

# Richard Schechner

## Ethology and Theater

*Abstract: In this writing Schechner examines the convergences between human and animal behaviors. Using an ethological point of view, i.e. applying the evolutionary theory to the analysis of behavior and culture, the American scholar identifies common dynamics which at several levels govern both animal and human performances. The full version of this article was originally published in Essays on Performance Theory, 1970-1976 (Drama Book, New York 1977, pp. 157-201).*

*Keywords: Ethology, Theatre, Animal-human performance, Ritualization, Communication*

### Animal-Human Performance Continuities

Darwin first proposed a continuity of behavior from animals to people in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* [...]. For a long time his speculations lay fallow, but they are now being followed up. We want to know how much of "body language" is genetically fixed and how much learned. The underlying assumption is that an inclusive web includes both human and animal behavior. Is there also a cultural web? How are human religions, customs, and arts extensions, elaborations, and transformations of animal cultures? I want to explore this question as it pertains to theater. But I propose that the theatrical paradigm is a key to understanding larger plans of human social interaction.

Theatrical performances consist of ritualized gestures and sounds. These may be displays of non-daily behavior as in kabuki, kathakali, ballet, or the dances of Australian Aborigines. Or they may be replications of ordinary behavior as in naturalistic theater. Theater trades on recognizable moments and on sequences of behavior that succinctly "tell stories." I think all kinds of theater – that on show in theaters or churches, that of rites of passage, that of sports, that accompanying official displays of power, and that happening on a microsocial level in play and daily routines – comprise a single system of script, scenarios, disguises, displays, dances, impersonations, and scenes.

Studies of this system have been made by people whose knowledge of theater is from the outside. My experience, and therefore my perspective, is from the inside, as a theater director.



107

Both "fun" and "rehearsal" seem to be part of the performance sequences of the great apes. In his studies of the mountain gorilla of central Africa, Schaller says the functions of the chest-beating sequence include the discharge of excitement and showing off. Young males "occasionally displayed with great abandon, then sat quietly, and looked all around as if to judge the effectiveness of the behavior" (1963: 227). The chest-beating display also repels intruders and maintains group hierarchy. [...] The function of discharging excitement among gorillas is parallel to the cathartic function of theater proposed by Aristotle and Artaud, an ancient, persistent, and robust therapeutic tradition of performance. [...] The build-up of tension does not lead to fighting but to display; potential disruption is transformed into entertainment. This outcome is very much like human theatrical performances. There too violence is present in both themes and gestures; but the process of theatricalization renders this violence less harmful than it would be if actualized "in life." The resulting performance is entertaining.<sup>1</sup>

[...]

To perform acts that are otherwise forbidden – punished, taboo, unthought of – is a way of "making fun." In human cultures these acts are often violent and sexual. This is as true of the obscene real-life dramas of the Kogu in Papua New Guinea as it is of Aristophanes [...] Rehearsals – whether these be the exploratory seeking for and repeating of actions characteristic of the modern theater, or the formal preparations that precede many rituals – are times of intense fun. [...] A big part of the fun of rehearsal is in trying out what may never be shown, a way of enacting the forbidden.

[...]

This is the way Grotowski worked during his poor theater phase (1959-68), the way Peter Brook and Joseph Chaikin developed their works. I used this method in all of my productions with The Performance Group (1967-80). Rehearsals are no longer what they were in Max Reinhardt's day when the director marched in with all the actions inscribed in a *Regiebuch*. Rehearsals have become centers of psycho-physical, sociological, and personal research. [...]

All this has been implicit in western theater since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stanislavsky was the first to put the training of the performer at the top of the theatrical agenda, a training that finally led to the deconstruction of performance texts. During the more than ninety-year course of this development western theater became increasingly ritualized, moving into areas of human interaction once reserved for religion. [...] This kind of training is intrinsic to the traditional performance genres I studied in India, Java, Bali, and Papua New Guinea. It is also there in Africa and native America. But in modern and postmodern performance, new "ideograms" have to be invented or discovered for each production. [...] The first fruits of this method were the stiff biomechanics of Meyerhold; next came the carefully arranged, though ordinary-appearing, compositions of Brecht [...]. Then Grotowski developed exercises that helped actors "confront" texts, discovering meeting places between their own

1. [...] The unifying idea is the belief that visible behaviors, and what we can learn of deep behaviors through analysis of brain structure and activity, skin temperature, glandular secretion, and so on, correlate with what is happening socially, that is, between individuals and among groups. This kind of study is a holistic behaviorism. [...]

psychophysical impulses and the logic of the texts. [...] in Wilson's super-slow imagery spectators can predict moves and follow their trajectories through time-space. Also some actions are repeated so many times that the spectator is forced to look at different aspects of the action. Similarly, in the postmodern dances of Dunn, Forti, Jonas, Paxton, and others, as well as in the performance art of Allan Kaprow and many others, ordinary human actions are isolated, displaced, stopped, slowed or accelerated, repeated: all ritualizations ethologically speaking.

