gives more emphasis both to emotional reactions and evaluative judgments (Eskenazi et al. 2013; Shteynberg 2010). If we pay attention to a sad video clip together with another person it becomes more sad than if we watch it alone, and joint attention to a piece of chocolate makes it tastier (Boothby et al. 2014; Shteynberg et al. 2014). Moreover, when attending to the same joint tasks, participants show more dedication and more perseverance. Strikingly, these effects arise even between total strangers and without any particular notions regarding the mental states of the other participants (Shteynberg 2015, p. 582). Joint attention makes things stand out, as we were, and what stands out we regard as more relevant. Once we come to treat something as relevant, we file it away in our minds as a matter that might require future coordination and communication. Curiously, these effects occur also when the subjects are scattered and neither co-present nor co-contemporaneous with each other. You can watch the performance on your own, you can watch it repeatedly over and over, and each time there will be implied others who will be watching the performance with you. Your reactions, moreover, anticipate and are influenced by theirs (Pinel et al. 2006; Shteynberg 2015, pp. 587–588; Langellier 1983, pp. 34–35).

This is how religious communities come to be made up of everyone who goes through the same ritual movements, recites the same prayers and visits the same pilgrimage sites. This is also how entities such as nations come to be imagined. The nation suddenly appears before the eyes of the members of a certain linguistic community as they open their newspapers in the morning and peruse the same headlines (Anderson 2006). We are dispersed, but we feel the presence of everyone else reading the same paper at the same time. Cultural sociologists and scholars of nationalism knew this already of course, but by means of neuro-cognitive science we can explain how it works. This should be good news for cultural sociologists who study performances.



The weakness of the “strong program”

By means of a summary, consider the notion that a performance is an “experience.” A performance, Alexander argued, is an example of the pragmatics of culture; it is an experience that the members of an audience sit and go through. But we may wonder what exactly an experience is and how we come to have one. Cultural anthropologists have answers to these questions (Geertz 1973b; Turner 2001, p. 76; Throop 2003, p. 223; Cf. Alexander et al. 2011). It is only as interpreted, Clifford Geertz argued, that experiences come to exist, and interpretations are arrived at by means of the culture—the “organized systems of significant symbols”—of the society in which a person lives. “[U]ndirected by culture patterns, man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless” (Geertz 1973b, p. 46). It follows, as a point of logic, that beings without culture can have no experiences.³ This includes animals, but presumably also people who have suffered serious brain injury, Alzheimer’s patients and newborns. “Neonates,” as Geertz puts it, are “human only *in posse* anyway.”⁴

Inspired by Geertz, this is how Alexander too understands the pragmatics of culture. The audience makes sense of a performance as it is read, and it is only by means of this act of decoding that something becomes an experience. The task of the social scientist is to reconstruct “the implicit text behind every contingency, the symbolic gesture that frames every action, and the aesthetic envelope that expresses and shapes feeling, belief, and moral conviction” (Alexander and Smith 2011, p. 2). This is also the rationale behind the so called “strong program” in cultural sociology which aims “to provide meaning centered accounts of social life” by analyzing culture as an autonomous systems of symbolic representations (Alexander and Smith 2011, p. 2). “What is needed is a Geertzian ‘thick description’ of the codes, narratives, and symbols that create the textured webs of social meaning” (Alexander and Smith 2002, p. 137).

However, as the work of neuro-cognitive theater scholars makes clear, meaning is a far broader notion than the proponents of the strong program acknowledge. Meaning is not initially, and not primarily, the result of interpretations. We do not really read and decode, instead we perceive and experience. And experiences here have a phenomenology which is not reducible to that which can be explicitly interpreted by our minds. An experience is not given in relation to a cogitating subject, but in relation to a sensate body. Although meaning certainly can be discursively constructed and culturally elaborated on, it is originally an embodied event.⁵ Or, better put, meaning is first and foremost a result of the way embodied subjects interact with their environment (Johnson 2008, p. 11; Booth 2016, p. 3). There is a logocentric

³ Fellow anthropologist Victor Turner makes the same point. Turner (2001), p. 76, Turner and Bruner (1986), and Throop (2003), p. 223.

⁴ Geertz (1973a), p. 405. This is also why new-borns still in the 1980s were operated on without anaesthesia. *The New York Times* (1987).

⁵ “Culture is crude and inhuman,” as Eugene Gendlin puts it, “in comparison with what we find directly. The intricacy you are now living vastly exceeds what cultural forms have contributed to you.” Gendlin (2003), pp. 100–115.



bias to Alexander's account, and to the strong program more generally, which it, too, is a legacy of a turn-of-the-twentieth, modernist, hubris—in this case the structuralism of Ferdinand Saussure and his subsequent followers (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 427). Meanings, we can conclude, are not contained in some shared, inter-subjective, code which is inherited from previous generations and into which each new generation is socialized. Neither is meaning a function of the way the world is represented in language or in some language analogue. Instead meaning is derived through our direct bodily interaction with the world and only later culturally elaborated on and codified into a system of symbols. As a result, the world is just as meaningful, if in a different fashion, to animals who engage in no explicit interpretations, and it is meaningful to newborns too who have no words in which to describe it. Interpretivists arrive on the scene too late as it were, once meaning already has happened. Yet by paying more attention to cognitive theory and neuroscience, cultural sociologists too will be able to show up on time.

Acknowledgements Thanks to Naomi Rokotnitz for reading the text with such a critical eye, and to Rhonda Blair, Jason Mast and Lars Svendsen for comments and suggestions. The indefatigable librarians at Internet Archive and Library Genesis were as obliging as always.

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy. *Sociological Theory* 22 (4): 527–573.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006a. From the Depths of Despair: Performance, Counter Performance, and 'September 11'. In *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast, 91–114. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006b. *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2011. The Fate of the Dramatic in Modern Society: Social Theory and the Theatrical Avant-Garde. *Theory, Culture & Society*, November 22.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2010. *The Performance of Politics: Obama's Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast (eds.). 2006. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., and Philip Smith. 2011. Introduction: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Clifford Geertz. In *Interpreting Clifford Geertz. Cultural Sociology*, 1–6. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., and Philip Smith. 2002. The Strong Program in Cultural Theory: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics. In *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, ed. Jonathan H. Turner, 135–150. New York: Kluwer.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Philip Smith, and Matthew Norton (eds.). 2011. *Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New ed. London: Verso.
- Bargh, John A., and Idit Shalev. 2012. The Substitutability of Physical and Social Warmth in Daily Life. *Emotion* 12 (1): 154.
- Blair, Rhonda. 2009. Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy. *TDR: The Drama Review* 53 (4): 92–103.
- Blair, Rhonda. 2008. *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience*. London: Routledge.
- Booth, Kelvin J. 2016. The Meaning of the Social Body: Bringing George Herbert Mead to Mark Johnson's Theory of Embodied Mind. *William James Studies*, 1.
- Boothby, Erica J., Margaret S. Clark, and John A. Bargh. 2014. Shared Experiences Are Amplified. *Psychological Science* 25 (12): 2209–2216.