The movie camera has given artists the ability to stop action, examine gesture frame by frame, go forward and backward, repeat, and study compositions as they condense and evaporate; these techniques have reshaped theatrical imagination. A theoretical basis for these examinations exists in the work of "human ethologists" such as Eibl-Eibesfeldt, Birdwhistell, and Ekman.<sup>2</sup> The kind of ritualization they study does not focus on social organization so much as on microgestures: glances, eyebrow flashes, smiles, hand gestures, shoulder lurches, pelvic thrusts, etc. To be alive is to dance.  
[...]

In [Schechner 1973] I cited Goodall's description of the chimpanzee "rain dance." This performance is both a prototype and a parallel to human theater. The spectacle Goodall saw, and other observations made in the field, confirm how fundamental the performer-spectator dyad is. In fact, we may be speaking of a triad: protagonist-antagonist-spectator. The dyad is the basic performance relationship, the triad the basic dramatic-theatrical relationship. [...] Among animals and many human societies, the roles shift during performance: this moment's observer may be the next moment's protagonist, while this moment's antagonist may be the next moment's spectator. But can I say with any assurance that the young male and female chimps sitting in the trees observing the mature males rushing with branches down the hillside in the midst of the terrific thunderstorm – the event Goodall saw – are spectators? And in what sense are the mature males performers? The display is most parsimoniously explained as a performance, a kind of playing.

Lorenz connects animal and human performances in this way:

The formation of traditional rites must have begun with the first dawning of human culture, just as at a much lower level phylogenetic rite formation was a prerequisite for the origin of social organization in higher animals.... In both cases, a behavior pattern by means of which a species in the one case, a cultured society in the other, deals with certain environmental conditions, acquires an entirely new function, that of communication. The primary function may still be

2. Since writing this essay in the mid-1970s, the debate concerning cannibalism has sharpened. Some anthropologists doubt that there is, or ever was, cannibalism – except out of the need for sheer survival (shipwrecks, for example). The debate is reported in Science (Kolata 1986). [...] Factual or not, cannibalism exercises a powerful hold on the human imagination and, like incest, is a primary taboo. Cannibalism – either "barbaric" or, for example, Christian (the Eucharist) – is a strong component of many cultures' belief systems; there is an undeniable link between what is eaten and what "becomes part of." To share food is to contract friendship; to share that food which is the loved/hated other is to acquire power. And is it too much to suggest that mother's milk – the first food – is mother herself? What exactly is the nipple the infant takes into its mouth? A myself who is another. [...]

performed, but it often recedes more and more into the background and may disappear completely so that a typical change of functions is achieved. Out of communication two new equally important functions may arise, both of which still contain some measure of communicative effects. The first of these is the channeling of aggression into innocuous outlets, the second is the formation of a bond between two or more individuals. In both cases, the selection pressure of the new function has wrought analogous changes on the form of the primal, non-ritualized behavior. It quite obviously lessens the chances of ambiguity in the communication that a long series of independently variable patterns should be welded into one obligatory sequence.... The display of animals during threat and courtship furnishes an abundance of examples, and so does the culturally developed ceremonial of man.... Rhythmical repetition of the same movement is so characteristic of very many rituals, both instinctive and cultural, that it is hardly necessary to describe examples.... This "mimic exaggeration" results in a ceremony which is, indeed, closely akin to a symbol and which produces that theatrical effect that first struck Sir Julian Huxley as he watched his Great Crested Grebes.... There is hardly a doubt that all human art primarily developed in the service of rituals and that the autonomy of "art for art's sake" was achieved only by another, secondary step of cultural progress. (Lorenz 1967, 72-4)

I doubt whether there ever was any "art for art's sake." [...] Actions are segregated "in the theater" where through exaggeration, repetition, and metaphORIZATION they can be displayed and handled. The interactions played out in the theater are those which are problematical in society, interactions of a sexual, violent, or taboo kind concerning hierarchy, territory, or mating. This is not a characteristic of western theater only, but of theater everywhere. In my view drama is not a model of all human action, but of the most problematical, difficult, taboo, liminal, and dangerous activities. The theatrical actions vivifying drama are rhythmic, repetitive, exaggerated; the body adornments and physical deeds of theater are spectacular: everything in theater is ritualized, if we understand ritual the way ethologists do. Drama arises where clarity of signal is needed most: where the risk is greatest and the stakes highest, where redundancy of signal is an advantage. [...]

The second point in Lorenz's statement is the link between aggression and aggregation. He suggests the underlying effect of releasing aggressive behavior ritually is not to separate individuals but to bond them. I've seen this confirmed in Papua New Guinea [...] as well as in my own workshops and rehearsals [...]. Thus on two levels simultaneously – the level of drama and the level of theater – aggression and groupness often support each other, if the aggression is expressed in/as ritual.

Furthermore, [...] every drama is a story enacted for those who are, directly or indirectly, the subject of the story they are seeing, who are doubly represented – as characters and as spectators. Or, as Geertz said of the Balinese cockfight, it is "a story they tell themselves about themselves" (1973, 448). It is no accident that Shakespeare's plays are not only full of metatheatrical plays-within-plays and references to the stage but also thematically return again and again to questions of personal-vs.-state interests. [...] If

one of theater's functions is to model interactions resulting from the release of repressed material, another is to form groups that can control, through ritualization and play, this explosive material. In this way, theater can be a laboratory of group process.

Lorenz concentrates on the finished artwork. He doesn't differentiate between theater and the other arts. [...] Theater, dance, and music – these must precede the material arts whose remnants we possess. Ethological analogy suggests that people, like other primates, vocalized and danced before they spoke or told stories. The surviving Paleolithic sculptures and paintings were more of an "action art" than a "gallery art." Much of the cave art is located deep in unlit chambers difficult of access; other work is superimposed one image over another, forming rich palimpsests. This indicates that the cave art was designed to accompany performances or was executed as performances. [...] If Lorenz were more familiar with theater, he would see that rehearsal is the link between animal ritual and human art. [...]

## Phatic theater

All animals, including *Homo sapiens*, exist within the same ecological web. But animals are not all alike. Analogies must be put forward cautiously. [...] Where everything is genetically determined, where no genuine learning takes place, where no improvisation or variation is possible, where error and/or conscious lying cannot easily occur, art is not. [...]

Schaller points out that people in a stadium watching sporting events display in much the same way as great apes do [...] People dramatically display their moods by throwing things when angry, kicking the wall, jumping up and down with enthusiasm, clapping or stamping the feet to show strong feelings, etc. These "mood displays" change character when they are ritualized into mass actions such as spectator sports, political rallies, or militarized parades [...].

In the 1960s and 1970s "phatic theater" – performances based on evoking mood displays – re-emerged in the west. This kind of theater is present in mass spectacles and their opposite: quasi-theatrical therapies where individuals learn again, or for the first time, how to let their feelings "out". [...]

A very radical integration of therapy into theater was Robert Wilson's work in the 1960s-1970s. Wilson drew also on non-western performances, especially trance dancing, selective inattention, and extended performance time/space. Wilson's approach to therapy was like what Australian Aborigines do. [...]

Spectators say that Wilson's work is comforting, even healing. I think this is because Wilson unfolds his images very slowly, evoking alpha rhythms, "slowing" the brain down, engaging the trophotropic right hemisphere [...]. Also because his performances are vast, truly epic world visions, they are all-encompassing, reassuring. While traditional western art since the Renaissance has been obsessively single-minded, monoscopic, intensive, and dialectical, Wilson's work is many-minded, multiscopic, extensive, and varilectical.

Wilson's methods, and their results, are like some shamans' performances [...]. I pointed out how Aborigines construct ceremonies from what a shaman "sees" either

while asleep or alone in the desert. He returns to his people and shares with them what he experienced – a dance, a narrative, a song. [...] Performances made from vision-quests, drug-induced visions, or dreams are treated by many of the world's peoples with special respect precisely because they hinge two spheres of reality. A shaman is a professional link connecting disparate but interacting reality spheres. [...] The one unifying factor is that the shaman after receiving the call in a flash, a crisis, a sudden sickness, later learns through difficult detailed training a specific technique which is a performance.

Earlier I mentioned "phatic theater," a kind of performance where the evocation and expression of a group mood is the most important thing. [...] The multivocality of ape communication is close to human phatic expressions. [...] The cry of a frightened child, the moaning of grief, the scream of pain, the gasp of terror, and other phatic expressions – as well as the body configurations, gestures, and facial displays accompanying these – probably constitute universal signals [...].