- Camic, Charles. 1986. The Matter of Habit. *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (5): 1039–1087.
- Campbell, Donald T. 1958. Common Fate, Similarity, and Other Indices of the Status of Aggregates of Persons as Social Entities. *Behavioral Science* 3 (1): 14–25.
- Chanda, Mona Lisa, and Daniel J. Levitin. 2013. The Neurochemistry of Music. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 17 (4): 179–193.
- Chartrand, Tanya L., and John A. Bargh. 1999. The Chameleon Effect: The Perception-Behavior Link and Social Interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76 (6): 893–910.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cook, Amy. 2010. *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance Through Cognitive Science*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cook, Amy. 2009. Wrinkles, Wormholes, and Hamlet: The Wooster Group's Hamlet as a Challenge to Periodicity. *TDR: The Drama Review* 53 (4): 104–119.
- Damasio, Antonio R. 1994. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Diamond, Elin. 2000. Re: Blau, Butler, Beckett, and the Politics of Seeming. *TDR (1988-)* 44 (4): 31–43.
- Eskenazi, Terry, Adam Doerrfeld, Gordon D. Logan, Guenther Knoblich, and Natalie Sebanz. 2013. Your Words Are My Words: Effects of Acting Together on Encoding. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 66 (5): 1026–1034.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner. 2003. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fuchs, Thomas, and Sabine C. Koch. 2014. Embodied Affectivity: On Moving and Being Moved. *Frontiers in Psychology* 5.
- Gallese, Vittorio. 2005. The Intentional Attunement Hypothesis the Mirror Neuron System and Its Role in Interpersonal Relations. In *Biomimetic Neural Learning for Intelligent Robots*, 19–30. New York: Springer.
- Gallese, Vittorio. 2001. The Shared Manifold Hypothesis: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (5–7): 5–7.
- Gallese, Vittorio, Morris N. Eagle, and Paolo Migone. 2007. Intentional Attunement: Mirror Neurons and the Neural Underpinnings of Interpersonal Relations. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 55 (1): 131–175.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali. In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 360–411. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973b. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gendlin, Eugene T. 2003. Beyond Postmodernism. *Understanding Experience: Psychotherapy and Postmodernism*, 100–115.
- Havas, David A., Arthur M. Glenberg, Karol A. Gutowski, Mark J. Lucarelli, and Richard J. Davidson. 2010. Cosmetic Use of Botulinum Toxin-A Affects Processing of Emotional Language. *Psychological Science* 21 (7): 895–900.
- Heider, Anne, and R. Stephen Warner. 2010. Bodies in Sync: Interaction Ritual Theory Applied to Sacred Harp Singing. *Sociology of Religion* 71 (1): 76–97.
- Heinskou, Marie Bruvik, and Lasse Suonerä Liebster. 2016. On the Elementary Neural Forms of Micro-Interactional Rituals: Integrating Autonomic Nervous System Functioning Into Interaction Ritual Theory. *Sociological Forum* 31 (2): 354–376.
- Hölldobler, Bert, and Edward O. Wilson. 2008. *The Superorganism: The Beauty, Elegance, and Strangeness of Insect Societies*, 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hopkins, Nick, Stephen D. Reicher, Sammyh S. Khan, Shruti Tewari, Narayanan Srinivasan, and Clifford Stevenson. 2016. Explaining Effervescence: Investigating the Relationship between Shared Social Identity and Positive Experience in Crowds. *Cognition and Emotion* 30 (1): 20–32.
- Hove, Michael J., and Jane L. Risen. 2009. It's All in the Timing: Interpersonal Synchrony Increases Affiliation. *Social Cognition* 27 (6): 949–960.
- Johnson, Mark. 2008. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kelso, J.A.Scott. 1995. *Dynamic Patterns: The Self-Organization of Brain and Behavior (Complex Adaptive Systems)*, 1995. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Lakin, Jessica L., Valerie E. Jefferis, Clara Michelle Cheng, and Tanya L. Chartrand. 2003. The Chameleon Effect as Social Glue: Evidence for the Evolutionary Significance of Nonconscious Mimicry. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 27 (3): 145–162.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 2003. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lande, Brian. 2007. Breathing like a Soldier: Culture Incarnate. *The Sociological Review* 55 (s1): 95–108.