[...] Ordinary speech everywhere is immersed in a sea of exclamatory sounds, stutters, repetitions, ohs, ahs, and uhs; as well as variations in rhythm, pitch, and volume – a whole language of metaverbal communication giving to each utterance its unique and unrepeatable shape and significance. In any situation of strong feeling this infrastructure erupts into dominance: the cognitive value of words is submerged in a rising tide of phatic expression. The center of speaking actually shifts downward to where diaphragmatic breathing controls how sound is released automatically as sheer breath. Not enough is known about this transformational process, about how cognitive speech becomes metaverbal sounding.

In opera, Indian raga, and jazz "meaningless" vocables temporarily replace words at moments of intense expressivity. The extension of sounds built on modulations of pitch, volume, and duration characterizing the aria, the raga, and the jazz riff is a formal way of giving over to the phatic quality of "pure music." In left-brain/right-brain terms, the utterance that begins as left-hemisphere-dominant arouses the right hemisphere so strongly that the original cognitive function is overwhelmed – the singer, and the audience too, is "swept away," "moved," "overcome," "touched" – all dynamic and sensuous metaphors appropriate to the right hemisphere. [...]

Eibl-Eibesfeldt points out the relationship between inborn releasing mechanisms and artistic expression, especially music. Breathing and heartbeat can be brought into harmony with metronomes or melodies; drumming raises body temperature. [...] Of course anyone who has ever wept at a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, or a soap opera, or while reading, knows how susceptible humans are to an artistic induction of feelings. Brecht struggled against these reactions, wishing to highlight thinking or sitting in judgement. If even the tame shows of western theater are capable of inducing such strong reactions think how much more thorough are total theater performances – dreamed of by Artaud but realized mainly outside the Euro-American context. Outside if we consider only what we call theater. Certainly charismatic churches, rock concerts, and some sports events achieve every bit as much phatically speaking as the ritual performances of non-western cultures. [...] For all the differences, [Sergei M.] Shirokogoroff [the Russian anthropologist who studied

Siberian shamanism] and [Kenneth E.] Read [an anthropologist who lived with the Gahuku of Papua New Guinea] report the same pattern: a collective performance, rising to an epiphanic climax, then subsiding into a calm that leads to a "recollection in tranquility" of what it all means. This same pattern characterizes charismatic church services, rock concerts, and maybe even the waltz or tarantella in their heyday. These events each require not "spectators" but "participants," even "congregations," assemblies of believers who co-create the world of the performance. [...]

## **Lying and pretending**

A great difference between human and non-human performers is the ability of humans to lie and pretend. There is plenty of deception in the animal world: mimicry, camouflage, and the like. But most, if not all, of these body modifications and behaviors are hard-wired, genetically determined. [...] People can choose to do, or not do; to adorn or transform their bodies, or not to; to wear masks, or to go bare-faced. Hamlet's very basic "to be or not to be" is a question only humans can ask – and answer in the negative if a person so decides. [...]

## **Ritualization, blocked display, and performance**

Before considering drama, farce especially, which is a unique creation of our species, I want to look at more parallels between animal and human theatrical behavior. [...] Correlations between animal and human performances occur at deeper levels too, in events ethologists call displacement activities, redirected activities, and ritualization.

[...] I argue that ritualization in the theater is [...] a function [...] of the rehearsal-to-performance sequence, the periodicity of performances, and on the microsocial level, the prevalence of conventions designed to remove ambiguity from the communication. [...] Here I want to discuss ritualization from the point of view of the performer's process and the spectator's response.

The debate concerning whether there is a "universal" body language is now running in favor of such a conclusion. A look of surprise, a belly laugh, a howl of pain, a child's cry, the outstretched arms of a mother, and so on, are all understood everywhere. Paul Ekman [...] has shown how facial displays associated with six emotions – surprise, disgust, sadness, anger, fear, and happiness – are universally recognized. [...] There appears to be a developmental continuity of behavior among primates. Surely certain human behavior sequences are enacted everywhere in the same way; these may constitute a basic repertory of mini-dramas: the child running for protection into the arms of its mother; the open-palm greeting; freezing in place when a suspicious noise or an unknown threat is perceived; taking cover by means of hiding, crouching, or flattening when an over-whelming force is encountered. There is a large repertory of universally recognized situations eliciting equally recognizable responses. Theater plays with these situations and responses, often twisting ironies out of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. For with the ritualization of signals comes the possibility, among humans particularly, of irony, tricks, lies, and the dissemination of misinformation. [...]