- Langellier, Kristin M. 1983. A Phenomenological Approach to Audience. *Literature in Performance* 3 (2): 34–39.
- LeDoux, Joseph E. 1996. *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Lewis, Marc D. 2005. Bridging Emotion Theory and Neurobiology through Dynamic Systems Modeling. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28 (2): 169–194.
- Liebst, Lasse Suonerä. 2019. Exploring the Sources of Collective Effervescence: A Multilevel Study. *Sociological Science* 6: 27–42.
- Lutterbie, John Harry. 2011. *Toward a General Theory of Acting: Cognitive Science and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Madzia, Roman. 2013. Mead and Self-Embodiment: Imitation, Simulation, and the Problem of Taking the Attitude of the Other. *Österreichische Zeitschrift Für Soziologie* 38 (1): 195–213.
- Maister, Lara, and Manos Tsakiris. 2016. Intimate Imitation: Automatic Motor Imitation in Romantic Relationships. *Cognition* 152: 108–113.
- Mancing, Howard. 2010. See the Play, Read the Book. In *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and F.Elizabeth Hart, 189–205. London: Routledge.
- Mast, Jason L., and Jeffrey C. Alexander. 2019. *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics*, 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan: Cultural Sociology. Springer International Publishing.
- McConachie, Bruce A. 2008. *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McConachie, Bruce A. 2010. Preface. In *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*, ed. Bruce A. McConachie and F.Elizabeth Hart, ix–ixv. London: Routledge.
- McConachie, Bruce A., and F.Elizabeth Hart (eds.). 2010. *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*. London: Routledge.
- McDougall, William. 1920. *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology*. London: G.P. Putnam's.
- McNeill, William H. 2008. *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History*. New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book.
- Meltzoff, Andrew N. 2002. Elements of a Developmental Theory of Imitation. In *The Imitative Mind: Development, Evolution, and Brain Bases*, ed. Andrew N. Meltzoff and Wolfgang Prinz, 19–41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, Chris, and Philip J. Dunham (eds.). 2014. *Joint Attention: Its Origins and Role in Development*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Pearce, Eiluned, Jacques Launay, Pádraig MacCarron, and Robin I.M. Dunbar. 2016. Tuning in to Others: Exploring Relational and Collective Bonding in Singing and Non-Singing Groups over Time. *Psychology of Music* 63 (4): 596–612.
- Pinel, Elizabeth C., Anson E. Long, Mark J. Landau, Kira Alexander, and Tom Pyszczynski. 2006. Seeing I to I: A Pathway to Interpersonal Connectedness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90 (2): 243.
- Ringmar, Erik. 2017. Outline of a Non-Deliberative, Mood-Based, Theory of Action. *Philosophia* 45: 1527–1539.
- Ringmar, Erik. 2018a. What Are Public Moods? *European Journal of Social Theory* 21 (4): 453–469.
- Ringmar, Erik. 2018. The Problem with Performativity: Comments on the Contributions. *Journal of International Relations and Development*.
- Riskind, John H. 1984. They Stoop to Conquer: Guiding and Self-Regulatory Functions of Physical Posture after Success and Failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47 (3): 479.
- Rizzolatti, Giacomo, and Laila Craighero. 2004. The Mirror-Neuron System. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 27: 169–192.
- Rochat, Philippe, and Claudia Passos-Ferreira. 2010. From Imitation to Reciprocation and Mutual Recognition. In *Mirror Neuron Systems: The Role of Mirroring Processes in Social Cognition*, ed. Jaime A. Pineda, 191–212. New York: Humana Press.
- Rokotnitz, Naomi. 2017. Goosebumps, Shivers, Visualization, and Embodied Resonance in the Reading Experience: The God of Small Things. *Poetics Today* 38 (2): 273–293.