There are two kinds of body language. The first is the "natural language" of animals in the wild studied by ethologists and the microsocial exchanges among humans studied by scholars such as Ekman, Goffman, and Birdwhistell. The second is the artificial languages of ritual and art. Separating these two kinds of body language is not easy; perhaps with humans it's impossible. Human social life affects human biology at a very deep level.

But let us look [...] at the Paleolithic cave art of south-west Europe [...]. Already in this art the human body is exaggerated, distorted, transformed, masked, and abstracted. Most of the art is of animals – but these animals are depicted in groupings that don't fit what goes on "in nature." Predators and prey are shown together in non-agonistic arrangements; some species are painted together that do not run together in nature; and a few paintings are of imaginary animals such as the unicorn-like figure at Lascaux. At least one figure depicts a person dressed in an animal skin and mask. This is the "sorcerer" or "shaman" of the Les Trois Frères cave. [...] the cave art, and the mobile art of the period too, suggests theater, dance, and music: an art of physical action. [...] To be in the world, as all animals are, is one thing; to present this being is something else; to transform it is something else again. And to transform it as a way of constructing its potential, its "as if," is the heart of the theatrical process.

Thus from the earliest art we can know about with certainty, and continuing to the present, ironies, contradictions, transformations, and imaginary beings and situations are part of art – while art itself is fundamental to religion and other belief systems. People make what isn't there, combine elements from fantasy, actualize situations that occur only as art or performance. These actualizations in the service of social organization, thought, ritual, or rebellious anti-structure contain, transmit, and (dare I say it?) *create* the very circumstances they purport to depict.

The way this process works is different, or at least inordinately more complex, for humans than for animals. The "innate releasing mechanisms" of animals – hard-wired in their nervous systems – cause the display of a sequence of behavior that is predictable and in many cases invariable. A stimulus – an interaction with another animal, or something else – releases an animal's display (Figure 1). [...] In people interaction also stimulates displays, but often these displays are blocked from full expression. [...]

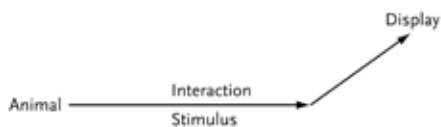


Figure 1

Art, custom, religion, and social convention flow from and cluster around these arenas of blocked display. [...] dammed-up excitation is frequently redirected inward where it happens as a fantasy [...]. The fantasy picks up and elaborates on materials associated with the blocked display. The fantasy is like a dream [...]. Ultimately, [...] the fantasy plus its associated material from "other channels" re-emerges as a display. This display, a performance, is a public way to show private stuff (Figure 2). In this way many performances have a restorative function for the performer analogous to the cathartic function for the spectator.



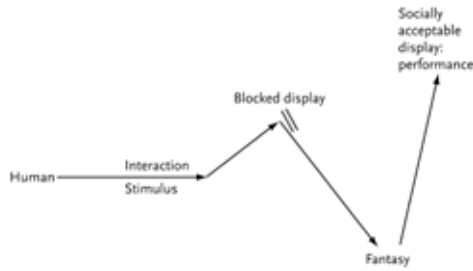


Figure 2

Performances can get at, and out, two sets of material simultaneously: 1) what was blocked and transformed into fantasy; 2) stuff from other channels that otherwise might have a hard time getting expressed at all. Seen this way, performing is a public dreaming. Conversely, dreaming is an interior drama. It is not only psychoanalysis that assumes as much. [...] Fantasy is interiorized display and performance is exteriorized fantasy.  
[...]

## Drama, displacement, and redirection

Drama is a narrative dialogic text written to be performed. The high points of drama include Greek tragedy, Indian Sanskrit plays, the Elizabethan theater, Japanese noh. [...] Here I want to deal not with drama itself but with what E. T. Kirby [...] calls "ur-drama," the process of transforming social conflict into aesthetics. [...]

These events are analogous to what ethologists call "displacement" or "redirected" activity. As Lorenz describes it, "a redirected activity is just this: if I am furious with my boss, my fear may inhibit my aggression against him, so I release my aggression toward the underdog or toward anything else" (1959, 187). The high incidence of sex and violence in theater can be partially explained as redirected activities. [...] Among peoples of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, tribal warfare was banned first by Australian colonial authorities and later by the Papua New Guinea government. What has arisen in its place are performances. [...] Among the Kogu of Papua New Guinea, observed by Ronald M. Berndt in the 1950s, warfare and cannibalism were replaced by local courts. By the mid-1980s there was debate regarding whether cannibalism ever was practiced in Papua New Guinea or anywhere else. But the Berndts accepted it as fact.

"Dead human flesh, to these people, is food. . . 'Cut my body,' a dying man or woman may say, 'so that the crops may increase. Eat my flesh so that the gardens may grow'" (Berndt 1962, 271-2). [...]

The cruelty with which the Kogu dispatched their enemies is reminiscent of Greek myths [...] like that of Pentheus of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. [...]

In 1976 when I originally wrote this chapter I accepted as factual these accounts of the cruel, bizarre actions of the Kogu. But in 1987 the debate concerning the existence of cannibalism made me think the "data" over again.

In the preface to his book, Berndt says, [...]

There was, however, as there must always be, much that we could not see: for example, violence during cannibal feasts, sharp fighting and confusion when a

village was raided, certain extra-marital ventures, and so on. Although by all accounts these were still taking place south of Wanevinti, it would have been unwise and dangerous to attempt research there at that time. (1962, xiii)

So the detailed descriptions of cannibalism and necrophilia previously presented [...] were not witnessed by the ethnographers. [...]

The accounts the Berndts accept as raw data I now interpret as displays analogous to how some of our artists depict American life in films, writings, and visual arts. Any prime-time night on TV, or the Rambo or Schwarzenegger films, or the dozens of horror movies full of bloody murder, ghouls, dismemberment, cannibalism, and corpse-fucking, will yield very similar information to what the Berndts gathered from the Kogu, if what is presented in the American media is accepted as raw data.

It is data, of course: not of events done, but rather of events dreamed, fantasized, and desired. These representations – of the Kogu, of American popular entertainment – [...] can be regarded as cathartic displays, healthy blowouts of fantasies everyone has. In either case, such accounts – true or false at the level of events – point to the violence of human possibility and imagination. Such violence is not, I think, a local event assignable to the Papua New Guinea Highlands.

Among the Kogu, co-existent with cannibal facts and/or stories, were "informal courts" where dramas were acted out. [...]

Sexual cases are especially relished. In such cases the court proceedings closely resemble traditional farces. For example, Jowajaca's husband caught her in the act of adultery. The court established that the adultery took place at least five times, but that Jowajaca had some cause: her husband didn't have sex with her often enough. Part of the judgement was that he copulate with her at once while the crowd watched. Throughout one night they were made to fuck many times, always in front of witnesses. [...]

It's not only in Papua New Guinea that trials and dramas converge, offering entertainment to the people. Public trials in Europe or America are ostensibly about crime and punishment, but often they are as entertaining as the "informal court" of Kogu. [...] Earlier still in medieval Europe disputes among the upper classes were frequently settled by duels or jousts waged by "champions", combatants who substituted themselves for those they represented. This practice developed in two directions: into sports contests where individuals and teams are "champions" representing clubs, universities, or cities (at least on the surface because in fact, of course, modern athletics are big business); and into modern legal practice where the champion of the state is the prosecutor while the champion of the accused is the defense attorney. [...] Both drama and trials are theatrical events of great entertainment value. And the two can be easily confounded. [...]

Ritual combats often employ theatrical means. [...]

"Sounding" is a [...] word duel common in American black neighborhoods. Soundings are formal tradings of ritual insults – also called "the dozens" or "signifying." According to Labov "the ways in which sounds are delivered, and the evaluation of them by the group, follow a well-established ritual pattern" (1972, 127). Sounds are

"evaluated overtly and immediately by the audience" (Labov 1972, 144). The mark of winning is laughter. [...]

Sounding feeds on the aggressive tendencies of laughter – which in its breathing pattern shares much with the derisive-triumphant pant-hoots of our fellow primates. [...] This is the root structure of a certain kind of theatrical dialogue, from stichomythia, the short, give-and-take dialogic assaults of classical Greek theater, to the punning wit and quick-flying obscenities enjoyed by such Shakespearean characters as Beatrice and Benedick, through to the laconic exchanges of Pinter. The audience's participation may not be heard (except in comedy and farce), but their judgmental presence is decisive. They are always being solicited to take sides. [...]