- Rokotnitz, Naomi. 2008. 'Too Far Gone in Disgust': Mirror Neurons and the Manipulation of Embodied Responses in the Libertine. *Configurations* 16 (3): 399–426.
- Sacchi, Simona, Emanuele Castano, and Markus Brauer. 2009. Perceiving One's Nation: Entitativity, Agency and Security in the International Arena. *International Journal of Psychology* 44 (5): 321–332.
- Schmidt, R.C., Lin Nie, Alison Franco, and Michael J. Richardson. 2014. Bodily Synchronization Underlying Joke Telling. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8: 1–13.
- Sebanz, Natalie, Harold Bekkering, and Günther Knoblich. 2006. Joint Action: Bodies and Minds Moving Together. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 10 (2): 70–76.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. 2015. *The Phenomenology of Dance*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. 2011. Thinking in Movement. In *The Primacy of Movement*, 419–449. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Shteynberg, Garry. 2010. A Silent Emergence of Culture: The Social Tuning Effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99 (4): 683.
- Shteynberg, Garry. 2015. Shared Attention. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10 (5): 579–590.
- Shteynberg, Garry, Jacob B. Hirsh, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Jeff T. Larsen, Adam D. Galinsky, and Neal J. Roese. 2014. Feeling More Together: Group Attention Intensifies Emotion. *Emotion* 14 (6): 1102–1114.
- Singer, Tania, and Claus Lamm. 2009. The Social Neuroscience of Empathy. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1156 (1): 81–96.
- Strack, Fritz, Leonard L. Martin, and Sabine Stepper. 1988. Inhibiting and Facilitating Conditions of the Human Smile: A Nonobtrusive Test of the Facial Feedback Hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54 (5): 768.
- Struku, Wanda. 2011. Mining the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 25 (2): 89–105.
- Summers-Effler, Erika, Justin Van Ness, and Christopher Hausmann. 2015. Peeking in the Black Box: Studying, Theorizing, and Representing the Micro-Foundations of Day-to-Day Interactions. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 44 (4): 450–479.
- Tarde, Gabriel. 1903. *The Laws of Imitation*. New York: H. Holt and Company.
- Thiele, Leslie Paul. 2006. *The Heart of Judgment: Practical Wisdom, Neuroscience, and Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, Evan. 2010. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Throop, C. Jason. 2003. Articulating Experience. *Anthropological Theory* 3 (2): 219–241.
- Tomasello, Michael. 1995. Joint Attention as Social Cognition. In *Joint Attention: Its Origins and Role in Development*, ed. C. Moore and P.J. Dunham, 103–130. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Turner, Victor W. 2001. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Turner, Victor W., and Edward M. Bruner (eds.). 1986. *The Anthropology of Experience*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Vacharkulksemsuk, Tanya, and Barbara L. Fredrickson. 2012. Strangers in Sync: Achieving Embodied Rapport through Shared Movements. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48 (1): 399–402.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2005. Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership. *Qualitative Sociology* 28 (4): 445–474.
- Watson, James L. 1993. Rites or Beliefs: The Construction of a Unified Culture in Late Imperial China. In *China's Quest for National Identity*, ed. Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Weinstein, Daniel, Jacques Launay, Eiluned Pearce, Robin I.M. Dunbar, and Lauren Stewart. 2016. Singing and Social Bonding: Changes in Connectivity and Pain Threshold as a Function of Group Size. *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37 (2): 152–158.
- "Why Infant Surgery Without Anesthesia Went Unchallenged." *The New York Times*, December 17, 1987, sec. Opinion.
- Williams, Lawrence E., and John A. Bargh. 2008. Experiencing Physical Warmth Promotes Interpersonal Warmth. *Science* 322 (5901): 606–607.
- Wiltermuth, Scott S., and Chip Heath. 2009. Synchrony and Cooperation. *Psychological Science* 20 (1): 1–5.



Young, Iris Marion. 1980. Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality. *Human Studies* 3: 137–156.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Erik Ringmar is professor in the Dept of Political Science and International Relations at Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Turkey. He has a PhD from Yale University and has previously worked at London School of Economics and Shanghai Xiaotong Daxue. He writes on social theory and international relations. His next book will deal with international politics and dance.