The Kogu informal court, [...] and sounding are all examples of "redirected activity". They may also be examples of "displacement activity", a deep-level behavioral process that Lorenz explains this way:

Displacement activity happens if two mutually inhibiting motivations result in such a perfect equilibrium as to block each other completely. What happens then is that another movement, which is usually inhibited by both of them, becomes disinhibited because the other two neutralize each other. So, if a bird wants to attack and is afraid in more or less perfect equilibrium of these two motivations, he may start to preen or to scratch, or to perform other activities which are inhibited both by attack and escape, attack and escape being at the moment mutually inhibited. (Lorenz 1959, 188)

In the examples I've cited, the sexuality, violence, conflict, and obscenity are transformations, redirections, of behavior prevented their full expression. But other behaviors – laughter, feeling "entertained" – are "displacements" in the ethological sense. [...] In every case, forbidden or extremely dangerous relationships – adulterous, incestuous, warlike, cannibalistic – are blocked by law or custom even as they are desired. Drama condenses around the "I-want- but-can't/shouldn't-do"; or around the "I-do-but-will-pay-for". If the forbidden relationships are consummated in fact (as they sometimes are) the social order may be threatened. When the social order is threatened, even by fantasies and desires, a special kind of public performance is called for, one that uses "real people" acting out "real events" (the Kogu trial); or sometimes the principals can find "champions" to act in their behalf ([...] Euro-American trials); or often enough the desires manifest themselves in wholly fictionalized transformations of the forbidden events (dramas). But in all cases what must be performed are the forbidden acts which are thereby both released and contained. The formal nature of these ur-dramas – the Kogu court [...] the trial [...] the sounding – guarantees some measure of control over the impulses being enacted.

Also the ur-dramas suggest their own elaboration into full-fledged theater. [...] The resulting displaced activity – entertainment eliciting laughter and/or tears from the audience – is as different from its causes as a bird's preening is from is mutually blocked impulses to fight and flee. Instead of causing further anxiety the performance of forbidden relationships relaxes tensions. [...]

## Laughter and Freud

So much violence is expressed in laughter. Cruel farces probably preceded tragedy. Laughter preserves the ambivalence of the conflicts that give rise to displacement activities. As such laughter is both aggressive and aggregating. Eibl-Eibesfeldt notes that: "The rhythmic vocalizations [of laughter] remind one of similar sounds made by primate groups when they threaten in unison against an enemy.... In its original form laughing seems to unite against a third party" (1970, 132). Thus laughter presupposes, even creates, a "we" that opposes a "them."

In 1905 Freud explained "joke-work" by offering a model analogous to his ideas concerning "dream-work." Freud thought dreams and jokes worked in much the same way, expressing/concealing unrecognized desires. Freud's model (interpreted by me in Figure 3)

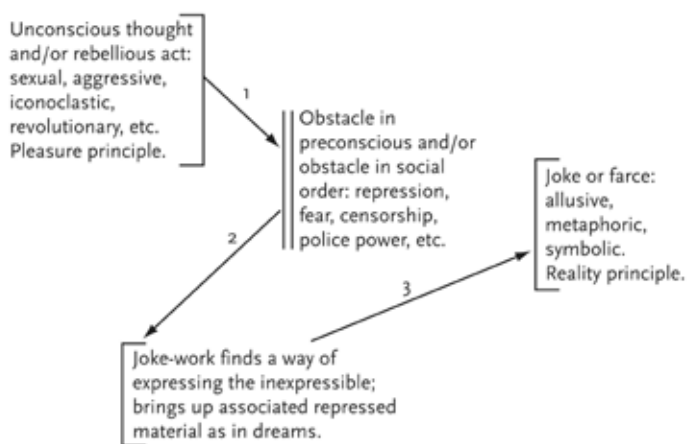


Figure 3

explains how farce especially, and maybe all theater, accomplishes the complicated task of uniting an in-group, threatening an out-group, and bringing repressed materials to the surface. Joke-work condenses, inverts, and displaces images, actions, and associations. A successful joke – and a farce is a string of successful jokes comprising a coherent structure that is itself a joke – is an extremely dense, specially coded communication. In releasing laughter the joke liberates laughter's double purpose of threat and bond. It also stunningly erases the gap between audience and performer: the audience hears the performers, laughs as a response; the performers hear the audience laughing, perform as a response; and so the farce progresses. [...]

But what purposes do jokes serve? First, there is "criticism against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke, then, represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressures" (Freud 1963, 105). And then there is delight in celebrating the obscene. It is clear how this works both in the Kogu court and in Euro-American trials. [...] In aesthetic farce there is no need even to pretend to deplore the crimes, outrages, and reversals of social order. Satire, parody, ridicule, and caricature are all species of hostile joking. These are the heart of farce, different from "comedy of

manners" which maintains a façade of politeness. In farce, the young ridicule the old, prodigality laughs away prudence, promiscuity overturns marriage, the poor rule the rich, the underdog lords it over the overdog. From Kogu to the Marx Brothers, [...] Harlem to Chaplin: a bedlam anti-structure as well as *sacer ludus* marks farce. But only temporarily: "for the time being."

Farcical actions can by mocking authority become strong political weapons. [...] The student uprisings of 1968 in Europe and America combined farce and eroticism with radical thought and action. [...]

Ludwig Jekels, a follower of Freud, interprets comedy in a unique way. If the Oedipus complex is the basis of tragedy, he argues, then its opposite underlies farce: "the feeling of guilt which, in tragedy, rests upon the son, appears in comedy displaced on the father; it is the father who is guilty" (Jekels 1965, 264). Once the father – the authority of the old (state) – is done away with "we find the ego, which has liberated itself from the tyrant, uninhibitedly venting its humor, wit, and every sort of comic manifestation in a very ecstasy of freedom" (Jekels 1965, 264). In revolution the liberation is actual, if temporary; in aesthetic theater, in even the Kogu court and other "near-dramas," the liberation is monitored, controlled, overseen by authorities who give permission for the temporary suspension of the usual order of things. In this way rebellion is co-opted, serving the powers that be.

## In-group, out-group

From an ethological perspective rituals evolve as a way of improving communications, removing ambiguities, making signals clear. [...] Rituals are biologically necessary because conspecifics need to mate, organize in stable social hierarchies, share territory. Interactions determining how these are to be achieved are likely to cause trouble. Rituals mediate these difficult interactions by creating a second reality more compelling than direct action. This second reality is performance.

These performances are just as aggressive as direct action but less deadly. Among animals, in fact, two separate kinds of aggression operate: that directed against prey is unemotional and deadly, while that directed against conspecifics is emotional but ritualized. [...]

In humans as in other animals, separating in-groupers from out-groupers gives rise to two complementary conflict systems: 1) aggressive conflict against outsiders ("not my people"); 2) aggressive solidarity for insiders ("my people"). These two systems express themselves everywhere, but especially in war, business, and sports. [...]

Conflict-resolution systems – mediation, courts, and diplomacy – try to convert the first kind of aggression into the second: widening the circle of insiders. Often the conflict-resolution process is a mirror or reduction-transformation of the conflict to be resolved: a theatrical playing out of the conflict.

In human theater the subject matter and actions include the most horrible deeds; bloody conflicts between people, gods, beasts, and demons; war and murder; atrocities; torture: every violent action imaginable. But all this is acted out as ritual and/or play. This is because redirected behavior and displacement activities in people create

complicated sequences of transformations, different in each culture, maybe in each individual, but interculturally recognizable as make-believe. Audiences can enjoy watching/participating and performers can enjoy playing out what otherwise would be dangerous, forbidden, or inhibited. Acting out the troubles of Oedipus, the murders of Macbeth, the adventures of Rama, the crucifixion of Jesus, the struggle of a shaman against the disease-causing demons, the farces or informal courts of the Kogu all yield great pleasure. In serious drama or tragedy as well as farce, the pleasures derive from the excess of energy released when obstacles to seeing/participating in taboo actions are suddenly removed. The sound of laughter is triumphantly, celebratorily, aggressive.

All human theater is created by processes analogous to dream-work/ joke-work. Dream-work/joke-work, in turn, are versions of redirected activities and displacement. Thus human theater arises precisely where animal rituals do and serve analogous needs. These performances are liminal events existing to mediate or explore for pleasure interactions that are potentially risky and disruptive. Where transitions/transformations are dangerous what van Gennep calls "rites of passage" are invented; where trouble is liable to break out, theatrical fun eases the way.

## Conclusions

[...]

Ethological thinking is the application of evolutionary theory to behavior and culture. On several levels human and animal performances converge and/or exist along a continuum: 1) on the structural level where performances are redirected activities, displacement activities, and/or improvements of signal functions; 2) on a processual level of dream-work/joke-work; 3) on the level of technique where drumming, rhythmic vocalization, dancing, and visual displays are used to create, spread, and share moods; 4) on a cultural level where performances are means of social control providing avenues for the discharge of aggression or providing ways of mobilizing people either to maintain or change a given social order; 5) on a mimetic level where animals imitate animals and people imitate animals – even appropriating skins, feathers, faces, gaits, gestures, and sounds; 6) on a theoretical level where animals and humans are included in reciprocal social structures as in totemism. (Ironically, a criticism of ethologists is that they anthropomorphize.) These similarities and convergences offer a basis for re-examining human theater from the perspective of animal performances. A re-examination not of two opposing systems but of a single bio-aesthetic web.

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The original text has been abridged by Leszek Kolankiewicz.

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